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**The Social and the Political Influence
of Literature in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the
Caged Bird Sings***

**Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English
as a Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
'Master' in English Language**

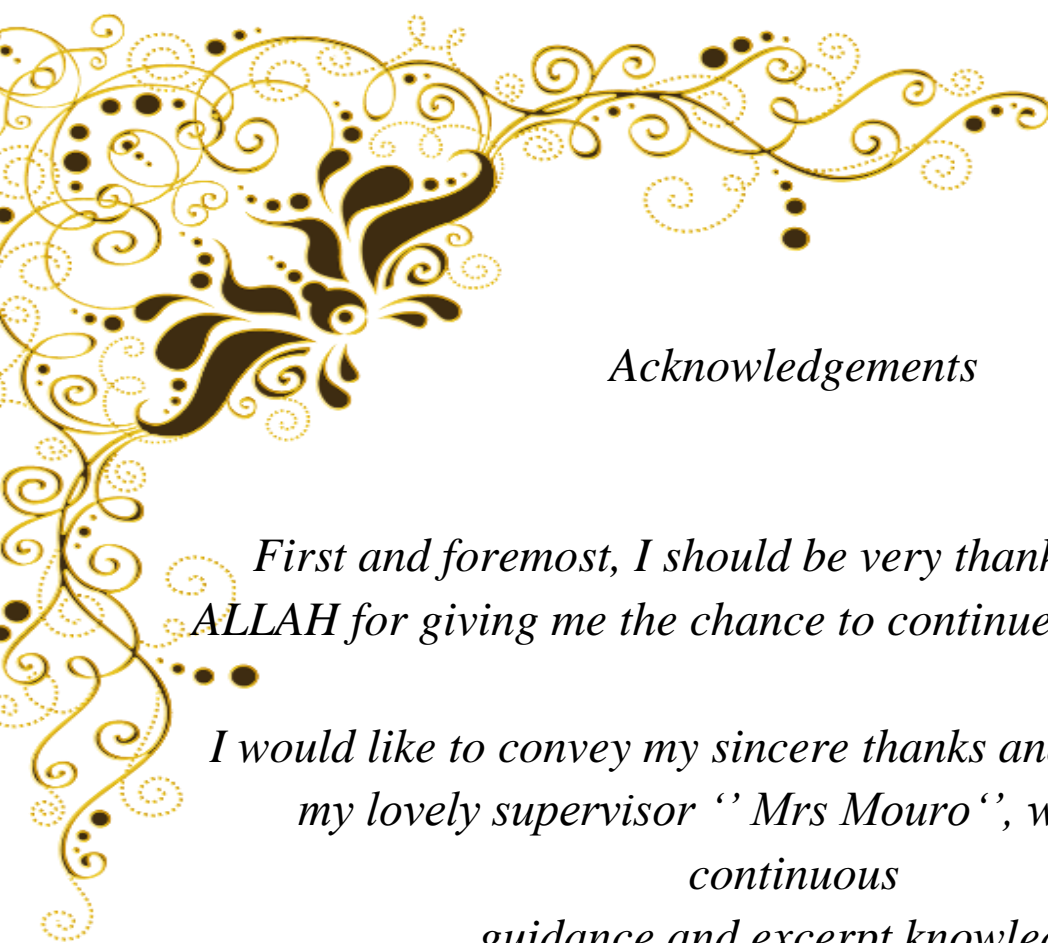
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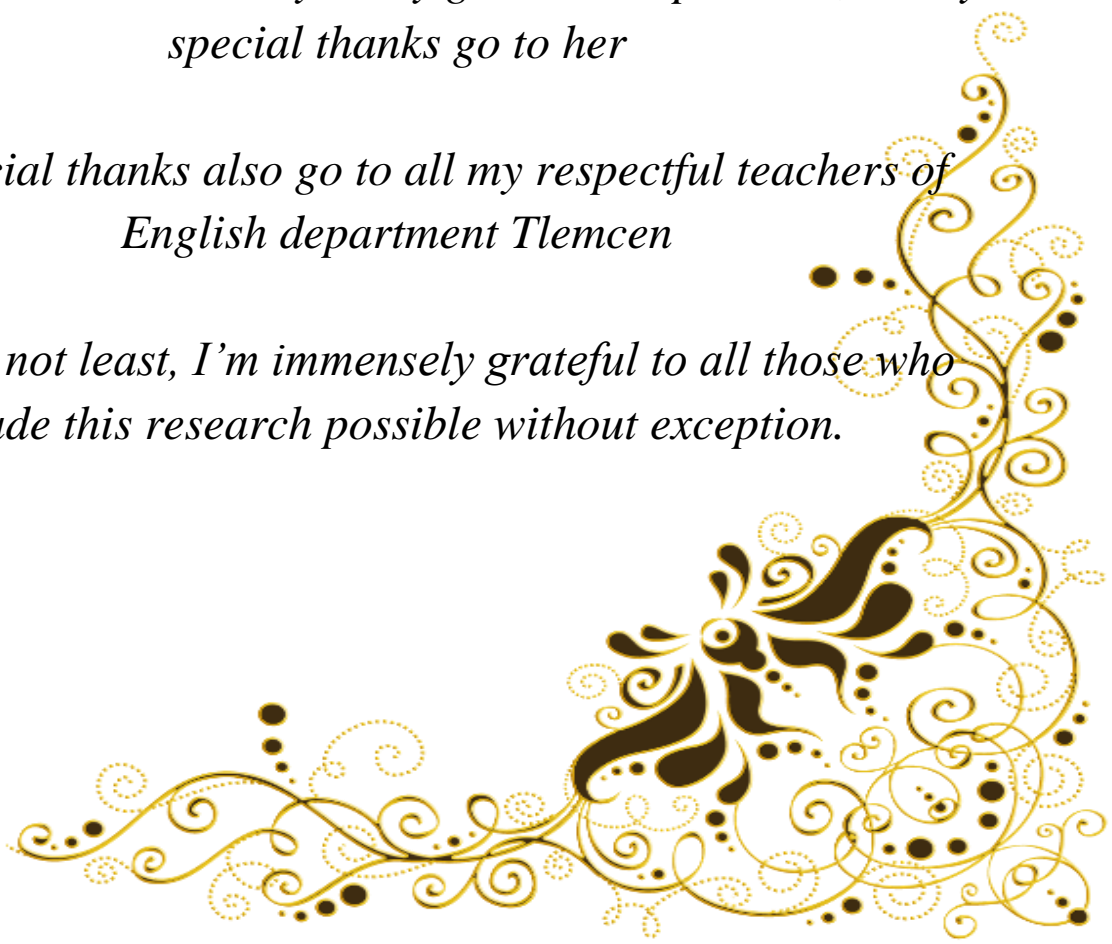
*First and foremost, I should be very thankful to our God
ALLAH for giving me the chance to continue this humble work*

