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A MINORITY WITHIN A MINORITY: A Study of the
African American Women Based on Maya Angelou's
Autobiography *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is the analysis of the way in which Maya Angelou illustrates the condition of black women in 20th century American society in her autobiography. The autobiography is composed of 7 volumes but I have focused my analysis on the first one *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; through the evolution of Maya's life, we can appreciate the role of black women in society, the question of black identity and the influence other women have in Maya.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou, Black Women, Sexual Identity.

RESUMEN

Mi objetivo es el análisis de la forma en que Maya Angelou ilustra la situación de las mujeres negras en la sociedad americana del S.XX en su autobiografía. La autobiografía está compuesta por 7 volúmenes , pero he centrado mi análisis en la primera *Yo sé por qué canta el Pájaro Enjaulado* ; a través de la evolución de la vida de Maya , podemos observar el papel de las mujeres negras en la sociedad, la identidad negra y la influencia que otras mujeres tienen en Maya , entre otros.

I Know why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou, Mujeres negras, Identidad sexual.

INDEX

1. INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Reasons	1
1.2 Hypothesis	1
1.3 Objectives	2
1.4 Methodology	2
2. WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES	3
2.1 African-American women (a minority within a minority)	3
2.1.1 The situation of women in the 19 th C and her evolution in the 20 th C.	3
2.1.2 The situation of black women in the 19 th C and her evolution in the 20 th C.	7
2.2 The influence of other people in Maya Angelou's life	9
3. ANALYSIS OF <i>I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS</i>	12
3.1 The formation of Maya Angelou's identity	13
3.2 Maya Angelou's evolution	17
3.3 The role of the Afro-American woman.	22
4. CONCLUSION	27
5. REFERENCES	29

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 REASONS

I have focused my dissertation on the study of Afro-American women, and I have chosen Maya Angelou's autobiography because she has had a major influence on the condition of Afro-American women in America nowadays. Her autobiography deals with her whole life and it comprises 7 volumes, though I have only focused my analysis on the first one. Maya Angelou has been one of the most important African American women and in her autobiography the reader finds illuminating ideas about the conditions of black society in America, especially concerning the black women.

Moreover, I have analysed this autobiography because it deals with the life of a strong woman, with strong principles and the disposition to do everything that is necessary to bring justice and fairness to society. Maya Angelou was one of the women who became active in the Civil Rights Movement in 1964. In the first volume of her autobiography (*I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*) the reader can observe important aspects of the society at that time such as the way black people were treated, the differences between white and black people, the jobs the Blacks would have, the conditions, and the struggles in her life. All these aspects show us the many-faceted society in which Angelou lived.

1.2 HYPOTHESIS

African American writers thought that literature did not have an aesthetic dimension only; rather, they encouraged a propagandist facet in literature much in accordance with Black Aesthetics of the period. As W.E.B. DuBois said in the NAACP publication *The Crisis* (1921): "We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one." ("African American Literary Theory: A reader" 2000. p. 154). As a consequence, African American authors were concerned with a vivid, accurate portrayal of their lives in American society so that readers could have a thorough knowledge of the hardships they endured.

African American women, regarded as a minority within a minority, had fought to change their status in the society and despite the struggles, they have achieved a better position in today's society. Maya Angelou's autobiography, as well as other stories

written by African American writers, shows how society treated them and how they managed to gain dignity and self-respect.

Maya Angelou was one of the most influential women in the African American women literature, and her books are nowadays in the reading lists of many US schools, because they reflect the lives of African American people from the 30s onwards. She provides detailed descriptions of the situations she had to face. She wrote her autobiography in order to make people understand how difficult it was to experience the differences between Blacks and Whites, and also between men and women. Angelou's autobiography is told in an episodic form (beginning, middle and end) that derives from her literary experience. Her memories are classified within the genre of "novelistic autobiography", similar to the style of slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano, or Frederick Douglass.

1.3 OBJECTIVES

This dissertation will deal with the analysis of the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, focusing on the role of Afro-American woman, the role of Angelou in the society of her times and her identity as an African American woman, her evolution from a three-year-old child, to motherhood, experiencing rape and working as a train-driver, and finally the influence of other women in Maya. To do this, I will examine her autobiography focusing on the way black people, and especially women, were treated. I will also analyse Angelou's sexual identity, the way she was raised, and the obstacles she had to overcome and how despite the difficulties in her life, she managed to get by and succeed. The purpose of this analysis is to see how important was Maya Angelou's autobiography for the development of many woman rights, as well as many other women. She was one of the first women writers who were not afraid of telling the truth.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

To achieve this I have read the first volume of the autobiography, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* paying attention to both Angelou as a character and to the women who appeared in her life. The role of the Momma of course was essential to the development of the story.

The analysis of the first volume of Angelou's autobiography is set against an overview of black women in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For the first section of this dissertation I have used the following books: William L. Andrews: *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (1990), Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor: *African American Women's Literature* (2009), and Elizabeth C. Stanton: *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881). This is done within the context of the situation of black people in general, as described by Anna Julia Cooper: *A voice from the South* (1892) and Kimberle Crenshaw *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* (1989).

The reading of interviews and criticism of her books and poems gathered information about the author herself. Once I have collected the information about the author and her environment, I have moved on to analyse the question of identity in order to have a more detailed view of African American women's condition in Angelou's times.

A third step was to provide a detailed analysis of African Americans, and in particular, African American women as they are described in Angelou's autobiography. Finally, I have devoted my attention to other people who have had an influence on the author as she was growing up in an attempt to specify how those people have shaped aspects of Maya Angelou's personality. This is followed by an exposition of a series of events in Maya Angelou's life, which could have brought her down, but have instead made her a strong and independent woman.

