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FACULTE DES LETTRES ET DES LANGUES  
DEPARTEMENT D'ANGLAIS



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African American Woman's Autobiography as Social and  
Psychological Discourse.**

**Presented by:**

CHEMALA Rania  
KHELIFI Siham

**Supervised by:**

Dr. BOUTOUCHENT Fadhila

**Board of Examiners:**

**Chair:** Mr. BIA Mohammed Ameziane, MAA, Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou.

**Supervisor:** Dr. BOUTOUCHENT Fadhila, MCA, Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou.

**Examiner:** Mrs. MATMER Dalila, MAA, Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents;

My brother and sisters;

And to all my friends.

**Rania**

To my beloved parents to whom I owe my success;

My brother and their wives;

My sisters and my nephews; my husband and his family;

My best friend Sarah;

And to all my friends.

**Siham**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation studies the construction of an African American woman's identity from psychological and sociological perspectives, in Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). To achieve our goal, we have relied on W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "Double Consciousness" introduced in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). We have first studied the devaluation of the protagonist's identity as a little black girl living in the bottom of the American society. We have introduced the main social factors which enhance the distortion of her psychological state. Second, we have examined Maya's journey to self-revaluation, which is characterized by a positive sense of herself as an individual, and as an important social constituent. The analysis of the development of the protagonist's identity in the light of Du Bois's theoretical concepts, shows that the character of Maya, as many African Americans in general, and Black women in particular, had passed through several social circumstances, which shaped the construction of her self-consciousness and her identity as an African American woman.

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## I- Introduction

African American Literature is the subcategory of American Literature that comprises works produced by writers of African descent in the United States.<sup>1</sup> History situates the beginning of this Black Literature approximately in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the poetry of Phillis Wheatly (1753-1784). Having been kidnapped from West Africa and enslaved, this young woman was the first African American and one of the first women to publish a book of poetry in the colonies. In 1773, Phillis Wheatly published her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, and was determined to show that a black slave was capable to write poetry.

Later on, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many slave-narratives and autobiographies were written by African Americans to express their opposition to slavery and to claim their liberation and freedom. Fugitive slaves wrote about their lives in the South, aiming to show the cruelty and harshness of life under slavery. Many of the works written at that time are now recognized as the most literary of all 19<sup>th</sup> century writings by African Americans. The two best-known are Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The latter was the first autobiography by an enslaved African American woman, where Jacobs describes her harsh experience of sexual exploitation.

It was during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that the African American Literature reached its high points and became an inevitable part of American literature and culture, with the famous Harlem Renaissance. During the 1920s, writers and artists in Harlem, New York, led a flourishing new movement in literature, theatre, and jazz. They wanted to redefine and recreate the Black Community apart from the stereotypes that were inflicted to them by the whites. They also wanted to get rid of the Victorian and bourgeois values that were applied in

America. One of the most notable black female figures of the Renaissance was Zola Neale Hurston who wrote the classic novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937). Although she was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's works faded into obscurity for decades. In the 1970s, she was rediscovered by Alice Walker in her article "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston".

The struggle of black people against racism is particularly manifested in memoirs and autobiographies; "The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American pursuits."<sup>2</sup> In fact, the autobiography was the most effective way for African Americans to express the harshness of racism and the evils of injustice and slavery. As a written account of life and experiences of a person, narrated and written by themselves, autobiography is, therefore, the recreation or the rediscovery of oneself. Through autobiographies, African American writers sought to recreate and to rediscover their ethnic identity. It was a self-revelation for them to write about their own experiences with segregation and injustice.

Influential writers became pillars of this Black Literature, including Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and many others. However, the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed the emergence of black women's writings. Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, as two important American figures, tried to establish their own voice through recreating and rewriting about their identities. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), addressed the question of how self-identity is constructed and achieved by a black girl in a society that devalues her and ignores her oppression and violation.

As one of the most famous African American female figures, Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was also one of the first black autobiographers to present "a powerful and authentic



signification of African American womanhood in her quest for understanding and love rather than for bitterness and despair.”<sup>3</sup> Her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is in fact a testimony to her personal quest for self-fulfillment and struggle to survive within the distress associated with her life in a racially divided, misogynist and white-male-dominated society. This society that defines beauty in terms of whiteness and rejects the black woman, in general, and Maya, in particular, simply because she is black skinned. In fact, the American white-dominated society framed and specified standards of beauty emphasizing skin colors, body sizes, and hair types that exclude black women with dark skin and curly hair. Since whiteness is considered superior and white people are considered more attractive than others, the blacks, especially women, consider themselves as ugly and inferior.

Maya Angelou’s autobiography is told from the perspective of a black female child living in a racist society. It is, therefore, highly effective at illustrating many child development topics in relation to the society she lives in such as the development of self-identity, self-esteem, self-resilience, effects of abuse, gender issues, and identity formation. It also interprets women’s issues such as lost and regained motherhood. In this same context, Danielle K. Taylor and Angelyn Mitchel argue that “contemporary African American women writers sought to understand the self in relation to society, historically and politically as well as the interior self, often through personal experiences, like motherhood and marriage.”<sup>4</sup>

## **The Literature Review**

One of the most phenomenal bestsellers that appeared on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for nearly three years, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), raised important debates among writers and critics all over the world. In fact, her work was of great interest to scholars and reviewers because of its important issues and themes, such as racism and rape. Moreover, some critics placed the work within the tradition

of African American autobiographies, namely Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) and others.

In the March 2, 1970 edition of *Newsweek*, critic Robert A. Gross praised *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, noting that it was more than a *tour de force* of language or the story of childhood suffering because it quietly and gracefully portrays and pays tribute to the courage, dignity and endurance of the small, rural Southern Black community in which Angelou spent most of her early years in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

In his *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, George E. Kent places Angelou's work within the African American autobiographical tradition and praises her credit for the black community and the black culture and identity. He asserts that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has created for itself a unique place within this tradition, "not by being "better" than the formidable autobiographical landmarks described, but by its special stance toward itself, the community, and the universe, and by a form exploiting the full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity."<sup>6</sup>

Another critical reading of Angelou's work is presented by the famous scholar Harold Bloom. In his book entitled *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, he writes: "We have no history, only biography, and our biography has a single theme: Survival of the innermost self."<sup>7</sup> He affirms that Maya Angelou, incarnating that theme, "celebrates the immortality of a deep self that was born, and so cannot die, and is always being resurrected."<sup>8</sup> Bloom praised Angelou's account about survival and resistance in a cruel-white-world where she is oppressed and abused.

Similarly, Dolly A. McPherson asserts in *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, that the book is "a carefully conceived record of a young girl's slow and clumsy

growth.”<sup>9</sup> She adds: “It is also a record of her initiation into her world and her discovery of her interior identity.”<sup>10</sup> McPherson analyzes Maya’s initiation and self-discovery, and how an African American writer describes her painful experiences and struggles in a segregative, hegemonic and sexist society.

In her article titled “*When I Think About Myself: Identity Building Process in Maya Angelou’s Autobiographical Sequel*”, Alice Godfrey states that “Angelou, in close resonance with the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs, aims at showing others how one overcame “those times”, using her experience as a testimony of what the 1930s in Arkansas and California were like.”<sup>11</sup> She affirms: “Through her writing process, willingly or not, she portrays herself as emblematic of a young girl growing up in the South and the hurdles she had to face.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Issue and Working Hypothesis**

The review of literature about Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* shows that the work has been studied from many perspectives. We consider that the depth of the work invites rereading and exploration of issues such as identity from psychological and sociological perspectives. Our work explores how an African American girl succeeds in developing a positive sense of self, despite the social and cultural standards that impose characteristics for the black and the white. Our work analyzes how Maya deconstructs and then constructs the racial and gender identities as a black female within a white-male-dominated society.

We attempt to develop a new conceptualization of the black identity development by examining the way the character of Maya strengthens and develops her self-identity, and how she comes to love her race and her gender. Maya’s gender and ethnic identities are affected and shaped by the social standards of the American white-male-dominated society, in addition

to other harsh experiences including rape, displacement, and rejection of parents. We have studied Maya's quest for identity and personal fulfillment from both sociological and psychological perspectives, and the way these two affect and influence each other.

To achieve our task, we will rely on W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "Double Consciousness". In fact, this theory will help us to examine the social and psychological impacts on the identity building process of Angelou's protagonist. "Double-Consciousness" offers, according to us, a very interesting framework for interpreting African American identity.

Our dissertation will be divided into four parts. The first part is the current introduction where we have introduced a background about African American literature, black women's writings, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In the second part we will present the methods, which consist of W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of *Double Consciousness*, and the materials in which we have presented a general summary of Angelou's book, a brief biography of the author, and a historical background to put her story in its historical context. The third part will comprise the results in which we will mention the main findings we have reached in the discussion part. The latter will be divided into two chapters; the first consists of the analysis of Maya's devaluation; the second examines her revaluation and the way she finally comes to confirm her self-worth. Finally, the last part of our work will be devoted to a general conclusion of the whole work.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lit2Go, "African-American Literature," (University of South Florida, Florida Center for Instructional Technology, 2006-2016), <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/welcome/license/>

<sup>2</sup> Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*. (New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 6-24, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor, *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Gross, "Growing Up Black," in *Newsweek* 75 (March 2, 1970): 88-93.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Kent, "Maya Angelou's 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' and Black Autobiographical Tradition," in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1993, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Bloom, *Maya Angelou's I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (Chelsea House of Publishers, 1996), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne M. Braxton, *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Alice Godfrey, "When I Think About Myself: Identity Building Process in Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Sequel," in *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction* (Sweden: Elanders, 2015), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## II. Methods and Materials

### 1. Method: The Double Consciousness Theory

Double consciousness is a concept in social philosophy and psychology, referring to an inward alienation and rootlessness. It describes the individual sensation of “twoness”; a feeling as though one’s identity is divided into two or more social and personal realities, making it difficult to situate and to reach a true self-identity. This feeling is generally experienced by subordinated groups in oppressive societies, specifically by African Americans because of their racial oppression and devaluation in the American society.<sup>1</sup>

The term was first introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his article titled “Strivings of the Negro People” published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1897, then republished later in the first chapter of his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois opens up his book with a psychological analysis of identity among African Americans. In the first chapter, entitled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, he introduces the concept of “Double-Consciousness” and the metaphor of “the veil”. By introducing these two concepts, Du Bois aims at describing the quintessential black experience in the American white dominated society and its effects on shaping the individual’s self-identity.<sup>2</sup>

When Du Bois coined the “double-consciousness”, he puts it as follows:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>3</sup>

To explain the black man’s inner conflict because of his double self, he adds:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to

Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>4</sup>

In these two excerpts from Du Bois's book, he describes the feeling of the black man who strives in developing a sense of self. For Du Bois, the oppressive circumstances imposed by the white/racist American society cause the African American individuals to constantly measure themselves through the perspective of others, often through the eyes of the dominant white whom they feel looks down at them. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness analyses the self at the psychological level. He argues that the individual's self-consciousness is threatened by a "multifaceted sensation" under hard social experiences such as segregation. He refers to the feeling of "twoness" experienced by the African Americans because of their distorted identity and their divided self. This concept is a psychological state which describes the black identity as having more than one ideal since they strive to be both "Negroes and Americans". Black persons or American citizens; it has become so difficult for them to locate themselves within a single identity, for they don't know how to be just black persons and not American citizens. Therefore, they strive to reconcile the two selves without having to lose one of them.

