

Social Exclusion and the Challenges of Growing Up as a Marginalised Child in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

African-American Literature acts as an archetype of how literary texts and artistic exploration can influence the dynamics of the race in American society. The black women's writings of African-Americans had permuted the violating principles of the white community over the southern black people. The subservient nature of black people accelerates to exhaust due to the contribution of writers, artists, and social activists from African descents. The black intellectuals seized the opportunity to express themselves during the Harlem Renaissance and the unity among American Negroes, challenged the socially constructed obstacles in the American nation. Unlike in India and West-Indies, the rigid class system in America is color oriented rather than class-oriented. African-Americans are well aware of the fact that social laws, amendments, concessions could never erase the conflicts in society, amending the education of children is the only way to end inequality. Apart from the usual discussion on sufferings of the stereotypical African-American traits, this paper intends to analyze the national issues faced by the marginalized children like survival issues, insecurity, sexual assault, violence, denial of education and improper parenthood. This paper further argues that the conceptualizations of African American social structure challenge the life of the marginalized children in terms of racial segregation and discrimination. Although the undeniable black women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston shared their black experience in their works, Maya Angelou expresses the various dimensions of social exclusion remarkably from her childhood to early adulthood in her *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* in a more benevolent way.

Keywords: Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, African-American Community, Marginalization, Children's Rights, Racial Prejudice, Social Injustice.

Introduction

Maya Angelou, a civil right activist, poet, dramatist, and memoirist, who belong to the African-American community has been named as the black woman's poet laureate, not merely, and also probably said to be the first African-American female conductor on a cable car system. Maya Angelou is widely honored and acclaimed for her seven autobiographies, out of that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the debut autobiographical work published in 1969 which fostered the literary career of Maya Angelou favorably attained both public as well as critic reputation.

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As a result of the resolution, completing the next six more autobiographical memoirs, Maya Angelou's literary acquirment made her engage in the pursuit of poetry collections, screenplay writing, casting in movies, and so on. Her literary and artistic contribution towards her dominated society made her receive the most esteemed civilian award in her country designated Presidential Medal of Freedom. The first memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the reflection of the social exclusion process of her own childhood experiences which display the ascendancy of the white supremacy over the African American community.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is an autobiography, exhibiting the 1930s American South and several exclusionary processes in the everyday lives of African Americans. This inspirational autobiography embellishes the coming-of-age journey of Maya Angelou that constitutes the denial of social participation of black Americans in terms of education, politics, economic status, and personal security. The white-dominated American society augments its power by politically limiting the rights of black Americans and gradually changing the law to suppress the growth of the African American community. Ergo, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* beautifully evokes the marginalized life journey of Maya Angelou's from being a child to being a child's mother.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings opens up with the impoverished marriage of Maya Angelou's parents, resulting three-year-old Maya and her four-year-old brother Bailey to be under the care of grandmother Momma at a small country town named Stamps in Arkansas. The town Stamps besieged with racial segregation and social inequality between the black and white challenges the routine life of Maya and her community people. Being a marginalized child, the socially constructed notion troubles Maya and her childhood development. Despite, Maya's limited standard of living and intense dislike towards the submissive nature of the African American community, her love towards her community people was inevitable. When Maya was seven, she was stunned by the arrival of her parents named Vivian and Bailey Johnson. Maya was forced to pursue her life in San Francisco along with her glamorous mother, Vivian, who employs herself in an unstructured lifestyle. Maya was brutally raped by Freeman when she was eight and muted for several years after the death of her mother's boyfriend Freeman.

On the other hand, life in California along with her father ended up in a mess and Maya voluntarily excluded herself, merely, to stay with homeless teens in a junkyard. At the age of fifteen, Maya challenged racial discrimination which neglected most of the employment opportunities for African American women, yet Maya succeeded breaking the racial policy by becoming the first African American female conductor on San Francisco streetcars. Later, a one-time sexual encounter leads Maya to pregnancy, and after her graduation from Mission High school, she gave birth to a son. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ends with Maya as an unemployed young mother in California, leading to a sequel *Gather Together in My Name* (1974).

