

UNCAGED VOICES: MAYA ANGELOU'S EXPLORATION OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

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Abstract

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a powerful exploration of the interrelatedness of race, gender, and socioeconomic status in shaping individual experiences. Through the protagonist, Marguerite Johnson, Angelou offers a clear perspective on how systems of oppression intersect to create unique forms of marginalization. By adopting Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory, this paper examines how Angelou's work challenges the traditional narratives of race and gender because her (Angelou) memoir provides a critical analysis of the complexities of identity and social justice. The work highlights the importance of considering multiple axes of identity simultaneously to fully understand the experiences of marginalized individuals. By centering the experiences of a Black woman, Angelou offers a compelling narrative that challenges rigid conceptions of identity and oppression, eventually contributing to a more refined understanding of social justice.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Race, Gender, Oppression, Privilege, Power, Discrimination, Identity, Social justice.

Introduction

Intersectionality, a concept that explores how various social identities intersect and create distinct experiences of oppression and privilege, has been critically examined by scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde. These scholars have contributed to a greater understanding of how factors like race, gender, class, and sexuality converge to shape the lived realities of individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2020; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984). These scholars, among others, have helped to shape our understanding of intersectionality and its relevance in analyzing systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

Kimberle Crenshaw, widely credited with coining and popularizing the term, revolutionized legal and feminist discourse through her cutting-edge work on how race and gender intersect in shaping individual experiences in *Race and Gender in Legal Theory*. Crenshaw explains that intersectionality is not primarily about identity but about how structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability. Her writings have illuminated how multiple forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism, intertwine in legal and social contexts in shaping individuals' experiences. Similarly, Collins (2011) through her work on "Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality" has explored how systems of power—such as patriarchy, racism, and classism—interact and reinforce each other, shaping the experiences of Black women in particular. bell hooks also has equally written extensively on the intersections of race, gender, and class in her feminist theory work. She has emphasized the importance of acknowledging and addressing the interlocking systems of oppression that affect marginalized groups. Audre Lorde is known for her writings on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, particularly concerning her experiences as a Black lesbian woman. She has highlighted the importance of recognizing and valuing the diversity of experiences within marginalized communities.

This issue of marginalization of Lesbians is evident in our anchor text, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. She (Angelou) lets us know that heterosexuals are marginalized but when one is termed a lesbian, the individual is rejected by all. Not knowing what she is and the idea of being associated as a lesbian is what led her to sleeping with a boy which resulted in her getting pregnant. Women's subjugation is multi-faceted, being associated as a queer would worsen it. The incident of getting pregnant is a deliberate attempt not to be associated with anything queer. Being black and a female was already difficult now being associated as a lesbian would bring about more level of oppression as the person is likely to be disowned by their families, snubbed by friends or ostracized from every society.

Bridie Taylor (2019), stated that, "Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider anything that can marginalize people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability etc." (para 1.) She goes further to write that:

Without an intersectional lens our efforts to tackle inequalities and injustice towards women are likely to just end up perpetuating systems of inequalities. Feminist writer, Zoe Samudzi reminds us that intersectionality is such a vital framework for understanding systems of power, because 'woman' is not a catch all category that alone defines all our relationships to power. A black woman may experience misogyny and racism, but she will experience misogyny differently from a white woman and racism differently from a black man. The work towards women's rights must be intersectional—any feminism that purely represents the experiences of white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual etc. women will fail to achieve equality for all. (Bridie, para 2)

Crenshaw developed Intersectionality as a critical framework to understand how multiple social identities intersect and shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege. To support this, Ihueze and Ozoh (2024) writes that, "Intersectionality acknowledges the way in which gender interacts with other elements of identification, such as socio-economic class, race, and social standing, to influence one's own experiences (1)." In the context of Maya Angelou's works *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* applying an intersectional analysis to the politics of self can provide understandings of the complex ways in which race, gender, class, and other social identities interact to shape the experiences and autonomy of the characters.

