Chapter II

The Image of the ‘Caged Bird’ in Maya Angelou’s Early Poems

Taken from the volume of verse, Shaker, *Why Don’t You Sing?*, the poem “Caged Bird” represents Angelou’s isolation as a result of racism and oppression.

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the courage sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

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.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing. (1-30)
The “caged bird” image as described in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy”, published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* in 1899, recurs throughout her work. In her first volume of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Maya Angelou recounts many incidents of racial discrimination that she experienced as a child. In this volume, Angelou tells the story of a young African-American girl growing up in the South and shows how the young African-American girl overcomes life’s obstacles through the constant support of her grandmother.

Stamps, Arkansas, in the 1930s was not a place where an African child could grow up freely or reach his or her full intellectual and social potential. In the poem “My Arkansas”, Angelou reveals the trepidation concerning it.

There is a deep brooding
In Arkansas.
Old crimes like moss pend
From poplar trees.
The sullen earth
Is much too
Red for comfort.

Sunrise seems to hesitate
And in that second
Lose its
Incandescent aim...(1-11)

Angelou constantly felt caged, for she was unable to get away from the “homemade” dresses she must wear to church, unable to escape “the reality of her blackness…and by her limited opportunities in a segregated
school system. She was trapped, too, by the bigotry of Stamps, whose
town fathers demanded that she and all African-Americans live in only
one section of town and attend only those schools in their part of town”
(Lupton 66). Imprisoned, the “caged bird” is a symbol for the chained slave who tries to survive by singing the “blues”,

The blues may be the life you’ve led
Or midnight hours in
An empty bed. But persecuting
Blues I’ve known
Could stalk
Like tigers, break like bone,
.................................
Bitterness thick on
A rankling tongue,
A psalms to love that’s
Left unsung,

Rivers heading South,
Funeral music
In a going-home mouth.
All riddles are blues,
And all blues are sad. (1-6, 11-20)

As it is the nature of the “caged bird” to sing for its freedom, so it is said to be “the black person’s nature to make music while in bondage “to lift every voice and sing: to sing in praise of the Lord.”” (67)

Stamps was nevertheless the home, to which Angelou often referred to in her autobiographies and poetry. As young children in Stamps in the 1930s, racial prejudice was a severe limitation. Angelou endured several appalling incidents that taught her about the insidious nature of racism. At the age of ten, she took in a job for a white woman
who decided to call Maya Angelou “Mary”. She noted that “for African-Americans in general, naming provides proof of identity in a hostile world that aims to stereotype blacks and erase their individuality” (Sparknotes 101, 388). In an effort to get fired, Angelou responded assertively to the demeaning treatment of her white employer by breaking the woman’s fine china. On another occasion, Angelou recalled that during her childhood a white dentist who owed her grandmother money refused to treat Angelou because of the color of her skin, stating that he would rather place his hand in a dog’s mouth than in hers. Then, at Angelou’s eight grade graduation, a white speaker condescendingly dismissed the idea that African people can succeed. Reflecting on these incidents, Angelou silently cries out in the poem “When I Think About Myself”:

Sixty years in these folks’ world,  
The child I work for calls me girl,  
I say “Yes ma’am” for working’s sake.  
Too Proud to bend,  
Too poor to break,  
I laugh until my stomach ache,  
When I think about myself. (8-14)

For Angelou, as for many African-American writers, the South has become a powerfully evocative metaphor for the history of racial and social inequality. It may be said that every African-American from the South brings into play his or her individual voice to a long history of
struggle with the land and the matter of color. “Black Southern writers embrace the necessity of creating works of art that are grounded in the lived experience of Southern culture.” (Ervin, 357) Thus in the poem “Glory Falls”,

From crawling on this
Murky planet’s floor
We soar beyond the
Birds and
Through the clouds
And edge our way from hate
And blind despair and
Bring honor
To our brothers, and to our sisters cheer. (13-21)

But the South was nevertheless the home of Angelou’s grandmother, the “momma”, who came to stand for all the courage and stability she ever knew as a child. “Momma” is portrayed as a realist whose patience, courage, and silence ensured the survival and success of those who came after her.