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A decorative border surrounds the page, featuring intricate gold scrollwork and several pink roses with green leaves. The roses are positioned in the corners and along the sides of the page.

Dedication

*I dedicate this memoir to my family
And my friends,
Who have supported me the most
during the writing process*

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General Introduction

What is literature, but a collection of books that hold inside them a story. A story tells and shares an author's world, history, experiences, struggles, passions and desires.

Reading such pieces of literature gives an insight about the author's mind, and the world as whole. Some written works are forgotten just after reading them but some others linger because their writers played the role of teachers and their literary works were a kind of lessons for many people.

Throughout history, many works and books made a great sensation, fanned the flames to call for change and influenced not only people but changed systems, politics, and societies, and this is a strong reason that led me to write about this interesting subject that attracted my concern, being myself influenced by the book of Mary Shelley *Frankenstein* and later with the latest sensation *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Challenging the idea that literature is just a piece of writing, one may say that literature is more than just a work of art and it has other potent roles in human's world mainly respond to and call for change. This research is an endeavor to deal with the role that literature plays to capture the imagination of readers, inspire reforms and revolutions, change hearts and minds and alert people's life, focusing on American literature and mainly on Maya Angelou, the African-American writer who changed her life using the power of words and predominantly the power of literature. With her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she influenced and impacted many fields and arenas as her voice was heard worldwide; society, politics, women and many others.

This work is therefore about the influence and impact of literature, taking as example Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. At this level, the following research questions can be raised:

-How does literature shape or affect society and politics?