Within the concept of "double-consciousness", Du Bois introduced the metaphor of "the veil" and the problem of "the color line". For him, the veil concept primarily refers to three things. First, the veil suggests to the literal darker skin of Blacks, which is a physical demarcation of difference from whiteness. Secondly, the veil suggests white people's lack of clarity to see Blacks as "true" Americans. And lastly, the veil refers to Blacks' lack of clarity to see themselves outside of what white America describes and prescribes for them.<sup>5</sup> The veil represents also the invisible division and barrier between the world of African Americans and that of white Americans. It is an obstacle that stands between African Americans and their

self-fulfillment and self-actualization. This separation is combined with what Du Bois refers to as “the problem of the twentieth century”<sup>6</sup>, the problem of the “color line”. It is both symbolic and figurative; the skin color really makes the difference and divides people into different groups and reminds a problem in the black community. “And yet, being a problem is a strange experience, peculiar even for one who has never been anything else [...]”<sup>7</sup>. Du Bois wrote this to explain that not only whites consider blacks to be a ‘problem’, but also blacks see themselves so. This image created by whites is anchored in blacks’ identities. They have always been oppressed; they have always been a “problem”. How can they now see themselves otherwise? The problem of the “color line” is still persistent, and as long as it exists, African Americans will perceive themselves as the problem of the American society.

The issue of the “color line” lies on the creation of “the veil”. This describes how this division prevents both whites from seeing blacks as true Americans, and also blacks from locating their self-identity outside of the biased image perpetuated by the white society. As a result, such a negative consciousness prevents blacks from depicting their intellectual talents and capacities. Moreover, the stereotypes and social standards perpetuated by the white society enhance the feeling of inferiority and low self-esteem in African Americans’ identity. Such feelings result in identity confusion and help to create another veil which stands as a barrier between the black individual and his/her self worth:

The veil not only divides the individual self; it also fissures the community, nation, and society as a whole (and ultimately, world society in its entirety). The veil's antagonisms, however, are also thoroughgoing interrelationships, such that it not only splits self and world along the “color-line,” but simultaneously founds the self and produces the social world.<sup>8</sup>

“The veil” exists in the white American eyes and in the souls of Black Americans. Thus, it becomes difficult for African Americans to build up a sane and clear identity and to confirm their self-worth within the American white-dominated society.

Although the concept of “double-consciousness” was introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it continues to be used and discussed by numerous commentators on racialized



cultures, societies, and literatures, by cultural and literary theorists.<sup>9</sup> While many people would like to argue that we live in a post-racial society, there are still many inequalities based upon race that make it difficult for black Americans to reconcile their identities as blacks and as Americans.<sup>10</sup> The use of the term was expanded to include not only race but also gender and class issues. It has been applied to several cases of social inequality, notably women living in patriarchal societies, enduring male violence and oppression. “Double Consciousness” in Women's Studies is the idea that a woman is not only oppressed and devalued for being a woman but also for another factor such as race and gender. This idea of Double Consciousness towards women was first introduced by Frances Beale in 1969 during the Second Wave of feminism in a pamphlet titled *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*.<sup>11</sup> She described the dual discriminations of racism and sexism that subjugate black women: “As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men.”<sup>12</sup>

The “Double Burden” is also another way at looking at the concept of “Double Consciousness.” It was first introduced by Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex*, where she maintains that, “sexism is racism extended.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, the most oppressed group in the American society is African American women. They suffer not only from racism by white people but also from sexism by both white and black males. Although Du Bois’s theory of “Double Consciousness” is placed in the American segregative culture, it is not limited to race only. Du Bois does not include gender, but it remains difficult to study race without discussing gender. The striving of black women is widely discussed in historical and cultural studies where they fight against the cruelty and supremacy of masculinity over them. In 1904, Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, wrote: “Not only are colored women ... handicapped on account of their sex, but they

are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women.”<sup>14</sup> In this same context, African American writers such as Toni Morrison and Bell Hooks discussed the double problem that black women suffer from. Hooks explains:

“No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or a present part of the larger group ‘women’ in this culture.... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women.”<sup>15</sup>

In this quote, Bell Hooks shows how black women are marginalized and ignored by the two groups that they are supposed to belong to; the group of “blacks” and that of “women”. She confirms that the first group is represented by black men and the second by white women. In this case, black women are barely recognized to be part of the society they live in.

## **2. Materials**

### **a. Summary of the Book: Little Maya’s Coming-of-Age Story**

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is the first in a seven-volume series of autobiography by Maya Angelou. It tells her coming-of-age story from age three to sixteen. Angelou decided to write about her childhood experiences after editor Robert Loomis challenged her of writing an autobiography as a piece of literature.<sup>16</sup>

At the beginning of the book, Marguerite and her brother Bailey Jr. are sent by their newly divorced parents to Stamps, Arkansas, when they are three and four, respectively. Their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson takes them to live with her, and her disabled son William Johnson. During their early years, the two children are haunted by the rejection and abandonment of their parents. Maya suffers from a tormenting inferiority complex and a belief that she could never measure up to white girls, because she is black and ugly.

When Maya is eight, her father, Bailey Johnson, arrives unexpectedly and takes them to St. Louis, Missouri, to live with their mother. In St. Louis, Maya and her brother are looked after by their mother Vivian Baxter, a beautiful, alluring, and strong woman, and her family. Mr. Freeman, Vivian's live-in boyfriend, sexually molests Maya and rapes her later. In the court, Maya lies to the judge and denies the fact that Mr. Freeman has molested and touched her before the rape. He is arrested but released that same evening. Afterwards, he is found beaten to death, probably by Maya's uncles. Maya is shocked and thinks it was all her fault because she lied. She endures the guilt of a man's death and the shame of having been sexually abused. After convincing herself of being the devil, and that her words are doomed, she decides to stop speaking to everyone except Bailey. At first, her family accepts her silence as a post-rape trauma, but soon after, they become angry at her and treat her badly, for they perceived her muteness as disrespect. Thus, they decide to send back the two children to Stamps.

When back in Stamps emotionally injured, Maya meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers who helps her to regain her speech and inspires in her a love for poetry and literary books. During these years in Stamps, Maya learns how to be proud of her own race; the black race. At age ten, she takes a job for a white woman who finds the name "Marguerite" hard to pronounce, so decides to call her "Mary". Maya becomes enraged and takes revenge by breaking the woman's favorite dishes, succeeding in making her call her by her real name. Maya endures and witnesses several awful incidents that taught her about the harshness of racism and injustice. When she got a rotten tooth, Momma takes her to the only dentist in Stamps, a white man who refused to help her and insulted her saying that he'd rather place his hand in a dog's mouth than in Maya's. After various incidents, Momma begins to worry and decides that the two children should leave the South, where violence against the black community is keeping them from living safely. She sends them back to live with their mother Vivian in California.

When Maya is thirteen, the family moves to live in San Francisco, and her mother marries Daddy Clidell, a very kind and strong man, and Maya's first real father. San Francisco is the first city where Maya finds her sense of belonging. During the summer, she goes to spend her holidays with her father and his girlfriend, Dolores, in Los Angeles. Dolores is not much older than Maya herself, and the two girls do not get along at all. One night, Big Bailey takes Maya to Mexico where he gets drunk and falls asleep. Maya is then obliged to drive the car down a mountain by her own, although she has never driven before. She is terrified but once it is over, she feels very proud of her great achievement. When back home, the two girls get into an argument and Dolores cuts Maya with scissors. The latter runs away from home and lives for a month with a group of homeless teenagers in a junkyard, where she learns about friendship and self-reliance. She returns to San Francisco strong and self-assured, with the feeling that she is much older than her age and loses interest in a lot of things, mainly school. Maya decides to work as a streetcar conductor, although black people are not allowed to do this, she persists until they finally accept her. She becomes the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco at the age of fifteen.

After her reading of a book about lesbianism, Maya begins to doubt about her sexual identity. She thinks that she might be a lesbian because of her physical appearance. She decides to ask a neighbor boy to have sex with her, and they do. The experience is disappointing and boring for Maya. But few weeks later, she finds out that she is pregnant. At the age of sixteen, she gives birth to a boy and realizes how much motherhood makes her a self-confident and strong woman.

### **b. Life and Achievements of Maya Angelou**

In this section, we're going to introduce some biographical elements about the author, Maya Angelou. This part is justified because the work under study is an

autobiography and elements from her real life will help us to locate the events of her autobiography within her personal experiences.

Maya Angelou, an African American poet, autobiographer, educator, dramatist, film maker, actress, historian, producer and civil rights activist, was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Angelou's older brother, Bailey Jr., nicknamed Marguerite "Maya", derived from "My" or "Mya Sister". At the age of three, her divorced parents sent her with her brother to live in Stamps, Arkansas. They were raised by their grandmother who gave them a deep religious education and principles. In Stamps, Angelou witnessed and experienced the racial discrimination of the segregated south of America.

At age 7, she and her brother returned to their mother's arms in St. Louis. There she was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. Maya was traumatized after the assassination of her attacker and fell silent for five years. Back in Stamps again, literature and poetry helped Angelou to find her voice at the age of 13. She read a lot of books, recited poetry and showed a great interest to literary works.

During the Second World War, Maya Angelou moved to San Francisco to live with her mother and her new husband. There, she studied Drama and Dance at the California Labor School. She got a job as the first black female street conductor in San Francisco. In 1944, she gave birth to an illegitimate son some weeks after her graduation in high school. In 1951, Maya married a Greek sailor named Tosh Angelos, and then she took the professional name "Maya Angelou". Angelou's marriage ended in 1954 but her career flourished as a singer and dancer. Later, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild, where she met several major African American authors.

In 1961, she and her son Guy moved to Cairo, where Angelou worked as an associate editor at the weekly English-language newspaper *The Arab Observer*. In 1962, they moved to

Ghana where she met and became close friends with Malcolm X during his visit in the early 1960s. In order to help him build his new civil rights organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, she returned to America in 1964. Unfortunately, Malcolm X was assassinated shortly afterward. In 1968, Dr Martin Luther King, asked her to join his movement, she agreed but King was assassinated on 4<sup>th</sup> April (her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday). A year later, she published her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Her autobiography nominated the National Book Award as the first and the most successful of her seven autobiographical works.

