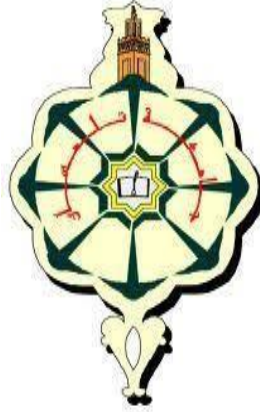


**PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA**  
**Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research**  
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**Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages**  
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**Angelou Maya's I know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969): from  
an Autobiography to an Exploration of Social Issues**

*Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English as a Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of << Master >> in  
English Literature and Civilization.*

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## ***Dedication***

*I dedicate this work to my mother, to my everything **Fatima Larbi**, who supported me by her love and prayers.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*To my beloved sister **Hanaa Frid** and her son **Moncif Djemoun**.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*To all my family and friends, I am blessed to have you in my life.*

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## **Abstract**

*I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings* is the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiographies and the most successful one. It is a personal narration of her childhood traumatic events. The novel portrays the life of the black girl, who suffers from: displacement, poverty, racism and sexual abuse. This extended essay aims to shed light on the major social issues in the United States during the nineteen thirties. Besides, it shows how Maya Angelou used her autobiography as a weapon against sexual abuse, racism, and social rejection.

**Key words:** the great depression, new deal, displacement, racism, trauma and sexual abuse

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# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

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### General Introduction

The nineteen thirties were a significant decade in the United States of America. The Stock Market Crash of the 1929 came to put an end to the economic boom of the Roaring Twenties. After the crash the country economy went in the greatest economic catastrophe called the Great Depression, it lasted for ten years. During this period there were major changes in all sectors, and not only in the economy. By the 1930 till the 1933, most of the banks were closed, because investors stopped putting their money in the banks, industry had failed by nearly the half and most of the population was unemployed. As the employers lost their jobs, they did not find other jobs, the competition was even on the worst jobs. In addition, to the great depression the Dust Bowl was another catastrophe in the mid of the decade, it caused a big damage in the agricultural lands. Due to these catastrophes the nineteen thirties gained the names of: The Dirty Thirties, the Anger Decade or Red Age and the Depression decade.

The economic crisis led the Americans to rethink about their political and economical system. The changes started first in the political field. In the election of the 1932 the president Herbert Hoover was replaced by his charismatic competitor Franklin D.Roosevelt. The US new president presents his government plan, in order to recovery from the economic crisis his plan was The New Deal for the Americans. The new deal was the first governmental program that provides a kind of the welfare state for the citizens. It was divided into two parts, the first and the second new deal. The first one started by the Hundred Emergency Days, Roosevelt declared the banks holidays and passed several bills. The second new deal started after the 1935, the major focus was on the social services such as: health, houses and foods. On the other hand the economic system witnessed many changes. Roosevelt expanded the government's involvement in the economic crisis. This step faced a large disagreement mainly from the Supreme Court, because it limits the economic freedom of the business leaders.

The American society and culture were deeply affected by the great depression. The social values had changed, as many women started to work and they get more freedom. The notion of displacement and pessimism overwhelmed the social life. The



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American high standard of living was replaced by poverty and long bread lines. In addition the cultural life of the nineteen thirties was influenced by the great depression and the dust bowl, many masterpieces were produced, inspired from the hardship of the decade.

Maya Angelou was among the many other writes, who portrays the American life during the decade of changes. Maya Angelou narrates her childhood in her first autobiography *I know why the Cage Bird Sins*. Her first aim was to show the life of the black young girl in the segregated southern area. But it became an exploration of social issues starting from: racism, segregation, prejudice, sexual abuse and women's rights.

The selection of Maya Angelou's autobiography has come to existence because of two main reasons. The first one is the time when the events took place, the nineteen thirties and the beginning of the nineteen forties, is a period of clashed events, fear and hope, failure and change, disappear and emerge. All these combined to make the decade as the most influential decade that builds what is called the modern United States of America. The second reason is that Maya Angelou's brave description of her childhood, not all people can speak about their traumatic events in the bold and brave way she did. *I know why the Caged Bird Sings* do not represent only one person or one social issue, it is a voice of all the African-American people and it deals with all their struggles in the American society.

After having a close reading of *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*, and date collecting about the author, the period when the actions took place. The present extended essay seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1 -What were the principal surrounding events affecting Maya Angelou's masterpiece ?
- 2- How were the American social issues portrayed in *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*?

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Based on these research questions, it is hypothesized that:

1-During the nineteen thirties there were different major events in the United States where the novel took place including: the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl and the New Deal.

2- Maya Angelou's autobiography deals with several social issues in the American society mainly: racism, sexual abuse, poverty and feminism.

After collecting the required data and sources which are books, journal and websites, the extended essay has a close look at the American society during the nineteen thirties. The approach used in this thesis is the text analysis approach. Because through the analysis of the novel, many social conflicts are depicted. This work is divided on two chapters

The first chapter is entitled "*Background and Context: 1930's America*" it deals with the transformation of the American economy from the top prosperity to the collapse. In addition it presents the political and the economical changes of the decade. As well as how The American policy took another direction.

The second chapter is entitled "*Social Issues in the Novel*" in this chapter there is the brief biography of Maya Angelou and the synopsis of her novel, also it shows how Maya portrays the social issues in her novel.

# **Chapter One : Historical Background : Prosperity and Depression**

# **Chapter One: Historical Background: Prosperity and Depression**

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## **1.1 Introduction**

The period between the nineteen twenties and the nineteen thirties was a turning point in the American history. It begins with an unusual economic prosperity of the Roaring Twenties, it is the most remarkable period in the American history, and it caused huge changes in all sectors of life. But it did not last a long, after the decade of economic boom, came the Stock Market Crash in the 1929, to put an end for the happiest years, and start a new decade of suffering, and paralysis in all sectors of life, especially the economical one.

## **1.2 The Roaring Twenties**

The Roaring Twenties is the decade starting from 1921 to 1929. During this period, the United States had experienced wave of changes in all sectors. It started by the economic prosperity, as the First World War took place in Europe, the economy of the United States recovered quickly from the damage and it paved the way for the birth of new kind new industries such as: automobiles, radios refrigerators and washing machines. These inventions became later known as the “Consumer Industry”. It contributed a lot in the economic growth of the 1920’s, the production increased and it reduced the rate of unemployment as well as the new technology provided a modern life style.

The economic boom of the decade had deep effects on the society, with the increase of wages and the multiple entertainments such as radios and movies, a new style of living emerged, people started to spend much more money on movies and entertainment. In the 1920’s the American society became more materialistic all people wanted to take the advantage from the new industries as most families moved from rural to urban areas.

Moreover the remarkable shift in society was the position of women. After a long journey of asking for equal rights, the white American women in the 1920 finally had the right to express their opinions and vote. In addition, the new technology had provided women with more freedom, there were two kinds of women in the 1920’s. The first one was the traditional woman who keeps the traditional image of the

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housewives. Besides, the second kind was called Flappers, most of them were young ladies with short hair and skirts, they used to drink and smoke in public they had masculine attitudes.