-Can literature be a weapon in the hands of women to get freed of the male -dominated world?

-Who is Maya Angelou? And how does she make an influence by writing a book?

To answer these research questions, it relies on Marxist criticism which focuses on the relation between literature and society and advocates change. They are treated through two chapters.

The first chapter is a general overview about literature and its relationship with society, politics and women and how it can help for a better change.

The second chapter is devoted to study Maya Angelou's life and how the abused girl changed her awful past to become a famous powerful woman and renowned writer... through literature.

Chapter One: Literature and Society

*“If you want to change the world, pick
up a pen and write”*

Martin Luther King, Jr

1. 1 Introduction

Literature, with its different types and genres, is created and written for specific missions as it used to document the past with a realistic setting and historical events and then, it has come to entertain readers and make them enjoy their free time, as well as to escape from reality when the writer creates a fictional world. However, literature has to be created to look for better change.

This chapter aims at providing an understanding of the connections between literature and society and to show how literature is intimately related to society and can help for its radical alteration and utmost change. Then, it tries to touch the impact of some literary works especially in American and British literature that were of great importance and were the driving force for change and development.

1. 2 Literature and Context

Novels, poems, and stories, these are some of the things that first came to mind when one ponders over the question ‘what is literature?’

Defining ‘literature’ is a difficult task and a road that is much traveled as Socrates once said “the beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms” (quoted by Trump and McIver 69).

There are a lot of definitions of literature but in the most general sense, literature is anything that is written; “pieces of writing that are valued works of art, especially novels, plays and poems” (Wehmeier 751), or “the entire body of writings of a specific language, period, people, etc...” (*Webster’s Dictionary* no page). Its major forms are poetry, prose and drama, in addition to some basic kinds. Whatever its type, fiction or nonfiction, we generally call literature a novel, poem, short story, essay, biography, speech or any other form of writing.

Literature is a special type of art. Its main content is human life. Authors and mainly writers used literature to share their views about life and express their human experiences, ideas, feelings, imaginations and social realities; they paint the ease and sorrow, smile and cry, joy and affliction...etc. Literature, then, is a work of art that is created for many diverse reasons in different structures. In the first flight, some literary

works are produced to entertain the readers; such entertainment might cause hope, happiness or even horror and sadness. “It is literature not philosophy or history and certainly not mathematics or the sciences which can most effectively manage our emotions...it can also expand our emotional experience by offering us opportunities to enjoy” (Trace 102). To entertain then is to engage the reader in the story or in what is written and either make him or her feel the same thing as if the story is about himself or herself or to escape from daily existence to that new world that the author creates and enjoy it.

Other works can be informative, expressive, and meaningful. From plays to short stories, each literary work has a moral lesson, a message or a reflection of the author and thus literature has to play its part as reflector and corrector at the same time; to be a corrective mirror in which people can look and find out the need for positive change. Literature also aims to inform, guide, instruct, and offer a moral lesson or a message, whether negative or positive. A powerful, convincing and successful writing might teach something; the author thus becomes the “teacher” and the reader or the audience “his students”. (ibid. 100)

They [literary works] take us beyond the limited experience of our lives to show us the lives of others, giving us experiences we may not face in our lives. It leads us intellectually and emotionally, and deepens our understanding of our history, society and our individual lives. This connection between people and literature works both ways: as literature affects people, and people affect literature. (Kirk)

As a matter of fact, to understand a work you need to understand the author’s background, the author’s life, and the ideas which were prevalent and spread during the time the author was writing. This is called ‘Context’; the circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting. It is then the environment in which either a text is produced or in which it is read; “when one ignores context, one may completely disregard a particular influence or aspect of the text and consequently the true sense of the piece will be dismissed” (Ibid.)

Therefore, there is no interpretation without a context and since every text draws on the ideas and attitudes of the time and place in which it was written and in which it is set; the reader attempts to reach an understanding of that context in order for the fullest meaning of the text to emerge.

History plays a fundamental role in shaping literature. Every novel, play or poem, or any other kind of literature one reads, is influenced by the political context in which it is written, the people that the author knows and the wider society that frames the entire work. That is, literature is one of a given time reflections. It gives clues about what people thought at this given time, and what people wrote about it allows the readers to know what they were thinking, how they were socially organized, what their concerns were, ...etc.

