Chapter – IV

Scathed And Scarred Yet Exquisite in Maya Angelou’s

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

“My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive, and to do so
With some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style...”

- Maya Angelou

Truly a phenomenal woman as she herself had depicted in her own poem. She filled in many roles as that of a novelist, professor, actress, director, singer, poet, scholar, researcher and what not, short of excellence. She was also an integral part of the civil rights movement. She had the advantage of working closely with stalwarts like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. She was a survivor of a harrowing childhood, poverty and familial discord. But Maya Angelou was such a credible person who was able to turn her remarkable, tumultuous and arduous life into creative inspiration and her work of *Bildungsroman* and autobiographical novel *I know why the caged bird sings* an initiative which launched her long and fruit full journey of life. She has withstood time and today she is celebrated as one of the most admirable and notable African American women representing the twentieth century. Yet again her all her accomplishments do cross lines of gender, race, culture and sexuality.
“Maya Angelou’s autobiography, [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings] like [Richard] Wright’s, opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self will seek escape. The black girl child is trapped within the cage of her own diminished self-image around which interlock the bars of natural and social forces. The oppression of natural forces, of physical appearance and processes, foists a self-consciousness on all young girls who must grow from children into women.” (Literature Resource Center)

The success of a black woman depends on how she overcomes the challenges of her being black and female. And Maya Angelou finds the Bildungsroman as a perfect vehicle to convey her thoughts to the World. Maya Angelou was born on 4th of April 1928, and is known for her memoir I know Why the Caged Bird Sings which made a landmark in literary history as the first nonfiction best seller by an African American women writer. In 1971 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry collection. Just give me a cool drink of water ’Fore I Die’. She later when on to write the poem On the Pulse of Morning is of her most credible and appreciated work which was recited at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993. She received several honors throughout her career. She wrote numerous autobiographic collections throughout her life. In 1995, Angelou was
applauded for remaining. On “The New York Times” paperback nonfiction best – seller list for two years. The longest running record in the chart’s history. The mourning of her death took to huge proportions in social media. President Barack Obama also issued a statement about Angelou, calling her “a brilliant writer, a fierce friend, and a truly phenomenal woman”. Angelou had the terrific ability to remind people that all are God’s Children and each and every one has something to offer.

“It was awful to be a Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead. I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of other. A pyramid of flesh with white folks on the bottom, as the broad base, then the Indians with their silly tomahawks and teepees and wigwams and treaties, the Negros with their mops and recipes and cotton sacks and spirituals sticking out of their mouth. . . As a species, we were an abomination. All of us.” (181)

Maya Angelou voices out loud and clear to the world through her work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a vivid portray and also an autobiographical sketch of Marguerite Johnson who was famously later known as Maya Angelou. Typical of a “Bildungsroman” hero or protagonist the book takes the reader from Marguerite’s arrival in Stamps, Arkansas to the birth of her son. Throughout the portrayal of events in her life, the reader literally
experiences the insecurity faced by Marguerite and also witnesses the love of her family. There are rich portrays of her church and school experiences which were an integral part of her growing up days. Her visits to her mother and father too gather weightage in the novel. It is during one of her visits to meet her mother that she was raped by her mother’s friend. But as there was a breach of trust, the penalty she had to pay was with his dear life at the hands of the brother of Mother Dear’s Brother. But the shock of the episode makes her mute for almost five years. Later on only after she moves back to the stamps she was able to make two friends, Mrs. Flowers and Louise Kendrick’s. It is only as time goes by and with maturity she is able to see the social order around her in Stamps. The novel has a pictorial description of the church picnic, the congregating of the neighbors in the store to hear the fights telecast on the radio, and the esteemed pride of the community which is a part of the eight grade graduation exercise. The scared young narrator sits and observes all the class and caste system that is prevalent in the South.

The goriness of it all dawn only when her brother witnesses the scene of a man being dragged from the river, does he opt to move out of the Stamps and move to California, to live with her mother. Yet again the little girl is admired at the way she adapts and functions in the new social structure. She also throws light in the class and caste system that was prevalent in the West. She was convinced that she knew all about the functioning of the system. But only after her father invites her to another part of California does she realize there is still another social structure prevalent.
Life is not easy with her father as he lives with Dolores Stock land. One day as the father daughter duo goes to Mexico and returns only the next afternoon she is infuriated and in an argument that followed she hurts Marguerite. The father both embarrassed and ashamed over the incident leaves the daughter with his friends, from where she escapes and spends the night in a junkyard and wakes to find strange faces peering at her through the window. Surprisingly she finds a group of juveniles who follow their own code of conduct but lives in those cars. She settles down with them for a month and this is where her insecurity is dismantled. But as life can’t go on like this for long she calls her mother and asks for a train fare home.

It was only in California that she breaks all racial barriers and secures employment as the first Black employee who got the privilege to be on board San Francisco streetcars. Though she was safe and absolutely at ease even with the junk yard gang. But she was struggling to deal with her own sexuality and she started questioning herself if she was growing up the normal way. Her fears kept on increasing as she read a book on lesbianism, and she develops her own fears if she is a lesbian. And in the process of answering her own questions and to find out if she is normal, she decides to have sex and find out. She works out a relationship with one of the two guys who live near her house. But three weeks roll by and her questions are all still unanswered, until she finds herself pregnant. Marguerite manages to keep her secret from everyone except Bailey. She graduates from high School with just about three weeks before she gives birth to her son. The book comes to an end with Marguerite totally succumbing to the care and support of the child she had borne and loved.
Maturation or realization of the self is the foremost theme of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing*. It not only aims and focuses only on the development of Marguerite alone but also to a certain extent the growth and development of Bailey. It is simultaneously both these characters who under the care and stable guidance of their grandmother who is a static character is growing and changing into a dynamic character. Like most of the life histories of African American men or women the grandmother here plays a pivotal role, here she is known as Mrs. Annie Henderson.