Furthermore, the decade characterized by the birth of new culture. For the first time the African-American artists, poets, writers, dancers and singers gathered to create their own cultural movement they call it the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Culture. The movement was created in order to distinct the black heritage from that of Europe and to prove to the world the existence of a different community but at the same time a peaceful people who want to live free from the barriers of the color and race. The Harlem renaissance is the most influential movement in all African-American culture, the most important product of the Harlem culture was the Jazz Music; it became an iconic kind of music that attracts even the non-black people, the nineteen twenties is often called The Jazz Age.(Hutchinson,2018)

### **1.3 America During the 1930's**

#### **1.3.1 The Economic Life: The Great Depression**

The nineteen thirties were the hardest years for the United States economy. They symbolized the end of the prosperity of the “Roaring Twenties” and the beginning of new era, characterized by a series of economic crisis. The decade started by the Wall Street Stock Market Crash in October, 1929.The crash was caused by the massive selling of shares, during a short period of time as a result the prices fell dramatically and many investors lost their money in a single day .The stock market crash was followed by the deepest economic crisis that gained the epithet of the Great Depression, it began in the 1929 and lasted until the Second World War. Although the Wall Street Crash was like an earthquake that hit the stock exchange and the economy, yet it was not the only cause of the depression. In fact there were a various weaknesses in the American economic system that gathered to create the worst economic slump in the world history. Gordon (2007)

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No country in world history has seen the economic growth the United States experienced in the first 150 years of its existence. And no industrialized nation has experienced a depression to equal what the United States endured from the fall of 1929 to the winter of 1932–33. In those three and a half terrible years the country went from blue-sky prosperity to near collapse. Unemployment increased from 3.1 percent to 26 percent, a figure that would have been far worse had not many jobs been made part time<sup>1</sup>.

The great depression came to put a sudden end to the happiest years and to change the American life from “the world’s highest standard of living” to a paralysis in most sectors.

It is impossible to isolate a single event that led the United States economy to the edge after the stock market crash, but the major one was the decline of agriculture. During the 1910’s especially in the First World War (1914-1918), the American farmers had years of growth. They were encouraged by the government to increase production in order to supply the European Allies. The farmers started to take loans from banks to buy more lands and new equipments, the production increased and the prices were high, the agricultural prosperity had continued even in the two years that followed the end of the war. However as the European countries began to recovery from the damage of war, the demand for the American agricultural goods fell, the farmers find no market to sell their products, the prices dropped down and the farmers did not have any other source of money to repay their loans (Murphy, 2009).

The land lost its value simultaneously with the birth of new industries such as Automobiles and radios. Therefore, most farmers were obliged to move westward seeking for better conditions. Kennedy (1999) stated that:

Agricultural income had plunged by almost 60 percent in the last four years alone. And agricultural depression dated not simply from 1929. It was nearly a decade old at the time of the Great Crash. By early 1933 banks

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<sup>1</sup>[https://web.archive.org/web/20080420194514/http://americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2007/1/2007\\_1\\_23.shtml](https://web.archive.org/web/20080420194514/http://americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2007/1/2007_1_23.shtml)

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were foreclosing on farm mortgages at a rate of some twenty thousand per month. The president of the Farm Bureau Federation, among the most conservative of agricultural organizations, warned a Senate hearing in January:” Unless something is done for the American farmers we will have revolution in the countryside within twelve months (p. 141)

The Agricultural depression launched from the 1920’s, because the economy at that time was depending on banking and industry; however, agriculture went through hard times. In addition to the depression, the natural disaster of 1934 added to the ravage, it turned the agricultural situation from bad to worse. When the dust storms hit the Midwestern Plains including Oklahoma, Panhandles and Texas. The catastrophe was known by the Dust Bowl, it gave the decade the name of Dirty Thirties. The imbalance between agriculture and industry in the economic boom of the 1920’s was among the many other causes of the depression.

Both historians and economists deal that the real problem was rooted in the American weak banking system. Although the Federal Reserve System was created in 1913 in order to relieve financial crisis, yet most of banks in the United States were small individual institutions, relying on credits in their transaction, especially with the birth of new industries all Americans wanted to buy radios, Henry Ford’s cars, they started to take credits from banks under the slogan “buy now and pay later”. During the panic of the 1929 the depositors did not know which bank was troubling and which was safe, so they pulled out their money from all banks as a result many banks failed in the early years of the great depression, because they did not have enough money in reserve. From 1929 to 1932 around 5,000 banks closed, a year after the number was increased to 11,000. The bank failure had a big impact, since the economy was based on it. ( Markham, 2002)

The president Herbert Hoover was blamed for doing nothing to stop the spread of crisis. He dealt with the Crash and the bank failure as a passing crisis. Hoover’s response was highly related to his philosophy of limited government, during the three years of the depression there were no remarkable legislation or regulation from the

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authority except giving money to the affected banks. The economist Markham (2002) commented on Hoover's reaction as

President Hoover assured the country that it had nothing to fear after the stock market crash of 1929. There was in fact reason to hope that the depression that followed the crash would be short duration. The economy appeared to rally in the beginning of 1930, and the president proclaimed that the worst was over. In fact, it had just begun. The upswing soon dwindled, and the nation found itself in the worst depression in its history. Over 26,000 businesses failed in 1930. (p160)

The government misdiagnosis of the economic catastrophe led to conflict the situation. Till the 1931 when the economy reached the bottom, the president Hoover realized that the market cannot heal itself and the government should intervene, he created the President's Emergency Committee for employment as well as he asked the workers to work more and the businessmen to volunteer and help the economy. Nevertheless, it was too late for those actions because the depression was actually deepened.

The unequal wealth distribution played also a fundamental role in the economic failure of the 1930's. Not all American citizens enjoyed the 1920's, only businessmen and industrialists who benefit from the economic boom of the decade. In addition to farmers the ordinary workers and minorities were also suffering from low wages and bad working conditions. Eldridge (2008) noted that

Even in the "good years" of the 1920's, forty million Americans lived on an income below the level of subsistence, including not only rural farmers and poorly paid workers like miners, but also ten million non-whites and majority of the elderly. From this perspective, writes David Kennedy, the Depression was not just a passing crisis but an episode that revealed deeply-rooted structural inequalities in American society. (p 4)

The industrial dictatorship of the nineteen twenties gave the business leaders the power to dominate the industrial world; this policy made the rich richer and the poor poorer.



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In addition to inequality, there was the rate of unemployment, in the beginning of the 1920's it was 5 percent and it rose to 23 percent by the end of the decade. The United States was the only industrialized country that has no unemployment insurance or any kind of dole provide to the poor.

Since the majority of the population were either low paid or unemployed it led to the overproduction, this problem was not created by the massive productivity, but because the supply was more than the demand. The prices were high and people were poor to buy many new products as a result most of goods were unsold.

The great depression was an unavoidable reality, even if it was not in the 1930's; it will be in the other decades, because after every economic growth there is of course a collapse.

The great depression was a turning point in the American economy, it caused a paralysis in the production, Henry Ford stopped producing his cars, the industry fell by 45% percent and more than 11.000 banks declared their fall. The long breadlines replaced the high standard of living. By the 1933 millions were homeless, they did not have money to pay their rents, so they were living in huge tents named "Hooverilles". In all failures there is something to, only positive consequence of the great depression was the shaping of new economic theories that include the government participation to reduce the crisis as well as it made the business leaders rethink about a new economic system

### **1.3.2 The Political Life**

The great depression was a reason of many changes in the American political system. Before his office was over Herbert Hoover seemed unable to deal with the surrounded problems, he was blamed for his wrong decisions that allowed the crisis to spread. Hoover's failure was led by three main factors. The first one was the period of his presidency, he was president of the United States from the 1929 to 1933 when the depression was at its worst and nothing can stop its spread or damage.

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The second factor was his ideology of 'small government' i.e. the policy of limiting the government involvement in the economic matters. If the authority interferes from the beginning of the crisis, of course it will not end it but at least it can reduce from its severity. Hoover's philosophy of laissez-faire can be applied in a total different situation, when the economy is stable but not when it faces the worst crisis.