Hence, Marxist theory and even New Historicism focus their studies on the role of literature in connection with society and come out with a result that literature and society are indivisible. “The Marxist critic assumes that the relationship between art and society is organic and indivisible...that a work of art is not only a reflection but also a product of its social and historical milieu” (Gillies and Mahood 17). Similarly, New Historicism argues that literature is produced by society in which “history shapes the present, and the present shapes and influences our understanding of history and its representation: culture influences art, and art influences culture and society” (quoted by Hölbling and Tally 111). Moreover, literature reflects culture and it is the main transmitter of it; it represents its trends and issues and also helps in communicating one culture to other cultures and their members. Knowing a culture with its social organization, beliefs, values, prejudices, taboos ...etc at that specific time leads to a better understanding of the literary text.

Furthermore, Marxist Frederick Engels considers realism as a trend in literature which “implies beside truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances” (quoted by Blunden). The reader and the literary text become partners in the process of communication and if what is communicated is to be of any value, the primary concern would be no longer the meaning of the text but its effects. The writer is not only influenced by society: he influences it. “Art not merely reproduces Life but also shapes it. People may model

their lives upon the patterns of fictional heroes and heroines. They have made love, committed crimes and suicide according to the book” (Wellek and Warren 97).

Literature is, then, a detailed preview and a copy of human experiences, actions, and mainly society; it re-creates a reality by means of language. Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competences that daily life requires. By a way or another literature affects the reader’s mind and feelings and then influences society as whole.

Therefore, literature is a social product of its time, the writer is the source of providing the facts of his time and the “Context is a text himself and must be read” (quoted by Hölbling and Tally 112). Subsequently, literature has a very important function within the context of society and history. Literature is a world changer; it might have a major impact on the development of society; it might shape civilizations, change political systems and expose injustice. Through literature, life of the individual as well as the whole civilization can be enlightened.

Literature might change the way readers feel, think and most importantly, the way they act.

1. 3 Literature and politics

Literature does not only reflect but it also shapes socio-political relations, exposes injustice and ignites revolutions. Accordingly, important literary works address the great issues of politics. Doubtless, literature is like a result of what is going on in politics, society or economics; people become angry, depressed and that makes them write about it:

Any work of literature is in part a product of sociological and political factors, to the extent that the writer’s personality has been shaped by sociological and political environment of his time. Conversely, important works of literature or whole literary movements have had profound effects on society by setting up or destroying taboos, conventions, and social prejudices, thus contributing to changes in values which in turn have brought about social and political change (Lindberg 163).

Travel literature like that of John Smith can be considered as literary works which have been written for the political purpose. Quite often these travel books were written by explorers, traders, missionaries, soldiers, settlers and so on. In this regard, settlers' reports were written to justify their enterprise, to take possession of the new lands in the name of the monarchs who had sponsored their expeditions, also to describe the geographic and economic conditions for the future settlers and mainly to attract the greatest number of emigrants. For instance, Captain John Smith (1580 – 1631) was a mercenary soldier who emerged as a leader and saved the new British colony in America. He made the settlers build defences and plant crops, traded for food with the Indians and learnt their ways. He was named president of the colony in 1608. His reports of exploration are the first American literary texts to be written in English.

Smith's first published work was a letter sent from Virginia to a friend in England where it was printed as "A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents in Virginia". He also wrote *A Description of New England* and *The General History of Virginia*, his longest and most influential work. They were written not merely to record the settlement of North America but also to serve as propaganda or advertisement for the lands he had explored. They were also used by British monarchs to prove their possession of the recorded places and served in the dispute over the New World by European powers. So, travelers' accounts like that John Smith's and even those before and after him from Christopher Columbus, Cortez... to nineteenth-century explorers in Africa and Asia were used to effect colonialism and justify imperialist expansion.

This process of capitalist expansion was (and still is) witnessed in thousands upon thousands of travel books. Travel literature played an extremely important role in the production of consciousness and the making of ideology in connection with the expansionist enterprise (Pratt 200).

Literature thus, is used for political purposes of colonization and imperial expansion. "The sword of conquest found in the pen, and in the printing press, an indispensable ally" (Baym 8).