Throughout the novel she describes the personal, cultural, social and the historical influences which were the basic elements which shaped her and helped her to find her identity and develop into the confident personality that she emerged. She goes on to explore her individual identity at the same time succoring her relationship with the family, the community at large. Finally she comes to an understanding with the world. In spite of the fact the divergent experience that she has been confronting in her life also represents the stages of her self-awareness and spiritual growth. In reality her works only echoes her owns conception as a unique human being along with all the survival strategies available to a struggling Black American to sustain in America.

This particular aspect is very familiar to any Black American girl who grows up in the South with the exception of very few who is beautiful and bountifully endowed. The very aspect which makes them go in search for solace and identity form pillar to post but only succumbing to the brutal realities of the outside world, before they ever try to find out anything. These
are the two most brutal realities which are the significant issues that she has been struggling with in her childhood and her adolescence too. The heart rendering feeling for these girls is the sense of feeling ugly and awkward and never sentiment or a sense of home or bond at any place that they tread into. Naturally like any other child of the same sector and background and god given for bearing they naturally imagine that even though people around her Judge her unfairly based on the awkward looks alone she is very confident that one day they will all be surprised to see her when her true self emerges. As ironical as possible she imagines that herself truly to be an angel or a fairy blonde white girl. This only brutally signifies of how racism was rampant and at its peak that it has completely engulfed the mind of a small little girl of the South. Yet again abandoned and ripped off from family bonds, and tossed and turned from one parent to another is too gruesome. To top it off the gory acts that she had to witness when she visits the parents act in only further demoralizing the kid.

The nativity of the voice and the tone with which she starts of the narration of the novel shows during her childhood day’s reflection suggest that she must be only five to six years old. Those who had witnessed or had been accustomed to the scenarios are very well aware that the living in the South is like putting a razor to one’s throat. The threatening feeling worsens when the same Black girl happens to be alienated from her own community too. The strong sense of horror of being displaced is like the rust on the razor, making the heart and soul bleed. The little girl feels that the insults she is facing because of the displacement is unwarranted and soul ripping. Right in the
beginning she fully well pictures the end static and later on takes the reader on the journey of how she had to endure all those insults stage by stage she was given a few beverages like the way she escaped the critical and mocking community and later was strong willed enough to wade through all this and laughed about her liberation. As tiny little toddlers she and her brother faced the pain and unfathomable pain of being abandoned and rejected by their parents. One image that stands like a phantom looming large over her always is the fact that she an ugly looking child and can never ever be measured up to that of white girls. Neither does she feel equal to the rest of the Black girls in the community. Though a child feels elated and proud to demonstrate before a gathering and the appreciation lifts the morale of any child. But on Easter Sunday she finds it very difficult to finish narration of a poem in the church. She feels belittled and ridiculed and a total failure. She had raced back home crying to no big solace, but just to flee to safety and escape from those piercing eyes all around.

Time is not stagnant, though cruel it might be, there comes a time when she takes serious pride in being a member of a resilient Black community only during her graduation where her disgust and anguish turns into pride. Though she gets very angry and is demotivated by the caustic speech of Donleavy, she finds it difficult to pull herself out of the mental wreck that was created is a few minutes. But later she realizes her community’s worthy of Henry Reed’s speech reminded the audience and all the fellow graduates and Maya herself of the contributions of all the Black people who had contributed heart and soul to
provide her the opportunity to graduate from school and give them an identity in society. All the more vital to the identity of Maya is that after acquiring knowledge in literature and poetry, she comes to know how many Black people have contributed to the celebration of Black identity and their achievements. Maya for the first time is life listens to James Weldon Johnson’s inspirational song “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” And then only starts looking at herself in a new perspective. She no longer considered herself just as a member of the regular graduating class, but looks at herself as a wonderful member of the most beautiful Negro race. Maya is thankful to all the Black artists and poets for helping her to come out of her despicable state and sustain hope and to realize her pride in being a Black woman. A dawning light which was becoming her in the midst of discouragement and disappointment.

Life shows her a new turn of events and portrays, in a different perspective rosier than the bed of thorns she had so far witnessed. As San Francisco beautifully represents on entirely different from that of the rural South. The education becomes even more varied with the addition of drama and dance added to her curriculum, making her wholesome. Unlike the monotonous south, San Francisco undergoes constant changes every now and then because of the upheaval of the war. As a sequel to the Great Migration in the East, in California to the defense industries and the related factories went into full swing during the war. As the Japanese population had moved unjustly into the incarceration camps, the employed willing Blacks and whites alike. The continuously harrowing scenes of constant displacement become somewhat ironically, which finally thus out to have a varied effect on Maya.
For she feels a sense of belonging which gave her a new boldness and awareness into herself. But her strong sense of isolation and alienation is totally warded off with the constant changing of faces during war time in San Francisco. A feeling of oneness which she never experienced anywhere at any point in her life.

