

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Autobiographical Subject: Agency and Autonomy in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Smriti Deori

Independent Scholar, Assam, India

Abstract:

*Autobiographical writings, in case of marginalized people, provide a means of coming to terms with their identity and thereby claiming agency. The writer reconstructs her life in writing and comes to a better understanding of it. The autobiography, then, is an appeal for acceptance, a possibility to relive significant relations in her life and also to connect to a wider, empathic readership. This establishment of relations fosters confidence; entering a discourse of identity with a larger community equips the subject to disrupt the discursive dominance upon her and attain selfhood. This paper concerns itself with how the subject in Angelou's first volume of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, asserts autonomy via the autobiographical act.*

Keywords: *Autobiography, agency, relations, readership, discourse of identity, discursive dominance.*

1. Introduction

One of the primary objectives of writing autobiographies is to authenticate the self. The writer looks back at her life retrospectively and tries to locate herself as an autonomous being. The written text is thus entrusted with the task of guaranteeing the identity of the author. Autobiographical writings, in this sense, are not simply objective records of the writers' lives, reproducing with accuracy and precision the 'lives lived.' Instead there is the politics of identity governing such texts. The subject that we come across in an autobiography is a projection of the writer, a 'self' that she 'becomes' via the very act of writing. The autobiographical subject is, thus, both the writer and not her; it is, at one and the same time, a representation and a construction. Scholars have commented on how in 'mainstream' autobiographies, the autobiographical act is meant to be a celebration of the writer's unique individuality—the subject revels in presenting his life as an exemplum. However, in case of marginalized sections, where their very existence is often denied, the question of celebrating individuality does not arise. Rather the autobiographer undertakes an exploratory journey—one in which she tries to claim an identity she had been forced to despise. It is this journey—the journey of a black girl from self-hatred to self-affirmation—that we see in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

2. Objectives and Perspectives

Assertion of the 'self' is an assertion of autonomy. In black women's autobiographical works, the authors' claiming of an autonomous existence is made difficult by their complex socio-historical positions as blacks and females. Hence, they often start with a subject—confused and diminished—trying to come to terms with her racial and gender identity. Being black women, they are not only the 'Other' of the 'unified, universalizing subject', claimed by white men but also the 'other' of the 'other(s)'—black men and white women. As the 'Other' they are already displaced, but as 'the other of the other', displacement and hence alienation become twofold. With their differences, then, from both the dominant group and the "others", defining the "self" becomes increasingly difficult. In order to carve out a niche for themselves, they have to move beyond the alienation that being a woman in a man's world, black in a white world generates. They have thus to develop a definition of the self in terms that defy both racist and sexist expressions. This paper aims at examining how the autobiographical subject we encounter in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* shapes and asserts herself via the autobiographical act. We argue that the subject, by claiming intimacy with other black women, can develop and reinforce her sense of selfhood, thereby overcoming the dominance upon her.

In understanding the autobiographical subject's self construction, we make use of Stanford Friedman's ideas put forward in "Women's Autobiographical Selves." She suggests that in contrast to the emphasis on individualism in privileged male autobiographies, identification, interdependence, and community are key terms in defining the autobiographical selves of marginalized classes. For marginalized people, group identity is crucial to the affirmation of selfhood. Recognition as a group—an oppressed group—can help in constructing alternative ways of seeing themselves by developing a group identity based on common experience. Building on her idea, it follows that being minorities black women's sense of collective identity can serve as "a source of strength and transformation" (Smith 75). To analyze how this sense of a common group identity can be generated through the autobiographical act we apply feminist critic Rita Felski's ideas on feminist confession put forward in "On Confession." According to Felski,

The longing for intimacy emerges as a defining feature of the feminist confession at two interconnected levels: the actual representation of the author's own personal relationships and the relationship between author and reader established by the textthe confession is a cry for love, allowing the author to express powerful emotional feelings to an unknown reader without fear of rejection. The writing self is profoundly dependent upon the reader for validation, specifically the projected community of female readers who will understand, sympathize, and identify with the author's emotions and experiences. . . . Writing becomes both a medium of, and a substitute for, personal relations (Smith 90).

The autobiographical act, thus, can function as a means of reliving one's personal relations (and thereby gaining affirmation) through representing them in the text and can at the same time, make for the absence of them by allowing the writer to connect to her imagined community of readers who would also reinforce selfhood by identifying with her. This sense of identity with a larger community helps overcome the dominance faced and thereby in finding a voice of her own. In this context we would refer to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's ideas. According to Henderson, black women's "complex social, historical, and cultural positionality which, in effect, constitutes black female subjectivity" makes black women speak in a "dialogic of differences based on this complex subjectivity" (Gates 119). 'Othered' by all, black women speak in a discourse of difference not only to white men but also to black men and white women. However, black women also speak in a "dialectic of identity with those aspects of the self shared" (Gates 119) with the other(s). She, therefore, speaks in a discourse of gender difference but racial identity with black men, and gender identity but racial difference with white women. Henderson goes on to suggest that "it is this notion of discursive difference and identity underlying the simultaneity of discourse which typically characterizes black women's writings" (Gates 120). It is through the 'dialogic of difference' and 'dialectic of identity' which characterize the black woman's subjectivity as well her discourse that she writes and constructs herself. Black women writers enter into a 'dialogue' with the discourses of the other(s) and disrupt and revise them and thereby overcome discursive oppression.