Another significant example of such literary works which had a great impact on the political sphere is that of Thomas Paine's 'Common Sense'. The pamphlet, often credited with inspiring the American Revolution, "conveys a breathless energy and an appetite for change" (Brack 8). This energy would get the colonial mindset ready for a revolution that would change the country and the world in the future.

The political situation in the colonies in 1775 was confounding, muddled and chaotic.

Paine had to find a way to make Americans believe that not only could they survive without Britain, but that they could actually prosper from the separation. He wanted to convince Americans that there was only one option—complete and absolute independence. (Vickers 29)

Many Americans felt the same thing about Paine's view on independence, but never took any action on it. Thus, Paine used his pen to change that and he wrote and reasoned 'Common Sense' in a style that common people understood. He based his work on biblical references and structured it like a sermon.

He spoke in a straightforward and simple way to make the political ideas tangible for a common audience as Olivia Smith has argued, "With Common Sense Paine became the first pamphleteer to address a broadly-based audience with colloquial language and to articulate political ideas that had remained unexpressed" (quoted by Larkin 128).

Paine divided the pamphlet into four sections. The first and second are about how a government should be set up and why a monarchy is wrong and how the effects of hereditary succession are negative. He starts the second half of the pamphlet on the natural rights human beings have, and he ends it by talking about the capabilities of America and how the colonists would be able to defeat Great Britain. He was determined to change the sentiments of the people from dependence to independence and from the monarchical to the republic form of government. (Crenshaw 16)

Subsequently, 'Common Sense' took a hard blow and made Americans aware of the necessity of a war and to raise arms against England. Paine thus, was like a firebrand and his pamphlet, a fevered call for independence and that a war was the only option

to take urgently as he stated “We have it in our power to begin the world over again” (Paine 53). These revolutionary words inspired the American colonists to action.

Behind the call for American independence from Britain, his common sense announced universal values about equality and freedom. For America to retain her virtue and remain God’s chosen people she would first have to cut her ties with the Great Satan, Great Britain. Thus at times Paine’s rational, political arguments were infused with emotion and righteous indignation.

At its best, ‘common sense’ was a powerful and persuasive piece of political writing that has ever been produced and Thomas Paine was a truly great man who lifted his pen to fight for better life for ordinary working people. In his greatest works including *Common Sense*, *Rights of man*, and *the Age of Reason*, Paine proposed a political and social system based on liberty, justice and freedom which are the principles that inspired men to fight and even die for freedom in America, England and France (McCartin 6). Thence, his impact on the political events of his time has proved so effectively that words are weapons.

1.4 Literature and society

In every part of the world, literature has been more or less a mirror of society, it reflects what is seen, felt and wished by the author during his time. Hence, literature influences society; society is reflected in literature and in this way, in all languages and at all times there has been a close interaction between the two. The literature of any age cannot escape the influence of the social scene and therefore is found reflecting the society of the age when it is created. Literature and society go hand in hand; society is the building block of literature. Without one, the other is nothing.

Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers- such literature does not deserve the name of literature, it is only a façade (Taylor 2).

No doubt, the influence of any piece of literature is going to be felt directly or indirectly. Therefore, literature and society should remain ever intertwined. The more they are, the more literature would lead to a sustained growth and works as adjuster and corrector of social order; “it is therefore in the literature of today that we have cultural hope for change tomorrow” (Walker 140).

As best illustration for such kinds of literature which had a major impact on social reforms were those of the 19th century mainly in Victorian England, starting with Carlyle’s call about ‘the condition of England’ and to the response of novelists like Charles Dickens, and even Benjamin Disraeli through novels to denounce the Industrial revolution.

The term ‘Condition of England’ was first used by Thomas Carlyle in his essay titled *Chartism* (1839) where he sought to draw attention to the problems associated with industrial growth and mechanization; Carlyle was concerned with the “two nations theme”, the rich and the poor. He warned about the urgency of this matter and called to action to “touch the disease”. Carlyle then, contributed to the awakening of social conscience among the reading public and understood well the social and political importance of literature. He attacked the growing materialism of Victorian society and its *laissez-faire* doctrine. (Diniejko)

A feeling very originally exists that the condition and disposition of the working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done in regard to it. [...]To us individually this matter appears, and has for many years appeared, to be the most ominous of all practical matters whatever; a matter in regard to which if something be not done, something will do itself one day, and I a fashion that will please nobody. The time is verily come for acting in it; how much more for consultation about acting in it, for speech and articulate inquiry about it! (Carlyle 1).