But tragedy struck brutally at St. Louis when she went to live with her mother. As her mother’s boyfriend Mr. Freeman rapes her as she was only eight years old. And as the proceedings go by he was immediately arrested, produced in court and the affirmative statement of Maya aids him being released the same day. But as destiny or well plotted by her maternal uncle Mr. Freeman is murdered the same day. Maya is left with indescribable pain of not only being raped but also the sorry feeling of a man being killed on the pretest of her predicament. Muted for a long time when the family sends her and her brother back to Stamps. Though the child was tattered and shattered at an unholy age, she was naïve and righteous enough to feel for the man who had to end his life at very earlier stage. Though Mr. Freeman deserved his fatal end his punishment is in the pity the victim feels for him. She heaves a sign of relief and starts being her natural self as she only wanted.

“The bareness of stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness… the resignation of its inhabitants encouraged me to relax… entering stamps, I had the feeling I was stepping over the border lines of the map and would fall without fear, right of the end of the world. Nothing more could happen for in stamps nothing happened. Into this cocoon I crept.” (IKWCBS 89).
Only when self-dumped in the junkyard does she realize her worth and understands the world better and gains intellectual experience. A growing sense of independence and confidence which had begun to intensify and coalesce only in the junkyard ironically. Only a few days before that she had not only surprised herself but took ultimate pride in driving a car, which could, or would be the dream of any child of that age. But as destiny would have it. It is the intensity of the self-assured fuels which fuelled her quest and her pay which gained her the position on the street car when she returned home from the hustle bustle San Francisco. It was a time when higher pay was offered at many places, irrespective of the color and discrimination was lying dormant. But Maya choose to stick to the job she first opted and did not want to faultier, all that easily. The child at the age of fifteen had rapidly developed an adult will. It was after this point she did not want to look back and headlong rushed into the big bad world and did not stick to the demarcated Black neighborhood and community.

Maya being raped is also a direct result of her own displacement, and later her pregnancy is also a result of the continued displacement contributed by her mother Vivian. When Maya questions Vivian about sex, though she takes her seriously and answers but still falls short. As she has not found out if she had answered all the questions. She took it for granted that if she washes her face drinks a glass of milk and sleeps, she will totally forget all about it and presumed she will continue to be the child she knew once she gets up the next morning. But unfortunately searching for answers and a search initiated for her
identity set off. Which is an over seemingly positive picture of Vivian. The strength which Maya possess actually belongs to her mother Vivian, who though had made a lot of mistakes along the way, but manages to survive along because of her adorable qualities of honesty and strength which ultimately provides her sustenance. Even when Maya becomes pregnant she does not condone her, but rather gives her the support and encourages her on her life. She further more gives her the most important lesson of trusting her maternal instincts. Maya forever admires her unflinching honesty, for her indomitable strength and her adorable caring nature, though she had the major flaw of often faltering as a parent. The mentor who channelizes the protagonist and realigns her back into the track of life is found in the mother Vivian. Another aspect of Bildungsroman which is essential to keep check on the protagonist is Vivian

Vivian after she was married moved to Chicago and enjoyed the big city life, but she did not want her children to stay with the grandparents. Maya and Bailey Jr had to move away to live with Anne Henderson, their grandmother whom they addressed as Momma. The first displacement or sense of being abnegated from the womb. As children the warmth and love of the mother is what keeps children ticking and becomes a tonic for healthy growth. But her mother did not prefer to live in the segregated town or even try to simply adjust to the things as they were. And in not only adjusting she chose not to stay with her children and give them the warmth and security needed at that age. The first stage of alienation for the Bildungsroman protagonist started there itself. This scenario leaves her traumatized beyond limits as she could not cope up
with the abandonment. She went on to fantasize that her mother was dead as only a dead mother would leave her children alone that way. The scene of seeing her mother dead often flashes in her mind, according to her “I could cry anytime I wanted picturing my mother…Lying in her coffin. My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive, and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style…” (IKWCBS 52)

The displacement kept haunting her for long as the distorted image of her mother haunted her. Only when she conceives and is on another journey to find an answer. When the query arouse within her on who she is the big question of an identity crisis begins. That is the foremost and the central theme of the Bildungsroman, Search for Identity. It was her mother Vivian Baxter who gave her all the support, love and the much needed assurance that everything would turn out fine. A sense of security and bondage which she had been craving since childhood and finally Vivian becomes the compassionate loving mother who Maya had been fantasizing since childhood. It is Vivian herself who finally shows Maya who she is, a seat of introducing her daughter to Maya. The search for identity of knowing who and what she is ends there as her mother tells her. “See you don’t have to think about doing the right things. If you’re for the right things, then you do it without thinking.” (IKWCBS 289).

This is the pinnacle, the point of self-realization the road finally reaching the destination. Having started her life with fragmented awareness, she again treads back to the place where she started her journey on the beginning point of constructing her identity with the aided influences of varied
women who played a role in her life. She stands tall and actively confronts issue of race and also the institutions of power as well as that which “resurrects” her after her emotional death which occurs after her rape and later how she learns to accept willingly as in African American Southern woman.

She has found herself or recognized her own potential as a Black woman who depicts her anguish from the point of a poor southern Black girl who is devoid of all the opportunities and love, a growing up child needs. The irony of it all is this is happening in a land which promises abundant opportunities and is branded as a so called prosperous and promising land. Her search for identity, gradual realization and finally recognition of Black beauty and in the process self-acceptance of Black woman hood and compliance of motherhood are also portrayed in her writings. There is so much of the author’s private life that is discussed in public, and Maya Angelou, was the first woman to do it. The work carries valuable endeavor because of the use of novelistic techniques but conveys beautifully throughout her growing up years how certain people, places and varied events in the form of the imagination of Marguerite. Even when she keeps her own counsel, she also carries on with her a private dialogue with her which is in turn poetic, sardonic, humorous and ultimately tragic. Gifted with the wondrous ability to be able to see through shams and affection, she is able to wade through because of her sharp observations. She is endowed with the potential to know what is real and what is phony. And all these information’s are not acquired overnight they were intellectually assimilated
over her growing up years which gradually helped in forming a positive self-image.