The third was the president misdiagnosed of the situation. He informed the nation that the depression was just a passing crisis like the other crisis that occurred before which was caused by external factors such as the decline of the foreign trade after the First World War. It was then a severe depression that lasted ten year, caused by internal weaknesses. In the elections of 1932 the popularity of the Republican Party decline on the other hand the Democratic emerged as a major party in the country. The American thought that it was time to change the leader, will take into account the hardship of the depression.

Hoover was replaced by his charismatic competitor Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who won the elections due to his skillful use of the media, he used the radio for two purposes, the first one to convey his message, and the second one was to restore confidence in the federal government. The American people saw him as the right man at the right time. He was mindful of the conditions that brought the economy to reach the bottom rock including the imbalance and the industrial dictatorship. When Roosevelt was explaining his policy he stated that "What we seek is balance in our economic system-balance between agriculture, and balance between the wage earner, employer and the consumer". Roosevelt looked after the real problems and tried to correct them in order to reach the solution. In addition he provided the American people a psychological support by promising them that the government will change its policy toward the citizens and it will be responsible of improving the living conditions. On the other hand the practical support was reflected in a series of reforms he called them the New Deal for the American.(Heale, 1999)

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The new deal was a set of reforms, sought for economic recovery, introduced by the president Franklin Roosevelt during his first years of administration. All historians deal that the new deal program is divided into two parts. The first new deal of the 1933 was launched during the first 'Hundred Days' of Roosevelt presidency and the second new deal started from the 1935 till 1938.

In his first days of office the president Roosevelt and his administration made bold steps. He started his program by ending prohibition of alcohol in the 1933, also declaring Banks Holiday. Roosevelt asked all banks to close for eight days; he confirmed that the banks would not reopen unless they were safe. The president spoke directly to the nation throughout a series of radio program called The Fireside Chats, in order to explain his actions and restoring confident. The second step of the first hundred days was by passing fifteen bills, aimed to fix the economic weakness. It started by making balance between agriculture and industry by create the National Recovery Administration (NRA) its function was to negotiate the wages and the working conditions, the purpose of NRA was to make business leaders and the authority work together for establishing an economic recovery. Moreover the agricultural recovery was a top priority in the government program; the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) was created to regulate production so that the prices could increase. The third main issue was to fight against the industrial dictatorship that control the nation's wealth. All in all the first new deal main concern was the economic recovery and its decisions were urgent (Eldridge, 2008)

By the 1935 the critics rose against the new deal, because it did not end the unemployment which was the main problem of the depression. There were still 11.3 million of people out of work, the number decline comparing with the last years, yet it was still higher than the normal. The second new deal focused on reducing unemployment by different laws such as the Work Progress Administration (WPA) and the National Labor Act (NLA), both of them were created to provide the American people with more jobs opportunities. In addition to the Social Security Act which was the main achievement of the new deal. With all this changes in direction the program

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was still facing troubles. Like any government decision it had supporters from the working class, because it was calling for their rights and from the African-American, although it did not pass any law for their welfare but at least it was seeking for equality.

However, the new deal faced a lot of criticism from the industrialists as a rejection to the high taxation and encouraging the labor unions, they claimed that Roosevelt was fighting his own class. In the 1935 the United States Supreme Court threatened to limit the power of the government over the economy in order to keep the main policy that built up the American economy' the *laissez-faire*'.

With his achievement during the four years, Franklin Roosevelt created a coalition of supporters that made his party the most powerful in the elections of 1936. Roosevelt supporters were from different classes such as: intellectuals, farmers, African-American and minorities, all wanted another four years of Franklin Roosevelt presidency.

His policies did not please all Americans, and he made his share of mistakes, but he showed that he was prepared to look for solutions and to use the powers at his disposal constructively. During these years Washington became a city of frenetic activity, and Roosevelt's command of his administration could not be doubted. If his enemies reviled him with a chilling bitterness, this was in part because his confidence and charisma early made him president of massive stature. (Heale, 1999, p. 4)

Roosevelt's flexibility and freshness in dealing with the crisis were among his strengths. The new deal philosophy was supremely Pragmatic, based on the experimentation of the hypotheses in the real situation, if they did not work ,they will be replaced by another one, what matters was ending the great depression not the philosophy. Roosevelt's plan was not committed to any pre-formed ideology; it was considered as a haphazard plan. The American historian. Reeves (1999) said that:

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FDR was supremely pragmatic. Enjoying the clash of ideas, he surrounded himself with people from different views and listened carefully before making any decisions. Braintruster Rexford Tugwell, for example, was a strong believer in central planning; his conservative colleague Raymond Moley was not. Agriculture Secretary Henry A. Wallace of Iowa was a dreamy, idealistic sort of progressive. Director of the Budget Lewis W. Douglas was a hard-nosed, laissez-faire Democrat (p.106)

Although the new deal could not end the depression, in fact it was ended by the Second World War, when the manufactories started to produce war equipment, but at least the program could reduce from its damage and change many things in the American political system.

After the First World War most of the Americans wanted to return back to their isolation. In the 1920's they wanted to enjoy their economic prosperity far from the rest of the world. The isolation continued even when the entire world was facing the great depression, they wanted to focus just on the domestic problems. Even Roosevelt's administration did not place the foreign issues high in its plans. Nevertheless by the end of the decade the foreign event i.e. the Second World War overshadowed the domestic, especially after the Japanese attacked the American fleet in Pearl Harbor. Hereby, United States officially entered the war.

### **1.3.3 The Cultural Life**

#### **1.3.3.1 Entertainment**

The nineteen thirties are described as a "Fear and Hope" period. The great depression had totally changed the American lifestyle; most of the population was depending on charities in order to survive during the depression. Yet the nineteen thirties is considered as Hollywood's Golden Age, despite the financial crisis many filmmakers understand that people needed to escape from reality, through watching movies so they kept production at lowest cost. In addition to sound and color, movies

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became so popular at that time because they mirrored the reality and the popular culture such as: King Kong (1933), Lost Horizon (1937) and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939). Radio on the other hand became a source of entertainment for people who could not pay for movies, since most of Americans lost their money in the depression they used to sit around the radios listening to their favorite broadcast or the president's radio program Fireside Chat.

### **1.3.3.2 Art and Literature**

Although the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression were the greatest catastrophes in the American history, but they were also a source of inspiration for many writers and artists. By the beginning of the nineteen thirties the number of publishing decreased by less than half because many publishing houses were closed. On the other hand by the end of the decade many famous works were published, especially when Roosevelt's government started to encourage arts. Most of painters were turning around the country in order to portray the surrounded misery throughout their paintings. On the other hand writers produced novels, their stories and characters were inspired from the hardship of the decade such as John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath (1939), Nelson Algren's Somebody in Boots (1935) and Henry Roth's Call it sleep (1934). Most of the best works in both art and literature always came out from deep experiences.

### **1.3.3.3 African-American Culture**

The African-American culture is always regarded as an outstanding culture; it has a double standard; its first aim is to stand up as a weapons against racism and slavery most of black writer use their writing in order to narrate their personal experiences under the chains of slavery and it serves as a kind of hope for reaching an equal rights. During the nineteen thirties the African-American writers wrote in the same standard as the white American writers or in some cases they wrote in much high standard because the suffering was greater and they portray the black's lives during the economic crisis.

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Although the difficulties of the nineteen thirties and even centuries before the African-Americans kept showing to the world their cultural heritage throughout music and dance from this platform Wright (1941) writes

Our music makes the whole world dance... But only a few of those who dance and sing with us suspect the rawness of life out of which our laughing-crying tunes and quick dance steps come; they do not know that our songs and dances are our banner of hope flung desperately up in face of the world that has pushed us to the wall.(p. 90)

What made their music distinctive was not the special rhythm or the way of dancing but the deep message, the combination of contradictory feelings such as: hope and fear, happiness and sadness, existence and disappearance.

