

# **A Study of Maya Angelou's Memoir *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*: A Tryst with Selective Mutism**

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper explores how Angelou records the extent and degree of debilitation endured by her body and mind, as she initially sinks into selective mutism and gradually reverts her situation into her creative strength of resistance in her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In this first volume of her autobiographical narrative, she probes the impact of her mutism upon her psyche leading to an extreme inability to express how both her body and mind had been mutilated beyond repair. However, what is most intriguing is the self-enforced silence she withdraws into caused by her belief that words had terrible consequences. This reverse psychology in which the victim bears the guilt, is set aright when she is finally able to break free from her mutism. The scars that she bore from the tender age of eight left her with the epiphany that "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you". Therefore, her disabled self, threatened into silence, gradually willed itself to heal. This transition from mutism to self-expression, as recorded in this volume of her memoir, creates scope for introspection as to how a form of disability can eventually ignite the most articulate expression of selfhood.

**KEYWORDS:** selective mutism, disability, self-expression, African American literature

"If you're always trying to be normal you will never know how amazing you can be."  
Maya Angelou

To probe the concept of disability as a physical/mental impairment is a social construct that demands redressal. So, the process of evolution from a disabled body to able subjects of careful consideration allows the opportunity to explore a situation beyond the yardstick of 'social normalcy'. This paper therefore will discuss Maya Angelou's brush with selective mutism which she expresses in the first volume of her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. As the canonical author of African American literature, Angelou firmly believes, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." So, when she begins to write the first volume of her memoirs, we feel the intimacy she is creating with her readers, allowing them to step into those corners of her life which had remained dark and untold for very many years.

As she narrates her life-story in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, we are inducted into her world; which she shared with her brother Bailey and grandmother Henderson, who formed her support system in these early uncertain years of her life. Angelou dedicates this volume of her memoir to her son "Guy Johnson, and All the Strong Black Birds of promise who defy the odds and Gods and sing their song." We gather therefore, from the start of the Memoir, that this journey is one of self-evolvement, an edifying process of both the body and the mind. It's a journey towards strength to uphold a story that needed to be told to the world. Angelou writes: "At fifteen life had taught me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honourable as resistance, especially if one had no choice." This unique way of defining surrender, offers an alternate perspective to the physical and psychological trauma Angelou suffered from her adolescence. In this volume of her memoir, Angelou records the extent and degree of debilitation endured by her body and mind, as she initially sinks into selective mutism and gradually reverts her situation into her creative strength of resistance through her activist and protest writings.

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been mutilated beyond repair. However, what is most intriguing is the self-enforced silence she withdraws into driven by the belief that words had terrible consequences.

It all began when Maya and her brother is taken to St. Louis to live with their Mother whose presence had always been fleeting in their lives. The movement from their secure life with their grandmother in Stamps, to St. Louis was a displacement she had looked forward to in earnest. However, her life with her mother brought along with it, its own adversities as she found herself subjected to repeated sexual abuse by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman. So drastic was the impact upon her formative mind that Maya in these delicate years of her adolescence found herself benumbed into silence. Her reticence, about the brutal torture her body suffered repeatedly, made her more fragile and insecure. She nurtured her pain in secret and withdrew in a shell of absolute silence. When she was brought before the legal proceedings and painfully was forced to a confession of her feelings of guilt, she affirms, that, words had terrible consequences. This was because her words had led to the lynching of Mr. Freeman and she sank further into the pit of an unending guilt.

Selective Mutism as a form of disability is defined as a speech disorder in which individuals who exhibit normal language skills with no delays in daily home situations are unwilling or unable to speak when confronted with novel situations or people. It hinders the psychological and social progress of the subject. To understand the scope of selective mutism better we could study psychodynamic theories which suggest that selective mutism is a choice made by the child to have power over a certain part of their life. It is their way of exerting control over that experience which they wish to keep untold. Behaviorists, however, feel that selective mutism results from excessive trauma in which children use silence to control the anxiety within.