Along the way of self-realization or coming of Age she has guides and mentors like her grandmother Annie Henderson, Mrs. Flowers, her mother Vivian Baxter Johnson and her high school teacher Miss. Kirwin. All her mentors were strong women who were not just preachers but people who have preceded her and had survived similar trials and tribulations all along youth that she was going through now. It was sad that the contribution of the males in her life were quite negative. They happen to be weak links in the life path to success of Maya. It turns out to be the story of a shy and awkward Black cherub who surfacing from troubled waters grows up into a self–confident and assured young woman. She herself is amazed by the herculean growth and writes. “The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges as for mid able Character is often met with amazement, distance and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by Survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.” (IKWCB: 46)

Faith, self-empowerment, struggle as quest, intellectual curiosity, survival and complexity of choice are the ideas that are the underpinning factors of her story. Various themes are being explored as she begins her developmental years, and they are inconsistent. It includes traditional society and its values versus that of contemporary society with its values, silence versus self-expression, literacy versus the forces of oppression, the nature of generosity versus nature of cruelty and finally spirituality versus the rituals.
Every single episode of the novel, these and other ideas in the formation or creation of portrait of a young girls struggle against the flurry of adversity. All these aimed towards identity and self-affirmation.

In fact the novel opens with the elegant, poignant, halting voice of Marguerite Johnson the young Maya Angelou slogs and struggles for her own voice beneath the vapid doggerel of the yearly Easter pageant “What you looking at me for?” “I didn’t come to stay” (IKWCBS 19). The two lines alone tells the whole novel in a capsule. This is not only the question of Maya who looks up at an adult and asks “What you looking at me for?” but sadly the painful question every Black girl is made self-conscious and self-doubting by the omnipresent white world critical of her very existence. It does not stop with that, the claim and affirmative statement from a young girl that she did not come to stay all the more increases the irony as the entire work climatically affirms the determination of Marguerite Johnson and symbolically, all of the numerous unsung survivors of the middle passage, opt ideally to do that very thing, the essence to stay. Because the ability to stay is the capacity to affirm life with all the possibility of redemption. In the country like America to stay despite the circumstances of their slavery, despite the arduous attempt to remove them by lynching or by means of segregation that is to finally make them totally invisible.

The story of Maya begins with the state of being semi – orphaned and ends with the state of motherhood. In order to interpret her quest for freedom and that of self-affirmation as the representation of the many African American
and American women with special reference of Black American women. She coherently presents varied incidents from her life that illustrates the conditions faced by numerous people. And more so in her case these conditions are a result of the post struggle at a certain moment and carry a certain hope.

She begins her narrative with a painful incident, where the date does not reflect but as we could resume it sounds like something from five to seven. We get back to the beginning more often as the predicament of the protagonist is astoundingly pictures more often is the opening episode itself. When the child gets ready for the church recitation with a frock which she presumed was very pretty and later realized it was an old and not so pretty looking costume, it weights her down, but before that for a kid of that age she could not bring herself to remember the lines of an Easter poem beyond first two lines. She takes it to be a reminder to express her constant state of temporariness as a displaced orphan and a humiliated outcast. The childhood stage which is supposed to be carefree and blissful and her beautiful dream of being accepted, beautiful and understood all of which had been the (privilege) appendage of the whites is totally shattered and in on her mind is occupied with thoughts of imperative self-restraint, persecution and impending death. She is at the penultimate stage where she feels she might burst anytime, her means of release, which is the socially unacceptable one of urinating in her pants only reinforces her predicament.
The introduction emblematically depicts the distorted state of protagonist in her childhood she then talks about her arrival in stamps at the tender age of three and goes on to chronicalize her emotional development. This is a reflection upon the implications of her heartfelt experience and her understanding of racism, sexism and the prevalent human conditions. From the tender state to motherhood the protagonist crosses four different stage settings. Once in Stamps with her grandmother called as Momma, and Uncle Willie, that was from the age of three to seven years and in St. Louis along with her mother and mother’s parents, brothers, and boyfriend, when she was eight years old and from the age of nine to thirteen back in Stamps. And finally in California along with her mother up to the age of sixteen. The novel not only traces her growth alone but to certain extent the growth of her brother who was her constant companion during all but her last year.

The childhood of Maya was full of trials and tribulations but there was never financial crunch as the families were relatively well off. Both the Johnsons in Stamps and the Boxtens in St. Louis featured strong and influential women. The grandmother was not only well propertied, but rented out to the poor whites and also owned a General Merchandise Store, which served as a center for the Black community. The curious, sensitive and thoughtful Maya was well placed in a position where she could observe a wide range of Black experiences, character types, roles and also patterns of expression. She even tells about how a bone – weary, cotton pickers caught in economic enslavement which is within the general impoverishment of the African Americans. That it
is a threat to uncle Willies life by the prevalent Ku Klux Klan resulting in the complete segregation in Stamps. It engulfs the resulting ignorance and prejudice on the part of African Americans and the Whites. A confrontation arising between some racially insulting children of her tenants and her Momma is another happening factor. The strange antics of the enthused parishioners during services, as a contrast to Momma’s more reserved role and behavior are a few scenes which made her realize one of her mentors and a god mother figure by who she was instantly influenced and absorbed a lot of qualities from the Momma. But the relieving factor was she had to witness all these things as a child only in the context of protection by Momma’s loving, authoritative and loving competence, with the adorable & affectionate companionship of Bailey to add succor to the tiresome life.