Children's Position in the African American community

Imposing the concept of Marginalisation in children's lifestyle cannot be considered as common social sufferings that happen to other individuals in a society. Moderately, it acts as a sequence of the discriminating process that has been taken up to the next generation and functions as a continuation of selective group supremacy over the other group. In simple terms, the most influential particular group of a society that has a habit of exercising intimidation or subjugation doesn't have any aspire to withdraw the social conflicts such as color, ethnicity, race, class, and gender over the other minority group. A problem faced by a marginalized woman/man is never the same as the problem faced by a marginalized child. The reason is that the socially constructed stereotypes are seen to apply to the next generations to possess the supreme authority by carrying the process to the children who are the upcoming generation.

Children of the African American community start to endure the black and white conflicts in American society, even at the very beginning of their childhood days. Maya Angelou expresses the complexity of social stratification of a marginalized child as "If growing up is a painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat" (6). The social experiences of the African American community children are so miserable resembling both physical anguish as well as mental anguish. James Baldwin, one of the prominent African American writer praises *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* for portraying African American childhood experiences as, "I know that not since the days of my childhood, when people in books were more real than the people one saw every day, have I found myself so moved". The marginal position of African American children deceives social participation, especially in terms of education, and the frequent migration executes the black children to white people like immigrants who fail to contribute to the nation's development.

The white children are not an exception of the unequal social system and execute their role in mistreating the black children through some extent they abuse even the elders of the black community people. The outcome of prejudice leads white children to picture black children as an inferior being, and the white children who live on Momma's farmland have been called poor white trash by black children. Maya Angelou's expresses her rage of the unfair treatment of white children over the black elders and her inability towards the power of white children in *I Know Why the Cage Birds Sing* as, "I wanted to throw a handful of black pepper in their faces, to throw lye on them, to scream that they were dirty, scummy peckerwoods, but I knew I was as clearly imprisoned behind the scenes as the actors outside were confined to their roles" (29,30).

Due to the pre-formed negative social challenges, Maya wished to become white and hesitated herself for being black, later she started loving things associated with her own culture. Maya Angelou attribution of black skin color as, "The age-faded color made my skin look dirty

like mud" (4) and white skin color as "I Knew God was white too" (54) is more enough to explain the racial prejudice and black subordinate position in American society. Maya thinks that turning to be a white child could make her beautiful, and she would be admired and respected equally as the other white girls in Arkansas.

Marginality Exposed in Children's Life

Marginalized children are a particular group of children dominated by the other social groups and fail to accomplish a proper social, political, economic and cultural benefits from their respective nation that emerges as a problem from the very fundamental stages of their life. The marginalized children have been given lesser importance or sometimes denied in receiving the primary perquisites from society. Even the fringe benefits for the marginalized children seems interrogative, due to the frequent change in the law of amendment, which often causes discomfort instead of promoting the well-being of the marginalized child.

The complex social code defines children more by their race, ethnicity, and culture rather than by their behavior and moral values. The discrimination and subordination of slavery had abandoned after the 13th amendment in the United States in 1865 and the 14th amendment in 1868 endorsed equal rights for every citizen and 15th amendment guaranteed the constitutional right to vote in 1870. Nevertheless, the dominance of whites in the society, workplace, and politics remained over generation to generation, and no written laws could promote the marginal status of the African American community. As an outcome, the marginalized life of South American black children, enhanced as a matter of suspicion and their future does not seem to be very promising due to migration, family disintegration, and parenting problems. The numerous encounters of racial prejudice in their day to day life affects the marginalized children in all aspects of their personality development.

Maya experienced the complex problem of marginality at her eighth grade of school when she suffered from two very painful cavities. To suppress the pain, Maya along with her grandmother Momma consulted a nearby Dentist Lincoln, a white doctor in Stamps who owns Momma a favor. Despite her inclination, the white dentist Lincoln refuses to treat Maya for being black and holds a racial policy to not to treat color people. And when Momma further argued over the dentist, he ridicules in an abusive manner, saying, "I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" and insists "raising your voice won't make me change my mind" (203). Maya Angelou symbolizes that the rise in the voices of the marginalized community would never transform the oriental thoughts of the white prejudice people, preferably, only the community development could make them exist to survive.