Maya Angelou's life was full of successful experiences thanks to the diversity of her talents. She engaged in theatre, music and dance. In addition, she worked on adaptations; she produced, directed, wrote and composed musical scores. These accomplishments and her writings of poetry and autobiographies made of Angelou a highly respected black woman. Therefore, she was honored by universities, literary organizations, government agencies; and gained several praises. She received over 50 honorary degrees and was the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University for more than 25 years. Angelou had also served on two presidential committees. In 1993, she recited her poem "*On the Pulse of Morning*" in President Bill Clinton's inauguration. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Art in 2000 and the Lincoln Medal in 2008. In 2010, she was awarded again the Presidential Medal of Freedom by the president Barack Obama. Maya Angelou passed away on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Her funeral was attended by many important personalities and country leaders.

### **c. Historical Background**

Maya Angelou's book is a part of cultural and historical heritage and a product which describes an important chapter for the African American community. Angelou's

childhood spans a period of time from 1931 until 1944 and draws a realistic portrayal of her people's struggle with segregation and injustice. These years were actually a turbulent time for race relations in the United States of America. Political, social and economical problems affected them more than any other group in the country.

During the 1930s, African Americans were harshly hit by the Great Depression which actually began in the rural South with a severe crisis in agriculture. Black people suffered from unemployment and if they happen to be employed, their wages were the lowest. Moreover, they were often fired from their jobs to be replaced by whites. As the "Last Hired and the First Fired," they entered the Depression long before the stock market crash in 1929, and they stayed there longer than other Americans.<sup>17</sup> Racial violence became more common especially in the South and it was a pervasive part of daily life for black Arkansas, where Maya Angelou spent some years of her childhood.

Angelou describes the socially and racially divided Jim Crow South, where conditions for Black Americans were consistently inferior compared to those available for white Americans. In fact, the Jim Crow Laws institutionalized a number of economic, educational, and social disadvantages for African Americans, and required the separation of whites from "colored people" in public places, public transportation, and public schools. Under the doctrine of "separate but equal", segregation in the South reached their highest tops during the Jim Crow era.

Moreover, Black Southerners did not only undergo separation and inequality, they were also violated and killed. During the 1930s and the 1940s, the Ku Klux Klan was still active in the Southern area. This group of white extremists attacked and killed black people, whom they thought did not deserve to exist or to be treated like humans. They targeted mostly the vulnerable black Southern families.

However, the situation of the blacks living in the North was quite different. The decades in which Angelou's childhood story takes place saw 458,000 blacks leaving the South in the 1930s and 1,345,400 in the 1940s.<sup>18</sup> The north wasn't completely free from segregation, but black people certainly had more opportunity of bettering themselves in the North. Angelou's protagonist lived in the two areas; she witnessed the harshness of segregation in the South and a similar harshness of life in the North. Her journeys and displacement, therefore, played a major role in building her personal and social identities.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> John P. Pittman, "Double Consciousness", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/double-consciousness/>

<sup>2</sup> Debora Upegui-Hernandez, "Double-Consciousness: A Journey through the Multiplicity of Personal and Social Selves in the Context of Migration," (Praeger, 2009), 129, 130.

<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903 (New York: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "The Veil and Double Consciousness." <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug03/souls/defpg.html>

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903 (New York: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Winant, "Dialectics of the Veil" in *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>9</sup> John P. Pittman, "Double Consciousness", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/double-consciousness/>

<sup>10</sup> Kirstin Does Theory, Understanding W.E.B. Du Bois's Concept of Double Consciousness, <http://kristindoestheory.umwblogs.org/understanding-w-e-b-du-bois-concept-of-double-consciousness/>.



- <sup>11</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Double Consciousness," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double\\_consciousness#Uses\\_outside\\_of\\_Du\\_Bois](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_consciousness#Uses_outside_of_Du_Bois).
- <sup>12</sup> Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, 1979), 90-100.
- <sup>13</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Double consciousness," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double\\_consciousness#Double\\_consciousness\\_in\\_relation\\_to\\_women\\_and\\_feminism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_consciousness#Double_consciousness_in_relation_to_women_and_feminism).
- <sup>14</sup> Mary Church Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," *Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 7 (July 1904): 292.
- <sup>15</sup> Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Know\\_Why\\_the\\_Caged\\_Bird\\_Sings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Know_Why_the_Caged_Bird_Sings).
- <sup>17</sup> Joe W. Trotter, "African Americans, Impact of the Great Depression," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, ed. Robert S. McElvaine, Vol. 1. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004, 8-17 (*U.S. History in Context*).
- <sup>18</sup> "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," *Literature and Its Times*, . *Encyclopedia.com*. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/i-know-why-caged-bird-sings>

### **III. Results**

Our work explores the issue of identity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. To achieve our aim, we have relied on W.E.B Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness to highlight the construction of an identity within psychological and sociological dimensions.

In the first chapter of our discussion, we have examined the way Angelou's protagonist, struggles to construct her social and personal identity and how she suffers from the devaluation of the white racist American society, which results in her personal self-devaluation. Appealing to the theory of Double Consciousness and its different concepts, we have found out that Maya's identity, like that of African Americans, is distorted and confused because of different social elements. We have analyzed these different elements which may have caused her self-devaluation and the split in her identity. Between being ashamed and proud of her race and gender, Maya often compares herself to the whites who devalue and oppress her. Moreover, we have found out that the grief of abandonment, displacement and rejection of her divorced parents left her with a feeling of rootlessness and lack of sense of belonging. Furthermore, Maya is haunted by her inferiority complex and was a victim of xenophobia that resulted from her experiences in the 1930s segregated American South. Finally, we have discussed the way young Maya faces the "double jeopardy" not only from the white racist society but also from her black society. In a male-dominated and sexist society, Maya had to bear the "double burden" of being a member of the most oppressed groups in the society; the black group and the female group.

In the second chapter we have discussed Maya's reevaluation of her personal and social identities, and the way she reshapes the image she had about herself and her own race. She passes through several experiences that contribute to build a different personality with a strong soul and a knowledgeable mind. Maya's self-revaluation is achieved through a set of

elements that we have discussed in this chapter. Our discussion analyses the different characterizations of Maya's portrait of resilience and developed identity with the identification of factors which determine the transformation of her very low self-esteem. We have deduced that Maya's psychology is reevaluated by the recognition of her racial and self-worth influenced by Black female characters. Further, Maya learns how to be intolerant of racial discrimination rising her self-confidence and racial belonging. She rebels against white mistreatment and deconstructs white social standards and negative perceptions about her race after longing in a critical observation. In addition, Angelou's work highlights the importance of Education in shaping Maya's identity and reevaluating her sense of self. It is a way to promote both racial and self-awareness. Moreover, Maya's journey to self-revaluation is characterized by a new sense of belonging. After a long struggle with residential destabilization, Maya comes to feel for the first time that she is part of a place. The fact influenced positively her self-revaluation. Finally, Maya's final step of her psychological development is characterized by her maturity and self-reliance with an affirmation of her gender identity. Several experiences as homelessness and motherhood shaped her psychological development as being a self-reliant.

## **IV. Discussion**

### **Chapter One:**

#### **Maya's Devaluation and Double-Consciousness**

In her autobiography, Maya Angelou gives an objective account of her people's cultural status and their struggle with segregation in the white-dominated American society. Through her protagonist, Maya, she shows the world of a black little girl fighting the odds of life and trying to construct her identity. She describes the personal, social, cultural, and historical experiences that influenced her life and personality. She shows Maya and African Americans as rejected individuals by the American society; their ethnic identity and culture are more or less ignored and devalued because black people are in a perpetual conflict with the white American dominant culture.

#### **a- Self-Hatred as an Effect of White "Standards" and "Stereotypes"**

The early years of Maya's childhood cover predominantly her struggle with xenophobia, self-hatred and inferiority complex. Her experiences echo the larger black society and gives account of how every black girl grows in the American white/male-dominated society. Because of the "veil" set up between her and her black community, and between her and herself; Maya was pleased neither with her physical appearance nor with the race that she belongs to. She wished she was not a black but rather a white girl, for she believes that only white girls are beautiful. She writes: "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."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is believed in every society that beauty means being white, thin, straight haired, blue eyed...etc. It is important to note that those beauty standards are purely Eurocentric, and are created and perpetuated by whites themselves. Consequently, the beauty standards which exclude anyone who is not white become normalized as cultural ideals, bringing about a negative effect on how colored people, namely women, perceive themselves and their race. It also has an effect

on the way white people perceive colored people. Subsequently, black people often measure themselves according to those standards set up and perpetuated by the whites. Maya, as her fellow black girls, perceives herself as not measuring up to those standards.

In the light of Du Bois's "Double Consciousness", this is what he refers to as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>2</sup> Du Bois explains how his black community has the tendency to regard itself from a white perspective. The mainstream beauty ideals along with negative stereotypes about colored people affected not only whites' perception of these colored people but also that of the colored people about themselves. The African American is torn between the way others see him/her and the way he/she sees himself/herself.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the idea that the black skin echoes ugliness is anchored even in the black mind. Their consciousness of their own identity has been manipulated and biased by the white dominant culture, and they did not learn to see themselves otherwise than how white standards makes them appear to be.

Angelou sheds light on how the young Maya perceives herself through whites' eyes. She dislikes her body, she believes that she is ugly, and wishes that being black would one day appear to be just a nightmare:

The age-faded color made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs. Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, [...]. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.<sup>4</sup>

As a black girl living in a white-dominated society, Maya sees herself through that society she lives in. She knows from the very childhood that being white and blond is a privilege and equals beauty and power even among the blacks themselves.<sup>5</sup> Although she does not have

much interaction with the white folks, the image that they are the beautiful race is rooted in her mind and her consciousness. This image is rooted in the mind of every African American individual who sees themselves and their community through the eyes of the white society they live in. This society makes the minorities, including blacks; believe that the world always operates under the terms in which they view it. The created standards and stereotypes impose a specific way in which those different races should be like.

