Chapter IV

Living Again and Singing of “Freedom”

*The Oxford Dictionary* defines “freedom” as “the condition of being free” and “unrestricted liberty” (Elliott, 299), and for Angelou, the experiences and situations she experienced, have in itself, helped her define freedom. For Angelou, freedom was hard earned. This chapter will strive to analyze how a community of African-American women, helped Angelou by guiding and supporting her in her struggle for freedom and self-reliance in a patriarchal society. These women were Angelou’s poetic muses who breathed life into her poetry. Their guidance helped enrich her poetry because theirs were the voices of inspiration that provided the resources to influence her.

Your smile, delicate
Rumor of peace.
Deafening revolutions nestle in the
Cleavage of
Your breasts.

............... 
Your laughter, pealing tall
Above the bells of ruined cathedrals.
Children reach between your teeth
For charts to live their lives.
A stomp of feet. A bevy of swift hands. (1-5, 18-22)

This community of women was more supportive of Angelou’s growth into maturity and womanhood and hence more effective than the prevailing system that was patriarchal in nature. In *Classifying Maya*
Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings Kurkowski states that "The men do not offer Angelou any guidance as she matures into womanhood and Angelou does not engage any of the men for support". These women, Annie Henderson, Mrs. Bertha Flowers and Vivian Baxter were matriarchs in their own world. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the matriarch represented "a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive hardworking servant" (Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, 75). Besides being the head of the family, "the matriarch often shows tremendous strength under adverse conditions" (75). Such a characteristic fits the description of what Alice Walker calls "womanist". "To be womanish, according to Walker, is to be independent, responsible and in charge". (Womanist Theology and Ethics, 162) Significantly, the African-American women whom Angelou admired in Stamps were those who had achieved such a degree of independence. She admired them because of their fortitude in being able to achieve financial independence, education and acceptance. These were the strong women characters to whom Angelou looked upon for the positivity and creativity that defines her work. Their strength and the power to endure come through in her poem "Still I Rise".
Out of the huts oh history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide. (29-34)

Of these women, Annie Henderson, Angelou’s grandmother, was a strong role model for Angelou as she began her transition from child to woman. Annie Henderson’s strict religious beliefs and rigid discipline gave Angelou clarity of vision, a vision that encouraged her to leave the beaten roads and “cut herself a brand-new path” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,24). Despite her independence, Annie Henderson chose certain paths in life that were looked upon by Angelou as choosing “a certain way of being in this world”. This “way of being” is eloquently presented in the poem “Our Grandmothers” from the volume of poem I Shall Not Be Moved:

She heard the names,
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,

.................................
She said, But my description cannot fit your tongue, for
I have a certain way of being in this world. (44-46, 49-51)

The scene in the autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, where Angelou’s rage mounts up on seeing the white girls imitating her grandmother’s posture, causes Angelou to weep. She even thinks of using her uncle’s rifle and to scream at them. But when they left and when she
sees her grandmother whom she calls “Momma”, politely bid goodbye to them, Angelou realized the impact of her grandmother’s achievement. “Something had happened out there...whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won” (26-27). In giving Angelou moral roots to start life with, Annie Henderson wittingly hands over to Angelou the ability to make her own clear judgments in order to articulate herself. Thus in the poem “Our Grandmothers” Angelou encapsulates her grandmother’s victory to her faith in God.

Into the crashing sound,
Into wickedness, she cried,
No one, no, nor no one million
Ones dare deny me God. I go forth
Alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The divine upon my right
Impels me to pull forever
At the latch on Freedom’s gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my
Feet without ceasing into the camp of the
Righteous and into the tents of the free. (77-87)

The significance of this is reflected in Kurkowski’s work Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: “By being a homeowner, landowner, business owner and a woman who does not have to rely on men for financial support in a poor, Southern, rural, African-American community, Annie Henderson provides a unique insight into the role of the emancipated African-American woman”. 
Another strong woman character, “Mrs. Flowers gives Angelou a chance to reflect on her life and consider other possibilities other than being black, poor, and living in the South” (Kurkowski Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings). For Angelou, her identity as an African-American woman had always been in question, but Mrs. Flowers changed that perception by helping her realize that “pride in self is not limited to those of light skin.”(Bloom, Modern Critical Views 45) Angelou always noticed how Mrs. Flowers carried herself with style and grace in their community, and this she reflects in her poem, “Just for a Time” taken from her poetic work And Still I Rise,

Oh how you used to walk
With that insouciant smile
I liked to hear you talk
And your style

............... 
You were my early love
New as a day breaking in Spring
You were the image of
Everything
That caused me to sing. (1-4, 6-10)