Maya Angelou was a part of one of the most visibly marginalized minorities to experience racial inequalities in the western world. She evokes the marginal position of African American children via shared her struggles in Southern California, an urban part of American society where she resides at a junkyard, dirtied with the remains of old cars along with homeless

teens. Angelou fantasizes the setting of her residence as "The car was an island and the junkyard a sea, and I was all alone and full of warm" (270).

Maya finds the position of the African American community at her first George Washington High school in San Francisco where the white children have better vocabularies and the southern black children lacks knowledge of words and were least in the counts. Maya Angelou found herself unable to settle down in high school and expresses her discomfort in crossing the white neighborhood, "as the streetcar traversed my ghetto I experienced a mixture of dread and trauma" (230). Social exclusion executes African American communities as one of the least literate social groups across the globe. Marginalization affects the academic achievement of southern black children, and the education standard won't sound very promising unless the racial system would completely eradicate.

Impact of Marginalization in Childhood Development

The Impact of Marginalization grieves the African American communities in numerous ways, especially of children, such as child labor, frequent migration, exploitation of wealth, unemployment, sexual abuse, personal insecurity, and poverty. In general, to interact with social issues in a certain way, it is inequitable to pass out without addressing the sociological perspective of Marxism. The Marxist theory affirms that exploitation of the wealth and poverty-stricken class are a part of an inevitable consequence of a capitalist society. Maya Angelou put the hardships of working-class people into words denoting "I thought them all hateful to have allowed themselves to be worked like oxen, and even more shameful to try to pretend that things were not as bad as they were" (131). Marx preceded the race conflict theory, known as a fundamental part of social conflict theory, whose primary purpose, eventually is to process the racial emancipation and anti-subordination which is engrained mostly in the social system of America.

Poverty, child labor, unemployment, migration, and exploitation have been closely connected and interwoven with each other, and recognized as the major problem for the marginalized groups in the African American community. Regarding Marxism, these marginalized problems are the results of the direct consequences of social inequality and also sustains a principle that a particular social group can be rich (white), only if the other social group (black) is poor. Maya Angelou's in her *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reveals the social inequality between the two communities as "the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed" (27).

The fraternity of the marginalized children relies on their family bondings and interpersonal relationships between their community people. On account of the problem of migration, these marginalized children lack proper parenting and child-rearing, which is a chief source for childhood development. The emotional development of love and affection of the

marginalized children towards their families and kinship relations is restricted ascribed to incompatible family structure.

The partial structure of Maya Angelou's family and incompatible marriage of her parents affected the emotional state of Maya and her brother Bailey. When Maya learns that her parents are still alive, she says to Bailey that "I couldn't believe that our mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children" (56). Maya believed that her parents do not belong to the environment where she belongs and feels completely strange to live with them declaring that, "He was a stranger, and if he chose to leave us with a stranger, it was all of one piece" (65).

The sexual abuse and exploitation of children have recognized as the worsen impairment ever against marginalized children and are viewed as one of the brutal impacts of the marginality. Early pregnancy is another major cause of marginalization, which denies black children to regain their childhood innocence. When Maya Angelou was eight, she went through a traumatic experience of being brutally raped by her mother's boyfriend named Freeman, and this physical and psychological distressing "act of rape on an eight-year-old body" made her mute for several years, drastically affecting her childhood days (84). Maya Angelou unveils this brutal experience as, "My legs throbbed, or rather the inside of my thighs throbbed, with the same force that Mr. Freeman's heart had beaten" (85).