The protagonists that is Maya and her brother at a very early age were brought up in a very strict atmosphere and abundant wealth of knowledge. They were thought arithmetic, poetry, Shakespeare and above all lessons on deportment and avoidance of vexation and tribulation with the Whites. Abandonment at the tender age by the parents or loss of the parent is one of the foremost factors of a Bildungsroman. A feeling where the child is lost and always craves for the love and affection of the parental bondage Maya too is exposed to such a scenario and at the tender age along with her brother and they start coming to terms with the reality they are suddenly taken at the age of eight to live in St. Louis to live with their mother. Maya who had only imagined or known her mother only as someone who had abandoned her own
children or as someone who was dead and gone. But to her after surprise and
astonishment is a light skinned beauty and a woman with hurricane energy,
who is always under social demand. People could not easily relate her to be a
Black woman and she had powerful connections not only with the underworld
of St. Louis, but also with the local politicians and with the police. It so
happened that her uncles were the terror of the Black community of St. Louis.
Though the affluence of the mother and her family is supposed to give the
children all the comfort and confidence, it landed the children in deeper trouble
than one could fathom.

Though the mother was a larger than normal figure she did not get the
love and affection she anticipated, but nonetheless tried considering St. Louis
her home. But destiny was not all that kind to her as she developed nightmares.
As a neglected child she found some similarity with Mr. Freeman who had
experienced a similar kind of childhood like her when he began to abuse her
which first was accompanied by gestures of affection she did not find it
offensive. She fantasized that she had at last found her real father which was
not the truth even in the minuscule quantities. As instructed even at the trial of
the rape, she denied the fact, that he had any contact with her earlier. A lie that
had saved him from imprisonment but cost him his life. She strongly believed
that it was her lie that had caused him his death and feared that her speaking
might bring death to others. As a paranoid young toddler she stopped talking to
anyone except to Bailey. This was too much of a nuisance to the Baxter’s
family hence they again sent her and her brother Bailey back to Stamps. Back
again in the silent and serene atmosphere and a pleasing community
environment, of quiet resignation, she is made to feel at home. But the scar did
not diminish or vanish all that quickly. It took some more time for the child to
come out of the consternation, though she relaxed a kid, but did not talk and
also suffered from memory loss and dulled sense. It was then her Momma
introduced her to one more god mother figure Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a beautiful
and educated Black woman who had brought Maya out of the cocoon and gave
her special attention. She focused on love of the human voice in the recitation
of literature. It was at a very tender age often itself gained sufficient self-
esteeem. It was not only to converse normally and also to work in a white
woman’s home. Furthermore to retaliate whenever the woman made a racist
assault upon her name. Not long after she started settling she found a girl like
herself. It was only with her that she found the long last childhood, where she
was finally able to share speculations about romance and being girlish.

Even in Stamps teachings about inequality was reinforced again and
again focused on the community and their religious experiences too did the
same. As such both the children were once again surrounded by racist. The
inequality persecution and justice constantly brought the children under attack
as they grew up. And when Bailey was asked to help carry the corpse of a
lynched man into jail, it was decided that the children should rejoin their
mother who was living in San Francisco. It was time when the child was seeing
the world in a different perspective as a self-learning kid. This time she found
her mother just as active and as beautiful as ever, but was more attentive
compared to her old self. Evolution of an older woman with time and experience. The man who her mother was married to made a good stepfather and she loved the life in the city with all diversity and fluidity. Compared to the frightened child that she was in the church while reciting the poem, she performed very well in school and also learned dance and drama, which was soul soothing for her. And summer visits to her father gave her even more precious experiences. She was able to command a bucking automobile down the mountain road and drove out of Mexico with her drunken father at the back seat. Later because of a tiff she had with the girlfriend of her father, she had to go and live in the junkyard of an automobile garage, along with a group of interracial and homeless children. Incidents like these hasten her process of maturation.

By the time she returned to San Francisco, her life process was initiated into a self-confident, self-reliant and valuable human brotherhood. Picking up from there she developed a determined campaign by which she became the city’s first Black female streetcar conductor. Her awareness and growing independence also precipitated an ultimate crisis. It was when her anxiety about her sexuality led her to experiment as a result she become pregnant. The story comes to an end with the birth of her son, Guy and her own revelation that with help from her mother she could trust herself to take proper care of the child.