### **1.3.4 The Social Life**

Although the great depression was an economic matter, but its impacts had quickly reached the American society. It led to many changes in the social system, starting from the individual life till the community life.

#### **1.3.4.1 Family**

The family life was deeply affected by the economic hardship, by the 1932 majority of the middle and poor class families lost their residences, they moved to live in less expensive housing or in tents cities called “hooverilles”. Before the great depression men were responsible for supporting their families and women had to take care of her family, after the unemployment crisis men lost their jobs, and they had two solutions, either to stay with their families or to leave them. As a result most women were obliged to work out doors in order to feed their children. With the economic hardship, it was difficult to support a large number of children, most women resorted to birth control, and they found the solution in the smaller family numbers. Goldston (1968) portrays the American family life during the great depression as

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Many of them hit the road. Accompanied by families, in broken-down cars or, increasingly, alone, jobless workers roamed from town to town, city to city, state to state, seeking work that was unavailable. The transient knew in his bones that things were no better ahead than they had been behind, but somehow the movement itself seemed positive. It was something, however a hopeless thing, to do. (p. 52)

Most of the families during the beginning of the 1930's, moved from a place to another, seeking for jobs or houses.

### **1.3.4.2 Women**

During the 1920's the American female have abandoned their traditional image of housewives, the economic growth of the epoch provided them with a new job opportunities. Many young women started to work in offices or stores and they earned good wages. The economic independency gave women more freedom, they started to wear short skirts, have hair cut as well as doing masculine acts such as drinking a smoking in public, they were nicknamed "Flappers"( Bingham, 2011, pp. 10-11). However by the end of the decade and the beginning of the economic crisis women returned to their traditional image and opted to more styles that are practical. Women's only concern during the great depression was to support their families. The role of female in the 1930's growth, they were obliged to help their husbands. In fact women had much available jobs, because the great depression hit the industrial world which was dominated by male, and female worked in public services such as nursing or housemaids. The First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt influenced American women to a large degree.

Although Franklin and Eleanor did not enjoy a happy marriage, they respected each other and worked in harmony. On her much-publicized travels Eleanor served as FDR's "eyes and ears bringing him information about the Americans and their needs that might otherwise have escaped him and pleading with him to do what she thought was right, even if it was a politically imprudent ( Reeves,2000, p. 112)



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Eleanor Roosevelt is the most active first lady in the American history. She was not just the lady of the White House and the mother of five children, Eleanor was concerned of many social issues mainly women, African-Americans and the other minorities

### **1.3.4.3 African-Americans**

Although the African Americans were not new to hardship, but their living conditions was worsed by the collapse. The black men found it difficult to have jobs because agriculture was severely hit and the other jobs were occupied by the white men. Even in the new deal era that claimed to end inequality, the black community was still suffering from discrimination and poverty

African Americans were particularly hard hit, as white men took jobs formerly held by black men, and white women took jobs of black women. A large proportion of the lucky few black Americans who had earlier managed to finance their own businesses or buy their own homes lost them. Wages of those still employed plummeted, and professional workers found themselves under played or unable to collect fees from their clients (Greenberg, 2009, p.21)

However the decade seemed the African Americans participation in the political parties for the first time in the American history, although they were new for the political field but at least they had a political representative.

### **1.3.4.4 Social Problems**

Society is always a mirror that reflects all what is happening, the economic hardship led to the emergence of many social problems that did not exist before. The 1930's in America is often described as a lawless time, it saw a rise in the rate of crimes, most unemployed were obliged to become thieves or they joined organized mafia, in order to provide a peak for their hungry families.

## **Chapter One: Historical Background: Prosperity and Depression**

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Many people suffer from severe diseases, they did not have money to visit the doctor or they visit in the emergency. Especially those who were living in overcrowded areas urban or rural. Where the diseases spread quickly.

Moreover the economic crisis changed the direction of the American Dream, as many immigrants returned to their native countries even the American migrated to other countries, as well as most children were obliged to drop out from schools and go to help their families.

### **1.4 Conclusion**

The nineteen thirties was a decade of crisis in the United States of America, It never seen before. Poverty and hopeless were everywhere, after the banking crisis most business failed. The American dream was replaced by the American pessimism. As a black American Citizen Maya Angelou had successfully portrays in her first autobiography *I know why the Caged Bird Sings*, the social issues that emerged during her childhood, she focused more on the life of the African- Americans, and their daily struggles in a racist society.

# **Chapter Two : Social Issues in the Novel**

## Chapter Two: Social Issues in the Novel

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### 2.1 Introduction

The American society in the nineteen thirties and the beginning of the nineteen forties, was struggling from the economic failure and the fear of war. These major events led to the emergence of many social issues. Maya Angelou is one of the American writers who were inspired by the hardship of the decade and wrote her first autobiography *I know why the Caged Bird Sings*. As a self narration of her childhood in a racist society.

This chapter aims to provide a link between, literature and society. How did the social issues and the miserable childhood influence Maya Angelou to produce a work that is regarded as the most influential work in the African- American literature.

### 2.2 About the Author

Maya Angelou is the most notable African- American women writers. The president Obama described her as “truly Phenomena Women” simply because; she was a novelist, poet, political activist singer and dancer. Maya was born in St Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928 to Bailey and Vivian Johnson. Her real name was Marguerite Ann Johnson, after the divorce of her parent at her early age she was sent with her old brother bailey to live with their paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas (ALS, 2002)

. Like many other black children Maya Angelou’s childhood was not easy at all, in her early age she experienced displacement, poverty, racism and the worst of them was the sexual abuse. Her love of the literary works helped her to build a strong personality and overcome all her childhood crisis.

At age of sixteen Maya became a single mother to her only child Clyde Guy Johnson. By the 1950 she married with Tosh Angelou, but their marriage did not succeed and they divorced. Her love of literature and writing pushed her to join the Harlem writers. In the 1960 Angelou married for the second time with a South African civil right activist named Vusumzi Make and they moved with her son to live in Cairo.

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Where she worked as an editor at an English language newsweekly. Their marriage did not last long and they ended up with divorce, Ms. Angelou did not want to return to her birthplace because of her bad memories, so she decided to move with her only son to Ghana, where she worked as a teacher and writer. (Brown, 2014)

With the emergence of the Civil Rights movement by the mid of the 1960's, Maya Angelou decided to return back to the United States in order to join the movement with Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King. During this period she started her political career, she served as the Northern Coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, this organization aimed to achieve equal rights for the black community throughout politics and non-violence, then she joined the political parties as a supporter of female politician Hillary Clinton. (Cullum, 25)

Maya Angelou's literary career is rich of achievement. She published more than 30 books including poetry, essays and six autobiographies. She inspired many women, since she was always presenting the image of a strong black female who was able to deal with different obstacles in a very young age.

Ms. Angelou became well known for the narration of her life events. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1967) is the first volume of the six autobiographies, she portrayed her early life as a black girl living in the poor segregated section and the struggles she faced. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the most successful work of Maya and none of her following works had gained the same popularity. In the second autobiography *Gather Together in my Name* (1974), Maya continued her story of struggling in order to survive with her son. In *Singin and Swingin and Get Merry Like Christmas* (1976) she writes about her love of dance and music. In the last two volumes of her autobiographies *The Heart of Women* (1981) and *All God's Children Need Traveling Boots* (1986) Ms. Angelou recorded her trips from the United States to Africa.