Reflecting on the courage that was infused into her, by her grandmother, Angelou remembers her in her poem “Our Grandmothers” from the volume I Shall Not be Moved,

Momma, is master going to sell you
from us tomorrow?
Yes.
Unless you keep walking more
And talking less.
Yes.

...Unless you match my heart and words,
Saying with me,
I shall not be moved. (11-16, 23-25)
Although Angelou is proud of her strong grandmother she however, recognizes that in the white world her grandmother’s power is diminished. ‘Momma’ uses her strength solely to guide and protect her family but not to confront the white community directly. According to Carol E. Neubauer, “Momma’s resilient power usually reassures Angelou, but one of the child’s most difficult lessons teaches her that racial prejudice in Stamps can effectively circumscribe and even defeat her grandmother’s protective influence” (Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition).

In the attempt to creatively endure the injustice she feels as a young African-American girl, Angelou uses her imagination and creates an identity in which she fits the vision of perfection that the white world surrounding her community projects. In her autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings she dreamt that upon her school graduation, she would appear to all her classmates that:

I really was white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me 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. (4-5)

Angelou’s use of an alternate identity is a result of the image of her African community that she sees reflected back at her. Lisa Giberson’s Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice, reveals that “Angelou wants to be like the dominant white society that she sees surrounding her black culture.
She wants to feel empowered and proud of her identity, just as the white majority she wishes to emulate. Her view of her immediate world is tainted by the racial disparity that is always present. "Angelou tries to build a self and identity after having battled with the hatred of whites with repressed anger. She goes through the turbulence of an oppressed community’s actual experience and sense of self despite socio-political change and development" (qtd in. Bughio 102). To bring out the identity conflict, Angelou uses the metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage, in her poem "Caged Bird". Like elements within a prison narrative, the image invokes the bird singing in the midst of its struggle:

His wings are clipped  
And his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing (12-14).

The ‘caged bird’ is symbolic of the African-American race being denied its freedom by its skin color. As a member of a racially oppressed society the African-American man or woman is forced to view himself/herself through the eyes of the one in control. Thus, there is a blurring of vision and a conflict of identity. It causes the kind of trauma that is reflected in her poem “Caged Bird” in which she tries to remake herself to fit into the larger white community. W.E.B. Du Bois calls it “double consciousness”. 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 (299)

“Double consciousness” is an awareness of one’s self as well as an awareness of how others perceive that self. The behavior of the person is influenced by what the other people think and is distorted through other’s negative image of his/her race. Du Bois saw the color line as a scale that divides the people and because of this distinction, people become prejudiced and stereotypical in their attitude. Du Bois further explains, ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, produces what he calls a “twoness, an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”. (299) The history of the African-American is the history of this strife,

He went to being called a colored man
After answering to “hey,nigger.”
Now that’s a big jump,
Anyway you figger.
Hey, baby, watch my smoke.
From colored man to Negro,
........................
Light, Yellow, Brown and Dark-brown skin,
Were okay colors to
Describe him then.
He was a bouquet of Roses. (1-6, 16-20)
Though “the Negro...is gifted with second sight” yet it is in itself peculiar because one has to always look at one’s self through the eyes of others. This peculiar orientation in thinking was the obstacle that Angelou had to confront early in her writing career. She was unhappy with the image of her African-American community because she too viewed herself and her community through the eyes of the predominantly white culture, symptomatic of the pain and confusion among African-Americans in which centuries of abuse had left them with an inevitable sense of inferiority. According to Ostendorf, this refers to “an identity conflict and to a schizoid phenomenon evident in all human interaction and communication. Its cause may be the stigma of race, color, class, or physical disability” (Black Literature in White America 19). However, one notes that this sense of “double consciousness” would later be the positive means towards acceptance and transcendence. Thus, while conferring that one should “keep on marching forward” in the poem “Equality”,

We have lived a painful history.  
We know the shameful past  
But I keep on marching forward,  
And you keep on coming last.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free. (15-18)
At the same time, Angelou proclaims in the poem “Our Grandmothers” that one should “lay aside” one’s fears and that one should “not be moved”, so