3. Discussion of *Caged Bird*

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* the prologue highlights the precarious position of the autobiographer as a black woman. White women tend to generalize femininity in terms of their essential qualities. Black men too hanker after the white model of feminine beauty. This discourse on femininity that both white women and black men enter into serves to subjugate the subject. Unable to conform to 'normative' femininity, Maya's sense of alienation, her 'otherness' is heightened. And she is forced to build her counter image on the ideal qualities of the "White Lady". She feels physically inadequate in not being 'gifted' with white standards of beauty, thereby developing a sense of shame at her own bodily features. It is this sense of self-hatred that makes the young child fantasize about transforming into a 'white beauty':

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must of been a Chinaman" (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty (Angelou 2).

Young Maya, thus, distances herself from what she considers an ugly body. The child experiences herself as a diminished individual within racist and sexist confinements. But the mature Angelou looking back at the event is able to understand the child's predicament and hence is able to come to terms with herself. By the end of the prologue the voice of the confused child is replaced by that of the understanding woman,

If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult (Angelou 4).

By rejecting the awareness of displacement as an "unnecessary insult", the mature Angelou disrupts the discourse on femininity that had occasioned displacement in the first place. In this disruption and thereby her own self-inscription, Angelou is aided by retrospectively claiming intimacy with the black female audience of Stamps, and by looking forward to the black female readers of her autobiography. The "you" with which she starts the prologue, "What you looking at me for?" (Angelou 1) at once establishes this affinity. The direct address invites the addressees to participate in the subject's experiencing of her trauma. This 'you' is at once the people in the church represented in the text and the imagined readers of the same. Young Maya relates herself to the people at the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and this gives a boost to her sense of self. Written down in *Caged Bird* "you" addresses mature Angelou's black female readership, appealing to them to recall their own similar experiences and thus identify with her. Identification with women who share her plight gives validity to her 'being', thereby making it possible to overcome the diminishment that the subject experiences.

As Angelou proceeds with the narration of her life there is a parallel development in her personality. Through various encounters with racial subjugation and sense of inferiority arising from non-conformity with white standards, there is a gradual understanding of self. In this process of self discovery, the personal relations represented in the text reinforce the self's progressive journey. Momma is one such person who contributes significantly in Maya's growth. Through her Maya learns to survive racial oppression, to assert her dignity, without any violent protest, in the face of crippling humiliation. In the incidence of the "powhitetrash" girls, Mrs. Annie Henderson instills in her a sense of pride. Though the young child fails to understand at the time, she has unconsciously mastered the lesson—the mature Angelou knows that victory can be judged in terms of the ability to hold on to one's own sense of dignity in the face of racist oppression.

Throughout we see the mystic understanding amongst women coming out as a significant force in asserting one's selfhood. After the incidence of the rape by her mother's boyfriend, Marguerite retreats into the world of silence. The physical violence of the black woman, in this case a child, by a black man shows how she is "engendered in the experiencing of race". Young Maya's violator sees

her only as someone belonging to the opposite sex. Thus violated by a man of her own race—one who assumed a father figure for her—the child is traumatized and guilt-ridden. The protective mechanism she adapts is to cocoon herself in a world of silence.

I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey (Angelou 87).

We see here how the child Maya is traumatized to the extent of fearing to speak. She is released from this self-built cage of isolation only with the help of Mrs. Flowers. This 'lady' manages the almost impossible task of bringing her out of her reticence. Her relationship with Maya opens new doors for the young child. She gifts Maya the world of books, assures her of her individuality, and makes her feel wanted:

I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson (Angelou 101).

Bertha Flowers frees the thwarted child from her sense of insecurity and identity crisis. By restoring Maya's sense of pride, she contributes to the growing development of her personality. This respect and affirmation of her being from an older person—one she is in awe of—instills positivity in her and removes the guilt that resulted from being raped. Mrs. Flowers also instills black racial pride in her, "she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (Angelou 95).

Similarly her friendship with Louise introduces Maya to the world of girly camaraderie, "At last I began to comprehend what girls giggled about" (Angelou 142). Angelou relates how through this relationship she begins to come out of her reticence, delighted at the fact that she too could have a friend. The friendship occasions a distinctive development in the young girl. The breaking of the cocoon of introversion, "Naturally I laughed too" (Angelou 142), would go a long way in the attainment of selfhood.

The assertion of her dignity as a unique individual comes out most glaringly in the incident where Mrs. Viola Cullinan calls her "Mary" instead of Marguerite. The white lady wants to have control over her by assuming control of her name. The autobiographical subject at this point realizes that intricately connected to her identity is her name, "imagine letting some white woman rename you for her convenience" (Angelou 109). Here Angelou speaks in a discourse of gender identity but racial difference in relation to the white 'lady'. When the white woman refuses to give due recognition to that identity—something she has learnt to cherish—she reacts by breaking Mrs. Cullinan's most cherished dish. This is a marked step towards the assertive self that would emerge by the end of the autobiography. Maya is no longer the child in the prologue who had to create an alternate white self in order to conform to stereotypical notions of beauty. She no longer feels the need to oblige to the white woman's demands upon her.