One of the major aspects of a Bildungsroman is the aspect of autobiographical element. And the aspect is very well satiated in the novel that it could even be categorized as an autobiography. But more than just an
autobiographical novel it fulfills all aspects of a *Bildungsroman* more aptly. She takes the title from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, *Sympathy*. Actually Dunbar’s bird sings from the frustration of being imprisoned and the song is a kind of a prayer. In the same way Maya Angelou’s bird also sings from frustration, but in the process of doing so, discovers that the song also transforms the cage from that of a prison that denies selfhood into a vehicle for self-realization. With a mind filled with memories, the woman goes on to recapture her childhood. Maya demonstrates an impressive recall of what it was like to be a child while diligently striving to maintain a perspective. Maya Angelou had publicly addressed this difficulty and felt confident about her presentation. Maya actually structures her story into three different parts, one as arrival, second sojourn and third departure both psychologically and geographically. The narrative begins with a flashback to an Easter Sunday church in the early 1930’s, shortly after she arrived in California. This particular episode constitutes a three page prologue which establishes the lack of status and insecurity felt by the child Marguerite. She begins to recreate the embarrassment she felt at her inability to remember the four lines poem she was to recite at the congregation not a new situation for youngsters of her age. She recalls how preparing for the church and the struggle she had with her troublesome body image she presumes she looks graceful but only later realize as she is dressed in a discarded. “Ugly cut down from a while woman’s once was – purple throwaway” (IKWCBS 2)
Which is naturally to a child’s perception makes her an unacceptable being. The child starts to crave for blue eyes and real hair which according to the young mind denotes acceptability and affluence. The beginning cries out loud a tone of displaced frustration which pervades the introductory section. This wins over the sympathetic confidante of the readers. This symbolic beginning signifies the journey to establish a worthwhile self-concept. It goes on to record the carefully conceived record of a young girls’ slow and kind of clumsy growth. Not just record of events, it is also a record of her initiation into the world and her own discovery of her interior identity. Reaching back and pulling out painful times on how she and her brother failed to understand the above code and hence broke laws that they knew nothing off. The pain of wondering who their parents could be and if they will get a chance of re uniting with them and living in their real homes. According to Maya living in Stamps was a continual struggle as against surrender to the very large adults. The so called adults did not live in the present refined world rather practiced and were taught traditions whose roots were buried deeply in Africa or something created during centuries of slavery. And accordingly these traditions expect a good child to drop her eyes when speaking to an adult, and is expected to speak softly she is also expected to never resist the fact that Whites were cleaner, better and more intelligent than Blacks. This painfully portrays how growing up and surviving as toddlers in the South during the 1930’s and early 40s was a very painful experience for a young girl whose very world was colored by disdain and disillusion, self-doubt, aloneness, and also a diminished sense of self.
Maya Angelou underscores how her diminished sense of self and the rootlessness of the painful early childhood years were stated loud and clear in her prologue where she proclaims “The words are painfully appropriate, for the young Maya, then Marguerite Johnson, is a shy, tensely self–conscious child who believes that her true beauty is obscured. As she struggles to remember her lines, she is conscious of her dual self, which is the constant subject of her fantasies. Beneath the ugly disguise – a lavender taffeta dress remade from a white woman’s discard, broad feet, and gap-teeth – is real Marguerite.” All the fantasies are ephemeral and a time comes when the young girl must have to face the painful reality of her being. In her book she recalls how

“Easter’s early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut down from a white woman’s once – was – purple throwaway. It was old – lady – long too, but it didn’t hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with Arkansas red clay. The age – faded color made my shin look dirty like and mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs. (IKWCBS 7). For the little girl there was no respite on magical metamorphosis from her “Black dream”. It is only on the Sunday of Easter, she understands the fertility of her wish to become.

“One of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what is right with the world” (IKWCBS 9). As resurrection is not possible, Maya cannot be reborn into another life where she will be reborn as white and be perfect and wonderful. The reality and her white fantasy pains her a lot hence she flees from the church “peeing and crying” all the way home.”
Maya Angelou in her younger days grew up in a society which defined beauty only in terms of white physical beauty.

“If the society says that to be attractive is to be white, finds herself unwittingly striving to be something she cannot possibility be; and if femininity is rooted in feeling oneself eminently lovable, then a society which views her as unattractive and repellent has also denied her this fundamental wellspring of feminity.” (IKWCBS 25)

The pain did not end there but none deepen to the soul, which was bleeding with the sad story of her own self. “My belief that I was ugly was absolute, and nobody tried to disabuse me – not even Momma. Momma’s love enfolded me like an umbrella but at no time did she try to dissuade me of my belief that I was an ugly child” (IKWCBS 78). This was the cry of a child to her “longtime friend Rosa Gay to whom she wrote in the year 1990. In the letter and in the autobiography too she offers important insights into the effects of social conditioning on the tender minds and the emotions of a naive Black child who has the only option of growing up in a hostile environment. Though she wrote the book as an adult and the perspectives clashed she reveals that within the imprisoning environment. There was actually no place for Maya as a youngster. She is a displaced person whose agony is intensified by her own awareness of her displacement. “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.” (IKWCBS 6)
Blatant truths like these characterize the important segments of Maya Angelou’s life and also provide varied significant themes for the work. Though not all aspects of her childhood experiences related to the protagonist is revealed. She takes up a few episodic chapters which she chronicles along with the incidents. Vital episodes where she as a girl child had the advantage to learn valuable, life determining truths about the great big world and also based the discovery of the self. It is only based on these epiphanies that the reader was able to define the kind of unique vision of the work and to a large extent the precise and also the individual illumination of reality.