Centered on the world’s stage,
She sings to her loves and beloveds
To her foes and detractors:
However I am perceived and deceived,
However my ignorance and conceits,
Lay aside your fears that I will be undone,
For I shall not be moved. (110-116)

In the poem “Caged Bird”, there is a clear parallel between the caged bird and the free bird. In the opening lines of the poem, Angelou compares the ‘wind’ to a creature that can hold a bird on its back. The free bird floats leisurely on “trade winds soft through the sighing trees” and even “dares to claim the sky”. In other words, the free bird illustrates the seeming truth of the white American’s supremacy and superiority. It feeds on “fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn” signifying a vision of life and soars to “name the sky his own”. Unlike its unbound brother, the “caged bird” leads a life of confinement that sorely inhibits its need to fly and sing. Trapped by the unyielding bars of his cage, the bird can only lift his voice in protest against his imprisonment and the “grave of dreams” on which he perches.

The “caged bird” metaphor also invokes Angelou’s displacement. “Her time in St. Louis first opens Angelou’s eyes to the possibility of
strong black women in the world, but it is not until she is permanently situated in the multi-racial setting of San Francisco that she can develop her persona as a proud member of the black community, having left behind the singular example of prejudicial toleration in Stamps” (Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* 50). A geographic displacement follows that of the emotional in Angelou’s work. Many have asserted the similarity between her works and those of the slave narrative, suggesting that Angelou’s constant physical movement through the years links her to the geographic escape of her ancestors. As slaves fled their masters, Angelou fled the discontents of her past, moving always toward a greater freedom of self and an eventual stable resting place. The link is further validated in her poetry, especially in the poem, “Our Grandmothers,” from Angelou’s poetic work *I Shall Not Be Moved.*

They sprouted like young weeds,  
but she could not shield their growth  
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor  
shape them into symbolic topiaries.  
She sent them away,  
underground, overland, in coaches and shoeless (57-63).

Here, the persona is trapped in a current of constant physical movement. When escaping from slavery, standing amidst an ocean and sending her children away, she is caught in a set of circumstances that she can neither control nor disregard. The scene changes with each verse, through time
and space but the woman repeats always, “I shall not be moved” (line 25).

Again, Maya Angelou considers her displacement as the most tragic loss in her childhood, because she is separated from her mother and father at a very young age. Sidonie Smith, in her article entitled “The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou’s Quest after Self-Acceptance”, notes that the rejection of Bailey and Angelou by their parents is “…internalized and translated as a rejection of self: ultimately the loss of home occasions the loss of self-worth” (Modern Critical Interpretations 24). In addition experiencing the trauma of being raped at the age of eight and emotionally scarred by the violent death of her attacker, Angelou found solace in the world of silence. However, Angelou finds a way of getting her voice back through her connection to Mrs. Flowers, an educated African woman. For like “a songless bird”, Angelou gave up “all singing, all sound” (Lupton 67) during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she was mute, locked in a speechless body, as she had willed it. She is liberated from her caged silence only after Mrs. Flowers helps her release her voice. Listening to Mrs. Flowers read aloud, Angelou describes 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).
Angelou’s relationship with Mrs. Flowers helps her develop her love for literature and at the same time draws her out of her silence. It was under Mrs. Flowers’ guidance that formal education became Angelou’s salvation. Mrs. Flowers taught Angelou to embrace the spoken and written word and not allow language to be a stumbling block to her development. Thus, like a “caged bird” opening its throat to sing, Angelou is able to control and find her voice again as well as provide herself with a dynamic image within the African community. Appearing both in the middle and end of the poem, this stanza serves as a dual refrain:

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. (15-21)

Although it sings of “things unknown,” the bird’s song of freedom is heard even as far as the “distant hill”.

Echoing a similar message, the poem “Still I Rise”, taken from her later volume *And Still I Rise*, indicates that the African-American is empowered to rediscover and find a balance in the community that is unbalanced by racism:
You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies.
You may trod me in the very dirt,
But still, like dust, I'll rise (1-4).

Angelou’s words contain hopeful determination to rise above
discouraging defeat. Referring to the slavery era, Angelou uses her
ancestors experience as a resource for her own strength. Thus in the poem
“Elegy” from her volume *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*,
Angelou remembers Fredrick Douglass for his hope of watching his
“children grow”,

I lie in my grave
and watch my children
grow
Proud blooms
above the weeds of death.

