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The Others and Otherings in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

Aims: *This paper aims to study Maya Angelou's first autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, covering Maya Angelou's life from childhood until she turned fourteen, to examine the others and the process of othering that were integral to growing up as a Black woman in America during the 1970s.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study investigates how Maya Angelou's experiences reflect broader social dynamics, focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and disability within the same societal structure.*

Outcome: *The paper highlights how the societal structure of the 1970s imposed various forms of othering on individuals, particularly on those marginalized by race, gender, and disability.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper provides insights into the pervasive nature of othering within societal structures, illustrating its impact on those marginalized in American society, particularly in the context of the 1970s. This analysis suggests that the process of othering is a foundational aspect of discrimination, with implications for understanding current social challenges faced by marginalized communities. By examining Angelou's experiences, the study reveals how personal narratives can illuminate larger cultural issues and suggests that future research might explore similar themes in contemporary settings to understand the ongoing relevance of othering in shaping social identity and belonging.*

Published in 1970, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* brought fame to Maya Angelou by being nominated for the National Book Award in the same year. The text's title is taken from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy*, where the poet has used the 'caged bird' as a metaphor for all the human beings imprisoned by the antagonistic and hostile situations that keep them away from the adventures and wonders of life. The bird mentioned in the text's title is Maya Angelou, who is caged because of the otherings she encounters at different levels while growing up as a Black woman. Maya Angelou is treated like an 'other' by both the Whites and the Blacks based on her race as well as gender. As a man with a disability, Maya's uncle, Willie, is also subjected to the same fortune as Maya and is treated like an 'other' by society. This paper aims to discuss the characters' otherings at different levels.

The text begins with little Maya in the children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church reciting the poem "What you looking at me for? / I didn't come to stay…" (1). Maya fantasizes about making this announcement to the Black community of Stamps that she is not one of them and she will not stay with them for long. Under her black skin is hidden her natural white skin. A White girl with 'long and blonde hair' is imprisoned under the shell of black skin just because her cruel fairy stepmother has turned her into a "too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil" (3). She wants to come out of her 'black ugly dream' (2) and let the world know that she has not come to stay in their community for her whole life. One day, her stepmother's magic spell will be broken, and she will turn into a beautiful White child again, startling all the Blacks. Maya's denial to accept the reality and her desire to change it points out how Blacks also have Whites as the standard parameters to measure their beauty. However, looking beautiful is not the only reason for Maya's white fantasy. Several dialectics can be traced in attempting to discern Maya's white fantasy. More than looking beautiful, by being White, Maya wants to escape from the antagonism that Blacks face. On the one hand, as, Kimberly Oden says that Maya's "desire to wake from her 'black ugly dream' echoes the experience of all

blacks in the South during the Great Depression era. Just as Angelou is trapped, the entire black community is trapped by pains of racism and poverty" (6).

The displacement that Maya Angelou is talking about is the amalgamation of several reasons for alienation. Maya has been far from her parents from a very young age. She does not even remember her mother's face. Maya's yearning for her mother embodies the Black Americans' yearning for their motherland, Africa. In their hearts, they have embraced the memory of their homeland that has been passed to them from their ancestors who have seen, felt and experienced Africa before their abduction to an alien country. This sense of displacement and alienation originates in Maya's mind from the inequality she has perceived as a very small child existing in her society. She thinks that only if she becomes White she can expect respect and equality. In short, Maya wants to get respite from the inhuman treatment Blacks are subjected to. In this context, Liliane K. Arensberg has further quoted William Grier H. and Price Cobbs M., who state, "the child must know that the white world is dangerous and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him" (117). A strong sense of racial self-hatred has generated Maya's White fantasy. Her belief that she is ugly continues to haunt her through her childhood, and even as an adolescent, an inferiority complex is repeatedly haunting her because of the same belief. Beauty is a matter of concern for everybody in every society. When Maya's illusion of being a White child is broken, she starts comparing her features with the accepted notion of beauty in her own community. If Blacks deny the White parameters of beauty, then Blacks have their own definition of that very abstract word. To them, the 'small', 'velvet black skin', 'graceful' (22) Bailey is beautiful, and the 'big, elbowy and grating' (22) Maya is not beautiful. When elders pass comments about Maya's features, Maya feels sad, but Bailey, with his unconditional support for Maya, always comes forward to her rescue.

In Stamps, while living with her grandmother, Maya experiences the struggle of the Blacks very closely. In the cotton picking seasons, at daybreak, the big wagons come to take the cotton pickers to work on the plantations. The morning remains full of energy and promise. Even the children join their parents

in cotton picking. In the dying sunlight, when they return, they know that their hard work is not enough to provide them enough food. Angelou writes, "No matter how much they had picked, it wasn't enough. Their wages wouldn't even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown" (8). In return for their day-long hard work, the little wages that they receive present the economic exploitation and discrimination that the Blacks are subjected to.