2. WOMEN IN THE US

2.1 AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN (A MINORITY WITHIN A MINORITY)

2.1.1 THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Throughout history the role of women in society has gradually changed and this has been due to a growing battle for women's rights. In 18th century England, following the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). But even before, in America, women had been very conscious of inequality in society. In the late 18th and early 19th century in America, women were believed to be the source of values in the family in a time of increasing corruption. Thus women

tended to be placed on a podium and it was popularly believed that women lacked sexual feeling except with regard to childbirth. At this time in history the image of women was that of the passive female and the society ensured the subordination of women in every aspect of life. Women gave up their independence with marriage and did not even have the right to own property. In the first half of the 19th C, women were not allowed the same liberties as those men had in relation to the law, the church or the government. The all-male establishment in the United States denied full political citizenship to women. Women could not vote, hold a position in the government, go to the University (women could not enter colleges until 1837 when Oberlin became the first co-educational college) or have a job; if they were married, they could not sign legal contracts, divorce from an abusive husband or obtain the custody of their children. (Morse, 2007) All of these measures were supposed to ensure that women would remain innocent and childlike, in other words: free of corruption.

In different ways, the birth of women's rights movement was closely related with the abolition movement and was supported by many US women. It can be said that the feminist movement in the US had its origin in a destructive movement driven by the women's oppression and marginalization (Morse, 2007). The Seneca Falls movement emerged from a concrete exclusion experience: women were excluded from the International Convention Against Slavery held in London in 1840. In that convention, the British abolitionist movement refused to allow the women representatives access to the main hall of the convention and they were only allowed to observe the events from the gallery. It was then that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott called the Seneca Falls' meeting. Before Seneca Falls, women had been fighting for their rights for some time, and some men gave them their support. One of these male supporters was William Lloyd Garrison, an abolitionist white man who was publisher of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* for 35 years, and the leader of the American Anti-Slavery Society. When women were not allowed to participate in the International Convention against Slavery in London, he joined them and sat in the gallery to give them support.

In July 1848, Stanton and Mott were joined by other women with the purpose of holding the First Women Convention, which finally took place in Seneca Falls, New

York; their *Declaration of Sentiments* based on the Declaration of Independence of the US demanded rights to women equal to those of men, including the right to vote. More than 300 people participated in the Convention, and 68 women and 32 men signed the document. The Seneca Falls Convention has been described as a revolutionary beginning in the fight for equality. After the Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented the *Declaration of Sentiments*, which became the foundational document of American women's suffrage movement. This was the first time that women and men had joined forces to fight for women's right to vote. Later, Stanton published *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881) in which she described how the movement gained prominence with the Convention.

In the National Woman Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts (1851) the vote for women was at the core of the movement. Although the feminist movement started to emerge before the Civil War, it did not take shape until the period of the US Reconstruction (1863-1877). In fact, 1870 is one of the most important years in the history of the feminist movement because it was then that black men gained voting rights in the US Constitutional system, and women were definitely excluded from the politic scene.¹

As expected, the frustration drew forth an internal clash of the feminist movement, which was divided into 2 branches. On the one hand, in 1868 appeared the NWSA- *National Woman Suffrage Association*, under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had officially abandoned the *Anti-Slavery Equal Rights Association*; on the other hand, the AWSA- *American Woman Suffrage Association*, located in New England with Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe as leaders.

The former defended the need for independence from the abolitionist movement and the separation from the Republican Party, which had granted voting rights to free men but not to women. This association defended the independence of women in the context of the family and its breakup with the abolitionist movement led them to defend a more

¹ The 15th Amendment, granting African-American men the right to vote, was formally adopted into the U.S. Constitution on March 30, 1870. Passed by Congress the year before, the amendment reads: "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Despite the amendment, by the late 1870s, various discriminatory practices were used to prevent African Americans from exercising their right to vote, especially in the South. After decades of discrimination, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 aimed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels that denied blacks their right to vote under the 15th Amendment.

radical feminism. In contrast, the efforts of the latter, which was more conservative and closer to the Republican Party, focused exclusively on women's suffrage, within the framework of the abolitionist movement. Strategically, they launched a campaign to reach their objective state by state, as opposed to Stanton and Anthony who favored a federal assault. Both associations remained separated until 1890, when after 3 years of negotiations they decided to join forces in order to establish the *National American Woman Suffrage Association*- NAWSA.

Women writers also had their influence: Lydia Maria Child and Frances Wright wrote in favor of women's wills and women's rights respectively. The Grimké sisters were one of the first ones who spoke in favor of equality between men and women, and against slavery in the social reform movements of the 19th C. In 1839, Margaret Fuller (editor of the *Dial*, the Transcendentalist publication) started hosting conversations among women (Sophia Ripley attended and in 1841; she and her husband founded Brook Farm). In 1845, Fuller published *The Great Lawsuit* asking women to claim independence.

It was in 1920, with the ratification of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution, that women in the USA were finally granted the right to vote. Ultimately, it was the economy, and not political factors, that brought about a change in the role of women in American society and gave impetus to the women rights movement in The States and in Europe.

The movement from the farms to the cities, had a diminishing effect on the economic role of women, but the Big Depression, which started with the Crack of 1929, forced many women to get jobs outside their homes in order to help their families financially. The Law of the Civil Rights Movement in 1964 banned gender discrimination in the labor market. To make sure that the provisions of the law against gender discrimination were fulfilled, some activists founded the NOW (National Organization for Women) in 1966; NOW is the biggest organization for feminists in US with over 500.000 members.