As “Double Consciousness” suggests, the oppressed individuals often compare themselves to the dominant that looks down at them, devaluates and humiliates them. Accordingly, Robert Gooding-Williams notes: “In essence, double consciousness is the false self-consciousness that obtains among African Americans when they observe and judge themselves from the perspective of the white, Jim Crow American world ...”<sup>6</sup> This false self-consciousness represents the image that one has about oneself. Meanwhile, a “veil” is created between the black individual and his self-awareness and self-identity. According to Ostendorf, this refers to “an identity conflict and to a schizoid phenomenon evident in all human interaction and communication. Its cause may be the stigma of race, color, class, or physical disability.”<sup>7</sup>

Maya is not pleased with the image of her African-American community because she too views herself and her community through the eyes of the predominantly white culture. This confusion about her self-image leaves her with an inevitable sense of inferiority. Such feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, and low self-esteem result predominantly from the biased and falsified image given to blacks. In fact, the whites project the most negative aspects of themselves onto black people, thereby bringing about the stereotypes of the “Negro”. Thus, Angelou’s use of an alternate identity is a result of the image of her African community that she sees reflected back at her.<sup>8</sup>

Like all African Americans, what keeps Maya from confirming her true social and self-identity is “the veil” that is set between her and her self-consciousness. This “veil” stands for a barrier between her and her identity, which is hindered and affected by the hegemonic American society she lives in. Moreover, the “color-line” is a major factor which enhances low self-esteem and feeling of inferiority within the black community, notably younger individuals. It is argued that colorism is a risk factor for low self-esteem in African American children and adolescents.<sup>9</sup> Their awareness of the oppression that their fellow black men and women undergo, because of their skin color, makes them feel their inferiority in the society. As a result, many African Americans have internalized Eurocentric standards of beauty, preferring lighter skin or more Eurocentric facial features.<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, because the white-centered world decided that only white-skinned people are beautiful and have the highest potentials in every society.

Albert Ellis has argued that the tendency towards negative self-evaluation and depreciation has less to do with the environment children grow up in and more to do with the strength of their biological instinct towards irrationality.<sup>11</sup> African Americans, notably children and adolescents are not pleased with the image of their black community because they view themselves and their community through the eyes of the predominantly white culture. Thus, even blacks’ view of themselves is a “white point of view”. The negative stereotypes and injustice left them with an inevitable sense of self-hatred and inferiority. This inner turmoil and distorted sense of self are a reflection of what Du Bois referred to as “Double Consciousness”. This confused feeling as if one’s self and identity are not fixed or unified but rather divided and perplexed.

### **b- Abandonment, Displacement and Rootlessness**

Through her story, Angelou portrays the rootlessness and lack of sense of belonging among African Americans. In the case of Maya, one of the major causes of this rootlessness is

displacement after abandonment. She describes how this was awful for her: “If growing up is painful for the Southerner Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult.”<sup>12</sup> This displacement haunted the girl during years of her childhood and affected her identity building process. Indeed, Maya Angelou calls displacement the most important loss in her childhood, because she is separated from her mother and father at age three and never fully regains a sense of security and belonging. Her displacement from her family is not only an emotional handicap but is compounded by an equally unsettling sense of racial and geographic displacement.<sup>13</sup> One can deduce that the abandonment of her parents had negative effects on her emotional and psychological states, notably on her identity building process.

When Maya was three and her brother Bailey four, they were sent to live with their paternal grandmother in a Southern town, after their parents divorced and abandoned them. This rejection haunted Maya and made her feel unwanted and unloved. Therefore, the very early separation, as well as subsequent ones, brought about her rootlessness and self-hatred. When she fantasizes of being white and blond, she does so because she sees herself as an ugly girl, whom no one could love, certainly not her parents who have rejected her. In her article entitled “*The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou's Quest after Self-Acceptance*”, Sidonie Ann Smith notes that the rejection of Maya and Bailey by their parents is “...internalized and translated as a rejection of self: ultimately the loss of home occasions the loss of self-worth.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, the abandonment left the two children, namely Maya, with a feeling of negative self-perception and self-hatred. They were left with the idea that their parents did not love them; otherwise they wouldn't have abandoned them. They were traumatized by the separation and the only way they could cope with this abandonment is to fantasize that their mother was dead because only a dead mother would leave her children alone. When Maya met her mother later, she thought she understood why the latter would have abandoned her:



“She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called “Mother”.”<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the beauty of her mother made her feel inferior and ugly, and according to her, it is her ugliness that pushed her mother to abandon her.

Maya was transferred around to seven different homes between the ages of three and sixteen: from California to Stamps to St. Louis to Stamps to Los Angeles to Oakland to San Francisco to Los Angeles to San Francisco. These physical journeys represent a metaphor for her spiritual journey of self-discovery. Angelou begins her book with a rhyme which describes perfectly the story of her displacement: “What you looking at me for? I didn’t come to stay...”<sup>16</sup> This refers to Maya’s being shuttled from a place to another and her unstable childhood: Wherever she lived, she couldn’t feel home. Moreover, during years of displacement, Maya continues to look for a place that will suit her and dissolve her sense of rootlessness. She and her brother Bailey have criss-crossed the western half of the country travelling between their parents' separate homes in the North and their grandmother's in the South. Her sense of geographic displacement affected negatively her sense of self-esteem and enhanced the lack of security and affection. The life-styles of her father in California and her mother in St. Louis and later in San Francisco were two completely different worlds from that she is used to with her religious Grandmother in Stamps. As a result, Maya never feels a part of a stable family group or a member of a specific community.<sup>17</sup>

When the two children moved from their grandparents’ house to live with their mother and her boyfriend Mr. Freeman, Maya feels indifferent since she never felt she belongs in somewhere, she just accepts that her faith is to be moved from a house to another, from a town to another. Yet, she hated St. Louis and couldn’t feel it as a home for her and Bailey:

I had decided that St. Louis was a foreign country [...]. In my mind I only stayed in St. Louis for a few weeks. As quickly as I understood that I had not reached my home, I sneaked away to Robin Hood’s forest and the caves of Alley Oop where all reality was unreal and even that changed every day. I carried the same shield that I had used in Stamps: “I didn’t come to stay.”<sup>18</sup>

Her refuge to salve her feeling of rootlessness and to shield herself against her inner turmoil was the fairy tales into which she plunges. She wanted to forget the painful feeling that her displacement caused, and to try to find home in another world.

However, Maya discovered that she was not the only black child to experience this displacement. She has found out that “the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children traveling alone to their newly affluent parents in northern cities, or back to grandmothers in Southern towns when the urban north reneged on its economic promises.”<sup>19</sup> Many black children experienced displacement and abandonment during their childhood. Between the South and the North, almost everything was different. Accordingly, Maya’s displacement between the South and the North may have caused what Du Bois termed “Double Consciousness”. The girl couldn’t maintain a sense of self because she is moved from a town to another, from a society to another, from a lifestyle to another. This difference between her life in the South and that in the North left her confused about her true self. Similarly, a parallel can be drawn with the displacement that the first Africans underwent.

African Americans descended from slaves who were displaced from their homes and homelands in Africa, and following the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, blacks continued to struggle to find their place in a country still hostile to their heritage.<sup>20</sup> In fact, when Africans were brought to be enslaved in America, they lost their previous cultural identity, and against their will; they learned English, were converted to Christianity and were given new names. In this context, Angelou projects a protagonist whose search for home crisscrosses with the history of the Black American displacement and dispossession.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, such displacement and dispossession prevented African Americans from maintaining a true sense of self and projected in them a negative self-consciousness. Africa was considered to be the homeland for the slaves brought from there to America, and America was, for them, a foreign country.

Concerning Maya, Stamps was for her the only homeland, while St. Louis, California was the foreign country. Further, the homeland was also divided into two: the black part of the town (the homeland) and the white part (the foreign land). Additionally, African Americans do not often consider Africa to be their homeland; it is rather a foreign land for them. They are born and have lived in America. But still, they feel strangers in their own country. In *Souls*, Du Bois asks the painful question: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”<sup>22</sup> The African American feels as if he doesn’t belong to any place since he is rejected by the dominant white society he lives in. He is torn between two different social identities; the African black identity and the American. He can’t choose between the two because he belongs actually to both cultures. In this framework, “Double Consciousness” describes how African Americans perceive themselves to belong to two different worlds, one African Negro and one American; they have two different selves and two different identities. It is this feeling of ‘two-ness’ which makes it hard for African Americans to locate their identity within the white society, and enhances their rootlessness and confusion about their sense of belonging. Du Bois describes this phenomena as “double-consciousness”, which is the awareness of the “two-ness” of being “an American and an African-American”, and the largely unconscious, almost instinctive movement between these two identities, as needed.<sup>23</sup>

In his essay titled “Stranger in the Village” James Baldwin discusses the African American identity which is split into two. About the American Negro he claims:

He is unique among the black men of the world in that his past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow. [...] At the time-to say nothing of the circumstances-of the enslavement of the captive black man who was to become the American Negro, there was not the remotest possibility that he would ever take power from his master's hands. There was no reason to suppose that his situation would ever change, nor was there, shortly, anything to indicate that his situation had ever been different. It was his necessity, in the words of E. Franklin Frazier, to find a “motive for living under American culture or die.” The identity of the American Negro comes out of this extreme situation, and the evolution of this

identity was a source of the most intolerable anxiety in the minds and the lives of his masters.<sup>24</sup>

The assimilation of blacks into the white American society left the formers with a distorted and dual identity that Du Bois describes as the feeling of “double-consciousness” or the “two-ness”. Thus, this “double-consciousness” results from being placed in several cultures. Black people desired to break away from this obscure identity and to realize a true self-consciousness. Similarly, Du Bois puts it as follows:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>25</sup>

Since time immemorial, African Americans always struggle to define their true identity apart from the white prejudices. Their ultimate goal has always been freedom of identity and culture, without being repressed or oppressed by the hegemonic white society.

For Du Bois, the discovery of self-consciousness is a kind of “awakening, the emergence of a repressed truth from the recesses of oppressive cultural systems.”<sup>26</sup> In her work, Angelou celebrates the black identity by strengthening it and giving account of her community’s struggle for the recovery of the black self. They try to rebuild their self-definition by strengthening the black pride and reassessing their African American culture and values. Equally, the Maya character portrays that similar struggle and strife in order to find her true self within her community and to define her identity. Through her physical journeys from a town to another, from a culture to another, she tries to stabilize her identity and her true self by finding a home into which she may belong.

### **c- Maya's "South": Racism and Harshness**

Although Maya likes living in Stamps with her Grandmother Henderson, the harshness of Black Southerner life keeps her from feeling she is a part of that place. Rather, she witnesses the horrific segregation that blacks endured in the South. As young children in Stamps in the 1930s, racial prejudice was a severe limitation for both Maya and her brother. In these terms, the "color-line" is a persisting obstacle for both children like their fellow black people. The latter are separated from the white community with a vast veil that keeps the two groups from accepting each other as members of the same race; the human race. Additionally, during years of her childhood, Angelou endured several harsh experiences that made her discover the insidious nature of racism.

