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**- Chief & Executive Editor**



## Expression of Self-Emancipation in 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' by Maya Angelou

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### Abstract:

The autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* focuses on Maya Angelou's experience growing up black in the American South. She uses her autobiography to explore subjects such as self- [identity](#), [rape](#), racism, and [literacy](#). She also writes in new ways about women's lives in a male-dominated society. Her race, violence, discrimination, exploitation, oppression and degradation she faced as a result of her race, played an integral role in shaping her as a person and as an artist. The memoir also focuses on the Black people's resistance to racism and Maya Angelou's search for her own identity, her fight against racism, violence, exploitation and oppression and how she tried to overcome all these hardships and dangers and expressed her self-emancipation.

### Introduction:

Autobiography is a prominent genre of literature. An Autobiography expresses the self-emancipation of its author. Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines autobiography as, "A narrative account of an extended period of some person's life, written by, or presented as having been written by, that person; or the practice of writing such works." Autobiography is the form of literature which gives us the account of the writer. But it also talks about the community where the author belongs. It focuses on all the problems faced by the community itself though it deals with a particular person; because this literary genre becomes the voice of suppressed people.

Black people of the USA are brought from Africa as slaves. They had not allotted the freedom like Dalits in India. Presently, African-American literature got its important place in American literature. It had its roots in slave narratives; and these narratives developed the Black autobiographies. The literature of Blacks primarily consisted of memories by people who had escaped from slavery; slave narrative concerned with account of life under slavery and path of justice and redemption to freedom. Black autobiographies deals with black culture, racism, a sense of home, segregation, migration, feminism, and more. The first Black writer is [Phillis Wheatley](#) who was a slave. The next major work written by a slave was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which was published in 1845, after the author of this book escaped from slavery in second attempt.

Black women also contributed in the slave narrative. Woman has got the secondary position in our patriarchal society. The subordinate position of woman began with sacred texts and the philosophers and religious saints and other scholars supported to the woman's secondary status in the society. Simone De Beauvoir writes in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born but rather becomes a woman..... It is civilization that produces this creature." The gender identity discriminate woman and black woman is doubly marginalized because of she is a woman and she is a black.

The Black woman in America is like a Dalit woman in India as she did not have any right of liberty. Black lady had not legal right on her own children, on her personal life. She was sexually and physically harassed by the both White and Black men. She had to live under the rule of her White master. The autobiographers had to struggle against the inhuman tradition of racism, exploitation and oppression.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first of seven autobiographical works by American writer Maya Angelou, published in 1969. She has woven her early life story with poetic descriptions that capture the young voice which tells the tale, but she also offers the adult perspective of the writer reminiscing about her life. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* offers solid character descriptions, a well- defined plot, and is told in a voice that belongs solidly to a woman who has survived racism, abandonment, displacement, and numerous other hardships in her life.

*Caged Bird* was nominated for a [National Book Award](#) in 1970 and remained on [The New York Times paperback bestseller list](#) for two years. It has been used in educational settings from high schools to universities, and the book has been celebrated for creating new literary avenues for the American memoir. However, the book's graphic depiction of childhood rape, racism, and sexuality has caused it to be challenged or banned in some schools and libraries.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* encompasses the first sixteen years of Maya Angelou's life. The rest of her tale spans five volumes following this first award-winning novel. Maya, the younger version of Angelou and the book's central character, has been called "a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America". Angelou's description of being raped as an eight-year-old child overwhelms the book, although it is presented briefly in the text. Another metaphor that, of a bird struggling to escape its cage is a central image throughout the work, which consists of "a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression". Angelou's treatment of racism provides a thematic unity to the book. Literacy and the power of words help young Maya cope with her bewildering world; books become her refuge as she works through her trauma.

### Objectives:

1. To study the historical, racial and religious background of black people in America.
2. To study the consequences of racism, exploitation and oppression on writer and how she tried to emancipate from these hardships.
3. To trace the autobiographical expression of black women in black literature.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome [racism](#) and [trauma](#). The book begins when three-year-old Maya and her older brother are sent to [Stamps, Arkansas](#), to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of 16. In the course of *Caged Bird*, Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an [inferiority complex](#) into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* follows Marguerite's (called "My" or "Maya" by her brother) life from the age of three to seventeen and the struggles she faces – particularly with [racism](#) and self-affirmation – in the [Southern United States](#). Abandoned by their parents, Maya and her older brother Bailey are sent to live with their paternal grandmother (Momma) and disabled uncle (Uncle Willie) in [Stamps, Arkansas](#). Maya and Bailey are haunted by their

parents' abandonment throughout the book – they travel alone, are labeled like baggage, and later accepted in the community.