2.1.2 THE SITUATION OF BLACK WOMEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

As described above, the birth of the women's rights movement was intertwined with the abolitionist movement and was supported by many US women. Nevertheless, the connection between feminism and abolitionism was not as close as it seems, and over the time, it completely disappeared. It is remarkable that the First National Woman's Right Convention, in Worcester, Massachusetts 1850, was attended by only one black woman, an old slave called Sojourner Truth, victim of male domination and racist oppression. In 1851 participants of the Women's Rights Convention in Akron (Ohio) were witnesses to one of the most outstanding speeches in the history of feminism. Sojourner Truth was freed in 1827 and began promoting the women's rights movement during in the late 1840s. Although she was unable to read or write, she was a woman of exceptional intelligence and uncommon courage. These were the opening words of her 1851 speech in Akron, Ohio:

"Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!" . . . "And a'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! . . . I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And a'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a'n't I a woman?. (Stanton 116)

The Black Feminist movement emerged at the intersection between the abolitionist and the suffrage movement in the US in the mid 19th C. An essential difference between Western Feminism and Black Feminism is that the former was made to fit white middle class women, with good education and high aspirations, while the latter emerged in the slave communities, made up of women that had been exploited in houses or work camps, physically and morally brought down, and without any access to education.

Truth's words vividly contrast the character of oppression faced by white and Black women. While white middle-class women have traditionally been treated as delicate and overly emotional—destined to subordinate themselves to white men—Black women have been denigrated and subject to the racist abuse that is a foundational element of US society. Yet, as

Crenshaw notes, “When Sojourner Truth rose to speak, many white women urged that she be silenced, fearing that she would divert attention from women’s suffrage to emancipation,” invoking a clear illustration of the degree of racism within the suffrage movement. (Crenshaw 143)

However, from the beginning Black Feminists were able to establish strong alliances: with black men in the fight against slavery; with white women in the fight for women’s suffrage; and among themselves when racism infected the US suffragist movement and feminism brought in the differences between genders within black communities.

Formally abolishing slavery in the United States, the 13th Amendment was passed by the Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified by the states on December 6. However this only changed the surface of the society that divided people into masters and slaves; only involved the rupture of the differentiation between free man and slave but not the one between black and white people; and soon racism replaced slavery as a new way of discrimination. The 15th amendment (1870) extended voting rights to black men, and this led to the definitive separation of the suffragist and abolitionist movements. But racism penetrated the suffragist movement, opening with that a marked gap between black and white feminists. It would not be until the passing of the 19th amendment (1920) that black and white women would be granted voting rights in the US.

It was in the Southern States that the consequences of the abolition of slavery and Afro-Americans’ voting and civil rights were more deeply felt. After 1879, many States implemented laws that deprived black people of most of their rights and established segregation in public places. Examples of this were the Jim Crow Laws.

“Jim Crow Laws were statutes and ordinances established between 1874 and 1975 to separate the white and black races in the American South. In theory, it was to create "separate but equal" treatment, but in practice Jim Crow Laws condemned black citizens to inferior treatment and facilities. Education was segregated as were public facilities such as hotels and restaurants under Jim Crow Laws” (“Jim Crow Laws” US History)

The following decades saw continuous migrations of black people from the South to the North, as segregation continued to be implemented. Because of that the Afro-American feminists often devoted their efforts to the establishment of a community inspired by

Black Nationalism, based on the belief that black people formed a nation with a common history and fate. The idea that black people had similar interests and should support one another contributed both to the creation of a feminist awareness among black women, as well as a black consciousness shared by men and women alike.

In the 50s and the 60s diverse social and cultural changes took place that favored the irruption of new agents in the politic field to change the US society and particularly, Afro-Americans politics. One example of this would be the Civil Rights Movement. In 1955, 1st December an event sparked the beginning of this movement: In Montgomery (Alabama) a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat to a white man in a Montgomery bus. She was arrested and fined. The boycott of public buses by blacks in Montgomery began on the day of Parks' court hearing and lasted 381 days. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ordered Montgomery to have an integrated bus system, and one of the leaders of the boycott, a young pastor named Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-68), emerged as a prominent national leader of the American Civil Rights Movement in the wake of this event.

In 1964 the Law of Civil Rights was passed, but this did not stop discrimination and racism, though it provided an important tool to fight against it. Activists concentrated their efforts on increasing the participation and the political representation of the black population. The most meaningful legacy of the Civil Rights Movement is the laws and the programs, which put an end to the legal basis for racial segregation and political exclusion.

This brought about dramatic changes and unprecedented progress in the situation of blacks in the US: the creation of a black middle-class, an active participation in public life, and huge educational and employment opportunities for thousands of people. However, violence swept through the ghettos of the big cities, particularly after Martin Luther King's death (1968).

2.2 THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER PEOPLE IN MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou has been an influential woman throughout her life; she left her mark in history and literature, and she celebrated the experience of being black in the US. The most breathtaking of all her achievements is the construction of her own personality. As

she stated once, “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” (Goodreads). Remembering her, it is important to highlight her commitment with equality; it was a fight not only for her own life, for women and for Afro-American people, but also for peace and justice all over the world.

Many people inspired Maya to write, taught her and influenced her writings as well as her life. She started writing her first book *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, when she was around 40 years old. She was on tour around Europe when she met the writer James Baldwin in Paris, and he convinced Maya to write her autobiography, after hearing stories about her childhood.

She returned back to the US in order to support Malcolm X’s initiative of the Organization of African American Unity, but shortly after her arrival Malcolm X was assassinated. After this tragedy, the assassination of her friend Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 was devastating for her, and this was the moment when she started to write.

Maya Angelou in an interview said,

“Working for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was very important for me. Developing a brother/sister relationship with Malcolm X has been very important to me. Being friends with Dr. Johnnetta Cole has been very important to me. The sisters and brothers that you meet give you the materials that your character uses to build itself. It is said that some people are born great, others achieve it, some have it thrust upon them. In truth, the ways in which your character is built have to do with all three of those. Those around you, those you choose and those who choose you. Let me add this, too, I am a very religious person, so it is the presence of God, the constant unwavering, unrelenting presence of God which continues to help me to keep a character which I am proud to show to young men and women.” (Angelou 1997)

In 1979 she met Oprah Winfrey, who later became her disciple. Oprah admired Maya’s capacity of survival, her ability to grow in a world made for educated white man, and of course, her literature. Winfrey was a vital support for Maya.