The Double Burden: Race and Gender Discrimination against Black Females in Maya Angelou's Narrative

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou reflects on her experiences as a young Black girl growing up in the segregated South. Through an intersectional lens, we can see how Angelou's identity as a Black woman intersects with her experiences of racism, sexism, and poverty. These intersecting identities contribute to the challenges she faces in navigating a society that marginalizes and oppresses her based on her race and gender. Angelou continues to explore themes of race, gender, and identity as she grapples with the complexities of motherhood, relationships, and career ambitions. Through an intersectional analysis, we can see how Angelou's experiences are shaped not only by her identity as a Black woman but also by her socio-economic status and level of education. These intersecting identities create unique challenges and opportunities for Angelou as she seeks to assert her independence and pursue her dreams in a society that often seeks to constrain and limit her.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou recounts her childhood experiences of racism and gender discrimination in a deeply segregated and patriarchal society. One instance that exemplifies intersectionality is seen when Marguerite says "I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world"(2). This comment shows the level of oppression fed by the black girls that they desire within themselves to look more like the whites perceived as perfect in order to be accepted in the society. As well, the treatment of the white girls were different from the treatment of black girls. "While the white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge

them” (104). Angelou further compares her Uncle Willie’s life to one who if he were not disabled would have been faced with probably one form of oppression because of race but fate also has contributed to the barriers in his life.

In our society, where two-legged, two-armed strong Black men were able at best to eke out only the necessities of life, Uncle Willie, with his starched shirts, shined shoes and shelves full of food, was the whipping boy and butt of jokes of the underemployed and underpaid. Fate not only disabled him but laid a double-tiered barrier in his path. (11)

Angelou through her character exposes the fact that women be they white or black are all the same yet there is discrimination against black females. “I knew for instance... and that white women’s breasts weren’t built into their dresses, as some people said because I saw their brassieres in the baskets” (25-26). The black females were oppressed not just by the whites but also by the black men and this can be seen in the preference of Bailey over Marguerite. “Whenever he thought about it, Dad asked, “Are you comfortable back there, Daddy’s baby?” He never waited to hear my answer, which was “Yes, Sir,” before he’d resume his conversation with Bailey. He and Bailey told jokes, and Bailey laughed all the time...” (57). In addition, “Bailey could count on very few punishments for his consistently outrageous behaviour, for he was the pride of the Henderson/Johnson family” (2). Here, Maya describes Bailey as the golden child who can do no wrong and this shows how her gender is working against her. For something that Bailey had started and she probably laughed about it, Bailey would always receive a lesser punishment than herself.

Another incident that plays out and shows black females objectification is the incident between Momma and the powhitetrash kids. The white girls mocked and were rude to Momma and she said nothing to them instead she said ‘bye, Miz Helen...’ (32), while they called her by her name Annie, after they had had their full of cajoling her. This oppression is evident and amplified when it comes to black females. To be safe and not risk your life as a black, one needed to be careful of what one says to the white folks, they couldn’t be spoken to insolently or harshly even in their absence unless they used the sobriquet. Black men were shot to death by white folks for sleeping with white women but when the same crime is committed against a black female, the white men go hardly receiving any punishments. This is seen in the incident where Bailey (Maya’s brother, a teenager) was asked to pull out a naked black man from the river who had been shot to death for doing the thing with a white woman. But in the case of Mr. Freeman against Maya, he only went to court and was released. This shows that black females are objectified, always seen as a thing for the satisfaction of pleasure.

Women were objectified and used only when the men needed them. Mr. Freeman had molested Marguerite and had threatened to kill Bailey if she ever spoke up about the incident and for months he stopped speaking to her. He only spoke to her when he wanted to satisfy his urge. This incident made her read more and wished she had been born a boy. This shows the awareness that boys were treated better than girls. The desire to also dress and look like pretty white girls shows the awareness that whites are perceived to be better than blacks. Hence, race and gender have intersected and they deny her certain privileges. One instance that also exemplifies intersectionality is when Marguerite Angelou is sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman a Southerner. This traumatic experience not only highlights the vulnerability and exploitation that Black girls faced in the Jim Crow South but also illustrates the intersection of race and gender in shaping the power dynamics and violence that Angelou experienced.

Ritie, come here. I didn’t think about the holding time until I got close to him. His pants were open and his “thing” was standing out of his britches by itself. “No, sir, Mr. Freeman.” I started to back away. I didn’t want to touch that mushy-hard thing again, and I didn’t need him to hold me anymore. He grabbed my arm and pulled me between his legs. His face was still and looked kind, but he didn’t smile or blink his eyes... “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. Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body... (77-78)

This incident resulted to the loose of her voice. She seldom spoke to anyone but Bailey until she met Mrs. Bertha Flowers who gradually made her reclaim her speech.

The Caged Bird's Song: Resistance and Struggle in Maya Angelou's Narrative

Mrs. Cullinan agreeing to change Marguerite's name to Mary just for the simple fact that the name according to her, is a show of oppression. "That's too long. She's Mary from now on" (108). The decision was solely made and carried out by her not minding the desires and wishes of the black female. Angelou presented a protagonist who was not willing to be oppressed and compared her to Glory whose former name was Hallelujah who accepted her fate as her boss renamed her for her convenience. In order to liberate herself, she had to break her boss' favourite casserole and two of the green glass cups which earned her back her original name.

