Chapter I

Introduction

Maya Angelou’s poetry is a painful process of recalling and remembering a past that is broken into fragments. Angelou’s poetry will be studied as deeply personal explorations of the strategies for survival that the African-American woman uses in order to free herself from being “caged”. Borrowed from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy”, published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* in 1899, the term “caged bird” stands for the African-American female who learns to cope and fight against the racist attitudes and realities that exist in the segregated South. According to Angelou the act of singing or freely expressing oneself through poetry sets a person free. While the “caged bird” is symbolic of the African-American race being denied its freedom by its skin color, the “phenomenal woman”, a term taken from the poem “Phenomenal Woman” is symbolic of the journey undertaken by the “caged bird” in its quest for self-knowledge and self-identity in order to become “phenomenal”. In other words, the image of the “caged bird” and “phenomenal woman” signify Angelou’s journey from confused child to accomplished adult, from the private sphere of being caged to the public
sphere of “helping African-American people to rise above poverty, prejudice and lack of power” (Nelson 16).

To understand Angelou’s poetic work one must understand her personal life as narrated in her autobiographies because her poems run parallel to her own history of racial oppression and survival; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry like Christmas* (1976), and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981). Angelou’s poetry is not only relevant to her autobiographical themes but the situations experienced and the community of characters that influenced and encouraged her also provided Angelou with the incentive to “sing of freedom”.

Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) is a testimony to her journey beyond the pain and displacement of her beginnings (Lupton 14). She narrates her growing up years in the racially segregated South where her love of the church can be partly attributed to her grandmother’s religious devotion followed by her reunion with her mother in St. Louis. Lisa Giberson’s *Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice*, tells one that living “in St. Louis, the eight-year old Angelou was raped by Mr. Freeman, her mother’s boyfriend. The rape, criminal trial and consequent murder of the rapist result in Angelou’s silence”. The poem
"Born That Way" from the volume *I Shall not be Moved*, gives one an insight into the pain that she went through,

Childhood whoring fitted her
For deceit. Daddy had been a
Fondler. Soft lipped mouthings,
Soft lapped rubbings.
A smile for pretty shoes,
A kiss could earn a dress.
And a private telephone
Was worth the biggest old caress.

As far as possible, she strove
For them all. Arching her small
Frame and grunting
Prettily, her
Fingers counting the roses
In the wallpaper. (7-14, 23-28)

Angelou has been likened to “a songless bird”, who “gives up all singing, all sound during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she is mute, locked in a speechless body, as she has willed it” (Lupton 67). This strong feeling of imprisonment is expressed in the poem “Caged Bird” which Angelou takes from Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s 1896 poem, “Sympathy”,

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings-
I know why the caged bird sings. (15-21)
Just as in Dunbar’s poem, the bruised bird invokes God so that he might be released, Angelou hints at the possibility of her tune being heard as far as “the distant hill”,

The caged bird sings
With a fearful trill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom. (15-22)

During this self-imposed silence, Angelou returned to Stamps where, her grandmother introduced her to the beautiful and educated Mrs. Flowers. Angelou was liberated from her “caged” silence only after Mrs. Flowers helped her release her voice. Listening to Mrs. Flowers read aloud, Angelou described the woman’s voice as singing: “Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing”. (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 84) In “Just for a Time” from her collection And Still I Rise, Angelou reflects on Mrs. Flowers:

You were the image of
Everything
That caused me to sing.
I don’t like reminiscing
Nostalgia is not my forte
I don’t spill tears
On yesterday’s years
But honesty makes me say,
You were a precious pearl (8-16)
Angelou admired “the black aristocrat Bertha Flowers for her ability to act, with the most beautiful of black skins, in a manner Angelou had thought possible only for a white person” (Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 45). Flower’s instruction in literature and tolerance opened Angelou’s eyes to the realization that “mastery of language and pride in self are not limited to those of light skin” (Bloom, 45).

The introduction to Mrs. Flowers is considered significant because it not only helped Angelou come out of her silence but it also taught her to grow as an individual. Thus, like a “caged bird” opening its throat to sing, Angelou is able to control and find her voice again. “Bear in mind,” Mrs. Flowers tells Angelou, “language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals...Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 82).