Maya Angelou coined the term of “sheroes” for the women who left their imprint on her. She said: “We women are fortunate to scan the generations and discover women who dared to be “sheroes” and role models for girls and young women. Madame Curie, Harriet

Tubman, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Mrs. Rosa Parks have brightened our days and influenced our thoughts. Because of their courage and insight, we have come to believe we can be the best and deserve the best. Thanks to all of them.” (Pak “Rosa Parks Honoured in Quotes”.) Although there are many people who influenced Maya during her life, we have to talk about three essential women in the development of Maya Angelou’s life and personality. The first one to be mentioned is the woman who first brought up her and her brother Bailey when they arrived in Arkansas at the age of 3 and 4 years old, respectively: Annie Henderson, their grandmother and known as “Momma”. Momma seemed to typify a certain image of the Black woman. In her book, Maya Angelou refers to her as the “Black Matriarch”, and describes her as follows:

I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so. In church, when she was called upon to sing, she seemed to pull out plugs from behind her jaws and the huge, almost rough sound would pour over the listeners and throb in the air. (47)

Maya Angelou remained mute from the age of 7 until almost 13. She had a voice, but she refused to use it. Momma used to tell her:

"Sister, mamma don't care about what these people say: 'You must be an idiot, you must be a moron'. Mamma doesn't care, sister. Mamma know, when you and the Good Lord get ready, you're gonna be a preacher." Well, I used to sit and think to myself, "Poor, ignorant mamma. She doesn't know. I will never speak, let alone preach." It has devolved upon me to -- not preach, as it were -- but to write about morals, about hope, about desolation, about pain and ecstasy and joy and triumph in the human spirit. So it seems to me, that is my calling. And I write about it for all of us, because I know that human beings are more alike than we are unlike. (Angelou 2003)

As Bloom says, the woman who probably rescued Maya from her muteness was Bertha Flowers, described in the book as the “lady who threw me [her her] my first life line” (Angelou 93). For Maya, Mrs. Flowers was the one who provided her “the measure of what a human being can be” and made her “proud to be a Negro, just by being herself” (94). By fostering Maya’s self-confidence, Mrs. Flowers contributed to the young girl’s affirmation of her identity: “I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected... for just being Marguerite Johnson... she had made tea cookies for me and

read to me from her favorite book”. (101).

While Mrs. Flowers established the basis for Maya’s appreciation of the poetic word, it was her mother Vivian Baxter who drove Angelou into womanhood and maturity. Angelou not only loved her mother's beauty but also loved the way her mother carried herself in society. Vivian Baxter taught Angelou values that were both feminine and strong. She guided her daughter through motherhood: a time that was crucial for Angelou when she was pregnant as an unwed mother. “My mother’s beauty literally assailed me. Her smile widened her mouth beyond her cheeks, beyond her years, and seemingly through the walls to the street outside.”(59) Her mother, she said, was her everything.

Talking about her mother in an interview Angelou said that “She was terrible” as an infant’s mother, unequipped as the parent of a small child. However, she was more than capable of parenting an older one. “This woman was the greatest mother of a young adult,” Angelou said. “Incredible. Just fantastic.” (Angelou 2013)

As for Maya herself, it will become evident in the next section of this dissertation that she played an important role in many people’s lives but also many people influenced her and helped her build the strong woman that she turned into. Maya is an example of how perseverance and doing things in the right way bring success into life. As her mother said once to her: “you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you are for the right thing, then you do it without thinking.” (Angelou, 290)

3. ANALYSIS OF *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

In this section, I will first analyse Maya Angelou’s identity as an African American woman during the period of her formation. I will then analyse her evolution as a woman as it develops throughout the first volume of her autobiography and, finally, how some important women who appear in the book influenced Maya’s life, evolution and identity, and these women’s situation as African American.

3.1 THE FORMATION OF MAYA ANGELOU'S IDENTITY

In this part of my paper I will deal with Maya's identity since the very beginning when she was a little girl, insecure and ashamed of her physical appearance, and how this identity started to be formed especially after an event that tore her apart (being raped) and how she, through literature and with other people's help, continued working on the building of her identity and the growth of her self-esteem. Due to issues of aesthetic order, as well as social, historic and cultural issues, women writers from the 60s onwards, created an environment in their fictional universes from which it was possible to define and to explore their search for identity. Being women and part of an ethnic minority, but at the same time belonging to the American society, the term "identity" in these women's texts can be interpreted from three perspectives: social identity, racial identity and individual identity.

In the introduction of her book, Maya imagined that she would look like one of the "sweet white girls" (2) with a dress that Momma had sewed. Here we can appreciate the desire to "wake up out of her ugly black dream" (2) to the standards of white beauty represented in many African American women writers, as for instance in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Through the first chapters there are many episodes in which she is critical of her physical appearance: "When I was described by our playmates as being shit color [...] my head was covered with black steel wool" (22). Maya is unhappy about her looks and hopes that she will be miraculously transformed into "one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world." (2)

One of the reasons behind Maya's low self-esteem is her feeling of loss and abandonment. ("The discovery of self in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*"). Maya and her brother Bailey experienced the trauma of their parents' divorce; they were sent to Arkansas wearing tags on their wrists saying "*To Whom It May Concern*" to live with their grandmother. This situation brought about feelings of isolation and insecurity in the two young children that can be observed in their behavior, as depicted in the book. Maya needed some time to adapt to the life in Stamps, with Uncle Willie and Momma;

the life in the Store and to follow Momma's advice (how to act with the whites, among others).