Throughout her works Maya gained a large number of audiences, her readers were people who were inspired by her life story and she became the author of bestsellers, the six autobiographies were translated into 17 languages. She has

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received a numerous honorary degrees mainly: the National book Award for lifetime achievement, US highest Civilian honor, Matrix award and she was among the top 100 most influential women in the world according to Time Magazine. (Sachs, 2013)

Maya Angelou passed away on May 28, 2014. Her death was the big loss for the African- American literature in particular, due to her and many other writers the position of the black women improved although they had still a long way toward the equal rights

### **2.3 Synopsis of the Novel**

The story begins in the train station with Maya and her brother Bailey Johnson, after the divorce of their parents they were sent to live in Stamps, Arkansas with their grandmother Annie Henderson and their uncle Willie Johnson. Maya was only three years old and bailey was four they were traveling alone from the North to the South, the author describes her painful feeling when they reach the segregated town. It was a strange place, totally different from the northern cities.

Maya and Bailey lived with their grandmother, they call her Momma, and she is a very religious person. Momma is the first black woman in Stamps who had a private business; she owns the only store in the black section for more than twenty five years. The store became a familiar place for two children they spend their whole time in it, sometimes they help their grandmother and the rest of the time they watch the clients and their attitudes.

Over the time Maya and her old brother used to live in Stamps. Maya describes her love toward her brother by saying “My pretty black brother was my kingdom”. However as she is growing up, she starts to discover the injustice of the society where she lives, especially when the white young girls come to the store and they start to order momma. In every visit her hate toward them was growing up too.

When the great depression spread to the southern areas especially Stamps. Momma found it difficult to run the store and raise two kids. A few time passed after the depression was hit and Maya’s father arrives in order to take his kids to live with

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their mother in the south. Angelou describes her father as a handsome gentleman, who speaks and acts like the white folks. His arrival was a painful event for the young girl because it means that they will leave the life in the store and move toward the unknown.

In the age of eight Maya moved to live in St. Louis with her beautiful mother Vivian. She owned a house where she lives with her two children and her boyfriend Mr. Freeman. In the beginning he sounds very friendly and the children start to like him, however after months he raped the poor young Maya and he threatened her that he will kill her brother, if she tells anyone about what he did to her. Maya was scared and did not understand what he had done to her, the only thing that she understood was that her brother was in danger, so she did not tell anyone even her Bailey, until her health worsened and Vivian discovered that her daughter was raped.

Just after taking Maya to the hospital they go to the court and Mr. Freeman was murdered by an unknown persons. When Maya learned about Mr. Freeman death she thought that she was the responsible for his murder; as a result Maya had a trauma and decided to stop talking with other people except Bailey.

After the shocking events the children return back to Stamps, where Maya get in touched with a beautiful educated black lady Mrs. Flower. One day she invited Maya to her house and advices her to read literary works so loudly in order to recovery from the trauma.

Soon after Maya regained her voice and her life retuned to be normal. She used to attend the church every Sunday, stay in the store, and she graduated from school. At age of ten Maya starts the first work in her life as maid in a house of a white woman. She was extremely resist and ill-treated.

One day Maya had a horrible toothache, Momma takes her to the dentist who was a white man, when Momma asked him to heal her child he said that he will put his hand in a dog's mouth rather treating black person. His response was enough for Maya

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to understand the big difference between the whites and the blacks. After hearing his words she forgot her toothache and asks Momma why the whites hate the blacks.

Maya's bad experience with racism did not end at age of thirteen her brother Bailey was forced to carry a body of a black man, he was killed by a white. When Momma heard of the crime she managed to leave Stamps. The whole family moved to live in Los Angeles with Maya's mother, after the marriage of Vivian, the children moved with her to San Francisco where Maya felt for the first time in her life that she was at home and not a passenger.

Soon after Maya's father came in order take her to spend the summer with him in Los Angeles but unfortunately she had a fight with his girlfriend and runs away, Maya lives for a month with a homeless people in Los Angeles, they taught her to be a strong person.

After that experience Maya learned how to take her responsibility, she returned to live with her mother Vivian and decided to be the first black girl streetcar conductor. At age of sixteen Maya had a relationship with her neighbor. Three weeks after she found herself pregnant.

Bailey advises her to do not tell their mother about her pregnancy until she finishes her education and graduate, Maya followed his advice and hide her pregnancy for eight months, then she told her mother. She gave the birth to her son and gained more strength as a mother and as a black female.

### **2.4 The Social Issues in the Novel**

#### **2.4.1 Displacement**

Maya Angelou grew up in times, when all the American society was instable, blacks and whites, young and old, male and female, all people during the 1930's were moving from one place to another looking for better conditions. As a black writer Maya Angelou's novel focus more on the lives of the African-Americans, she pointed



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out that from centuries ago the United States of America welcomed all the new comers except her people who were still struggling in order to find home and identity in America.

The protagonist Maya and her brother Bailey represent the black children who were obliged to travel alone from the North to the South. The theme of displacement is highly present in the novel, from the age of three to sixteen Maya and Bailey lived in more than six places their unstable life was controlled by different factors such as divorce, racism and sexism.

The book opens in the train station which symbolizes the displacement, after the divorce of their parents Maya and Bailey were sent to live in the south with their paternal grandmother. The author describes her painful feelings of loneliness, rejection and fear from the unknown she said

When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed-“to whom it may concern”-that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr, from Long Beach California... I don't remember much of the trip, but after we reached the segregated southern part of the journey things must have looked up. Negro passengers who always travel with loaded lunch boxes, felt sorry for “the poor little motherless darling”. (Angelou, p. 1)

After being in Stamps for several weeks the two children became familiar with the life in the segregated southern state, Momma and their uncle and the store became their world. However a year later Bailey Johnson arrives to take his children to St. Louis in order to live with their mother. For the second time the Maya's life is disturbed by another trip, she has to leave the store and life in Stamps and go to a new city. The author describes her trip by saying “We were being driven to Hell and our father was the delivering devil” (Angelou, p. 59)

The feeling of not belonging to anywhere did not leave the young Maya during all her childhood, it comes each time to remind her that she was abandoned by her parents

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and she has no specific place like the other people on earth. The young girl long trip in life never reached an end, when she was eight years old after being raped by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman Maya and Bailey were sent back to Stamps, her mother thought that she will recover quickly, if she returns to Stamps. This time what really hurts the author was not the departure but her sorrow was when she saw sadness in her brother's eyes because she could not help him to forget that he was forced to leave his mother dear for the second time.

We were on the train going back to Stamps, and this time it was I who console Bailey. He cried his heart out down the aisles of the coach and pressed his little body-boy against the window pane looking a last glimpse of his mother dear...Entering Stamps, I had the feeling that I was stepping the border lines of the map and would fall without fear, right off end of the world nothing more could happen.(Angelou, p. 89)

Because of living in different places, Angelou did not have time to feel that she belong to any town even when she returns to Stamps she did not feel that she returned home she felt strange as if she never lived in that town before, as if she did not have memoires in the store with momma; the trip toward Stamps was just another painful trip like the previous ones.

From the beginning of the novel until the end the writer uses different settings in order to portray, the life of the black girl who grew up aware of her displacement. In every time she moves to a new town she whispers the same words "I did not come to stay" she was sure that her visit will never last long. The only time she felt that she is at home when she moved to live with her brother and mother in San Francisco.

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 Franciscans, nor with the whites, but rather with the time and city ... to me, a thirteen-years-old black girl, stalled by the South and southern life style, the city was a state of beauty and a state of freedom.(Angelou,p212-213)

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Despite her young age Maya knows that she was like many other African-Americans what they were seeking for was freedom, she was as a flying bird looking for safety she finally found it in San Francisco, therefore she realized that home of any person is the place where he can celebrate his freedom free from the barriers of fear and racism. However the city was not her last home she had continued her long journey.

In her first autobiography Maya Angelou has successfully described the African-Americans life throughout her point of view as child; her painful experience with displacement represents all the hopes and fears, all the struggles of the black community in order to find a safe place, she continued her story with the displacement in the other five autobiographies.