The Ku Klux Klan, which still existed in the Southern American states during the 1930s, terrorized black people all around Stamps. Maya and her brother witnessed their horrific crimes against the black community. Late one day, a used-to-be sheriff came out and warned Maya's Grandmother: "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later."<sup>27</sup> The "boys" was, in fact, a soft term referring to the Klan. Her crippled uncle had to hide the whole night in a bin, covered with potatoes and onions. Hearing him moaning the whole night, the incident became for Maya a bitter memory that she couldn't forget easily: "Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light."<sup>28</sup> Thus, angrily, she describes those "boys" as follows:

The "boys"? Those cement faces and eyes of hate that burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging on the main street downtown on Saturday. Boys? It seems that youth had never happened to them. Boys? No, rather men who were covered with graves' dust and age without beauty or learning. The ugliness and rottenness of old abominations.<sup>29</sup>

The injustice and harshness of segregation left the two children with a heavy feeling of insecurity and self-doubt. Their identity was deeply affected with traumatic incidents that showed them the grim odds of segregation. They were, as Angelou describes it; "explorers

walking without weapons into man-eating animals' territory.”<sup>30</sup> The South during the 1930s was, in fact, not a place where an African child could grow up freely or reach their full intellectual and social potential. Black children were restrained and deprived from expressing their intellectual potentials and talents. Indeed, all they have got was the cruelty and violence of the racist white community against them. In this same context, Dolly A. McPherson argues: “Growing up and surviving as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and early 1940s is a painful experience for a young girl whose world is colored by disillusion and despair, aloneness, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of self.”<sup>31</sup> Maya, like many other black children, suffers from an unstable identity because of this problem of the “color line”. Du Bois saw this problem of the “color line” as a scale that divides the black and the white communities and because of this distinction; people become prejudiced and stereotypical towards each other.

The little Maya does not understand why white people treat blacks so terribly, and thinks of them as different species:

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.”<sup>32</sup>

Because blacks lived separate from whites, the formers did not have much interaction with the latter's society. Considering the concepts discussed by Du Bois, we may draw a link with the metaphor of the “veil” as a separator between the two communities. It is that dark and vast “veil” that keeps them from seeing each other as members of the same community, or as equal human beings. The Jim Crow America, namely, incarnated that veil. During the 20th century, Jim Crow segregation prohibited African Americans from accessing resources (e.g., education, health care, economic opportunity, employment) equal in quality and scope to those available to other members of society.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the region of Stamps was divided into black people's part and white people's part. It goes without saying that this separation caused

the distortion of African Americans' both black and American identities. Thus, a feeling of a "double-consciousness" remains inevitable. Maya, who has a very restricted image of the whitefolks, admits never believing that they were really real.<sup>34</sup> She thinks of them as alien creatures, completely different from black folks:

Whitefolks couldn't be people because their feet were too small, their skin too white and see-throughly, and they didn't walk on the balls of their feet the way people did—they walked on their heels like horses.

People were those who lived on my side of town. I didn't like them all, or, in fact, any of them very much, but they were people. These others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife, weren't considered folks. They were whitefolks.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, the "veil" that separates Maya from the white community is so vast that she, like many other black children, considers white people as "Others", as aliens and as strangers. She affirms: "A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white "things" [...]"<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, African Americans are conscious about the fact that white people are much more privileged than they are. Despite the little interaction with the white community, Maya is conscious about not being as privileged as their white children: "People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth. Other he had to be satisfied with chocolate."<sup>37</sup>

Undoubtedly, the harsh odds that Maya encountered during her childhood years in the South, gave her a deep insight about the grim reality of racism and segregation. Hence, one of the main incidents that make Angelou's account about this reality nastiest was the white dentist refusing to treat the little girl. Maya was having an austere toothache and Momma had to take her to the only dentist in Stamps, who happens to be a white man. Although Momma owed him money, the dentist refused to treat the girl just because she was black. Furthermore, he insults them and disrespected Momma:

"Annie?" "Yes, sir, Dentist Lincoln." He was choosing words the way people hunt for shells. "Annie, you know I don't treat nigra, colored people." "I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and she ain't gone be no trouble

to you..." "Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people." [...] "Seem like to me, Dentist Lincoln, you might look after her, she ain't nothing but a little mite. And seems like maybe you owe me a favor or two." [...] "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's."<sup>38</sup>

Through the conversation between Momma and Dr. Lincoln, one can notice the rudeness and impoliteness of the white man. However, what may attract our attention was Momma's response to his behavior. Although he did not respect her and called her "Annie", Momma kept calling him "Dentist Lincoln". Likewise, Angelou reports in the book several similar incidents to show the disrespect that white people, mainly the "powhitetrash", showed towards black people. In the fifth chapter, she made a contrast between the two children's (Maya and Bailey) good education, and that of the "powhitetrash" children. Angelou reveals that those children "took liberties in [her] Store that [she] would never dare."<sup>39</sup> In fact, some families of poor whites, or like Maya calls them; the "powhitetrash", lived in her grandmother's farm land. Despite this big favor she owes them, the poor whites do not respect her. One summer morning, two "powhitetrash" girls came in front of the Store and mocked Momma, aping her with a dirty and impudent behavior. In response, the old woman kept singing and addressing them as "Miz" or "Miss". This incident made Maya cry and feel a terrible pain, not only for her grandmother, but also to her whole race.

Through her harsh experiences in the Southern Stamps, Maya was confronted to the real bitterness of how the problem of the "color line" may have a destructive impact on the black and the white communities. Therefore, separated by a large "veil", these two communities can't get along or accept each other as belonging to a single community; the American community. The young Maya, subsequently, tries to construct a self and an identity after having battled with the hatred of whites with repressed anger. She goes through the turbulence of an oppressed community's actual experience and sense of self despite socio-political change and development.<sup>40</sup>



#### **d- The Double Burden of Being a “Black” and a “Female”**

Through her book, Angelou does not only celebrate the black race’s resistance to oppression and racism. She does not only tell her striving story with racism and segregation. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou also celebrates the braveness of her gender and reveals her harsh experiences with sexism and male-oppression. Angelou discusses the “double burden” that black women in America face and offers an example of how an African American girl attempted to survive against male prejudices at social and psychological levels. Her autobiography is representative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century autobiographies, which deal mostly with the experiences of marginalized black women who are the most oppressed “subaltern” in the American society. This society where the binary opposition of black and white is similar to that of male and female. Therefore, the work is a voice of the race and gender of the author and her fellow black women who struggle against male oppression.

Angelou uses the central character “Maya” as a symbol for every black girl growing up in a hegemonic and segregated society. She refers to the harsh experiences of all black children; those of black females in particular:

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.

The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.<sup>41</sup>

In the prejudiced society she lives in, the black female has to face both male domination and white segregation. African American women writers, namely Angelou, write about their experiences of being doubly oppressed; as blacks and as females. Their writings involve and stress gender oppression themes such as rape, incest, male violence...etc. By writing about their personal experiences with sexism and racism, they sought to redefine and to assert their self-identities.

Angelou in her story reveals her personal traumatic experience with rape. In fact, when protagonist Maya and her brother moved to live with their mother in St. Louis, the latter's live-in boyfriend molested the little girl sexually. Being only eight years old, Maya did not understand the physical contact. However, in order to cope with the lack of love, Maya thinks of Mr. Freeman as her real father and thought his intimacy and affection were a father-daughter relationship; but in return, he rapes her and snatched her virginity. In this context, Demetrakopoulos argues: "For Mr. Freeman, who is always in the house waiting for his woman, who is not always available, Angelou became a stop-gap, which he uses as an extension of the mother to assuage his denied sexual urge."<sup>42</sup> Certainly, it is this event that proves the cruelty and supremacy of masculinity over black women. The cruelty of a man exploited an eight year old girl's virginity and tore apart her self-perception and personal identity.

During her childhood, Maya was assaulted many times by whites since she is black, but now she gets hurt by a black man, a man of her own race, since she is a woman. As she herself mentioned at the very beginning her story, it is quite doomed to be a woman in racist and sexist society of America. Black women in America face double jeopardy from the white and the male group.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, they have to bear the "double burden" of being a part of the inferior race as well as the inferior sex. And "Rape" as a special tool, is used in the hands of men to provide pleasure and to make all women suppressed.<sup>44</sup>

Angelou's representation of rape portrays the striving and suffering of many African American women in the white sexist and racist American society. Her rape at a very tender age exhibits the inner self of a black girl who survives within the cruel man's world. Angelou portrays the grief of black females, being used and abused by both white males and males of their own race. Accordingly, patriarchy, the institutionalized structure of male dominance, encourages males of all races and classes to define their masculinity by acts of physical

aggression and coercion toward others, women and children.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, black men turn often to sexism and abuse in order to defend their masculinity and to prove their power, which is reduced by the whites. While whites dominated and oppressed blacks, the latter dominated and oppressed black women. Besides, while whites considered themselves as the superior race that would dominate all the other races, black men, in their turn, manifested their superiority and power over black women by abusing and raping them. Therefore, it is this male-dominance and violence against Black women that engendered their negative self-consciousness, inferiority complex, low self-esteem, self-hatred, self-doubt, and mainly; voicelessness. It is argued that “women who have experienced life in rape and hardship often carry their abuse in silence.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, after Maya was raped, she was emotionally and psychologically destroyed:

He released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning the radio up loud, he said, “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. I couldn’t understand why he wanted to kill my brother. Neither of us had done anything to him. And then. 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 is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot.”<sup>47</sup>

The girl did not understand the cruel act of rape; it was a new, but shocking thing for her. The above quote describes Maya’s state of mind and shows how she is abused and threatened by a black male. It went without saying that the girl’s world was torn apart after the moment she has been raped. Therefore, when Maya’s family found out what happened with their little girl, Mr. Freeman couldn’t escape their revenge. In the trial, Maya couldn’t but lie to the judge when asked whether the rapist has touched her before the rape. She actually denied his sexual molesting out of fear and shame:

I couldn’t say yes and tell them how he had loved me once for a few minutes and how he had held me close before he thought I had peed in my bed. My uncles would kill me and Grandmother Baxter would stop speaking, as she often did when she was angry. And all those people in the court would stone me as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible. And Mother, who thought I was such a good girl, would be

so disappointed. But most important, there was Bailey. I had kept a big secret for him.<sup>48</sup>

The biggest fear of Maya was to betray and to disappoint her family, mostly the most closer person to her and the one she loves the most; her brother Bailey. She was afraid of remaining alone, despised and rejected. Hence, when the rapist was released and, soon after, found beaten to death, Maya plunged into a deep abyss, where she convinced herself of having “sold herself to the Devil and there would be no escape.”<sup>49</sup> Silence then, was the only world where she found solace, and into which she retreats hoping to protect people from her sinful words: “Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they’d curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended.”<sup>50</sup> The post-rape period was traumatic for Maya; she remained almost mute for a very long period. In these terms, it is argued: “As a crime against the person, rape is uniquely horrible in its long-term effects. The anguish it brings is often followed by an abiding sense of fear and shame.”<sup>51</sup> Like Maya, black women are silenced and almost voiceless in the sexist society they live in.