While Mrs. Flowers laid the groundwork for her appreciation of the poetic word, it was her mother Vivian Baxter who gave Angelou the desired push into womanhood and maturity. Angelou not only loved her mother’s beauty but also loved the way her mother carried herself in society. Vivian Baxter taught Angelou values that were both feminine and strong. She helped guide her daughter through motherhood: a time
that was crucial for Angelou when she was pregnant as an unwed mother. Attributing her love for her mother Angelou writes about her in “Mother, a Cradle to Hold Me”,

The way you posed your head  
So that the light could caress your face  
When you put your fingers on my hand  
And your hand on my arm,  
I was struck with a sense of health  
Of strength and very good fortune (6-10)

Accepting motherhood was a means by which Angelou could take full control of her life and thus succeed in freeing herself from the cage, thus affirming what the critic Karla F.C. Halloway had to say about motherhood as being “central to African-American women writers. It is a theme that not only asserts the ability to create life, but a principle that emerges as central to feminine potential in religion, politics, economics and social spheres”. (28-29)

To define a new life for herself and her two-month old son, Angelou had to look for a job that would bring her recognition, money and independence. *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) carefully recounts Angelou’s “pursuit of economic stability as she moved from job to job from a Creole cook, to dancing, to prostitute”. (Lupton 75) In this autobiography, Angelou is not only exposed to a number of risky relationships with men but also endangers the safety of her son who was kidnapped by a baby sitter. In other words, *Gather Together in My Name*
depicts a single mother’s slide down the social ladder into poverty and crime. In “A Good Woman Feeling Bad” from her poetic work, Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing? Angelou considers “some of the blues she’s had” thus:

Bitterness thick on
A rankling tongue,
A psalm to love that’s
Left unsung,
............... 
All riddles are blues
And all blues are sad,
And I’m only mentioning
Some blues I’ve had. (11-14, 19-22)

However, in a promise to reclaim her innocence, Angelou abandons her degenerate life and vows to return with her son to her mother’s protection. While “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first-person account of a child who becomes a mother, Gather Together in My Name is the first person account of that mother and her struggle to survive as a black woman in white America”. (Lupton 76)

Angelou’s third and fourth autobiographies, Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry like Christmas (1976) and The Heart of a Woman (1981) covers her early dancing and singing career and her emergence as a writer and a political activist, along with her failed marriages. The narratives typify these years as Angelou’s most productive years as a writer and poet. She acted off-Broadway, worked for Martin Luther King Jr. and accepted a leadership role to become Northern Coordinator of the
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She also became close friends with Malcolm X and even helped him build a new civil rights organization, the Organization of African-American Unity. Honoring Malcolm X for his astute fight for unity and equality, Angelou eulogizes him in the poem “To a Freedom fighter”,

You drink a bitter draught.
I sip the tears your eyes fight to hold,
A cup of lees, of henbane steeped in chaff.
Your breast is hot,
Your anger black and cold,
Through evening’s rest, you dream,
I hear the moans, you die a thousands’ death.
When cane straps flog the body
dark and lean, you feel the blow.
I hear it in your breath. (1-10)

Angelou’s association with the two great personalities symbolizes her flight from the private sphere of her caged silence to the public sphere of being able to sing as far as “the distant hill” (Caged Bird). Lamenting the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, Angelou laments in her poem “My Guilt” from the volume Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diiie,

My guilt is “slavery’s chains,” too long
the clang of iron falls down the years.
This brother’s sold, this sister’s gone,
Is bitter wax, lining my ears.
My guilt made music with the tears.

My crime is “heroes, dead and gone,“
Dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,
Dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
They fought too hard, they loved too well.
My crime is I’m alive to tell. (1-5, 6-10)
Angelou was successful in carving a niche for herself by writing articles, short stories, poetry, plays, lecturing at universities around the country and serving on various committees. Besides appearing in a role in the television mini-series, *Roots* in 1977, Angelou’s “Georgia Georgia” was also the first original script by an African-American woman to be produced. Conversely, in discussing her marriage, Harold Bloom states that in several interviews, Angelou refused to talk about how many times she had been married. The poem “Men” taken from, *And Still I Rise* encapsulates how she feels about the men whom she was married to:

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Men
One day they hold you in the
Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you
Were the last raw egg in the world. Then
They tighten up. Just a little. The
First squeeze is nice. A quick hug.