Their petals wave
and still nobody
knows the soft black
dirt that is my winding
sheet. The worms, my friends,
yet tunnel holes in
bones and through those
apertures I see the rain.
The sunfelt warmth
now jabs
within my space and
brings me roots of my
children born.

Their seeds must fall
and press beneath
this earth,
and find me where I
wait. My only need to
fertilize their birth. (1-24)
Thus Angelou believes that she must preserve her ancestors’ dreams when she says “I am the dream and the hope of the slave” (Caged Bird line 40). She will rise above the pain and suffering that her ancestors have experienced in order to fulfill their dreams. Understanding the meaning of their suffering, Angelou dedicates the poem “Song for the Old Ones” from the volume *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, to her ancestors,

They’ve laughed to shield their crying  
Then shuffled through their dreams  
And stepped ‘n’ fetched a country  
To write the blues with screams.

I understand their meaning  
It could and did derive  
From living on the edge of death  
They kept my race alive. (21-28)

Angelou will therefore not falter from the pain and suffering that she and her ancestors have gone through but will continue to rise.

The poem “Harlem Hopscotch” from the volume *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diiie* also embody the poet’s confident determination that conditions must improve for the African-American race. Carol E. Neubauer’s *Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom* affirms that “Harlem Hopscotch” celebrates the “sheer strength necessary for survival. The rhythm of the poem echoes the beat of feet, first hopping, then suspended in air, and finally landing in the appropriate square”
To live in a world measured by such blunt announcements as “food is gone” and “the rent is due”, the critic Carol E. Neubauer feels that African-Americans need to be extremely energetic and resilient. “Compounding the pressures of hunger, poverty, and unemployment is the racial bigotry that consistently discriminates against people of color. Life itself has become a brutal game of hopscotch, a series of desperate yet hopeful leaps, landing but never pausing long”. (Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom). Yet in the final analysis, the poem ends with an exultant note: “both feet flat, the game is done/They think I lost. I think I won”. No matter how trying the situation, Angelou refuses to give up “singing”. This refusal to lose faith and hope, her insistence on making the most out of her life, is what makes her succeed in coming through from being silenced, displaced, and caged.
From crawling on this
Murky planet's floor
We soar beyond the
Birds and
Through the clouds
And edge our way from hate
And blind despair and
Bring honor
To our brothers, and to our sisters cheer. (13-21)

In an interview with David Frost of *The New Sun*, Angelou elaborates “I’m often asked, “How did you escape it all: the poverty, the rape at an early age, a broken home, growing up black in the South?” My natural response is to say, “How the hell do you know I did escape? You don’t know what demons I wrestle with.”” (Interview by David Frost. *TheNewsun.*Newsun.com.n.d.Web1March 2010).

While wrestling the demons of social injustice and economic hardship, Kurkowski states in his *Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that Angelou uses her “education, self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-identity, and self-reliance to push through the discrimination and racism placed before her from the white-dominated patriarchal society”. Angelou’s determined battle to empower herself breaks through in the song of the “caged bird”. Determined to battle racism, the “caged bird sings of freedom” by applying for a job as a female conductor at the Market Street Railway Company. Though the management team at the railway office and her own community did not support her, “the caged bird shouts on a nightmare scream” and opens her
throat to sing. Angelou did not let her anger overcome her determination. By calmly protesting the injustice of inequality, Angelou achieved her first victory as an adult by getting the job as a female conductor.

In conclusion, one would agree with the fact that the reason Angelou could transform a reality of hopeless shame to one of empowerment was because of her love for literature. Her belief that words have the power to redeem her enables Angelou to write about the trauma of being raped in a detached manner. By identifying with whom and what she encounters in literature that she reads, she is able to examine that trauma as an outsider rather than the victim. In “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” from her poetic work And Still I Rise, Angelou proudly claimed her strong determination to fight the various demons of hardship, that as long as the “caged bird” continues to sing and be heard, hope and strength will overcome defeated dreams:

I won’t cry
So they fly
I just smile
They go wild
Life doesn’t frighten me at all (17-21).
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