In an address to the World Congress of Representative Women in 1893, Anna Julia Cooper, an erudite champion of black women’s rights, affirms: “All through the darkest period of the colored women’s oppression in this country her yet unwritten story is full of heroic struggle... The white woman could at least plead for her own emancipation; the black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent.”<sup>52</sup> The first wave of feminism did not pay attention to the black women’s suffering, it was restricted only to the suffrage movement and it never acknowledged the racial prejudice that black women faced. But second wave of feminism draws our attention to a much broader perspective which more minor groups of women including Blacks, lesbians, and working women.

Black girls and Black women in general, suffer constantly from Black males’ authority and abuse. Sidonie Ann Smith affirms that “because of sexual oppression, systematized rape, forced breeding, and responsibility for domestic tasks, black women

suffered in more ways than black men.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Black men were also oppressed and repressed in the American society by the White group, but in comparison, Black women were doubly oppressed; by both the White and the Black groups. Each group uses its power to dominate a weaker group; seeking to define their realities, identities and histories. In the same context, Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class*, notes: “If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped.”<sup>54</sup>

Male and white total dominance has culminated in women’s reliance, subservience, traumatic experience, negative self-perception and remained them committed firmly to the role of passive, subdued victims. This sexist discrimination was one of the main reasons women have a double consciousness.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, being a woman in a male-dominated society and being black in a white-dominated society means being doubly oppressed and marginalized. As a result, their identity is distorted and split into two. Alice Walker acknowledges the bipartite identity of black women and the “double burden” they face as victims of both sexism and racism. She maintains that the black women are oppressed “almost beyond recognition; oppressed by everyone.”<sup>56</sup> They have always occupied the lowest possible positions in the American society and are continuously repressed and pushed back.

Angelou, through *Caged Bird*, portrays this female oppression and abuse in order to warn Black women from what is happening within their own community. The young Maya was a victim of her society. She was ravaged as an infant, robbed for her essence by white and black social structure.<sup>57</sup> Thereafter, it is quite doomed for Maya to be a black and a female at the same time. In the American racist and sexist society she lives in, she has to face the “double jeopardy” from both the white and the black male group and to bear the “double burden” of being both black and female. Therefore, she finds herself caged like a bird, craving

for freedom and struggling to escape physically and mentally the incarceration of racism and sexism.

## **Chapter two:**

### **Maya's Self-Revaluation**

In the previous chapter, we have explored and seen how Maya suffers from a distorted and confused identity as being black and female due to the white-male-dominated society. In this second chapter we intend to examine Maya's "self-revaluation" and the development of her identity which occur under different conditions. Maya overcame her psychological problems in relation to abandonment of parents, displacement and racism through developing a positive sense of self. She has also made social improvements in a society which often devalues members of her race and gender. The study of Maya's identity development is widely important since it depicts the most efficient factors which contribute generally to the improvement of the African American resilience in the American white-dominated society.

#### **a- Self-Resilience and Racial Belonging**

Maya struggles to reshape her self-concept as many members of her community during the twentieth century. Historically, the post-slavery era posed the problem of the divided identity among black members. The African American individual strives to be both a Negro and an American "without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."<sup>58</sup> However, several African Americans encountered social discrimination by the affirmation of their ethnic identity and their sense of belonging. This affirmation was realized only through their self-acceptance and the belief on self-worthiness. Throughout Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya comes to rebuild her self-worth and self-esteem due to the critical observation of her race and the rejection of social standards imposed by the white dominated society. The growth of her positive sense of self and her self-

awareness about the black race help her to learn how to face the problem of the “color-line” and to strengthen her personality.

Maya Angelou narrates her experiences and challenges to overcome the problem of the color-line. At the psychological level, Maya succeeds to remove the “veil” which stands between her and her self-consciousness. Maya’s strife is similar to that of every African American who strives to build a unified and dignified identity. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois asserts: “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”<sup>59</sup> At the social level, Maya becomes self-efficient and disregards the “veil” which stands as a racial barrier between the two races and creates social divisions and inequalities. She realizes that she is able to respond to prejudice by her intellectual strength and she did. Harold Bloom in *Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1996) states: “Yet as the young girl struggles with growing up and becomes more knowledgeable, she does develop a positive self-image; she comes to the realization that she can control her own life and to do so must rely on her own strong intellect.”<sup>61</sup>

When she was asked to describe her book in a single word, Angelou answered: “self-esteem”<sup>62</sup>. Through her strife, Maya comes to confirm her self-worth and overcome the double sensation after a long suffering from a very low self-esteem, inferiority complex and muteness. Through the autobiography, we have depicted several factors which contribute to enhance the revaluation of Maya’s identity and her self-esteem. During the early years of Maya’s childhood, her grandmother was a symbol of black resistance who infused in her soul lessons of respect, black strength, personal ethics, religious principles, social success and a capacity of self-determination. This brave woman teaches Maya and her brother moral values about the black community which contradict with the prejudiced perceptions and images created by the white society. Momma affects positively Maya’s thinking about her race:



“Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths of life that she and her generation and all Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones.”<sup>63</sup> She also affirms that “[she] saw only her power and strength.”<sup>64</sup> However, although Momma affected Maya’s self construction, the most important turning point in her childhood is her close interaction with another black woman named Mrs. Bertha Flowers. As a child, Maya felt rejected and unloved because of the abandonment of her divorced parents. In addition, the assassination of her rapist in St. Louis made her feel sinful and dirty. Maya’s muteness was not understood by the members of her society and she was regarded “as being a little sick or in delicate health.”<sup>65</sup> However, this bad sensation changes as she met her first “life line”; Mrs. Flowers. Angelou describes the black lady as follow:

[She] was the aristocrat of Black Stamps. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. She was thin without the taut look of wiry people, and her printed voile dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer. She was our side’s answer to the richest white woman in town.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, Mrs. Flowers affects Maya’s self-consciousness and helps her to regain her self-esteem. She eventually feels loved by the most attractive lady in her town. She states: “I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.”<sup>67</sup> Maya also feels important only for being herself, only herself and nobody else. Du Bois refers to it as an effective sensation in the African American soul who, “to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.”<sup>68</sup> This also can be noticed in Angelou’s assertion about Mrs. Flowers: “It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be a Negro, just by being herself.”<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, Mrs. Flowers helps Maya to find her voice through reciting poetry and reading books. The black lady becomes her cure to the dilemma of self-rejection, xenophobia, and muteness, and she gives her a shelter named poetry which promotes the revaluation of her sense of self. Maya finally finds an ideal from her race as an answer to the white standards of

beauty and class; Mrs. Flowers. The ideal gives her the sense of community, consolidation, and unity. Maya Angelou in her work shows the effect of the sense of attachment on the psychology of the African American girl. She states:

All I cared about was that [Mrs. Flowers] had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me* from her favorite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me [...] I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the enchantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes but its aura remains. To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood for a cup of mead with Beowulf or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist.<sup>70</sup>

Maya shows how this feeling of being a part of someone's life is a gift for a little girl who suffered from a deep loss of self-confidence because of rejection of parents and even the racial society.

A research studying African American resilience refers to Allen and Bagozzi (2001) theoretical perspectives on the African American self and suggests that having a sense of attachment, belonging, and affirmation helps children and adolescents develop a cohesive sense of self.<sup>71</sup> This can be noticed through Maya's interaction with the black lady. She shows a sense of cohesion because they belong to the same race. She says: "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be a Negro [...] It was fortunate that I never saw her in the company of powhitefolks."<sup>72</sup> Angelou introduces Mrs. Flowers to the reader as a reference to a solution for the "Double Consciousness" and the distorted identity. Her double sight changes to a single one; when she depicts the beauty in her race which she considers to be better than the white beauty. Accordingly, Du Bois argues that this change that occurs in the African American soul is a sign of success, he says: "And yet this very singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age is a mark of the successful man."<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the depiction of an ideal from the black community provides a single orientation to Maya's self-consciousness.

Angelou introduces the black woman, Ms Flowers, as an example to be followed, "a measure of what a human being can be."<sup>74</sup> A research titled *Resilience in African American*

*Children and Adolescents* argues that “identity development [...], includes both an understanding of the self and a reference (self) group orientation with comparisons to the dominant group.”<sup>75</sup> Yet, Maya disregards the negative stereotypes about her race and white standards of beauty which cause her self-hatred. Her experience with a member of her community promotes her critical view about her race in comparison to the white one in terms of beauty. Angelou goes on using words full of admiration to describe the black lady: “When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her. The action was so graceful and inclusively benign.”<sup>76</sup> The critical consciousness in Maya’s thinking about a member of her race helps her to raise a positive sense of self. The research argues that “racial awareness is linked to critical mindedness or consciousness in the portrait of resilience. Children need to be taught racial pride along with the skills to deconstruct racism.”<sup>77</sup> As a result, the veil which weighs heavily on Maya’s soul is removed and transformed to a self-awareness and a true consciousness allowing her to see beauty in her race.

#### **b- Black Resistance / Self-Confidence**

In chapter 16, Maya Angelou narrates her first direct interaction with the unjust treatment of the white Southerners of Arkansas and her resistance to white discrimination. In fact, Maya took a job at the age of ten in a white woman’s house as many African American children in southern towns. She describes how little Negro girls were “given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood,”<sup>78</sup> in order to work for white people; while white girls were enjoying their wealthy lives. In the post slavery era, Black children were assuming heavy responsibilities in the southern areas. Therefore, their hard experiences enhance their understanding of social discrimination in their youth. Due to racial segregation, some African American children experienced low self-esteem and psychological distress; while others were able to preserve their well being through self-worth determination and racial strong resistance.

Following her strife for self-actualization, Maya comes to build a new personality characterized by a positive sense of self and self-acceptance as a black girl. She begins to see white people differently. After measuring herself through white standards of beauty, Maya now feels the sense of blackness and determines its beauty over whiteness. As an instance, Maya finds her mistress Mrs. Cullinan, who is a white woman, ugly and feels pity towards her because she could not have children. Thus, she calls her “Poor old Mrs. Cullinan.” She understands that whites have not a perfect life as she believed before.