That clumsy nigger. Clumsy little black nigger. Old speckled-face leaned down and asked, "Who did it, Viola? Was it Mary? Who did it?"... Mrs. Cullinan said, "Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Magaret! (110)

The poem with the same title by Angelou describes a "caged bird", a bird that is trapped in a "narrow cage" with limited mobility, only able to sing about the freedom it has never had and cannot attain. This caged bird is an extended metaphor for the African American community's past and ongoing experience of race-based oppression in the United States in particular, and can also be read as portraying the experience of any oppressed group. The metaphor captures the overwhelming agony and cruelty of the oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of the caged bird. The poem uses the metaphor of the bird to capture not just the way that oppression imposes overt physical limitations on the oppressed, but also the way that those limitations emotionally and psychologically impact the oppressed. For instance, in lines 10-11, the poem states that the caged bird "can seldom see through his bars," which seems at first as if the poem is going to explain how being in the cage limits the bird's line of sight. Instead, the poem further describes the bars as "bars of rage"— the bird is imprisoned and certainly the physical bars of the cage limit its line of sight, but the bird can "seldom see" because these conditions make the bird blind with rage. By fusing the limits imposed by the cage with the emotional impact those limits inspire, the poem makes it clear that the environment and the anger can't be separated from one another. The oppression of the cage doesn't just keep the bird captive; the captivity changes the bird and in so doing robs the bird of its very self. As an extended metaphor used to convey the pain of the oppression experienced by the African American community throughout (and before) the history of the United States, aspects of the poem can be read as directly related to that particular African American experience.

Again, the caged bird's song can be seen as an allusion to African American spirituals. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy"(qtd in Halls 1918). Additionally, Angelou's image of the "caged bird" is one borrowed from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," which states, "I know why the caged bird sings, ahme[...]/ it is not a carol of joy or glee[...]"(qtd in Halls 1918). What both Dunbar and Douglass are saying is that the oppressed sing not because they are happy, but because they are unhappy. The cause of the caged bird's song explicitly mirrors Douglass and Dunbar's insights: though the song is full of the hope of freedom, the fact that the caged bird can only hope of freedom makes clear that it lacks that freedom. The song may be full of hope, but it is born from a place of deep pain, and the hope can be seen as primarily an attempt to cope with an intolerable situation.

Maya is a symbol of the caged bird who is in an intolerable situation and seeks advice from her brother Bailey on how to get out of the oppression she was facing. Determined to be set free from the cage, she breaks her boss' favourite glass wares. The breaking of the glass is an act of resistance. Maya serves as the caged bird that sings its way to freedom as compared to the character Hallelujah (Miss Glory) who resolves in submission. She says, "At fifteen life had taught me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honourable as resistance, especially if one had no choice"(294). Miss Gory represents those who surrender

because they have no option. To maintain her job she has to endure and bear whatever name her white boss gives to her, however, Maya believes that to attain her freedom, she has an option which is to resist.

Another instance that highlights intersectionality is: “The white kids were going to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises” (179). The above assertion shows the intersection of race and gender affecting the black female child. For the above comment means that the white kids (male and female) had an opportunity at becoming people while the black male also had an opportunity at least becoming something lesser whereas the black females had no opportunity at all. Although the girls had attended school, they were only meant to function as maids, farmers, handymen and washerwomen. Anything higher than this was unthinkable and that is what Angelou tried to resist.

Challenging Oppression: Black Women's Resilience in *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

There are instances that show the marginalization of blacks because of race is the incident with the Dentist, Momma and Marguerite. “Annie, you know I don’t treat nigra, colored people.”... “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (188-9). Dentist Lincoln stated that he had a policy in which one was not to treat a black even if the person was dying but his policy did not kick against going to borrow money from a black when he was in need. Angelou created her female characters so strong and able to deal with the events that try to oppress them. Momma challenged the white dentist and made sure to collect an already cleared-up money from him and got him calling her Ma’am and Mrs. Henderson instead of Annie he had reluctantly called her when they had arrived. This incident made Angelou very proud to be Momma’s granddaughter and she knew that with her by her side, she would not be harmed by any dentist not a Negro dentist if she could stand up to a white without fear.

Again, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's mother, Vivian, challenges societal norms by working as a successful businesswoman and providing for her family. Vivian's experience as a Black woman navigating the male-dominated business world showcases the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping her opportunities and obstacles in pursuing economic independence and social mobility. “When we asked her what she did, ... Some nights she played pinochle for money or ran a poker game at Mother Smith’s or stopped at Slim’s for a few drinks...she wouldn’t bust suds for anybody nor be anyone’s kitchen bitch.” (206). This is despite the fact she is a certified nurse. Vivian is a woman who hates to be dominated, over what should be rightfully hers. As seen in the comment below: “I’m going to become bitch, and I’ve already been that one... and Mother shot him.” (207) Angelou created her female characters as one who could break the barriers placed on them.

Though after the world war, there was a mixture of things done together. Blacks and whites fought the war together, rode on streetcars together, and went to the same school but this still did not stop the marginalization or the intersection that dis-privileges the blacks, especially the females. Marguerite was determined to break the restricting tradition even after her mother told her they don’t accept coloured people. As she attempted to apply, the secretary told her that they only accepted people sent by an agency. Thus:

The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death...the whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white(267).

This rejection is based on the intersection of gender and race. She was black and a female while white females had recently been allowed to do the job, hence, her rejection was solely on the fact that she was black and a female. However, Angelou created a resilient character who broke the order of things to become the first female Negro conductorette on the San Francisco streetcars. Discrimination in employment, education and other spheres of life were very normal for black women, but Maya decided to be among the

very few who broke out of the ‘normal’ to achieve her goal of becoming the very first black conductorette. “The black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power”(272). Despite all these levels of suppression of the black female, anyone who breaks the barrier and becomes a formidable character is looked on with either amazement, distaste or even belligerence.

Sing for Freedom: The Voice of Resistance in Maya Angelou's Work

In the title, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, ‘caged bird’ is used metaphorically to represent black women and ‘sings’ represents the voices of these women. The voice is used as a tool of resistance to oppression. The black female being aware of her varied level of suppression sings her way to liberation. ‘Sing’ isn't used in its true sense here but was used as a way to speak up. The caged bird sings for the captor to set it free or as a resignation to her fate. The caged bird also sings so that the world will hear her voice and the oppression she faces. This is evident in the incident where Magaurite broke her white boss' favourite glass just so that she could be fired and set free since the boss insisted on changing her name from what it is to Mary. In the incident, Maya, a representation of the caged bird, left the doors open so that people could hear what was going on and I presume that to be just in case her boss decided to kill her, there would be a way of escape and also so that people would truly know what happened. This is in a community where black life didn't matter.

According to *Punch Newspaper* on 21st February 2024 by Lekan Sote, the following is how he describes the theme of Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: “Those without freedom suffer through imprisonment. Not being able to be one's true self can result in damaging consequences in a person's state of mind and success. A person who constantly feels the weight of discrimination is often lacking in complete happiness” (para 2). In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou uses narration to effectively illustrate that, despite experiencing oppression, individuals still holds a deep yearning for freedom through her use of symbolism and imagery. “In other words, any human spirit that feels trapped in any way may find expression through the arts, in songs, or dirges, or elegy or weeping, wailing, mourning and gnashing of teeth ” (para 3). Again, according to Anita Sheti in *The Guardian* on 18th August 2013, the caged bird “sings of freedom”, writes Maya Angelou in her poem "Caged Bird"— a touching recurring image throughout her work, as she eloquently explores the struggle to become liberated from the shackles of racism and misogyny. She writes:

I looked up and saw Henry Reed, the conservative, the proper, the A student, turn his back to the audience and turn to us (the proud graduating class of 1940) and sing, nearly speaking,
Lift ev'ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty... (130)

This song, the Negro national anthem is symbolic, it calls all caged birds, the minorities, the marginalized, and those suffering from one form of oppression or are disadvantaged in one way or the other to rise and strive to attain their liberty. Angelou in her work created characters who broke their chains of limitation to achieve great feats such as Maya and Vivian Baxter. By implication, she is urging people to know that no matter the number of factors intersecting to hinder someone, with determination, any feat set out can be actualized.

Conclusion

These instances from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* demonstrate how Maya Angelou's narratives reflect the complexities and intersections of race, gender, and other social identities in shaping individuals' experiences of power, oppression, and agency. Through her story, Angelou challenges us to critically examine the ways in which intersecting social identities influence our understanding of self, society, and systems of privilege and marginalization.

Generally, by applying an intersectional analysis to Angelou's work, we can gain a deeper understanding of the politics of self and how social identities intersect to shape individuals' experiences of power and marginalization. Angelou's narratives challenge us to critically examine the ways in which race, gender, and other social identities intersect to shape our lives and the systems of oppression that we must navigate. Angelou's work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of acknowledging and centering intersectional perspectives in our understanding of the complexities of identity and power.

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