To theorize and inform the house regarding selective mutism, I would like to probe its history which dates back to the 1800s when this disability was first diagnosed by German physician Adolf Kussmaul. The disorder was termed 'aphasia voluntaria' in 1877 to emphasize the idea that the individual made a voluntary decision to maintain silence. In the essay titled, "From Aphasia Voluntaria to Selective Mutism", Eva Kocovska (2020) defines the condition as a relatively rare emotional disorder occurring in childhood with a puzzling and unexpected pattern of behaviour that was, until recently, misunderstood as obstinacy and contrariness. Here I would like to refer to the findings of Alice Sluckin, a senior psychiatric social worker in The Child Guidance Team in Leicester, UK. Drawing on her own knowledge of psychology, having extensively dealt with autism, physical and emotional abuse in children and adolescents, and selective mutism, Sluckin was quick to recognize that the real cause of the disorder is, in most cases, the particularly disabling form of anxiety. She, therefore, considered the disability to be 'situational mutism'. In 1934, Moritz Tramer coined the term 'elective mutism', which gained worldwide acceptance, defining that the individual chose the environment in which they would speak. However, the term 'elective mutism' was ousted by 'Selective Mutism' which was adopted by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1994 as extreme anxiety disorder. 'Selective Mutism' claims that the disability to speak is not about choice but about the circumstances that force, rather threaten, the individual subject into silence. Silence, therefore, translates to rejection and the child gets caught within a vicious web of anxiety, fear and isolation. When the element of blame is removed and the behaviour if not considered a deliberate intention only then one can employ optimal approaches.

For Angelou, this disability engulfed her life and thrust her into the depths of silence for a prolonged period of 5 years. The phallic connection between Mr. Freeman and Maya is in itself a case study as to little Maya, Mr. Freeman represented the image of the Father, she hardly knew and therefore the proximity with Mr. Freeman which she yearned for at first soon converted into the death snare she could never avoid. The threat was clear cut – "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell I'm gonna kill Bailey" (Angelou 1984).

Angelou writes: “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body 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” (Angelou 1984, 84). And then again, she writes: “I longed for death, but I didn’t want to die anywhere near Mr. Freeman. I knew that even now he wouldn’t have allowed death to have me unless he wished it to” (Angelou 1984, 88).

The pain that seared her body and tore her mind apart stemmed from the utter confusion she had willingly walked into at her mother’s residence in St. Louis. The void she was dealing with due to the absence of her father, created an intense need to look up to Mr. Freeman as a benign principle in her life. And what comes as infused with shock is the potent disbelief when this same Mr. Freeman uses little Maya for his sexual gratification. The debilitation that this young girl suffers is therefore, not just a mutilation of her body but also of her hopes, which she had allowed herself to build around the ‘father figure of Mr. Freeman’. One is tempted to draw in the Jungian philosophy of the Electra complex. The psychoanalytic term denotes a girl child’s subconscious sexual attachment to her father leading to an increasingly hostile attitude towards her mother. This theory developed by Carl Jung in 1913 may not entirely apply to the equation between little Maya and Mr. Freeman. However, we can explore the concept that such psychosexual developments in Maya eventually drive conscious decisions and morality. Freud argues that feelings of possession and desire towards the father figure don’t always fade with development. Freud believed this was due to unresolved internal conflict during the phallic phase. Since ‘Electra Complex’ remains as an unproven theory, the possible causes of unresolved, internal conflict during the phallic phase remain scientifically unsettled.

In the sexual connect between Maya and Mr. Freeman, the little girl yearning for the proximity of the man is what perhaps can be cited as a form of this complex as in her mother’s house she learns to accept Mr. Freeman in the role of the father she never knew. Maya remains in awe of the man and what he could do to hurt her if she so much as uttered a sound of protest. So much so, after the rape, she promises Mr. Freeman: “No Sir, Mr. Freeman, I won’t tell” (Angelou 1984, 85). Unable to cope with the situation that followed, Maya confesses to the judge and sinks into the pit of an immediate sense of guilt. If we attempt to analyse this guilt which overcomes Maya, we find ourselves caught within this bizarre psychodynamics in which the victim maintains silence not due to any pressure of social stigma but due to the personal belief that her words implicating the perpetrator had led to his death. Given the fact that Maya was in the formative years of her life, this feeling of anxious guilt which stifles her into silence can be perhaps understood as her individual notion that she had somehow betrayed Mr. Freeman by taking his name in public. This was because the entire process of the quiet violence of rape lay beyond the comprehension of her eight-year-old self.