Bailey played a key role for young Marguerite; he was depicted as "the greatest person in my world" (Angelou 22). Maya felt deep awe for Bailey; she felt loved by him and this helped Maya in many moments especially in her childhood. Her brother's character represents how crucial a sibling can be in a child's life, particularly when feeling unwanted, insecure and lonely. Maya was so insecure at the point that she was afraid of being compared with her father. The thought of being an orphan girl that had been picked to provide company to Bailey also came to her mind. "Then the possibility of being compared with him occurred to me, and I didn't want anyone to see him" (55)

Being raped by Mr. Freeman (her mother's boyfriend in St. Louis) is one of the most significant episodes in Maya's life. The story with this man started as a kind of "play" and was Maya's first physical contact: "Before my world had been Bailey, food, Momma, the Store, reading books and Uncle Willie. Now, for the first time, it included physical contact" (74). Maya felt attracted to him; she wanted to smell him, to be hugged by him and to hear his heart beating. Maya liked the way Freeman behaved and she regarded him as the figure of paternal affection she was missing. For some months Mr. Freeman stopped speaking to Maya, which made her feel hurt and lonely. However some months later, he raped her. It was so painful for Maya that she thought she had died.

After the family discovered what had happened, Mr. Freeman was sent to court and was found dead after the trial and Maya felt guilty "a man was dead because I lied" (86). As Sony Jalarajan Raj & Soumya Jose recollect in their critical article "*Bildungsroman of a Black Female Subject: A Reading of Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*":

Maya's insecurity and identity crisis drove her again to Freeman. Freeman cannot be entirely blamed for what happened, as it is Maya who took initiative in the second time to have a physical contact with her mother's boyfriend. The aftermath of her physical contact with Freeman is horrendous. She developed a feeling that she sold herself to devil. She decided not to talk with anybody except Bailey. She has a deep-rooted feeling that she was ill omened and that people who

come in contact with her would die. She believed that she was the cause of Freeman's death and she wanted others to stay away from her medusoid vision. "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they would curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended" (Angelou 87).

She was only eight years old, but she felt like a grown woman. As expected, this traumatic incident had consequences for her. Remaining mute for a while helped Maya learn and appreciate other things (like reading among others). This image of a mute girl as a consequence of a tragic event is symbolic of a race muted because of slavery. And it was Bertha Flowers (the aristocratic lady of the blacks in Stamps) who made Maya understand that she deserved respect and attention. With Bertha's help, Maya felt liked and it made a huge difference in her life; she was respected for being Marguerite Johnson. At this point in her life, Maya started to build up her identity and her self-esteem again.

Maya explored the nature and tragedy of racial oppression even in everyday life details. When she was ten years old, she was working for a while as a maid for Mrs Cullinan, a woman that believed she had the right to change the name to her black employees. The woman called her Mary (shorter than Marguerite) and this had an impact on Maya's identity. Mrs Cullinan's attack on Maya's identity, led her to revenge. She was sacked after breaking Mrs Cullinan's favourite casserole and green crystal glasses on purpose.

Questions about her identity show up in another event depicted in the book. It was during the summer picnic when she needed to pee; the signs with arrows indicated "MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN" and she could not decide which was hers. She did not feel like a child who had to squat but did not have "the nerve" to follow the way for women. So finally, she went in a different direction not knowing which arrow to follow. That day, she also met Louise, who became her first best friend. They laughed and played together, and as Maya recollects "after being a woman for three years I was about to become a girl" (Angelou 142).

Maya's identity became stronger as time went by. In chapter 23, which describes her graduation, Maya reflects how important she felt in those days. "In the store I was the

person of the moment [...] The center [...] I was going to be one of the first called in the graduating ceremonies” (171) She learnt to appreciate her physical appearance: “I was going to be lovely” (171). Her academic results were among the best of the year and physically, her hair pleased her too. She did not only feel confident about her appearance, but also appreciated beauty as a characteristic of the “wonderful, beautiful Negro race” (184).

Years later Maya, Bailey and Momma moved to Los Angeles, where Maya was delighted with the creation of her own world. She was happy living with Momma and Bailey, and Daddy Bailey visited them occasionally, Maya also admired the way Momma (an old Southern Negro woman) adapted to Los Angeles. Although it was when she moved to San Francisco that Maya affirmed: “for the first time, I perceived myself as part of something. Not that I identified with the newcomers nor the rare Black descendants of native San Franciscans, nor with the whites or even the Asians, but rather with the times and the city” (212)

There is another moment in which Maya refers to some people who had contributed to her life: “The allegiances I owed at this time in my life would have made very strange bedfellows: Momma with her solemn determination, Mrs. Flowers and her books, Bailey with its love, my mother and her gaiety, Miss Kirwin and her information, my evening classes of drama and dance” (219). At this point, she has reached fifteen and she wants to thank all the people that had helped her to build the person she is.

When Maya went to Southern California to spend the summer with her father, she met Dolores, and in the episodes described we can appreciate how the self-esteem of Maya and her security have grown. The most remarkable moment is her adventure in Mexico when she drove her dad’s car and she perceived herself to be a “special person” and “superbly intelligent” and referred to herself as “the brilliant Marguerite Johnson” (237).

San Diego junkyard is depicted by Maya as the “ideal community”. Here Maya met black people but also Mexican and white people. They all worked together in order to survive, and this way of living influenced her and “set a tone of tolerance for my life”

(255). In this community, Maya is allowed to be herself, and her identity is strengthened. Maya experienced along her life moments of isolation, but sometimes these moments give her a sense of freedom, as in the junkyard, where she can be “all alone and full of warm” (253). Maya’s loneliness finally comes to an end with the birth of her son.