Mrs. Flowers, as Angelou recalls in her children’s book Mrs. Flowers: A Moment of Friendship (1986), “emphasized the importance of the spoken word, explained the nature of and importance of education, and instilled in her a love of poetry”. Mrs. Flowers not only enabled Angelou to come out to speak, but also showed her how to grow as an individual. Under Mrs. Flowers’ influence, Angelou harnessed a greater respect for
literature and for the power that words have in transforming a reality of hopeless shame, to one of empowerment. It was under Mrs. Flowers’s guidance that formal education became Angelou’s salvation. Mrs. Flowers taught Angelou to appreciate the power of the spoken and the written word. According to Harold Bloom, “Mrs. Flowers became the catalyst that gave Angelou the courage to transcend her muteness and begin speaking once again, an illustration of language and education as a discursive medium establishing identity and worthiness” (Modern Critical Views, 28). Their shared reading made Angelou appreciative of literature and proud of her heritage, “I was respected...for just being Marguerite Johnson...She made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 79-85).

The ambivalence in the relationship with her mother Vivian Baxter is reflected both in Angelou’s personal life and in her writing career. Even though Vivian Baxter was not around to care for Angelou during her formative years, she stepped into Angelou’s life at a crucial time when she was in need of maternal guidance. Unfortunately, Lyman B. Hagen feels that Vivian Baxter’s absence in Angelou’s formative years was a selfish act on her part. “Vivian found it too inconvenient to care her two children or found it too incompatible with her lifestyle” (121). Even though Angelou looked up to her mother with great admiration, she
somehow questioned her mother’s way of life. Vivian Baxter showed her children what she did but never sat down to explain to them about her livelihood. However, Angelou did not carry any resentment towards her mother, instead, she described her meeting after many years with her mother as in which, she was awestruck at her beauty:

To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow...I was struck dumb. I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 58-59).

She was the epitome of femininity in Angelou’s world. Angelou was proud that her mother, Vivian Baxter, who had been away for so many years, was actually a beauty. While in “Avec Merci, Mother” from the volume Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing? Angelou praises her mother’s beauty,

From the perch of beauty
Posing loftly,
Sustained upon the plaudits
Of the crowd,

She praises all who kneel and whispers softly,
“A genuflection’s better
With head bowed.”

Among the mass of people
Who adore her
A solitary figure
Holds her eyes (1-12)

In “Call Letters: Mrs. V.B.” from And Still I Rise Angelou praises her mother for her talk was always filled with hope and encouragement.
Ships?
Sure I'll sail them.
Show me the boat,
If it'll float, I'll sail it

............................

Life?
'Course I'll live it.
Let me have breath,
Just to my death,
And I'll live it.

Failure?
I'm not ashamed to tell it,
I never learned to spell it.
Not Failure.(1-5, 11-19)

In *Classifying Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Kurkowski relates that “By creating this physical bond based on beauty between her and Angelou, Vivian Baxter inadvertently triggers certain emotions and fundamental questions within Angelou who was beginning to question her place in society and her role as a maturing individual. In separating herself from her mother, Angelou begins to understand her own self-identity and feminine values”.

Thus the relationship between Angelou and her mother was not by any standards ordinary because it gave Maya Angelou an ability to look at life and understand the complexities of life itself. Having left Angelou vulnerable to many tragic experiences, Vivian Baxter made up for her absence by arming her daughter with the needful wisdom in order to help her daughter strengthen her maturity. When Angelou applied for the post
of female conductor at The Market Street Railway Company she was met with resistance from the secretary in the hiring manager’s office. Said best in her poem “Lord, in My Heart” from the work *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* Angelou expresses this discontent:

Here then is my
Christian lack:
If I’m struck then
I’ll strike back. (41-44)

Angelou wanted to independently manage the situation on her own. Vivian Baxter simply told her daughter “life is going to give you what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 262). Angelou managed the situation on her own thereby strengthening her maturity.

As Angelou continued to look to her mother for guidance and support, their communication deepened. This communication served as the right passage towards womanhood for Angelou. By discussing femininity and the female anatomy, Vivian Baxter strengthened Angelou’s self-esteem as only a mother could, so when Angelou chose to have a baby out of wedlock, both mother and daughter cared for the baby together. Besides driving away Angelou’s fear in taking care of the baby, Vivian Baxter also gave Angelou the push into womanhood and maturity that her daughter needed. Thus with childbirth, Angelou took slow but sure steps into womanhood. As Angelou journeyed into womanhood and
maturity, “her bond with women, her communication with women, her image of herself in society all come together” (Kurkowski).