Two little toddlers are introduced immediately after the prologue as three and four years of age with tags identifying themselves as Marguerite and as Bailey Johnson Jr. The children are let all alone and have to travel all the way to stamps from Long Beach California. They carry a note addressed To Whom It May Concern about the schedule and their destination to land under the care of Mrs. Annie Henderson. As a result of their parents’ calamitous marriage terminating, they were shipped to the home of their paternal grandmother. The porter who was assigned the responsibility of these two children’s welfare and safe journey aborts his assignment the very next day once he pins the tickets of the children inside the coat pocket of Bailey. This single episode leaves Maya with a battered self—esteem and goes on to explain the underlying dynamics. She is tattered beyond limits when she realizes that no one absolutely no one would or could possibly ever love her, as she is an unfortunate little derelict who has been totally cast aside by her amorous
parents. But in spite all the odds the two little children safely reach Stamps and like angels beautiful gets accustomed to their new life and becomes an integral part of their grandmother Henderson’s religion and store. The life of Uncle Willie and the community at large encompasses the children. “as a real mother embraces a stranger’s child, warmly but not too familiarly” (IKWCBS 78)

Another important factor of “Bildungsroman” where the protagonist loses a parent or both the parents or is ripped away from the parents, which is brutality at its peak for a child. Because during the growing up stages more than luxury, more than numerous people around, children only want their parents to cocoon and protect them, the basic expectation or prerequisite of any child. And as a result of contretemps at such a tiny stage they are left with no other alternation but to cry and share their loneliness as ill-fated unwanted children who have been left in the flood by their parents whose marriage has been annulled. As a result of which they share a lot of questions

“Why did they send us away? And what did we do so Wrong? Why, at three and four, did we have tags put on our arms to be sent by train alone from Long Beach, California to stamps, Arkansas, with only the porter to look after us? (IKWCBS 51). The very fact that their mother could laugh and enjoy life and eat oranges in the life without missing her children or whining for their loss or be morose without having her children around. The children felt sorry that their mother could not revel in the glory of having them play around her. Hence the children pacify themselves and going on to convince each other that their mother is dead and gone and confronted with the imagined reality of their
mother’s death, Maya Angelou, where she recalls the child’s emotional response

“I could cry anytime I wanted to by picturising my mother (I didn’t know what she looked like) lying in her coffin. Her hair, which was Black, was spread out on a tiny little pillow and her body was covered by a sheet. The face was brown, like a big O, and since I couldn’t fill in the features I printed Mother across the O, and tears would fall down my cheeks like warm”( IKWCBS 50-51).

Having lost or missed the parents and their loving embarrassment the child starts questioning its identity and embarks on the search and finding antiphon for her copious questions.

The little girl Maya may forgive her mother later on in life as she gets acquainted with her and the mother play even goes on to play a responsible role in life which might soothe her hurt emotions and also erase all the scars that life gave her all along. But at that very moment she was only let to the crude reality of destiny where she has to face the fact that her mother was dead. Then at a juncture when she receives a gift from a mother, it is a shocker and brutal reminder of the mother being alive and ticking when she receives a gift from her a sudden or unanticipated. The gift is a toy tea set and a lovely doll with rosy checks, blue eyes and yellow hair aspects or symbols of foreign white world that too with the limit experience of the child. But the doll only reminds
her of the world she always craved to be like. Maya Angelou constantly
demonstrates the numerous “unnecessary insult” that the Southern Black
girlhood through her passage from childhood to the adolescence stage, at the
same time Maya skillfully recreates those intellectual, psychic and emotional
patterns that identify her experiences and individual consciousness. Thus as an
auto biographical element she gives concrete embodiment to significant themes
like Death, Regeneration and Rebirth, Individuals or Uniqueness, biographical,
Psychological and in Relation of human potential

Maya is a bird, and racism is a cage around her, trying to keep her in one
place, trapped. Yet, seeing people like Momma who exert their strength and
courage despite, difficulties gives Maya the power to keep singing her hope.
This is the theme of the whole novel and she writes a novel beginning from a
humble back drop but with a sympathetic note, “our parents had decided to put
an end to their calamitous marriage, and father shipped us home to his mother”.
(IKWCBS 5). In The middle the story line turns hostile where she had to hear
the brutal words from Mr. Freeman, all but to be raped “If you scream, I’m
gonna kill you. And if you tell, I’m gonna kill Bailey” I could tell he meant
what he said… The act of rape on an eight year old body… (IKWCBS78).
And she finishes the novel inspired and having self-realized who she is and
number of question she had asked herself as a toddler, have been to a certain
extent appreciably answered.
The quest of the child to know who she is has been to a large extent answered and she “No matter how trapper you feed keep singing and showing the world why you don’t deserve to be caged” (IKWCB 79). and she settles satiated though disgruntled with herself. At the tender age where could roam around without any worries or responsibilities or horrendous happening which was in reality crushing her beyond limits. She had to battle with the internal conflict about the fact that she did not look like one of her family member and fact that she looked ugly and lacked the features of femininity a heart breaking factor killed her beyond bounds. These were the internal conflicts that she faced and could not express it to anyone else in the family, but she had numerous external conflicts like the fact of being abandoned by the family and that too mother herself whom she starts believing is dead and gone. The first conflict itself is heart rendering, but at that age she tries to share the emotions with her brother and come out of the traumatic situation and get accustomed to the prevailing scenarios.

She is pushed into a scenario where she is raped at the tender age of eight, an age where she never believed or understood that something bad is happening to her or if she liked what was happening to her or not. Like any other Black American girl she had to facial discrimination. A situation nobody could opt out or find any kind of solace. And the forth conflict happens to be the tussle she had along with her father’s girlfriend. The fifth happened to be her own quest if she was sexually straight. Thus the journey of embarking on one of the horrendous trip to test her sexual orientation. Having self-muted for
years and not conversing with anyone except her brother she takes her own
time to return back to normally, which is more than just normal for a kid who
has been bashed by life at a tender age. She goes on a slow pace and slowly
starts getting acclimatized to the brutal reality. Though going with her mother
was not a very good sign in the first place, she had no choice as her brother was
more than just excited.