Portraying the whites’ devaluation of black people, Angelou gives the example of Mrs. Cullinan who devalues Maya and describes her as a “sweet little thing” or as being “quite as a little mouse.”<sup>79</sup> In fact, the dominant white race ignores the African identity of Blacks and their culture and even their names. African Americans are considered as none in the white American dominated society. Thus, most white members believe that they are allowed to treat them or call them as they want. This is due to the veil which exists in the eyes of white racists. As Du Bois explains, the veil prevents the white people from seeing the black members as human beings. Instead, they diminish their own humanity and treat them as animals or objects which have no soul or sentiments and “classed the black man and the ox together.”<sup>80</sup> Angelou gives the example of Mrs. Glory; an African American woman who works in the same house where Maya works. She unfortunately submits to white racial abuse and accepts being changed her original name “Hallelujah”. She is one among many other black Americans who unconsciously accept white manipulation because they believe they deserve bad treatment since they are descendents of slaves. However, Maya protests against such acts. Her reaction promotes the strength of her racial identity. Positive racial identity seems to be related to an ability to critically deconstruct experiences of oppression and racism.<sup>81</sup>

In this episode of the book, Maya grows conscious about her self-worth. Now she is strengthening her personality and reevaluating her identity while facing white denigration. Mrs. Cullinan could not pronounce Maya's formal name correctly, and called her 'Margaret' instead of 'Marguerite'. Additionally, Mrs. Cullinan's friend suggested that she should be called just 'Mary' because her name is too long. Although she experienced the same improper treatment as Mrs. Glory by changing her name, Maya had a strong reaction. She states: "That horrible woman would never have the chance to call me Mary because if I was starving I'd never work for her."<sup>82</sup> When Mrs. Cullinan began calling her 'Mary', Maya got furious and wanted to quit the job:

It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks.<sup>83</sup>

Maya believes that a name is one of the most important devices in one's identity. She demonstrates the notion of names as a sensible subject for all Negroes. In fact, to restore her identity and her dignity, Maya breaks Mrs. Cullinan's favorite dishes and pretends it was an accident. Eventually, Maya makes her mistress admit that her name was not 'Mary' but rather 'Marguerite'. Through this experience, Maya successfully proves her total self-confidence in facing white discrimination. Harold Bloom in his book *Maya Angelou* (2009), interprets Maya's reaction as follows:

At this particular moment, the girl assumes the consciousness of rebellion as a stance necessary for preserving her individuality and affirming her self-esteem. Freed from the whites' values and stereotypes, Maya is then ready to confront their system.<sup>84</sup>

For Bloom, Maya's reaction is an affirmation of the self-esteem. Now she is aware of her individuality and strong personality which is shaped away from white standards.

William E. Cross states in his book *Shades of Black* (1991) that African Americans pass through a stage in their ethnic identity development that he names *Encounter*.<sup>85</sup> In this stage, the events that occur make the individual aware of his own culture and race and the

way these have been oppressed. These events lead inevitably to the *Immersion* into Blackness which means “a tendency to denigrate white people and white culture”.<sup>86</sup> Cross’s concept is illustrated in Maya’s encounter with Mrs. Cullinan when she protests against white manipulation and proves her self-acceptance. She moves from her self-hatred to a self appreciation. Maya develops her own sense of self in relation to a developed racial identity. Therefore, participating in social relations with whites and others stimulates the process of developing a critical consciousness and discovering what lies behind the veil.<sup>87</sup>

### **c- The Importance of Education in Shaping the Black Identity**

Throughout Angelou’s autobiography, Mrs. Flowers teaches the little Maya what she calls “my lessons in living.”<sup>88</sup> They include precious advice about the importance of education and wisdom. She states: “[Mrs. Flowers] said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy [...] she encouraged me to listen carefully to what people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.”<sup>89</sup> Her words are considered as basic rules to face social hardships with a wise and knowledgeable mind.

In this context, Du Bois believes that education empowers the black identity and helps them to overcome the veil which weighed so heavily on their souls. He explains in his book *the souls of black folk* (1903) how an educated African American becomes a threat to the white discriminative society. In fact, Black intellectuals are able to achieve their goals because they are aware of their potentials as human beings. Du Bois affirms that “the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro.”<sup>90</sup> Education in the black community is a solution for the double-consciousness and the divided identity. The intellectual potentials make the African Americans aware of their rights and stimulate their fight against social inequalities. For Du Bois, proving cognitive abilities is a means to ensure social position in the American society and empowers the racial identity to face problems of ethnicity.

Therefore, the white dominated American government limits the conditions of Black schools. This is illustrated in Maya's school in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou depicts the African American school "Lafayette County Training School" in this town, as being less maintained comparing to the white "Central School". However, this didn't keep black students from achieving success.

In chapter 23, Angelou indicates that a very low self-esteem appears in Maya's thinking due to the "color line". Then, in the same chapter, it is transformed to a deep self-resilience with a strong black identity. The former is depicted when the graduated Maya feels that her graduation has no importance and her accomplishment is "nothing," only because she is black in a white dominated society. This is due to the speech of the racist politician who destroys her racial pride by telling the presence that the blacks' accomplishments are limited and white children have more opportunities to possess great positions in the future. In this context, Du Bois's states that "America is not another word for Opportunity to all her sons."<sup>91</sup> So, the diversity of races is the source of inequality.

Maya succeeds at removing the veil created by the color line and see the accomplishments of her race. Through the class valedictorian speech she realizes that she has the choice whether "To Be or Not to Be." She states:

[...], the words of Patrick Henry had made such an impression on me that I had been able to stretch myself tall and trembling and say, "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."<sup>92</sup>

In spite the fact that the White Central School opens more opportunities to its students comparing to the Black school, the black identity is confirmed in Maya's soul. Her awareness of the achievements of the black race grows inside her mind. For the first time, Maya listens to The Negro National Anthem and feels that its words really concern her. Through the healing forces of the Negro National Anthem; faith, pride, and self-determination were restored.<sup>93</sup> Maya affirms:

We are 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.<sup>94</sup>

These words confirm Maya's pride about her own race, her awareness of the Black inner strife, which is difficult, but leads undoubtedly to a shiny future.

In Cross's Nigrescence Model (1991), it is referred in the *Immersion Emersion* stage to the positive aspect of African Americans when they assume their place in the world and inform about the contributions that they and their ancestors have made over the years.<sup>95</sup> Through the little Maya's words, Angelou includes her voice in the end of the chapter to remind about the black poets in addition to preachers, musicians and singers who symbolize the black resistance and survival:

If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers).<sup>96</sup>

#### **d- A New Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging is the extent to which an individual feels accepted, respected and supported in their social environment.<sup>97</sup> For African Americans, being in a society that doesn't accept their presence as real individuals enhance the ambiguities in their sense of belonging. In this context, Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" explains how the experiences of slavery and segregation ensured the distortion of the African culture legacy. In fact, Black Americans are trying to reconcile the two cultures that compose their identity because they lost the sense of belonging. Being a black individual in the American society promotes the feeling of "twoness". The ambiguous sense of belonging affects negatively the formation of a unified and dignified identity. Therefore, black people need to reconcile both cultures and accept their belonging to both African and American identities. Cross (1991) in his theoretical model on racial identity development of African Americans, calls this psychological stage



*Internalization* which describes the acceptance of being both Black and American.<sup>98</sup> From this perspective, the concept of Double Consciousness is a positive means towards acceptance. However, this can be admitted only by diminishing the problem of the color-line and the extremely racial segregation.

Maya Angelou describes in her autobiography how the little Maya comes to affirm her acceptance and satisfaction with her racial belonging through several experiences. However, the dilemma of displacement from a place to another causes another destabilization in her psychological state and creates a multifaceted conception of belonging. As a black American, Maya's displacement is an example of many African American children who were displaced along the country alone or with their families to find social freedom even in the post-slavery era.

One of the strongest protective factors which contribute as a predictor of resilience is the sense of belonging.<sup>99</sup> Social acceptance and sense of belonging are important throughout life. Therefore, Maya's residential and moral stability are needed to her psychological development in order to build a strong personality. Displacement affects negatively Maya's feeling of being accepted by members of her society. She always feels a stranger in the place she comes to. Contrarily to previous chapters of the book, in chapter 27 Maya Angelou shows a new sense of belonging for the thirteen years old Black girl Maya. Maya and her brother moved with their mother and her family to San Francisco during the WWII. In wartime, San Francisco witnessed the new coming of Black southerners who replaced the disappeared Japanese and worked side by side with the illiterate whites in the defense industries. Angelou states: "The Japanese area became San Francisco's Harlem in a matter of months."<sup>100</sup> She describes how the Negro's situation changed in this period: "For the first time he could think of himself as a Boss, a Spender... very pleasant position for him to

experience.”<sup>101</sup> However, the newcomers are not the reason behind Maya’s new sense of belonging. Angelou states:

The air of collective displacement, the impermanence of life in wartime and the gauche personalities of the more recent arrivals tended to dissipate my own sense of belonging. In San Francisco, for the first time, I perceived myself as part of something. Not that I identified with the newcomers, nor with the rare Black descendants of native San Francisco, nor with the whites or even the Asians, but rather with the time and the city.<sup>102</sup>

In San Francisco hostility between the Black and the white race is less expressed and racism is hidden comparing to the southern state of Arkansas. Throughout Angelou’s work, the city is compared to an intelligent woman under siege. Maya feels she belongs to her new home and describes it as a state of beauty and freedom. She affirms: “I became dauntless and free of fears, intoxicated by the physical fact of San Francisco. Safe in my protecting arrogance, I was certain that no one loved her as impartially as I.”<sup>103</sup> The origin of her adaptation with the city is the decreased harshness of what Du Bois calls the problem of the color-line. African Americans were no more oppressed as harshly as in the south. The city could open doors of social opportunities to Black individuals. As long as they work hard, African Americans could ensure their life which makes them comfortable with the north’s lifestyle.

Maya is comfortable with the new place. Therefore, her psychological development is shaped by a moral stability and a sense of acceptance of both being Black and living in a place with dominant white values. Thus, her “Double consciousness” becomes a positive factor to her psychological development. She is able to reconcile both identities and possess two ideals. In fact, she feels part of a place which could accept members of her race. Although San Francisco is a white-dominated area, black individuals like Maya find some easiness to benefit from the opportunities given in that society. For instance, Maya was able to be integrated in a high school with white students. She considers it the first real school she has ever attended. Moreover, her teacher Miss Kirwin expressed an equal treatment for both races: “Miss Kirwin never seemed to notice that I was Black and therefore different. I was

Miss Johnson...”<sup>104</sup> Feeling part of a place contributes to the reevaluation of Maya’s self. Her social adaptation leads to her psychological stability. Maya’s self actualization is now far from the strong rejection of White culture and values because she is not rejected as a black member of the northern society as she was in Stamps, Arkansas.

#### **e- Maturity, Self-Reliance and Gender Identity**

Ralph Waldo Emerson argues in his essay *Self-Reliance* that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”<sup>105</sup> Through his doctrine of self-reliance, Emerson suggests that individuals have to enfold their own thoughts and opinions, their own convictions and contradictions and their own integrity and independence.<sup>106</sup> Throughout Angelou’s autobiography, Maya’s self-reliance in the last chapters is interpreted as the result of the integrity of her own mind as a mature adolescent. At the age of fifteen, Maya shows maturation while responding to life’s challenging situations. This leads to her psychological growth and self-revaluation comparing to her earlier childhood.