3.2 MAYA ANGELOU’S EVOLUTION

The life and personality of Maya progresses over the book, as we have seen in the first section of the analysis. In order to develop this part I have divided her evolution according to the places in which she lived, from the very beginning when she and her brother are sent to Stamps until the end of the book when she has grown into a mother. As Thaiya Afzal states in her article “The Song Of The Caged Bird: Revelations Of The Self In I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings”, Angelou’s first autobiographical statement is then a carefully conceived record of a young girl’s slow and clumsy growth. It is also a record of her initiation into her world and her discovery of her interior identity. It records and recounts the life of Maya Angelou from the age of three to the age of sixteen; the first ten years of which she lived in Stamps, Arkansas, and the last three in Los Angeles and San Francisco. (Afzal, 3)

The places in which Maya lived affected her and her life and gave her different points of view and also knowledge about other cultures. They tasted new food, they met people from other countries (Spain, Mexico, Germany) and Maya also began to speak Spanish. Being launched from one family to another, moved to different corners of the country, and dealing with the abandonment of her parents, Maya is left with emotional and mental scars that she carries with her as she grows up in times of turbulence and hate. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* delves into these issues and illustrates the real hardships of being left out to dry over and over again.

Maya starts explaining how after their parents decided to sent them away after “putting and end to their calamitous marriage” (Angelou 5), they arrived to Stamps after travelling alone from California; Maya realized later that this event was done also by other “frightened Black children to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities or

back to grandmothers in Southern towns” (6). In Stamps, they met Momma and Uncle Willie, and they lived in the Store. The process of adaptation took Maya and Bailey a little bit of time, but finally Stamps, and particularly the Store, was her “favorite place to be”.

However, the “South” then becomes a forceful determinant in the locus of Angelou’s text. Southern life, as Angelou demonstrates, is one of harshness and brutality. It is exemplified by the conditions under which the workers of Stamps lived, the fear engendered by the Ku Klux Klan (whites), the wanton murder of Black folks, the racial separation of the town, and the innumerable incidents of denigration which made life in the South an abomination against God and Man. (Afzal 4)

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. (Angelou 25)

Maya could not think of whites as people, she affirmed people were “those who lived in my side of town” (26). Young Maya lives under the threats of terrifying lynch mobs and the daily realities of discrimination and humiliation. Each racist incident contributes to Maya’s self-awareness and shapes her views about injustice. This is a place where her brother witnesses white men fishing the rotting corpse of a lynched black man out of the river and then making jokes, where her grandmother is humiliated by a group of poor white girls, and where her crippled uncle spends the night in a corn crib to avoid a lynch mob. (Sickels, 28)

Despite this, Bailey and Maya were totally adapted in Stamps and familiarized with the Store. Momma educated them and taught them how to act with whites and they knew perfectly the running of the Store and customers appreciated them. It was when they received their Christmas gifts from their parents that they started to ask themselves questions. “Why did they send us away? and “what did we do so wrong?” (Angelou 53). Maya had been thinking during all the time in Stamps that their parents were both dead. This event provoked much insecurity and changed the routine Bailey and Maya had

been conducting in Stamps when one day her Dad appeared suddenly in the Store. After a while in Stamps, Daddy Bailey decided to take the children with him, and in this moment Maya felt doubtful about what to do. “Should I beg Momma to let me stay with her? Did I have the nerve to try life without Bailey? I couldn’t decide on any move, so I recited a few Bible verses, and went home” (57). The feeling of leaving Momma, Uncle Willie and the Store frightened Maya, but this feeling increased when she was asked how was she going to feel seeing their mother.

The second place in which they lived was St. Louis, where the children met Mother Dear, Vivian Baxter who as Maya wrote: “To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power” (59). After living with Momma and Uncle Willie in the quiet Stamps where the Store was “the centre of her life”, in St. Louis they met her mother but also her mother’s family: grandmother and grandfather Baxter and her Uncles Tutti, Tom, Ira and Billy.

St. Louis also had a Negro Section, which had “all the finesse of a gold-rush town” (61). Although St. Louis was a foreign country for Maya, she was introduced to different types of food, enrolled the school and met different people.

“I would never get used to the scurrying sounds of flushing toilets, or the packaged foods, or doorbells or the noise of cars and trains and buses that crashed through the walls or slipped under the doors. In my mind I only stayed in St. Louis for a few weeks. [...] I carried the same shield that I used in Stamps: “I didn’t come to stay”. (70)

For the young Maya, Stamps is a symbol of order; in fact, the orderliness of the Store reflects the orderliness of her life in general. In St. Louis, however, Angelou is thrown into her mother’s world of taverns, pool halls, gambling, fast living and fast loving. This is a far looser environment than Maya has ever known and one that is devoid of the customary laws that Grandmother Henderson had taught her to respect. [...] Although Maya lives comfortably in St. Louis and is excited by many aspects of urban life, she remains a stranger among strangers, mainly because the urban community treats the individual as individual rather than as part of a group, and so is powerless to provide her the emotional security she needs. (McPherson 33)

After the rape, when Maya decided to remain mute, they were sent back to Stamps. That was the environment Maya needed, as she quoted:

“The bareness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness. After St. Louis, with its noise and activity, its trucks and buses, and loud family gatherings, I welcomed the obscure lanes and lonely bungalows set back deep in dirt yards” (Angelou 89).

In the second period living in Stamps the life of Maya was quite different, Maya had experienced a rape and she did not feel a child anymore. Her muteness taught her many aspects of life, and meeting Bertha Flowers was a cornerstone of her self-confidence and identity. She faced different events, which made her become aware of social reality. Her confrontation with Mrs. Cullinan proved to be a turning point in her life. McPherson explains: “Mrs.Cullinan’s attempts to change Maya’s name for her own convenience echoes the larger tradition of American racism that attempts to prescribe the nature and limitations of a Black person’s identity. In refusing to address Maya by her proper name, the symbol of her individuality and uniqueness, Mrs. Cullinan refuses to acknowledge her humanity” (McPherson 45).

In the event of the graduation in Stamps from elementary school it is possible to appreciate also the injustices of the segregated society and the low power Blacks had in society. The white speaker insulted black people and Maya found out the impotence of her race was feeling as well as her pride of being Black.