More. The hurt begins. Wrench out a
Smile that slides around the fear. When the
Air disappears,
Your mind pops, exploding fiercely, briefly,
Like the head of a kitchen match. Shattered. (15-20, 22-26)
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Angelou further explains, “The reason is that the number would make me appear to be frivolous. But in each marriage I brought all of myself and put in all my energy and loyalty, excitement, fidelity and hard work.” *(Bloom’s Bio Critiques: Maya Angelou* 40). Angelou also saw marriage as the answer to her own sense of dislocation and thus she exudes her
“secret wooing” in the poem “In a Time” from the volume Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diiie,

In a time of secret wooing
Today prepares tomorrow’s ruin
Left knows not what right is doing
My heart is torn asunder.

In a time of furtive sighs
Sweet hellos and sad goodbyes
Half-truths told and entire lies
My conscience echoes thunder.

In a time when kingdoms come
Joy is brief as summer’s fun
Happiness its race has run
Then pain stalks in to plunder.(1-12)

Thus, the meeting point of Angelou’s poetry and her autobiographies is exemplified “as a journey or an odyssey in a quest for self-knowledge, self-identity and ‘home’” (Nelson 16). Her autobiographies enable the reader to comprehend her poetry better.

In addition, the reason that Angelou chose to appreciate the community of strong women characters instead of the male characters was because with the exception, of her brother, the men in Angelou’s life did not offer her any guidance as she matured into womanhood. In Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings Kurkowski described the men in Angelou’s life as “cripples, rapists, thugs, and absent fathers”. While Angelou’s father is represented as the absent father, “the man who is not there for his children, literally and
figuratively”. (Lupton 60-61) her uncle, who could have been a better father, did not succeed in filling the absence because he was a cripple and was constantly in “solitude”. The poem “Willie” is dedicated to him. Taken from her poetic work And Still I Rise, Angelou remembers him,

Willie was a man without fame,
Hardly anybody knew his name.
Crippled and limping, always walking lame,
.................................................................
Solitude was the climate in his bed,
Pain echoed in the steps of his tread. (1-3, 6-8)

Angelou’s brother, Bailey has however been presented by her as being the greatest person in her world, who loved and understood her. To acknowledge her love for Bailey, Angelou chose rather to use the name that her brother gave her. Having borrowed a variation of her first husband’s surname, “Tosh Angelos”, and adopting her brother’s nickname for her, “Maya” for Marguerite and “my” for my sister, Marguerite Johnson finally legally became Maya Angelou. Bailey was not just a confidante but also became the wings that enabled Angelou to rise above the cruel experience of being raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman thus helping her regain the courage to live and love again.

In both the poems, “Kin”, taken from And Still I rise and “Family Affairs” taken from Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing? Angelou pays tribute to her brother. While in “Kin” Angelou speaks of their “silent walks” and “long talks”,
We were entwined in red rings
Of blood and loneliness before
The first snows fell

I will remember silent walks in
Southern woods and long talks
In low voices
Shielding meaning from the big ears
Of overcurious adults.(1-3, 17-21)

in “Family Affairs” Angelou remembers him for helping her through her
“centuries of horror”,

Tired now of pedestal existence
For fear of flying
And vertigo, you descend
And step lightly over
My centuries of horror
And take my hand.
Smiling, call me
Sister. (21-28)

The “phenomenal woman” according to Angelou, “should be
tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and the... woman warrior who
is armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate
victory” (Would’n’t Take Nothing For My Journey, 7). When discussing
women’s strength and courage, Maxine Hong Kingston’s well known
novel The Woman Warrior takes up this image. Kingston writes of her
childhood aspirations to become a “woman warrior”. In the text, she
succeeds and eventually becomes a military leader whose “female”
distractions such as menstruation and pregnancy enhances rather than
inhibits her skills. (qtd. in Whitson 11) As a result Angelou and Kingston
are not dissimilar. They both lay emphasis upon the importance of individuality and freedom for the “woman warrior”. Angelou’s poetry asserts the courage, audacity, strength and often the creative and wilful spirit of the “phenomenal woman”. It is this very courage and strength of character that assures her of being a “phenomenally, phenomenal woman”. Thus in “Phenomenal Woman”, Angelou sings aloud:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies,  
I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I’m telling lies.  
I say,  
It’s in the reach of my arms,  
The span of my hips  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me  