### 2.4.2 Racism and Segregation

Racism and segregation have a long history in the United States, since the Civil War they had been among the major issues in the American Society. Maya Angelou narrates her story during a period of time when racism and segregation were deeply rooted in the American society, despite of much efforts made by the blacks and even some whites in order to defeat racism, yet it is still at the top of the social issues. According to Angelou segregation was widespread during her childhood especially in the South; it was too easy for her as child of three years old to observe the difference between the whites and the blacks.

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

Segregation in the south was so severe, most of the black children did not know that people with white skin and blonde hair live in the other part of the city, all what they were knowing is that :they are different from them, they have money and better life.

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In *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou describes her inferiority complex. She was always thinking about the difference between people who are around her and people who live in the other side of the town. The racist society made Maya feel inferior when she compares her appearance with the white girls, this feeling had accompanied the author during all her childhood. Thus, she believes that beauty is in the white skin, colored eyes and blonde hair, these ideas made the young Maya see herself as an ugly black girl.

Racism and segregation are detected from the beginning of the autobiography, but the direct experience of Maya with the whites' prejudice was when she had ten years old, a white dentist refused to treat her teeth just because she was a black girl. This incident makes Maya realize the real face of racism. The dentist said to her grandmother Annie

“Annie, you know I don't treat nigger, colored people”

“I know, dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and she ain't gonna 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...I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's” (Angelou, p.188)

After this conversation Maya's toothache stopped and was replaced by another pain, it was so deep she could not describe it by words. Knowing that the doctor prefers to treat a dog rather than treating her causes a big shock, the cruelty of the dentist and the rest of people like him made Maya hate everything white especially the society because they dominate it.

Throughout her autobiography Maya Angelou tries to point out the real reason of racism in the American society, as a curious child she asks her uncle Willis to explain why the whites hate the black and according to his answer she understands that the main reason of racism was the white's prejudice and the rejection of everything different.

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Uncle Willie what colored people had done to white people in the first. Uncle Willie, who never was one for explaining things because he took after Momma, said little except that “colored people hadn’t even bothered a hair on a whitefolks’heads”

Uncle Willie why do they hate us so much?

Uncle Willie muttered, “They don’t really hate us. They don’t know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared.”(Angelou, p. 196)

Uncle Willie’s words were enough to explain the long conflict between the two races; racism was a result of misunderstanding, the white’s prejudice came as a barrier separates them from the other races, it put them in the center and marginalized the blacks. If they just break the barriers of fear, racism and prejudice they will find human beings like them, who want to be equal and not inferior.

Angelou believes that what separate the people are the race and color, but what gathers the all people is much bigger than these, it was the humanity. According to the young girl all people have nearly the same dreams and the same needs. So why they have to live in conflicts.

In addition to the black’s suffering, Maya Angelou portrays the sudden disappearance of the Asian popularity, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during the Second World War; the Japanese citizens were obliged to leave the United States. According to the author their absence was not noticeable because they were not a white people they did not speak and behave like them. So no one mentioned the absent Japanese as if they never exist.

As the Japanese disappeared, soundlessly and without protest, the Negro entered with their loud jukeboxes..... The Japanese removal was more subtle but was more profoundly felt. The Japanese were not a whitefolks. Their eyes, language and customs belied the white skin and proved to their dark successors that since they didn’t to be feared, neither did they have to be considered. All this was decided unconsciously. (Angelou, p. 211)

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Like many other works done by the black writers, Maya Angelou's autobiography describes the African-Americans lives in the American society. The title " I know Why the Caged Bird Sings" includes all black people who were caged by racism, injustice and slavery, and despite everything they sing their songs were their hope for a better future.

### 2.4.3 Racial Prejudice

The oppressed life had created a kind of racial prejudice, from the beginning of the novel Maya mentioned that the white people were different from people who live on her side starting from their physical appearance, their behavior and their life style. The notion of the self and otherness is highly presents, Maya Angelou believes that the real people are like those who live with her, they have black skin and strong bodies, and most important they suffer in order to survive, so they deserve life more than the others. However she sees people who live in the other side as strangers they are the others, they do not work hard but they have money to spend it on big houses, cars and clothes. She knew that they were not the same.

Whitefolks couldn't be people because their feet were too small, their skin too white and see-throughy, and they didn't walk on the balls of their feet the way people did – they walked on high heels like horses. People were those who lived on my side of town. I didn't like them at all or in fact, any of them very much, but they were people. These others, the strange pale creatures the lived in their alien unlife, weren't considered folks. They were whitefolks.(Angelou, p. 26)

Although Maya knew that they were all human beings, but she cannot think that they were the same, she always refers to the whites people by the others, they or the whitefolks and never by "we".

Maya Angelou shows her racial pride when she saw her father for the first time, he was a handsome man, he walks and speaks like people who live in the other side and the most important that he has a car, most of the whites in Stamps did not have a car.

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Moreover Maya's mother was also a pretty woman, when Maya saw her thought that she was not her real mother, they were not alike in the beauty and even in the behavior. Her parents made her thought that they left her just because she was not like them. The inferiority complex never left the young girl even among her people.

Why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called "mother". Bailey on his part fell instantly and forever in love. She was his mother dear. They were more alike than she and I, or even he and I. they both had physical beauty and personality so I figured it figured. (Angelou, p. 60)

Although Angelou felt that she was different from her family numbers, yet she was proud of having a pretty mother and beautiful brother. She proves that not only the whites who are beautiful. She shows that the black people are much beautiful than the whites because they are not fake like them.

Maya's racial prejudice grew more when she saw a white movie star like her mother. She was happy to see her mother twin in a movie surrounded by white handsome men, in fact she was happy to watch whitefolk adoring a woman without knowing that she has a black twin.

I laughed because, except that she was white, the big movie star looked just like my mother. Except that she lived in a big mansion with thousand servants, she lived just like my mother. And it was funny to think of the whitefolks'not knowing that the woman they were adoring could be my mother's twin, except that she was white and my mother was prettier.much prettier. (Angelou, p. 119)

She was pleased to see her mother twin as a movie star, the only difference between her mother and the movie star was not in the beauty or the way of life, but her mother was much prettier than the white woman.

Racial pride and prejudice are the major issues when dealing with the multi-ethnic society, every group shows its pride. Despite of her hard life as a young girl who lives

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in a segregated area, Maya Angelou was always showing her good fortune to be born as a black person. She emphasized on the fact that if the person did not accept himself and his people the others will never recognize him.

### 2.4.4 Resistance to Racism

Survival is the word that summarizes the long path of the African-American people. New World was the Promised Land for many people, except for the black slaves, it was a land of death. They were taken as properties from their homeland to America. The New World welcomed all the new comers from different parts of the earth, but it never welcomed those who came from Africa. They had to take a long road of resistance in order to be considered as the American citizens.

Maya Angelou tries to show the resistance of the African-American community against the injustice society. In *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* resistance to racism had took so many forms, starting from the title “I Know why the Caged Bird Sings” Maya represents all black people who were and still caged by racism, social injustice and slavery. Despite, all the hardship and the oppression, they continue to survive, their song was their hope for a better future.

Momma was a high example of resistance, when she improved her economic situation and owned a store, Momma was the first black person who has a private business in Stamps, her economic situation was better than many white people. Momma’s real power appeared when the white dentist refused to treat her granddaughter, she shows her real black power for the first time, even her granddaughter did not imagine that she was a very strong women.

“I didn’t ask you to apologize in front of my Marguerite, because I don’t want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown.”

“Now that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be a



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vegetarian caring for dogs with the manage cats with the cholera and cows withtheepizootic.”(Angel,p.