Elevating the Marginalized Identity of Blacks

Social exclusion occurs in a time of history and determines the life of the individuals or collective groups according to the rational knowledge and social values shared within the nation. A large number of white American men imposed the Jim Crow laws which were oddly designed to ensure the dominance of whites in the society, directly and indirectly, to further marginalize the African American community by limiting the political, economic and social opportunities to the southern black people.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, abolished the Jim Crow law and the nourishment of the New Negro Movement of 1920 helped the global people attain an increased understanding of racial conflicts constructed within American society. Even after many beneficial laws, the marginalized people remain excluded from the social circle in participating in any form of social events and mostly gathers negative attention. All the African American marginalized group hopes are to reconstruct the pre-racial American society into a post-racial American society.

Similarly, all the marginalized characters in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* such as Maya, Bailey, Momma, Vivian, Daddy Bailey, and Uncle Willie put maximum efforts to promote their community grade in their corresponding way. Momma bears the discriminatory behavior of white Americans via simply avoiding them as much as possible.

Maya's parents Bailey avails pretense to deal with the disappointment and being an heir of a mixed-race Vivian has enough freedom to prefer a glamorous job. The subsequent illegal behavior of whites transfigured Bailey into a teenage rebellion, and Uncle Willie believed upholding discipline would flourish the future of black community people.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) displays the unspeakable sufferings of humiliation and oppression faced by marginalized children. The brutal rape of Celie by her father, Alphonso, and the infanticide of *Beloved* committed by her mother, Sethe, explains the personal insecurity of marginalized children within their family. Moreover, Richard Wright in his memoir *Black Boy* (1945), demonstrates the survival of childhood from Northern racism and segregation and pointed out the local state laws bestowed to worsen the facilities for African American children. Richard Wright's odd mission in life to study people and literature helps him to overcome white racists and makes Richard a successful author.

Likewise, Maya Angelou's passion for education, literature love and power of words helps not only to elevate her reputation and also promoted her community pride. Mrs. Flowers introduces the power of spoken words to Maya Angelou by saying that the words are beautiful on the page but powerful when spoken aloud. Mrs. Flowers appeals to Maya like "women in English novels who walked the moors with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance" and Maya admires her by saying that "she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (103). The elevation of the marginalized black children lies in their academic achievement and word power because "words mean more than what is set down on paper" (106). Maya Angelou's love for literature teaches her the "lessons in living" and the books of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the epic poem *Beowulf*, molded her knowledge. Maya became conscious of the significance of education, and with the power of education, she received a sense of self-worth and a new level of self-confidence that urged her to complete her graduation.

Maya serves as an ideal figure in elevating the marginalized identity of black Americans using the source of education, arts, and various forms of literary expression. Maya's commitment to "evening classes of drama and dance" (233) and multiple artistic expression emerges in 1930s Harlem Renaissance, which served as a consequential platform for African Americans to express their social thoughts. The Harlem Renaissance also provided economic opportunities to the black Americans, which benefitted Maya to receive the scholarship, as she acknowledges, "At fourteen I accepted a scholarship and got one for the next year as well" (232).

Maya's explains her enthusiasm towards studies as "I, along with all the other excited students, read the San Francisco papers, Time magazine, Life and everything else available to me" (231). The Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s guides a path towards the Civil Rights

Movement, which contrived the stage for Maya to explore her intellectual abilities in forthcoming days.

Conclusion

Growing up as a marginalized child is not an easy task in a society engrained with social stratification. Marginalized children have been expected much to be socially and politically aware more than any of the other age groups in their respective community. Maya Angelou's contribution to Black history and the Civil Rights movement made her not only an icon of black culture but also a great inspiration to marginalized children. Maya Angelou shares her childhood experiences by referring to the words of Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities* as "It was the best of times and worst of times..." (108). Maya Angelou's life experiences reasons out that, the disposition of marginalized children could easily trigger them to perform anti-social behavior, which can function as a barrier in the nation-building. The effects of marginality could devastate the emotions of children in a twofold manner and influences the children's moral decisions. The moral choices taken by the children belonging to marginalized communities are very significant in the nation-building and social development. Every individual has the responsibility to wipe out the malignant social divisions like class, race, religion, culture, and color ere intruding into the cognizances of children.

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