Initially, when Mr. Freeman had threatened her into silence, he was primarily denying her the right to speak out, to identify herself as a victim of sexual harm, thereby, disempowering her completely. He instills the fear of revelation in her. Considering this idea from sociological standpoint, we find that increased experiences of self-blame create feelings of shame, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, depression and suicidal ideation. By silencing Maya, a victim of sexual assault, Mr. Freeman promoted these emotional constrictions in her. This is perhaps what led to Maya willfully silencing herself, so as to avoid the impact of her words upon the ensuing circumstances. Upon the sudden death of Mr. Freeman, Maya resolves to stop talking because of the deep sense of guilt that her words had killed him.

About this Angelou writes, “I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me. I walked into rooms where people were laughing, their voices hitting the walls like stones, and I simply stood still – in the midst of the riot of sound. After a minute or two silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds” (Angelou 1984, 94).

What started as a post rape affliction soon developed into a behavioral disorder as she immured herself into complete silence. The journey towards reversing this psychological disability, in which the victim bears the guilt, begins when it is set aright as she breaks free from her mutism. The moment of epiphany is arrived at after long years of silence. The epiphany that she has to speak, to show and tell the world in order to be able to heal. To purge herself of the pain she had nurtured all these years needed to be released and she does that by giving vent to her creative imagination. But, of course, her journey towards her emancipation was guided by the refined and therapeutic presence of Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Mrs. Flowers teaches Maya the magic of spoken words. She ignited in Maya the urge to transform herself into a canvas of diverse possibilities. Her words inspire Maya to think. Mrs. Flowers maintains that “language alone separates him [man] from the lower animals... Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.” This argument seemed “valid and poetic” to Maya. She remains grateful Mrs. Flowers’ presence in her life as gradually she steps out of the shell she had withdrawn into.

Angelou records: “childhood’s logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I didn’t question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention... All I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for me and read to me from her favourite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me” (Angelou 1984, 109).

The urgent need to be liked and accepted for who she was – Marguerite Johnson was the change that Mrs. Flowers infused in Maya. Angelou yearns for the recognition she had shied away from in her years of despondency. As she begins to recite poetry, she allows herself to evolve, to mature into a potent individual who translates words into music and music into songs and is finally able to comprehend the song of the Caged Bird. The song is a metaphoric rendition of the voice she finds back through her elocution under the careful tutelage of Mrs. Flowers. The symbolic implication of the title of the first volume of her Memoirs leads us to connect the song of the Caged Bird to an expression of centuries of oppression endured by the African slaves at the hands of the white supremacist regime. The title of her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, bears a direct reference to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, ‘*Sympathy*’ in which, the celebrated African American poet repeatedly uses the symbol of the ‘caged bird’ to signify the slaves in chains, the lines of the third stanza of the poem which inspired the title of Angelou’s memoir are:

“I know why the caged bird sings, ah, me

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore...” (Dunbar 1913, 102)

Angelou also composed a poem titled “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” which is a tribute to Dunbar’s poem and the fettered slaves who sang their way through pain. Since Harlem Renaissance at the turn of the 20th century, the silence of trauma, fear, and pain found voice through music, songs, poetry and literature, which remain as the testimony of the enriched African culture and heritage that was imported to the New World of America.

The Song of the Caged Bird thus involve the voice of redressal that, the new century ushered, to break the silence of the bygone era. In the first volume of her Memoirs, Angelou is hailing this ‘voice’ which formed the history and ethnicity of the African American community. The song which the Caged Bird sings is her story and story of her community of people gone before her and generations to come. Angelou recalls how this ‘voice’ strengthens and motivates her to speak out aloud and assert her rights as a free-thinking individual in an independent environment. Her indebtedness to Mrs. Flowers is repeatedly recorded in her Memoir as that beacon light of hope, which with its hypnotic influence delivers all into freedom.