Her threatening tone was enough for the racist dentist to live the segregated area, she never thought about the white’s rules, because she knew that they do not have the strength as the blacks, so they were hiding behind their rules.

To be a black person, and live in the United States during the twenties century, it means that they have to live an inferior life. However, Maya’s father was another example of resistance, he was showing off his wealth, and the comfortable life style just to break the social system. He proves that even the black person could leave a better life, he used the white’s words as well as fashion, in order to say, that they were not obliged to live in poverty all the time.

Maya’s family resistance against the social injustice influenced her in her early age. She never complained about her bad situation, because, she knew well that she has to suffer in order to get what she wants. The author described resistance as a heritage. Maya’s first resistance against racism was when she had ten years old, she worked as a maid in the white’s house, her racist boss used to call her Mary instead of Maya, she never accept to be called by another name, even though it sounds nearly the same. Maya’s self respect pushed her to quit the job in a short period of time. When Maya had fourteen years old she did a bold and brave step, she decided to be the first black girl streetcar. Vivian did not accept the idea at all because she knew that that kind of job was totally forbidden. Despite all the obstacles Maya took the job as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco.

In the office of the Market Street Railway Company, the receptionist seemed as surprised to see me there as I was surprised to find the interior dingy and the déco drab. Somehow I had expected waxed surfaces and carpeted floors. If I had met no resistance. As I was explained that I had come to see about a job, she asked, was I sent by an agency.(Angelou,p. 267)

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Maya's little experience in life, taught her that dreams never realize by chance, she had to work hard in order to get what she wants. If she did not gain something, she had nothing to lose.

### 2.4.5 Black Women

Women in all societies have a history full of suffering from gender inequality. To be a female, she has to live under the male order, but what if the person was a black female?

Unlike the whites, the black women had a far more complicated task. The black woman was living under the oppression of the patriarchal society as a female, the black men dominated all sectors of life. On the other hand they faced a racist society as a black person, the white female called only for their rights without including the blacks. Therefore, the African-American woman was suffering from double burden. With the emerge of the new social order in the United States during the 1920's, the black women started to think about their lives, and they released that they had been marginalized in every groups, so they have to be strong in order to survive, because life always defeats the weak.

In *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou added her voice to the other black women writers, by describing the difficult life of the black female, who is chained by many forces. The black female was marginalized by the white's female prejudice; they were always seeing them as inferiors. In addition to racism of the whites, the black men were adding to their suffering by imposing the masculine rules. "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".(Angelou, p. 273)

Angelou mentioned the three main black women, who played an important role in her life. They were representing an example of a strong black female.

The first black female in Maya's life was her paternal grandmother. Momma was a religious strong black woman, she gained the respect of her surroundings, due to

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her powerful personality and successful business career. Momma was a good example in dealing with the difficult situation, she worked at home by raising her son's kids and outdoors, she runs a store. Momma's looked as another person when it comes to the life of her family.

Vivian was another role model of the strong black female, her divorce decision was a brave step, Most of the whites could not do it. Vivian left behind, her two kids and the family life, just to live free as she wants. Even when her daughter was raped by her boyfriend, she did not stay in order to take care of her ill daughter, her reaction was to send her kid to the grandmother, rather healing her.

Unlike Vivian, Mr. Flower was not representing the beautiful woman, she was an example of an educated woman, she took her strength from the literary works, and Maya was attracted by her self –confidence. Mr. Flower was an exception in Maya's life, because overcome all the racist barriers and proves that everyone has the right of education, it was not dedicated for the whites.

The three women in Maya's life taught her to stand against everything wrong. She took from them: the strength, freedom, and education. As a woman writer the female characters took a big role in her novel. The few male characters did not have the same important. Maya did not only portrays the black women struggles she went further by dealing with the main issue in their lives.

### **2.4.6 Sexual Abuse**

Angelou's main purpose in writing her autobiography was to deal with the different issues in the American society during the 1930's. Women issues were a debatable topics in the United States from the beginning of the twenties century. Maya Angelou took another way, in order to improve women's statue, by going further than asking for women's right, she narrates her personal experience with the sexual abuse.

When Maya was eight years, she moved to live with their mother and her boyfriend Mr. Freeman. In the beginning he sounds a very kind person, she started to treat him as her father. Thus, Maya used to sleep with him and Vivian at night, in the

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first time and the second night everything seemed normal, however in the third time Mr. Freeman took the advantage from Vivian's absence and he harassed her girl.

Because of a need for stability, children easily become creature of habit. After the third time in mother's bed, I thought there was nothing strange about sleeping there. One morning she got out of bed for an early errand, and I fell asleep again. But I woke up to a pressure, a strange feeling on my left leg. It was too soft to be a hand and it wasn't the touch of clothes. Whatever it was I hadn't encounter the sensation in all the years of sleeping with Momma. (p. 72)

The poor young girl did not know what Mr. Freeman was doing. She never encountered a situation like that, so she did not understand that it was wrong. She thought that Mr. Freeman's touches were innocent just like the other father.

As the time passed, Maya was treating Mr. Freeman like her father. As a child of eight years she was happy to have for the first time a father. She was too young to understand what was going around her. Till one day when they were alone at home, he raped her and threatened her that he will kill her brother if she tells anyone. The worst thing in the world is to rape a child her only sin is her innocent.

The act of rape on an eight year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the mind of the violator cannot. I thought I was died- I woke up in a white-walled world and it had to be heaven. But Mr. Freeman was there and he was washing me. His hands shoo, but he held me upright in the tub and washed my legs."I didn't mean to hurt you, Ritie". (P. 78)

The worst part for the young girl was not the sexual abuse, she did not know that she was raped, the worst was when he threatened her if she tells anyone, he will kill her brother. Maya believed hem and keeps the secret, she felt guilty, because she hid the truth from Bailey.

After days, her little body could not resist more, and she told her brother about everything. She felt more comfortable, when he told her that Mr. Freeman cannot hurt

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him. At least she had trustful brother. Then Vivian took Maya to the hospital and just after they went to the court.

In the hospital the nurses told Maya, everything was over, she had nothing to fear from. Maya and Bailey were sent to Stamps, they thought everything bad was left in San Francisco but the worst of all was about to began.

### 2.4.7 Trauma

If events are described as a traumatic event, it means that they caused a deep shock in the life of a person or a community. Life of the human beings is full of good and bad surprises. People have the will to improve their lives, but they cannot control every single.

Maya Angelou's childhood is full of traumatic events, her first experience with the trauma was in after the divorce of her parents, they abandoned her in a very young age, the main problem in Maya's life was finding stability, she never felt that she belongs to any place, or trust anyone, her world was her brother Bailey.

The author lived a second shock when she was eight years old, she was raped. Although she did not know the real meaning of being raped, but she lived in fear from the abuser, who threatened to kill Bailey. The fear of hurting her brother was much bigger than thinking about the physical pain caused by the rape.

The greatest trauma in Maya Angelou's life was when she learned that Mr. Freeman died, she believed that her words in the court were the cause of his death. Maya could not bear the burden of killing a person, she decided to stop speaking with the other people except Bailey. Her words were a weapon she decided to stop talking, in order to avoid killing another soul.

The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey. Instinctively, or somehow, I know that because I loved him so much I'd never hurt him, but if I talked to anyone else that person might die to. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die. (p. 87)

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Maya spent her days mute, she did not speak with either her mother or her Momma, believing that if she speaks with them they will dead, the only few words she spoke were with Bailey, . Momma could not let the girl in that situation she took her back to Stamps.