The community of [Stamps, Arkansas](#), is the setting for a large portion of the book. Many of the problems Maya encounters in her childhood stem from the overt racism of her white neighbors and the subliminal awareness of race relations weaved in society. Although Momma is relatively wealthy because she owns the general store at the heart of Stamps' Black community, the white children of their town hassle Maya's family relentlessly. One of these "powhitetrash" girls, for example, reveals her pubic hair to Momma in a humiliating incident which leaves Maya, watching from a distance, indignant and furious. Early in the book, Momma hides Uncle Willie in a vegetable bin to protect him from [Ku Klux Klan](#) raiders, where he moans and groans under the potatoes throughout the night. Maya has to endure the insult of her name being changed to Mary by a racist employer. A white speaker at her eighth grade graduation ceremony disparages the Black audience by suggesting that they have limited job opportunities. A white dentist refuses to treat Maya's rotting tooth, even when Momma reminds him that she had loaned him money during the [Depression](#). The Black community of Stamps enjoys a moment of racial victory when they listen to the radio broadcast of [Joe Louis](#)'s championship fight, but generally, they feel the heavy weight of racist oppression.

A turning point in the book occurs when Maya and Bailey's father unexpectedly appears in Stamps. He takes the two children with him when he departs, but leaves them with their mother in [St. Louis, Missouri](#). Eight-year-old Maya is sexually abused and raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. He is found guilty during the trial, but escapes jail time and is murdered, presumably by Maya's uncles. Maya feels guilty and withdraws from everyone but her brother. Even after returning to Stamps, Maya remains reclusive and nearly mute until she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers, "the aristocrat of Black Stamps," who encourages her through books and communication to regain her voice and soul. This coaxes Maya out of her shell.

Later, Momma decides to send her grandchildren to their mother in [San Francisco, California](#), to protect them from the dangers of racism in Stamps. Maya attends [George Washington High School](#) and studies dance and drama on a scholarship at the [California Labor School](#). Before graduating, she becomes the first Black female [cable car](#) conductor in San Francisco. While still in high school, Maya visits her father in southern California one summer and has some experiences pivotal to her development. She drives a car for the first time when she must transport her intoxicated father home from an excursion to Mexico. She experiences homelessness for a short time after a fight with her father's girlfriend.

During Maya's final year of high school, she worries that she might be a [lesbian](#) (which she confuses due to her sexual inexperience with the belief that lesbians are also [hermaphrodites](#)). She ultimately initiates sexual intercourse with a teenage boy. She becomes pregnant, which on the advice of her brother, she hides from her family until her eighth month of pregnancy in order to graduate from high school. Maya gives birth at the end of the book.

Maya confronts the insidious effects of racism and segregation in America at a very young age. She internalizes the idea that blond hair is beautiful and that she is a fat black girl trapped in a nightmare. Stamps, Arkansas, is so thoroughly segregated that as a child Maya does not quite believe that white people exist. As Maya gets older, she is confronted by more overt and personal incidents of racism, such as a white speaker's condescending address at her eighth-



grade graduation, her white boss's insistence on calling her Mary, and a white dentist's refusal to treat her. The importance of Joe Louis's world championship boxing match to the black community reveals the dearth of publicly recognized African American heroes. It also demonstrates the desperate nature of the black community's hope for vindication through the athletic triumph of one man. These unjust social realities confine and demean Maya and her relatives. She comes to learn how the pressures of living in a thoroughly racist society have profoundly shaped the character of her family members, and she strives to surmount them.

Maya says, "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 scene as the actors outside were confined to their roles" (Angelou, 25). Maya couldn't understand why the girls were mocking Momma or why Momma made no attempt to get away from them. This event to her was an act of hate and jealousy, not one of racism and discrimination.

Through hate, discrimination, sexism, racism, and all else, Maya triumphs and brings hope to not only her, but to the black race as a whole. She brings hope that all blacks are capable and having persistence and dedication pays off in the end. She recognizes injustices, and instead of letting it impact her life negatively, she makes positive impacts on her life through the injustices.

Maya's journey throughout the book is one of true strength and empowerment. She fought racism, even when she didn't understand what it was. Discrimination strengthened her before she had graduated eighth grade. She turned hate into motivation and ambition. The racism and discrimination Maya faced throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, affected her attitude, personality, and overall outlook on life in a positive way.

Black peoples' resistance to racism takes many forms in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Momma maintains her dignity by seeing things realistically and keeping to herself. Big Bailey buys flashy clothes and drives a fancy car to proclaim his worth and runs around with women to assert his masculinity in the face of dehumanizing and emasculating racism. Daddy Clidell's friends learn to use white peoples' prejudice against them in elaborate and lucrative cons. Vivian's family cultivates toughness and establishes connections to underground forces that deter any harassment. Maya first experiments with resistance when she breaks her white employer's heirloom china. Her bravest act of defiance happens when she becomes the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Blacks also used the church as a venue of subversive resistance. At the revival, the preacher gives a thinly veiled sermon criticizing whites' charity, and the community revels in the idea of white people burning in hell for their actions.

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