We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race. (Angelou 184)

The inequality and disparity of the racist society is seen in these events, as well as in the dentist’s incident and the insult of the “powhitetrash girls”. Maya Angelou in her work tried to show the struggles the Black men, women and children faced and how they survived. Such experiences are not told only to show the history of the black people, but also to find how Angelou’s inner world was created and how she evolved. There are

social, psychological and geographic occasions that helped Maya in the process of personal development.

In 1941, when Maya is thirteen, she and Bailey move to Oakland and later to San Francisco to live with their mother, whom they had not seen in six years. By this time, Vivian Baxter has married Daddy Clidell, a gambler and respected businessman, who will soon become “the first father [Maya] would know. For a while, Maya re-experiences some of the personal dislocation already felt so acutely in Stamps and in St. Louis.” (McPherson 41)

“In San Francisco, for the first time I perceived myself as part of something... the city became for me the idea of what I wanted to be as grownup. Friendly but never gushing, cool but not frigid or distant, distinguished without the awful stiffness” (Angelou 212)

Later, Maya again demonstrates the strong person in which she had become when she drives her drunken father out of Mexico. She knows that something terrible could happen if she does not take control. As Sidonie Ann Smith states “for the first time, Maya finds herself in control of her fate. Such total control contrasts vividly to her earlier recognition in Stamps that she as a Negro had no control over her fate. Here she is alone with that fate. And although the drive culminates in an accident, she triumphs” (Smith 368)

In the last part of the autobiography she came back to San Francisco, she decided to look for a job. She wanted to work as a streetcar driver, but the path to gain this job was not easy. The strong personality of Maya made her fight and thanks to her perseverance she finally got it. At first Maya’s mother rejected her proposal saying: “They don’t accept colored people on the streetcars” (Angelou 265). But Maya did not give up and went several times to the office to ask for the job; Her mind also shouted: “I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD” (269)

In the latter part of the book, it was understood that even though she was restricted by circumstances as a bird is in the cage, she took things for granted and found joy in her

setting or situations by changing her perception and attitude towards various situations. (Sashidar, 2)

This autobiography represents the growth and evolution of Maya from a gawky “too-big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (Angelou 5) to a confident young woman who has an “immaculate pregnancy” (280). From being the black girl child trapped within the cage of her own diminished self-image, around which interlock the bars of natural and social forces, the Caged Bird (Maya) emerges into the brilliant skies, soaring towards the bright light of Freedom and into the realms of maternal and filial love; with this, Angelou’s autobiography comes to a sense of an ending. (Afzal, 9)

3.3 AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

This paper, and also the autobiography of Maya Angelou, deals with the issue of women in the society, so the last part of my analysis will deal with women who appear in the book and the way they influenced Maya. Though there are many, three of these women are crucial for Maya’s development.

According to what I have said previously, the three important women in Maya’s life were Momma, Vivian Baxter and Mrs. Flowers. However, in the book other women appear such as Ms. Cullinan, Ms. Kirwin (who also was important for the development of Maya’s artistic abilities), and also Dolores (her father’s wife) among others, which were also important. To focus on, I would like to center this part of my analysis in these first three essential women. Yolanda Manora in her article “‘What You Looking At Me For? I Didn’t Come To Stay’: Displacement, Disruption And Black Female Subjectivity In Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*”, argues:

“She is nurtured by all three women and each greatly influences her emerging subjectivity. Each bequeaths to her a particular legacy that helps the child make her way in the world and helps determine who she will be in the world. As the blank slate of the “O” is filled in by one then another woman, Angelou establishes mothering as a collaborative creative process; each woman engages the role of “MOTHER” in her own way, bringing her own inimitable colors and contours to the space, revealing mothering both as a potential form of resistance and a manner of artistry with the child Maya serving as the ultimate canvas. The book ends as Maya becomes a mother and

an artist in her own right, learning from her mother, expressly Vivian, but really the hybridized mother of Momma, Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers, how to mother her own child". (Manora, 15)

Different authors discuss who is the essential figure to Maya's development; Momma was the first woman to educate Maya and Bailey, Vivian Baxter was her *Mother Dear* and especially in the last part of the book gave many advices to Maya and was a strong support for her. Mrs. Flowers appear only in two chapters of the book, but this episode has a strong impact in Maya's way of thinking and appreciating literature.

Lionnet holds firm to her positing of Angelou's mother, Vivian Baxter, as the critical figure in young Maya's development: "It is against [Vivian's] maternal persona and role model that Maya the narrator keeps measuring her accomplishments" (Lionnet 132).

On the other hand, as Amy Sickels affirms in her article: "Part of what helps Maya survive the racism around her and feel more confident in herself is her connection to the black community and to the strong role models offered by her grandmother and Mrs. Bertha Flowers, "the aristocrat of Black Stamps," who takes Maya under her wing and coaxes her out of her shell—"another important turning point in the development of the autobiographer's consciousness".

As Sickels argues Mrs. Flowers instills in Maya feelings of black pride and a love for literature, and also teaches her "lessons in living" (Sickels 29). Angelou recalls, "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (Angelou 95).

Together, these three women form a triad that serves as the critical matrix in which the child is nurtured and sustained during her journey through Southern Black girlhood. During the historical moment in which Maya is growing up, these women also seem to represent three images of black female identity which the young girl must negotiate in the course of her own subject formation. (Manora 17)

Mrs. Flowers is the main character in chapter 15, she taught Maya the importance of being listened and also the correct use of words and these are things that Marguerite (the character) and Maya (the writer) learnt and helped her during her whole life, because Mrs. Flowers was the one that "threw me [Maya] my first life line" (Angelou, 93) during that period but meeting her was also the starting point of her writing:

Maya's "lessons in living" with Mrs. Flowers awaken her conscience, sharpen her perspective of her environment and of the relationship between blacks and the larger society, and teach her something about the beauty and power of language. Emotionally and intellectually strengthened by this friendship, Maya begins to compose poetic verses and ring songs and to keep a scrapbook journal in which she records her reactions to and impressions of people, places and events and new ideas that she is introduced to by books. When she is not yet nine years old, she records her impressions of early pioneer life in Arkansas. (Mc Pherson, 36)