I dropped the empty serving tray. When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, "Mary!" I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor (Angelou 110).

Breaking the utensils here is an act of resistance. Destroying her most prized things is an avengement for the attempted destruction of her sense of identity. Thus Maya at this point in her life has gained enough strength to disrupt the white woman's attempts to have discursive control over her by naming her. The episode ends with the autobiographer firmly asserting, "My name wasn't Mary" (Angelou 111).

As Maya keeps on growing, she equips herself to confront the racist and sexist world around her. Her outlook broadens as she comes out of the closed world of Stamps, Arkansas and faces the larger world outside. As Remus Bejan points out, the junkyard of abandoned cars in California where she finds herself in the midst of homeless, abandoned children from different races signals the gaining of "self-confidence, psychological openness, pluralistic and non-racist perspectives." (Bloom 153).

This is in contrast to her earlier inability to see whites as human beings. By the end of the book, she is ready to meet the White world not with hatred or vengeance, but with a pride in her own identity as a Black woman. When her repeated attempts for securing a job interview are given no consideration by the white secretary of the San Francisco street-car company, she is not filled with anger:

The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites . . . I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer (Angelou 267).

Rather she simply uses the flagrant technique of masking or lying employed by the Black community. Lying in the black community is an art—an art that they master or are forced to master as a means of resistance in a racist society. Angelou writes,

[T]he standard questions reminded me of the necessity for dexterous lying (Angelou 269).

And she does lye with dexterity. The autobiographer recollects how she "wrote quickly the fable of Marguerite Johnson, aged nineteen, former companion and driver for Mrs. Annie Henderson (a White Lady) in Stamps, Arkansas" (Angelou 269). Maya gets the job. Thus through the discourse of identity with the black community, by such interventionist acts as lying, she disrupts the dominant white society's discourse. And here again, standing by her side as a staunch supporter is another woman—her mother, Vivian Baxter. It is she who encourages Maya to get the job of her choice, to fight till her racially prejudiced employers are forced to employ her as the first black woman conductor.

Vivian Baxter assures Maya that she is beautiful, that every woman is beautiful, and openly guides her in understanding her maturing physicality. The last pages of Angelou's first volume of autobiography deal with the teenager trying to comprehend her body, her sexuality. She faces a major identity crisis at this stage too. Comparing her own to the visibly maturing bodies of other girls, she starts believing that she lacks the essential qualities of a woman—"For a sixteen-year-old my breasts were sadly undeveloped" (Angelou 274). Indeed she starts fearing that she might turn up to be a lesbian—"Then the question began to live under my blankets: How did lesbianism begin? What were the symptoms?" (Angelou 274). In order to test her own sexuality, she engages in an abrupt physical affair with a young man and gets pregnant. The last pages deal with her sense of insecurity at the prospect of mothering an 'illegitimate' child. But Vivian and her family turn out to be freely acceptant of the child,

There was no overt or subtle condemnation (Angelou 287).

This acceptance drives away the guilt that she had been feeling. At the end of the autobiographical voyage, the teenaged Maya becomes a mother herself and here again it is her own mother, Vivian who reassures her of her capacity for motherhood, Mother whispered, "See, you don't have to think about the right thing. If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking (Angelou 289).

The first volume of autobiography ends with Marguerite, a confident mother who is aware of her duties towards her child. She has successfully shed off her timidities and is capable of claiming agency. In this confident mother, Angelou finally locates the independent being that has been evolving throughout.

4. Conclusion

We can, then, conclude that the autobiographical act aids in the writer's attainment of selfhood by occasioning the recollection of life events and creating the possibility of connecting to readers yet unknown to her. It makes her look back at her life and thereby gain a better understanding of it. The process of self-affirmation is buttressed by the writer's sense of identification with the black women represented in the autobiographical text and with the projected community of black female readers. By thus gaining strength she is able to overcome her diminishment as the 'other', disrupt the discursive dominance upon her and claim agency. Angelou at the end of the autobiographical voyage relates her subject position to a confident mother, one who has learnt to be proud of her roots. The writer, by reliving the first sixteen years of her life, in a way by reconstructing it, comes to a better understanding of her teenaged self.

5. References

- i. Angelou, Maya. (2009). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- ii. Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. (1990). *Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition*. In Henry Louis Gates (Ed.), *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 116-138). New York: Meridian Book.
- iii. Friedman, Susan Stanford. (1998). *Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice*. In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Eds.), *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader*(pp.72-82).Madison: The U of Wisconsin P.
- iv. Felski, Rita. (1998). *On Confession*. In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Eds.), *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader* (pp. 83-95). Madison: The U of Wisconsin P.
- v. Bejan, Remus. (2009). *Nigrescence: Mapping the Journey in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. InHarold Bloom (Ed.), *Maya Angelou* (pp. 147-155). New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism.