

MAYA ANGELOU'S CONTRIBUTION TO AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article discusses prominent writer Maya Angelou's life path through hard times of Afro-American people. By writing beautiful poems and autobiographies she could describe Afro-American people's dreams, mostly her literal works were voice of unique literal genre often came across in Afro-American female literature as "caged bird".

Key words: Afro-American literature, autobiography genre, poetry, caged bird, racism, autobiographical fiction, motif, Civil rights' movement.

Born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928, and passing away on May 28, 2014, Maya Angelou was a significant participant in the American Civil Rights Movement as well as a poet and memoirist. Beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which was dubbed Angelou's "magnum opus" and nominated for a National Book Award, Angelou is well-known for her collection of six autobiographies. Her 1971 poetry collection *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diie* received a Pulitzer Prize nomination.

On April 4, 1928, Bailey Johnson, a doorman and navy dietician, and Vivian Baxter Johnson, a nurse, real estate agent, and subsequently merchant marine, welcomed Marguerite Johnson into the world. This is how Maya Angelou was born. She was given the moniker by Bailey, Jr., Angelou's brother. "Maya."¹ The specifics of Angelou's life have been sporadically described in her six autobiographies, as well as in a plethora of lectures, interviews, and articles. When Angelou talks about her life, she does so elegantly yet casually, "with no time chart in front of her," according to her biographer Mary Jane Lupton..²

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing, Angelou's debut book, details her early years and her encounter with racism, which is a major theme in her writing. She compared the stifling effect of racial prejudice on her life to a caged bird. Because of Angelou's extensive use of fiction-writing methods, including dialogue, characterisation, and the development of topic, setting, narrative, and language, her writings are frequently classified as autobiographical fiction. According to Angelou, they are autobiographies rather than works of fiction,³ but as feminist scholar Maria Lauret stated, Angelou has placed herself in this genre while critiquing it.⁴ Angelou also recognizes that there are fictional aspects to her books. Feminist scholar Mary Jane Lupton states that Angelou tends to "diverge from the conventional notion of

¹ Kate Kellaway, [Poet for the new America](#) *The Guardian*, January 23, 1993. Retrieved June 21, 2022.

² Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A critical companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, [ISBN 0313303258](#)), 2.

³ Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A critical companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, [ISBN 0313303258](#)), P 29-30

⁴ Maria Lauret, *Liberating literature: Feminist fiction in America* (New York: Routledge, 1994, [ISBN 0415065151](#)), P 98

autobiography as truth,"⁵ which follows the patterns of a large portion of African American autobiographies produced during the abolitionist era of US history, when the necessity for self-defense led to the suppression of the truth..⁶ Type of autobiographical fiction (an autobiographical type of fiction) which renders the process of evolution, growth, and formation of a character in his both biological and intellectual development usually from childhood till early maturity according to the principle of chronotope whose spatial and temporal components form the basis of its entire narrative structure and the basis for its analysis⁷. Such statements show natural character of autobiographies and justifies the author's intentions about writing in this type of genre.

Much of African-American literature has faced the difficulty of having its authors prove that their work is literature before it can achieve its political objectives. For this reason, Angelou's editor, Robert Loomis, was able to push her to write *Caged Bird* by asking her to write an autobiography that would be deemed "high art." One of Angelou's objectives in writing *Caged Bird* at the close of the 1960s was to satisfy the then-accepted standard of "organic unity," which had become a required and desirable aspect of literature. The themes of Angelou's autobiographies are consistent and "stretch over time and place," despite differences in style and delivery..⁸ From the start of World War II to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, events took place from Arkansas to Africa and back to the US. Her works contain episodic occurrences that are structured like a collection of short stories, although they are not strictly chronologically arranged. Rather, they are positioned to highlight the topics in her novels.

One way to characterize women's autobiographies from the 1970s is as "feminist first-person narratives." Writers such as Maya Angelou have reinterpreted women's experiences in a patriarchal culture via the use of autobiographies. The autobiographies that Maya Angelou has written have characteristics with fictional first-person narratives; they are recognized as "fictions of subjectivity" because they utilize the narrator as the protagonist and "rely upon the illusion of presence in their mode of signification." As Lauret puts it, Angelou's stories weave "the formation of female cultural identity" and present her as "a role model for Black women." By reconstructing the Black woman's image in her autobiographies, Angelou "signifies multiple layers of oppression and personal history" via her numerous incarnations and identities..⁹ Lauret sees Angelou's themes of the individual's strength and ability to overcome throughout Angelou's autobiographies as well.

The most significant themes in Angelou's autobiographies are "kinship concerns," which span all of her works and include everything from the event that defined her as a person—her parents' abandonment—to her relationships with her son, spouses, and lovers..¹⁰ [African American literature](#) scholar Dolly McPherson believes that Angelou's concept of family throughout her books must be understood in the light of the way in which she and her older

⁵ Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A critical companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, [ISBN 0313303258](#)), P 34

⁶ Crispin Sartwell, *Act like you know: African-American autobiography and white identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, [ISBN 0226735273](#)), 26.

⁷ Makhmudova, Nargiza Senior teacher (2019) "AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A GENRE FEATURE OF COMING-OF- AGE NOVELS BY CH. DICKENS," *Philology Matters*: Vol. 2019 : Iss. 2 , Article 23.

⁸ Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A critical companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, [ISBN 0313303258](#)), P 1

⁹ Maria Lauret, *Liberating literature: Feminist fiction in America* (New York: Routledge, 1994, [ISBN 0415065151](#)), P 97-98

¹⁰ Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A critical companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, [ISBN 0313303258](#)), P 11

brother were displaced by their parents at the beginning of *Caged Bird*.¹¹ Specifically, her experiences as a single mother, a daughter, and a granddaughter, are the "prevailing theme" of all of Angelou's autobiographies: motherhood. Lupton thinks that this mother/child motif from Harlem Renaissance poet Jessie Fauset's writings affected Angelou's plotting and character development. As a "central image" for her autobiographical series, Angelou employs the metaphor of a bird trying to break out from its prison, which is mentioned in a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar.¹² Similar to other components of the prison story, the caged bird symbolizes Angelou's incarceration due to the racism that permeates Stamps, Arkansas, as well as her ongoing struggles with various types of confinement, such as marriage, drug abuse, racial discrimination, and the work system. In addition, this metaphor alludes to the "supposed contradiction of the bird singing in the midst of its struggle."

Among the works published on and during the American Civil Rights movement, Angelou's autobiographies were placed by French author Valérie Baisnée. The work by Angelou was described as political by critic Pierre A. Walker. One of Angelou's main themes—the injustice of racism and how to combat it—is highlighted by the coherence of her autobiographies, he made clear. Walker said that all of Angelou's biographies, starting with *Caged Bird*, are "a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression." Angelou, the main character, moves from "helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle resistance, and finally to outright and active protest" in this section.¹³ throughout all six of her autobiographies.

Angelou has been honored by universities, literary organizations, government agencies, and special interest groups. Her honors include a National Book Award nomination for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a Pulitzer Prize nomination for her book of poetry, "*Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*"¹⁴, memorable appearance in the 1973 play *Look Away* that earned her a Tony Award nomination; her spoken word CDs won three Grammys. The longest record (two years) on The New York Times Paperback Nonfiction Bestseller List was acknowledged by Angelou's publishing house, Bantam Books, in 1995. She received the Lincoln Medal in 2008 and the National Medal of Arts and Humanities Award in 2000. She has served on two presidential committees. Artist Ben Harper has paid tribute to Maya Angelou by incorporating some of her poetry, "And Still I Rise," into his song "I'll Rise."

Artists, celebrities, and international leaders, including as President Barack Obama—whose sister was named after Angelou—and former President Bill Clinton, offered homage to Angelou and expressed their sympathies at the time of her passing. National Book Foundation director Harold Augenbraum stated that Angelou's "legacy is one that all writers and readers across the world can admire and aspire to."¹⁵ She has been awarded over 30 honorary

¹¹ Dolly A. McPherson, *Order out of chaos: The autobiographical works of Maya Angelou* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1990, [ISBN 0820411396](#)), P 14.

¹² Richard Long, [35 who made a difference: Maya Angelou](#) *Smithsonian.com*, November 1, 2005. Retrieved June 21, 2022.

¹³ Pierre A. Walker, Racial protest, identity, words, and form in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* *College Literature* 22(3) (October 1995): 91-108.

¹⁴ Homer E. Moyer, *The R.A.T. Real-world aptitude test: Preparing yourself for leaving home* (Sterling, VA: Capital Books, 2003, [ISBN 1931868425](#)), 297.

¹⁵ Colleen Jenkins and Bill Trott, [Maya Angelou, author and poet, dead at 86](#) *Reuters*, May 28, 2014. Retrieved June 21, 2022.

degrees.¹⁶ In 2011, President Barack Obama awarded her with the Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor.

In conclusion, Maya Angelou was one of the greatest Afro-American writers of all time and still being honoured by the readers of the literature throughout the world. Her enormous contribution is highly appreciated by world's literature community by increased demand to read her poems and autobiographies.

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¹⁶ Lucinda Moore, [Growing Up Maya Angelou](http://Smithsonian.com). Smithsonian.com, April 1, 2003. Retrieved June 21, 2022