Maya Angelou’s poetic works verify that the image of the “caged bird” has specific application to women. Annie Henderson’s nurturing of her granddaughter “mirrors the mother/daughter relationship of feminism. Angelou is daughter, granddaughter and finally a mother as she charts her development as a woman” (Lupton 71). Angelou is concerned with the women in her community, even though sometimes she sees their lives as being limited. Like the majority of women, she too gives birth to a child. Angelou does not begin by projecting a strong and positive image of women because the women in Angelou’s world become strong and self-reliant only after going through various experiences. In one of the most quoted phrases from the autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou describes herself as an “ugly black dream” (2). Unfortunately, Angelou shows contempt for herself in the parts of the narrative that takes place in Stamps and St. Louis, for reasons that have to do with her racial and sexual attitude. When Angelou was raped by Mr. Freeman, her self-esteem plunges to the point where she refuses to speak. Not until she regains her voice and moves to California does she retrieve her sense of self-worth. In California Angelou challenges the patriarchal order by becoming the first African-American female streetcar conductor.
Reading Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar as well as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe, also helped Angelou escape the ugliness of reality. She developed a personal world away from reality that helped her in developing a love for language. According to Giberson, “Angelou finds refuge and validation in the world of literature. Angelou is able through literature to find black voices and role models unavailable to her in Stamps” (Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice). This initiated within Angelou a sense of a new identity removed from the inequalities of Arkansas freeing her from the restrictions imposed by society. Angelou understood that she had to strive to be better than her grandmother, aspire to be just as educated as Mrs. Flowers, and to be as strong willed as her mother. Michelle Wallace states in Eva Lennox Birch’s Black American Women’s Writing that “slavery produced two distinct female archetypes: one who had been privileged by pre-Civil War emancipation; the other, a poor, strong, but nevertheless rebellious woman” (145). Wallace believed that Mrs. Flowers came from the “privileged pre-Civil War emancipation era” where she struggled to be an independent woman and somehow achieves that. Even though Mrs. Flowers can only be admired by the people in her community and would be limited in her recognition as a woman of stature in the white section of Stamps yet Angelou looked up to her because Mrs. Flowers according to
Angelou, has the economic resources to survive on her own. Without Mrs. Flowers, Angelou would never become a writer. According to Lisa Giberson the books and the writers that Angelou read also provided her “with a diverse view of the world, including her own ethnicity” (Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice). In “Phenomenal Woman” and “On the Pulse of Morning”, this is certainly true. While in “Phenomenal Woman”, Angelou infers that all women have qualities that attract attention

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please
And to a man
The fellows stand or
Fall on their knees.
Then they swarm around me
A hive of honey bees,
I say...
I’m a woman
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me (14-29).

in “On the Pulse of Morning” Angelou talks of diversity and the change that would come about with time. Conveying a social message of unity, the poem calls for peace, racial and religious harmony, social justice for people of different origins, income, gender and sexual orientations. The poem is against discrimination and inequality of any kind:

The horizon leans forward
Offering you space
To place new steps of change
Here, on the pulse of this fine day (94-98).

Through this poem Angelou expresses unshakable faith in the African-American’s ability to overcome adversity. Thus she asserts,
Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands,  
Mold it into the shape of your most  
Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts.  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For a new beginning. (86-94)

In his seminal work, *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), Stephen Butterfield describes Maya Angelou as one who “does not submit tamely to the cage. She is repeatedly thrust into situations where she must act on her own initiative to save herself and thereby learns the strength of self-confidence”. (29)

In conclusion one can say that the “caged bird” has succeeded in emerging from bondage to sing of her freedom. Thus the fullest expression of the “phenomenal woman” is singing of “freedom”. When Angelou was still bound to fears, she remembered how her grandmother continued to believe in her. “My grandmother told me she knew that when the good Lord was ready, He’d turn me into a great teacher. I thought: ‘This poor, ignorant woman, I’ll never talk never mind teach’—And now I speak eight languages.” (*Conversations with Maya Angelou* 81). Reading works of literature that demanded to be recited, proved to be so effective that it not only helped Angelou find a voice but it also spilled over into Angelou’s poetic career where she developed the auditory ability to succeed both as a poet and as a writer.
Having journeyed from disillusioned self to a successful independent woman, Angelou has been able to appeal woman of all walks of life. Thus her poetry is the metaphorical body that binds together all women in the face of various differences. The implications of being able to “live again” in order to sing of “freedom”, is attributed to Angelou’s strength and courage in all adversity. Elaine B. Crawford believes that the works of African-American women “who have suffered victimization through sexual abuse or physical violence reveal a distinctive discourse about hope. Hope is the theological construct that moves these women beyond endurance to survival” (Hope in the Holler: A womanist Theology 34)
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