Maya was around seven years old when she first sees her parents as far
as her memory could take her there is no image of them anywhere. Bailey Sr.
her father’s very presence and the unexpected appearances of a stranger who
fortunately or unfortunately happens to be the father. Having an alien as a
father she need not create any elaborate fantasies about him which is natural of
any kid of her age. In order to counter or nullify or erase from her mind the
negativity she has about her father nothing, absolutely nothing is told or heard
about her father. According to the people of the locality he is a man who has no
respect for anything, neither moral nor money. He is picturized as an arrogant
show off who is taller than anyone she has ever seen and with “the air of a man
who (does) not believe what he (hears) or what he himself is (saying)”
(IKWCBS 53)

The clash between reality and her imagination about her father is very
much poles apart. But in spite of all these she is highly fascinated by his ironic
portentousness. In her world of fantasy she always picturises her father to be
living a luxurious life, one which had numerous servants and was surrounded
by orange groves. She even fantasies an elegantly furnished mansion like the
ones shown in the movies and her father the blissful owner seated in peace with himself. But all these prove to be blatantly false when she comes to know that her father was only a doorman at the Breakers Hotel in Santa Monica California. And all the more tragedy dawns on Maya when she comes to know the purpose of his visit to Stamps. He had come all the way not to see his children or shower them with affection, but to deliver them to their mother in St. Louis. Though this is a sticking and totally contradictory act by the parents. Sending them off with tags to join the grandmother at the age of three and four and now at the age of seven the father turning up to escort them to join the mother. This is a major unanswered question, what is the psychology involved in this act. As her permissions did not give her a promise of a better land and people, the uneventful visit to St. Louis did not have any impact on her. In fact she was happy to be back into the folds of the ever loving grandmother Henderson and Uncle Willie and she is neither glad nor sorry when the father the stranger leaves.

After seven long years this is the picture that a girl child get of her father who was all along nonexistent. As things unfamiliar unraveling the concept of the mother according to the children was not alive as they have picturized her death turns out to be equally foreign. Vivian Baxter, Maya’s mother is a beautiful, lively, bold, unconventional and reliant woman. She is such an evolving woman, that though she is a trained surgical nurse, she does not practice her profession. For the profession does not give her the excitement that she craves for. It is highly monotonous according to her. In fact she craves for
herself and her children only through the liaisons with a variety of life in 
boyfriends who readily furnished the necessities. She also earns extra income 
through cutting poker games in gambling parlors. The mother is a powerful 
woman who has her way around. She has her own strict code of conduct of 
which the men are expected to follow if they want to stay with her. Failing 
which they will have to face the consequences dearly as one was cut off and the 
other shot for not falling in line with her prerogatives.

Psychologically the child is tossed and turned with hyper strange parents 
compared to the docile grandmother Henderson and her store. Her mother lives 
of others in a luxurious manner, while her grandmother gave away and found 
peace in living amongst people. And contradictory to her mothers’ materialistic 
world Stamps was a place of religious devotion and a place of acceptance of 
once worldly and racial lot. It was a close knit rural community. In fact Maya 
knew the world of devotional deliverance only from the point of view of her 
grandmother. A God motherly figure which is once again the prerogative of the 
“Bildungsroman”. It is usually holding the hands of the God mother wades 
through the sea of difficulties, it is usually a guiding figure who at every 
juncture reiterates faith and gives hope for a better future. Here the affluent 
grandmother leads a pious and straight forward life. She begins each morning 
with traditional prayer of thanks and supplication. This is not exclusive of her 
grandmother alone but the once that is Black American churches though the 
individual testimony and witness.
“Our father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you thank you that you didn’t allow the bed I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.” (IKWCBS 8)

As her grandmother was concerned, God was a real and personal friend. They also strongly believed God will punish those who tormented His people. She also believes that Blacks are God’s chosen vessels; this was the prevalent concept of that time. It was viewed as God protected the Jews from pharaoh, she too believes that it will take time, but God will protect in his own way and deliver the Blacks. It is until that day comes she teaches the children to rely on the promises of a just God. This is the channelizing of a mentor a god of motherly character. They are constantly reminded and warned to avoid contact with whites whenever and wherever it is possible and also to follow the paths of life which she and her generation because of which herself and her near and dears ones are safe.

The fact that an impudent boy or girl is not only detested by God and also happens to be a shame to his parents. The end result of such behavior will only bring destruction to the life and his house. It is only through quality of her disciple and purity the Grandmother demonstrates by centering one’s being in the almighty. By this the young ones can endure and mitigate the effects of an utterly unjust world. The author internalizes all these silent lessons and
ultimately she owes most of her clarity of vision to her grandmother, who was not always equipped to protect her own self and her family from the exterior climate of rate. Having powerful and more than life size woman folk as her mentors the child who was drawn away from the niceties of life. Find her roots and is on a platform where she has finally identified herself and is pretty much happy with her new found self, surpassing all odds.

Yes the central character of Maya Angelou’s is an exquisite diamond which is the result of years of suppression, destruction and mental debauchery. But as all other woman protagonist she surfaces and come out shining though she might be scarred and scathed. None the less she is a diamond who withstood al the currents of the world beaten up by race, gender, class and what not. Being able to combat life at a reasonable age is understood. But she combatted life at a stage just out of cradle. Here is one more phenomenal woman who is a classic example of both female bildungsroman and social Bildungsroman