In the first week my family accepted my behavior as a post-rape, post-hospital affliction. (Neither the term nor the experience was mentioned in Grandmother's house, where Bailey and I were again staying) They understood that I could talk to Bailey, but to no one else. Then came the last visit from the visiting nurse, and the doctor said I was healed. (p. 88)

The trauma worsted in Stamps, because they lived another displacement far from their mother. Momma managed for a meeting with an educated black women called Ms. Flowers, she was sure that Ms. Flowers will know how to deal Maya's difficult situation. Maya went to the black lady house where she had a short discussion about the impact of literature.

The last trauma in Maya's childhood was when she became pregnant in her sixteen years old, she had a relationship with a handsome black boy, and he left her in her fourth month of pregnancy. Maya was confused about how she will raise a baby, because she was too young and had not money. Her only supports in life was her brother Bailey, but he was living in another city.

The world had ended, and I was the only person who knew it. People walked along the streets as if the pavements hadn't all crumbled beneath their feet. They pretend to breathe in and out while all the time I knew the air had been sucked away in a monstrous inhalation from God himself. I alone was suffocating in the nightmare. The little pleasure I was able to take from the fact that if I could have a baby I obviously wasn't a lesbian was crowded into my mind's tiniest corner by the massive pushing in of fear, guilt and self-revulsion. (p.285)

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Maya's had different feeling of pregnancy, at first she felt that it was the end of the world, but later she remembers that she was alone and weak the baby will give her a reason to live and power to continue her path.

### 2.4.8 The Recovery from Trauma

Life in the 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's, was not easy at all. People were using the available entertainment, in order to escape from the sad reality. Like many American Maya was impressed by the Hollywood movies, especially when she saw a movie white star looks like her mother. She started to go every weekend to the movie theater in order to see her mother's twin. She felt as if the star was her mother except that the star was white and Vivian was prettier.

On the other hand, literature played a significant role in building Maya's strong personality. In a poor segregated area they had nothing to do except reading books or magazines. At first literature was like a bridge between her and the white people. She loved the works of William Shakespeare, she describes him as "He was my first white love". Then she started to explore the other white writers such as: Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain and Jane Eyre.

There was going to be a storm and it was a perfect night for rereading *Jane Eyre*. Bailey had finished his chores and was already behind the stove with Mark Twain. It was my turn to close the Store, and my book, half read, lay on the candy counter. Since the weather was going to be bad I was sure Uncle Willie would agree. (P. 153)

After being raped and the death of her rapist, Maya Angelou had a deep feeling of guilt, made her to stop talking with people. Literature again played an important role in her life. Ms. Flower advised her to read the literary works very loudly, it will help her to regain her voice. Ms. Flowers told Maya that the human voice gives the meaning for the words, and they cannot reach their aim unless they are pronounced.

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Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.

I memories the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic. She said that she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read them, I must read them aloud. (p. 98)

Maya Angelou's love of literature had accompanied her during all her life. Literature was a recovery and a weapon in face all struggles. Angelou's first aim to become a writer was to portray the life of the African-Americans in the racist society.

### 2.4.9 Poverty

The economic situation of the black Americans was like their social situation. They suffer from poverty and low wages. Even Momma who owns a store, because she was a black she could not enjoy a comfortable life. Maya Angelou describes the daily struggling of the black maids in the white people houses, in addition to, maltreatment they were suffering from low wages. People on the other side of the town were living a luxury life, they had enough money to buy cars, houses and clothes. But the black people were living in poverty, they called the cars and the big houses, as the white things, because only the whites who can owned them.

I couldn't understand whites and where they got the right to spend money so lavishly. Of course, I knew god was white too, but no one could have made me believe he was prejudice. My grandmother had more money than all the powwhite trash. We owned land and houses, but each day Bailey and I were cautioned, "Waste not, want not". (Angelou, p.50)

Momma had money to live a better life, but they have not the right to live that kind of life, it was belonged to the white folks, and the blacks were obliged to live an inferior life even though they had enough money.



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Maya Angelou narrates her childhood during a hardest period in the American history. When the great depression hit the economy. The depression affected more the whites economy, because the black had nothing to lose during the economic crisis. Maya Angelou noted that the great depression hit the white's economy before the black.

The Depression must have hit the white section of Stamps with cyclonic impact, but it seeped into the Black area slowly, like a thief with misgivings. The country had been in the throes of the Depression for two years before the Negroes in Stamps knew it. I think everyone thought that the depression, like everything else, was for the whitefolks, so it had nothing to do with them. (p. 50)

Although the great depression, was a bad economic crisis, but it did not caused a great ravage for the black community, they were living in poverty before and nothing had changed so much. Maya thought that at least the depression was not resist it hit the both economies. Black and whites were in the first time in the same economic level.

Community realized that the depression, did not discriminate. Welfare agencies gave food to the poor families, black and white. Gallons of lard, flour, salt, powdered eggs and powdered milk. People stopped trying to raise hogs because it was too difficult to get slop rich enough to feed them, and no one had the money to buy mash or fish meal. (p.51)

Maya knew that the depression was severe, when no one comes to the store, in order to buy fish or hogs. As a result Momma found it difficult to run her store when no client comes to buy.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Having equal rights in a completely racist society was not an easy task, it demands a long resistance path. Maya was not only suffered from racism and segregation, but she was deceived from trustful people, who were supposed to protect her from the strangers. The miserable life of the poor little girl caused her many

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psychological crisis, she was even very young to carry that amount of pain. However, despite all the hardship she found her refuge in literature, Maya made the novel as her best friend after Bailey. Her literary passion helped her to overcome all the social barrier and took her freedom from the racist society.

# **General conclusion**

### General Conclusion

The beginning of the twenties century marked by different events that had a great effects on the economy of the United States of America. After the end of the First World War the United States had an unprecedented economic growth, it was resulted by the birth of new business that provided new jobs with high wages. The nineteen twenties was a decade of new technological inventions such as: radios, washing machine and refrigerator. The new technology replaced the traditional life style by a modern life. Women in particular were highly influenced by the new inventions, because it gave them more freedom. They changed their looks became more practical and they gained more freedom. With the economic growth people started to spend more money on entertainment, they were highly attracted by the movies, the nineteen twenties is often known as Hollywood Golden Age. The United States in the nineteen twenties was a direction to many people who seek for fortune and entertainment.

However, everything changed after the Stock Market Crash in the 1929. Life in the United States started to take another direction. The Great Depression began just after the Stock Market Crash, the industry was deeply hit by the crisis, many banks closed and many people were out of work. The great depression caused many changes in the United States. In the election of the 1932 Franklin Roosevelt became a president. Roosevelt presents his new deal program, which totally changed the American policy toward the economic crisis. The great depression was also reflected on society, the pessimism was everywhere, and people were on the roads asking for money, foods and jobs. Many families moved from place to another seeking for a better life. The nineteen thirties is described as the lawless time, because the crimes rate was very high, many unemployed people became thieves in order to feed their families. Due to the great depression, the nineteen thirties are considered as a turning point in the American history.

The hardship of the decade was a source of inspiration to many American writers. Maya Angelou was among the writers who had successfully portray the American life during the nineteen thirties and the beginning of the nineteen forties, her first

## General conclusion

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autobiography under the title *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings*, was a narration of her childhood events and an exploration of social issues.

Because the fundamental objective of this study is to analyze how did Maya Angelou in *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* portrays the American society during the nineteen thirties. After the examination of the reflection of the American society in Maya Angelou's autobiography, there a several conclusions that this work is dedicated to explain it. First, displacement was the major social issue, the events took place in different setting. Second, racism and segregation were placed on the top of society. The major conflict in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was between the blacks and whites, each community aimed to prove its superiority. Last but not the least, through the novel Maya Angelou aimed to show miserable life of the black, who suffered from the divorce of her parents, poverty and the sexual abuse. By the narration of her childhood Maya Angelou presented the life of all the American black girls in the racist society.

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