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It’s the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me.(1-29)  

In discussing the role of the “phenomenal woman”, Angelou weaves into this image other images of exploitations that have been borne
by the African-American woman throughout her history. Taken from her poetic work, *And Still I Rise*, "Woman Work" confers the African-American woman’s subjugation,

I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I’ve got the shirts to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut

........................................
Storm, blow me from here
With your fiercest wind
Let me float across the sky
Till I can rest again. (7-11, 19-22)

Angelou’s notion of oppression of the African-American woman produces the image of a woman who is domesticated, family bound, traditionally tied, victimized and restrained in her creative abilities, the ‘caged bird’ as it were. It may be understood thus that Angelou’s passage from childhood to adulthood has never been an easy one. The metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage connotes a confinement both physical and emotional, resulting from racism and oppression.

At this juncture one might turn to W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness” where in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, he states that

The negro...is gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, his double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the type of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness (95-96)
“Double consciousness” is an awareness of one’s self as well as an awareness of how others perceive that self. Although in extreme cases, “double consciousness” resides in conforming and changing one’s identity to that of how others perceive the self, it is also an initiating factor that brings relief in the kind of sensitivity that defines Maya Angelou’s stance as an individual and as a poet and her ability to see herself as she really is.

Earlier in her life, this sensitivity makes Angelou unhappy with the image of her African-American community because she too views herself and her community through the eyes of the predominantly white culture. She tries at first to disentangle herself from the African-American community, and uses her imagination to dream of being white with blond hair and blue eyes. But with her experience in a larger world, Angelou determines to break free from the cage of a negative kind of “double consciousness” to a more positive one where she discovers as Lisa Giberson says “a world” where she “identifies with the writing and characters of literature” (Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice). Thus in the poem “Equality” she says,

Take the blinders from your vision,
Take the padding from your ears,
And confess you’ve heard me crying,
And admit you’ve seen my tears.

Hear the tempo so compelling,
Hear the blood throb in my veins.
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,
And the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality and I will be free. (21-30)

Again, Angelou did not stop here; she went on to work in various capacities and it was through the experiences that she experienced in life that helped her to teach others about survival and joy. A year before the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* a wave of feminism began to surge in America called the New Women’s Movement. (Lupton 70) This revival of feminism was indebted to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s with its grassroots appeal for social change. Angelou arrived on the literary scene at the moment when African-American women had started creating small discussion groups to share their experiences of oppression under the patriarchal order. Angelou herself worked with the women organization of the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH).

The autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the poem “Caged Bird” verify that the image of the “caged bird” has specific application to women. The image itself centres on strong women characters specially the women who aided her in her journey through young adulthood. However, Angelou’s support for the feminist cause has been ambivalent. She states that African-American women are more self-
reliant than white women. She also believes in equal pay, equal respect, and equal responsibility for everyone and goes on to explain “I am a feminist. I’ve been female for a long time now. I’d be stupid not to be on my own side”. (Lupton 71) In view of that, Angelou explicates this feeling of equality in the poem “Human Family”,

I note the obvious differences in the human family. Some of us are serious, some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived as true profundity, and others claim they really live the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones can confuse, bemuse, delight, brown and pink and beige and purple, tan and blue and white.

I note the obvious differences between each sort and type, but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike. (1-12, 33-36)

Being on her own side therefore the ‘caged bird’ is an important dimension of the “phenomenal woman”, who speaks of bondage and yet sings of hope, and who has chosen to face reality and not allow herself to be cowed down by it. Thus the ‘caged bird’ image is an important dimension of the “phenomenal woman”, the other aspect of the African-American woman that speaks of bondage and yet sings of hope. This dissertation will seek to contextualize the two images within the poetry of
Maya Angelou. Though they seem to be opposed to each other they are however organic to one another, in that the ‘caged bird’ successfully subsumes its identity in the powerful and telling image of the “phenomenal woman”.
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