Maya changes from a doubtful child to a self-confident woman in her adolescence. When she went to spend summer vacation in Southern California with her father and his girlfriend Dolores, a series of events occur and help her develop her self-reliance. Maya’s father invited her to accompany him on a trip to Mexico. During the trip her father got drunk and Maya decided to drive the car in her first experience of driving. She believes in her intelligence and good attention and trusts her own self. She states: “I had never driven a car before, but I had watched carefully...I was superbly intelligent and had good physical coordination. Of course I could drive. Idiots and lunatics drove cars, why not the brilliant Marguerite Johnson?”<sup>107</sup> She drove the car fifty miles back to Calexico. She says confidently: “The challenge was exhilarating. It was me, Marguerite, against the elemental opposition.”<sup>108</sup> For Emerson, the concept of self-reliance emerges from a belief that one is capable of self-guidance and self-determination.<sup>109</sup> He calls it ‘Trust thyself’ and affirms:

Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in their being.<sup>110</sup>

Arriving to the guard gate Maya smacked into another car. Angelou portrays the young Maya in a developed, strong and confident personality. She states: “Again, strangely enough, fear was absent from my sensations.”<sup>111</sup> This characterizes Maya’s self-revaluation and maturity which shape the development of her psychology.

Back to her father’s house, Maya encountered her father’s girlfriend Dolores in a hot conflict. The jealousy that Dolores feels toward Maya urged her to insult Maya’s mother. Maya warned her and slapped her. Her sense of rebel originates from her great love to her mother. This spontaneous reaction confirms her self-strength and the strong attempt to regain her dignity. Consequently, Dolores injured Maya with scissors and made her bleed. Maya’s father drove her to his friend to emergency medical care. Afterward, he took her to another friend where she spent that night. Maya did not believe in her father’s promise to come back for her she left the house without any destination “Now that I was out free, I set to thinking of my future.”<sup>112</sup> Her decision shows her ability to assume life’s responsibilities alone.

Maya found a junkyard and decided to spend the night inside a car. Instead of being afraid she bravely and confidently declared that “the idea of sleeping in the near open bolstered [her] sense of freedom.”<sup>113</sup> This sense of freedom helps her to create new patterns of selfhood and personal direction. The concept of self-reliance, according to Emerson, refers more significantly to the commitment to intelligent and imaginative independence and freedom.<sup>114</sup> Maya feels free from any bound and now she has to trust her own self and use her own mind.

Maya joined a junkyard group of homeless children who accepted her coming with a generous gesture and offered her friendship and the sense of security. The group was a mixture of races. In this context, Cross’s concept of *Internalization* (which is the last stage in

the African American identity development) suggests that internalized Blacks are ‘Universalists’ and ‘Humanists’.<sup>115</sup> It means that they can accept members from diverse cultural groups. Angelou argues:

After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly out of the pale the human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage, Angelou confirms that the character of Maya is now “Universalist”. Cross’s idea of *Internalization* is shown through Maya’s adaptation with the group of different cultures and races which refers to a developed identity as an African American individual.

Maya learned driving, dancing, gaining money and most of all, she learned to be self-reliant. Her experience as a homeless adolescent contributes to the development of her selfhood and changes her vision towards life. She jumps from her adolescence to adulthood and gets a new sense of self-direction. Angelou states: “After a month my thinking processes had changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself.”<sup>117</sup> Facing hardships of life alone and without fear is what characterizes Maya’s maturity and self reliance.

Maya’s self-reliance in an early age influenced her following experiences in life. She develops a new self-direction and assumes big challenges with a mature mind. She decides to get a job, bearing in mind that her mother would support her will because “[she] was a firm believer in self sufficiency.”<sup>118</sup> Maya’s mother is the one who encouraged her to be self-reliant and self-determined by telling her to do things by herself. Moreover, with a great self confidence, Maya chooses to work as a streetcar conductor, although her mother told her that colored people were not accepted in this job. Maya is rather determined to break the restricting tradition and persists on realizing her goal. She is facing the problem of the color-line imposed by her society after realizing her self-worth and potentials.

Emerson believes that self-reliance is the commitment to intelligent and imaginative independence and freedom whereby one has the courage and enthusiasm to think and to express one's own thoughts, ideas and dreams rather than a fearful or careful reiteration of popular opinion or traditional 'truth'.<sup>119</sup> Maya's challenge to face the restricting tradition of racial discrimination as a Black woman is the result of her self-determination and enthusiasm. Although she was refused from the very beginning, she had a strong will and never came back or gave up. Angelou expresses her determination by saying: "I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD."<sup>120</sup> She finally became the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcar at the age of fifteen. Her achievement strengthens not only her racial identity but also her gender as being a Black brave woman who is intolerant of racial and gender discrimination. Following her experiences which enhance the growth of her awareness about life, Maya realizes that "[she] had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware."<sup>121</sup> Therefore, Maya is psychologically developed and her self-revaluation is realized.

In the two last chapters of her autobiography, Maya Angelou presents the final step to her maturity and self-determination. This step is related to Maya's gender identity and her experience of motherhood. Because of African Americans' inferiority complex resulted from racial discrimination, Black women were subjected to sexual abuse by Black males. These wanted to affirm their domination and masculinity which was reduced by whites. They usually express their power over Black women by violent practices as rape. Bell Hooks believes:

[S]exism has always been a political stance mediating racial domination, enabling black men to share a common sensibility about sex roles and the importance of male domination. Clearly it has equated freedom with manhood and manhood with the right of men to have indiscriminate access to the bodice of women. It has been socialized to consider patriarchal affirmation of rape as an acceptable way to maintain male domination.<sup>122</sup>

Hooks explains how black males express their manhood through female discrimination, oppression and also sexual exploitation. This is mainly due to the racial domination in the American society. It was the case of Mr. Freeman who raped Maya when she was only eight.

Throughout her work, Maya Angelou shows the braveness of Black women and their resistance to both male oppression and racial discrimination. Maya's mother is a vivid example of Black women's power and resistance to male dominance that inspires in Maya's self the sense of protest against the double oppression. Maya passes from being a timid child who was a subject of sexual abuse to a free woman who chooses to practice sexual relations by her own will. In fact, she uses a male to prove her femininity and sexual identity because she is suspicious that she might be a lesbian. Therefore, to figure out her questions of sexuality and to define her identity, she decides to have sex with a young neighbor. This act was, for Maya, more of taking than giving: "He thought I was giving him something, and the fact of the matter was that it was my intention to take something from him."<sup>123</sup> The aim of her exploitation to a male was not only to prove her sexual nature but also to feed her new sexual desire. Angelou writes: "I was being crushed by two unrelenting forces: the uneasy suspicious that I might not be a normal female and my newly awakening sexual appetite."<sup>124</sup>

This first normal sexual encounter ended in an unplanned pregnancy. Maya's journey towards self-confidence and self-realization is eventually shaped by the experience of motherhood. Being a mother promotes her maturity and the development of her self-determination. She bears "the burden of pregnancy at sixteen on [her] own shoulders."<sup>125</sup> As she learns how to be a self-reliant through her previous experiences, Maya trusts her own self and assumes her responsibility as a mother.

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- <sup>101</sup> Ibid, 213.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid, 217.
- <sup>103</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (Medea: FLITES Editions, 2009), 104.
- <sup>104</sup> Kathleen O'Dwyer, "Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.2, No.1 (March 2012): 109.
- <sup>105</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), 237.
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid, 239.
- <sup>107</sup> Kathleen O'Dwyer, "Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.2, No.1 (March 2012): 103.
- <sup>108</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (Medea: FLITES Editions, 2009), 101.
- <sup>109</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), 240.
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid, 251.
- <sup>111</sup> Ibid, 252.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid, 252.
- <sup>113</sup> Kathleen O'Dwyer, "Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.2, No.1 (March 2012): 103.
- <sup>114</sup> Beverly J. Vandiver, Peony Fhagen, Kevin Cokley, William E. Cross, Frank C. Worrell, *Cross's Nigrescence Model: From Theory to Scale to Theory* (Journal of Multicultural Counselling and Development; Jul 2001; 29, 3; ProQuest Psychology Journals), 182.

- <sup>115</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), 255.
- <sup>116</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>117</sup> Ibid, 265.
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid, 266.
- <sup>119</sup> Kathleen O'Dwyer, "Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.2, No.1 (March 2012): 103.
- <sup>120</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), 269.
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid, 272.
- <sup>122</sup> Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End, 1990. Web. 14 Jan. 2015), 59.
- <sup>123</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), 282.
- <sup>124</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>125</sup> Ibid, 286.

## V. Conclusion

Through writing about their personal experiences, African American writers such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and many others, sought to give a deep insight about their race suffering to attain their self-fulfillment. As victims of racism and segregation, victims of male-oppression and violence, black women writers' personal account is considered as a testimony of their resistance against the odds and injustices of life. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is then highly effective at illustrating resistance and verberating as a strong black female American voice.

Angelou shows how a little black girl growing up in the American segregative South overcomes the hardships of life and struggles against her own self-hatred and self-doubt, as well as against white and male oppression. Maya strives to build her personal and social identity within a society that denies her existence as a woman and as a human being. In fact, the American society did not grant her any opportunity that would allow her to grow-up in a safe and a peaceful atmosphere. The hardships she encounters, especially in the South, left her with a dim sense of self. However, the black girl learned how to overcome her weakness and to confirm her self-worth. She passed from a victim of segregation and male-oppression to a strong, self-determined and self-confident young black woman.

Using W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "Double Consciousness", we have analyzed Maya's identity building process. We have deduced that Maya's inner conflict is similar to that of all African Americans who struggle to stabilize their identity and to cure their psychological division. Through the character of Maya, Angelou shows how this problem of identity's split and division can be resolved by resistance and self-reliance.

By analyzing Maya's identity building process into two main stages, we have come to the conclusion that her psychological development shifts from devaluation of both personal

and racial esteem to its revaluation and finally to the construction of the identity of a black American woman. The first stage is characterized by inferiority complex, low self-esteem, xenophobia, self-hatred, and self-doubt, where Maya was a victim of racism and male oppression. The second stage portrays her positive sense of self, strong racial identity, new sense of belonging, maturity, and self-reliance, where she constructs a new personality. Considering the Duboisian theoretical concepts which reflect the sociological and psychological conflicts of the African American individuals, namely the “double consciousness”, the feeling of “twoness”, the metaphor of the “Veil”, and the problem of the “color line”, we have analyzed the way Maya succeeds at overcoming her psychological and social problems, and developing herself as an African American citizen. The narrative work reveals as a social and psychological discourse in relation to the American society.



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