Maya is talking about a society where everybody is busy reaching an identity as 'underemployed' and 'underpaid' (11), the 'starched shirts, shined shoes and shelves full of food' (11), but disabled Uncle Willie is the butt of jokes and thus belongs to the category of the other. The Black men, although strong, are others to the powerful Whites. Again, for the Black men, Black women are the powerless others. As a Black American, Maya lives in the illusion of one day coming out of her identity of the other by being White. Uncle Willie's alienation reflects Maya's alienation. Uncle Willie also wants to escape from the marginalization of being crippled when one day, he pretends to be a man with sound health in front of two school teachers. After coming back from school, one day, Maya finds that her Uncle Willie is standing erect behind the counter of their Store and having a conversation with that couple. His walking stick can nowhere be seen. In order to prove himself as an able man, he pretends to carry the burden of a family of four on his shoulders. As a child, Maya remains unable to comprehend the reason behind Uncle Willie's pretension in front of the stranger couple.

Each day in Stamps, Maya is introduced to the cruel reality of living in America as a Black. On a Thursday evening, a former sheriff, full of the air of authority, comes to Mrs. Annie Henderson's Store to inform her that some of the White boys can come there for revenge as some 'crazy nigger' (17) has messed with a White lady. Following the sheriff's warning, Mrs Annie Henderson hides her crippled son the whole night in a bin with potatoes and onions just to protect him from being lynched at the hands of some crazy White boys.

When Maya and her brother Bailey later come to live with their mother

and her husband in St. Louis, Maya does not identify with the mechanical life of the place. When Mr. Freeman, her mother's husband, uses Maya for masturbation through his touch for the first time, Maya experiences the thrill of physical contact. But she can never understand what Mr. Freeman tries to do with her. She does not understand the adults, nor does she know the motives behind their actions. The only person who understands her is her brother, who is busy in his world. In such a situation, Maya feels terribly lonely and starts reading more and more. She desires to be a boy. She reads Horatio Alger and finds that all the victorious characters in his writings are heroes. They are never heroines. Maya secretly feels in her heart that she can be good and victorious only if she can become a boy, although she is aware that her desire can never be fulfilled. Maya's desire envisions the crucial factor of gender inequality in our society and how famous writers have unknowingly helped that inequality to persist. In her extensive reading, Maya cannot find a girl with whom she can identify.

The fact is not that Maya cannot identify with her skin colour, but she cannot also identify with her gender. The stories of the famous victorious heroes create an identity crisis in Maya's mind for being a girl, and thus, she feels that her existence is worthless. Only the existence of boys is worthy and valuable. As earlier in Stamps, she desired to be a White girl for security, love, and attention; now, in the same manner, as in Mr Freeman's house, she wants to be a boy for the same purpose. Nobody tries to help Maya regain her confidence as a Black and as a girl. The supportive and friendly environment of Stamps has given Maya security even in the face of direct racial prejudice in St. Louis. Although she never directly perceives racial hatred, she is alienated and unsecured because of a lack of significant relationships. As Dolly A. McPherson has said, "Her autobiography is singularly devoid of references to rewarding peer associations during her eight-month stay in St. Louis. She not only is dislocated by her new environment but also is alienated from any supporting peer relationship" (34).

Among the apparent chaos, Black familial relationships work as a vital centre, and Maya lacks that centre in St. Louis. One day that terrible incident happens when Mr Freeman rapes eight years old Maya and threatens to kill Bailey

if she reveals the rape to anyone. Maya goes through the pain alone as she cannot afford to lose her brother. Terrified by Mr. Freeman's sexual assault, Maya becomes sick, and she feels, "I knew that I was dying and I longed for death, but I didn't want to die anywhere near Mr Freeman. I knew that even now he wouldn't have allowed death to have me unless he wished it to" (81). At the time of Mr. Freeman's trial, the voyeuristic interrogation of Maya by the lawyer in the courtroom, where the lawyer tries to blame Maya herself for her victimization, adequately testifies to the saying that Black women are dually oppressed. We cannot deny the age-old tradition of any patriarchal society that blames women themselves for their victimization. Although here the victim and the victimizer both are Black, as the victim is a woman, she has to carry the burden of blame for her victimization.

One day, when Maya has a terrible toothache, her grandmother, Annie Henderson, takes her to a White dentist to whom she had lent money once, and now she feels the doctor will see her granddaughter because of her past favor. They go to see the doctor through the backdoor. But the doctor declares with an air of racial superiority, "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (189).

Throughout the text, Maya Angelou has highlighted the many ways other things effectively work. The caged situations Maya has perceived in Southern Stamps and in St. Louis contribute to her emergence as a person with a solid self. Even when Maya was at Stamps, Angelou remembers how, at the age when the White girls learned the manners, etiquette, and decorum of higher class society, the Black girls learned household work like knitting and sewing. Even Uncle Willie encounters the same caged condition as he is also treated as an 'other' because of his disability.

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