Grandmother Mrs. Annie Henderson (known as Momma) was the character that first drove Maya's life from my point of view; the way she understand Maya and the education she gave her was so important that she was a landmark for the little Marguerite. She was a character that Maya admired for reasons such as:

"I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so. In church, when she was called upon to sing, she seemed to pull out plugs from behind her jaws and the huge, almost rough sound would pour over the listeners and throb in the air (Angelou 47)

As we know, being female and Black was not easy in the South, but Momma was holding the Store and was respected, "wasn't she the only Negro woman in Stamps referred to once as Mrs.?" (47). During all the book, Momma is depicted with a strong personality, a woman who fought for the justice and who lived to protect her family; showing respect and teaching Maya how to react in difficult situations. An example of this could be the episode with the "powhitetrash" girls and how the particular behavior of Momma taught Maya that "Momma had won" (33). It is a character that accompanies Maya during almost the whole book, but it is so intense that in one moment Maya states: "Knowing Momma, I knew that I never knew Momma" (194) and this might provide a lead about the personality of Momma.

In the end, the other woman left is Vivian Baxter, or Mother Dear. In the book, Vivian as the mother of Maya appears in different parts with different connotations. The first one could be seen as the one of adulation when they first met her, "My mother's beauty literally assailed me. [...] I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children" (60). These were Maya's words after her first impression,

but after knowing more about her and her life, jobs, and friends, she said: “I could never put my finger on her realness. She was so pretty [...] she looked just like the Virgin Mary” (68). After the episode of Mr. Freeman, when Maya and Bailey came back to Stamps they did not receive news from her; they missed and admired her so much that they went to the cinema to see a white movie star who looked like her.

But this first absence in Maya’s life of the person of mother changes drastically at the end of the book when Vivian Baxter became an essential support for Maya in her job search and in pregnancy:

Vivian and Maya established a connection which, different as it were from the mother-daughter intercourse, constitutes a lasting point of reference for the narrator, who will always look at Vivian as a model of Black resistance and agency. “During this period of strain Mother and I began our first steps towards mutual adult admiration” (269), states the narrator, revealing the attainment of a reciprocal recognition as equal individuals and, what is more, as Black women. Thus, Vivian is not, at this point, a channel through which belongingness to blood ancestry may be obtained, but a model of Black womanhood linking Maya to her socio-cultural community and, so, to her ethnic ancestry (Menicucci 2005)

Maya expresses her admiration and appreciation for her mother’s personality and her attitudes in life. Maya admired the intelligence of her mother and her way of seeing life. “She comprehended the perversity of life, that in the struggle lies the joy. That I was no glory seeker was obvious to her, and that I had to exhaust every possibility before giving in was also clear” (Angelou 270). Her mother was a deep source of inspiration and support for her. Her mother’s support indeed would have helped her develop her identity as a black female.

The last volume of her autobiography *Mom&Me&Mom* shows the relationship between Maya and Vivian from the beginning of her life. Although Maya affirmed in an interview that Vivian was not well equipped to parent a small child instead she also said that Vivian was “the greatest mother of a young adult.”

As we have seen during my dissertation, Maya’s life was not easy but she fought for her

ideals and finally she became an international icon of literature and life principles. I think she learnt from the beginning of her life to appreciate the important things and to be perseverant to achieve objectives. It is obvious that the support of her family and friends was crucial for her development and specially these three women, who taught her different aspects of life in order to build the person in which she finally grew.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to analyze a particular case of the situation of black women in the society of the 20th century in the US. For that purpose, I have based my analysis on the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. I have provided a brief description of the situation of these women in that period, before carrying out an analysis of the book.

In the beginning of my paper an overview of the situation of women in the 19th and 20th centuries in the US has been made. The birth of the women's rights movement was an essential point in history, as well as the different Conventions, which helped to achieve the women's right to vote in 1920. Around the 60s the Civil Rights Movement had an important impact in society but despite these gains, the racial discrimination and repression remained as a significant factor in American life.

Regarding the historical context in which Maya Angelou and other women lived, this dissertation gives us an insight of how difficult it was for these people fight for their rights. Maya Angelou is determined to describe her life with utmost sincerity and the result is a daunting book, uncomfortable sometimes, but absolutely necessary to understand to what extent human beings are capable of mistreating their equals for the single reason of the skin-color. It is a book that claims justice and equality. This setting in which Angelou lived incited her to write about universal issues: identity and racism, life aspirations, education, sexuality and feminism. She did it with a huge literary ability and being a black woman in those times, with much honesty. Most of the women who lived in the same era as Maya were afraid of telling the truth. These circumstances turned her in an example to follow. She opened the way for other Afro-American women in the US to express themselves in their writings.

Her autobiographies, of outstanding expressive beauty, are a landmark and have become key readings in many educational institutions in the US due to the narrative's strength of courage and growth in the face of adversity; however they were also censored in many others because of their content, which reflects the sheer truth of the facts.

Her memories are classified within the genre of “novelistic autobiography”, similar to the style of slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano, or Frederick Douglass. Maya succeeds in establishing distance between the writer and the character, and the details she gives in the stories that are told in the book have nuances of reality, while remaining fictional. There are some events in the book in which the reader wishes they were not real, but there is also humor and lovely subtleties.

After she published her first volume, many other African American women writers felt the boost to write about their lives, their achievements and defeats and to liberate themselves from the caged in which they were caught. The relations between the characters in the book, and the events that occurred show the reader the evolution of Maya in her first sixteen years of life, and provide a realistic picture of many aspects of black life in US in the 20th C. In sum, Maya Angelou has been an icon and she has worked hard during all her life to achieve the equality and justice she had been looking for from the beginning of her life.

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