The stigma of guilt, of having sinned, once removed from her conscience, Angelou allows her inner self to unfold and experience the bliss of this freedom. She savours the experience with each passing moment as she treads confidently in her life’s journey ahead. As she finds her high school life in San Francisco fraught with racial challenges, she is able to withstand the onslaughts, with dignity. The influence of her teacher in George Washington High School, Miss

Kirwin, also remained as a boon in her academic life. Angelou describes Miss Kirwin as a rare educator, who was in love with information. The quiet strength Miss Kirwin exuded helped Maya find her own space in her classroom. Angelou writes – “There were no favourite students. No teacher’s pets. If a student pleased her during a particular period he could not count on special treatment in the next day’s class, and that was as true the other way around...she spent no time in indulging the frivolous” (Angelou 1984, 231).

And again, she records – “She was stimulating instead of intimidating. Where some of the other teachers went out of their way to be ‘liberal’ with me – and others ignored me completely, Miss Kirwin never seemed to notice that I was Black and therefore different. I was Miss Johnson...” (Angelou 1984, 231). Angelou pays immense tribute to Miss Kirwin when she writes – “Years later when I returned to San Francisco, I made visits to her classroom. She always remembered that I was Miss Johnson, who had a good mind and should be doing something with it.... I often wondered if she knew she was the only teacher I remembered” (Angelou 1984, 232).

In Angelou’s journey towards self-expression, the allegiances she pays therefore are not only to her grandmother’s (Momma) solemn determination, her mother’s gaiety and her brother Bailey’s love for her, but most importantly to Mrs. Flowers and books & guidance and Miss Kirwin her educator par excellence.

As Angelou stands on the threshold of yet another new phase of her life after academics, she finds herself caught within the whirlpool of a struggle for survival. It is around this time, that Maya begins to truly appreciate and understand the role of her mother in shaping her life. She writes – “During this period of strain, Mother and I began our first steps on the long path toward mutual adult admiration” (Angelou 1984, 288). As she embarks on her journey of struggle and endurance and once again finds herself within the folds of formal education, she desperately wanted to be “left alone on the tight rope of youthful unknowing” (Angelou 1984, 291). However, this also meant experiencing “the excruciating beauty of full freedom and the threat of external indecision”. (Angelou 1984, 291) As she oscillates between two polarities she concludes – “The Black female is assaulted in her tender years 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.” Thus, Angelou opines, “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” (Angelou 1984, 291-92).

When Angelou resolves, what she needed was a boyfriend, she felt – “A boyfriend would clarify my position to the world, and, even more important, to myself. A boyfriend’s acceptance of me would guide me into that strange and exotic land of frills and femininity”. (Angelou 1984, 300) The desperate urgency, which drives her into the arms of an unsuspecting neighbourhood boy. Angelou describes her sexual escapade in a matter of fact, categorical manner which clearly highlights her position of control in this episode. She recalls her experiences with Mr. Freeman almost with a sense of relief that she made this later experience seem like a casual and painless encounter. She notes: “... because of the absence of romantic involvement neither of us felt much had happened” (Angelou 1984, 303).

This is indeed intriguing that the act of rape she had suffered almost nine years back remained intrinsic to her memory not as a shameful experience she had once felt it to be but as a point of reference she could allude to in her sexual liaisons thereafter. The change that the intervening years had brought upon her finds expression through the creative faculties of her genius. Angelou’s prolific contribution in African American literature and her incessant endeavours to uphold the cause of her community through poetry, memoirs, essays, fictions, and art is a testimony of her dynamism. As she writes her life story in a series of seven memoirs, she is detailing not just her individual experiences of pain and joy but also the universal truth nurtured by the women of her community. In the final phase of this first volume, Angelou shares

her responses to motherhood writing that – “The first three months, while I was adapting myself to the fact of pregnancy ...were a hazy period in which days seemed to lie just below the water level, never emerging fully” (Angelou 1984, 305). And when she looks at her baby boy, she thinks, “Totally my possession and I was afraid to touch him” (Angelou 1984, 306). These mixed feelings suffused with joy of control and fear of loss render her as a complete woman eventually. The vociferous expression of the entire spectrum that her life oscillates within gives her more power and vitality, making her years of disability a mere passing phase in her journey towards consummation through motherhood.

Therefore, as a quintessential African American author Angelou steps into the role of a narrator to show and tell her life story as a process of self-edification. Making the world witness how her transition from mutism to self-expression can eventually ignite the most articulate exposition of selfhood.

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