Likewise, a number of Victorian condition-of-England novelists, particularly Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, attempted with varying

effects, to persuade the reading public to look for ways of reducing the gap between the “two nations”, the poor and the rich;

The ‘Condition of England’ question constituted the theme of a spate of novels in the 1840s and 50s. These novels, which took for their subject the impact of industrialization on man and society, are also known as ‘social problem novels’ or ‘industrial novels’.
(Choudhury 242)

Many novels have been written to portray the 19th-century society, and the extent of its calls for reform. Informing the middle class about the life of the poor, these novels marked an important growth in consciousness about the nature of society and served as bridge across the two divided nations by showing that the two are bound to each other and responsible for each other.

Benjamin Disraeli, in response, wrote his famous novel *Sybil or the Two Nations* (1845), which reports the extreme differences between Britain’s rich and poor. The wealthy landowners enjoyed excesses beyond all imagination, while the poor working class endured miserable conditions that were barely able to sustain human life.

In *Sybil*, Disraeli illustrates the social crisis and the horrific conditions in which the majority of England’s working classes lived, and hopes to bring about equal political and social rights for all classes by legal means and to diminish the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Moreover, Disraeli expresses his own belief in the importance of charismatic leaders, a working-class political reformist movement that sought social and political reforms. (Volkova)

‘Ah! Why have we not such a man now’, said Sybil, ‘to protect the people! Were I a prince I know no career that I should deem so great’.

‘ But Stephen says no’, said Gerard; ‘he says that these great men have never made use of us but as tools; and that the people never can have their rights until they produce competent champions from their own order’.

‘But then Stephen does not want to recall the past’, said Sybil with a kind of sigh; he wishes to create the future’.

‘The past is dream’, said Gerard.

‘And what is the future?’ inquired Sybil. (Disraeli 175)

In solution, he demonstrated a unifying public sentiment between the poor working class and the aristocracy within the political sphere in order to break the wall between “the two nations”, the poor and the rich.

Similarly, Charles Dickens was an influential participant in the social reforms of Victorian England; he was a follower of Thomas Carlyle and even dedicated *Hard Times* to him when it was finally published in 1854. Through his writings, Dickens brings to light the social injustices against the poor and reflected the extent and the impact of poverty on society at that period and devoted his work towards calling the society and the state to change their attitudes and approach towards the poor and making their life better through changes in political and economic institutions.

For instance, in his novel ‘*Hard Times*’, Dickens used his novel’s characters to show the caste system that has been shaped by the industrial revolution, and his critical view of the industrial society of the 19th century in England, which caused terrible conditions of a working class, in addition to his sympathies with the workers. So it does not matter what a kind of a class a person or mainly a worker is from, but they are all equal and must share the same human rights.

Elizabeth Gaskell also responded and wrote about the condition of England, and through the pages, she highlighted the divisions between ‘the employers and the employed’. In her 1848 novel, *Mary Barton*, it is clear from the preface that the suffering she saw around her was the motivational factor for the content of the novel:

I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want [...] The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which from time to time convulsed this dumb people. (Gaskell I).

Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* illustrates the life in Manchester in the early stages of the industrial revolution and emphasizes on the plight of the poor, and aims to effect

the social and economic reform and relief for the poor. Undeniably, Gaskell's sympathies were with the poor and therefore, she offered another exposition of the same theme in her *North and South* (1855). (Ameera 2)

North and South is a work which examines the relations between workers and their masters that is very clear from the title, and it focuses on the differences in lifestyles between rural southern England, inhabited by agricultural workers, and the industrial north, populated by capitalist manufacturers;

Throughout the novel, Gaskell effectively weaves a tale filled with at the time revolutionary new ideas for social reform. The Industrial Revolution was stirring in England, but the mill owners were slow to equate this sweeping change with a need to improve the lives of their slave laborers. The novel also points to the independence of industrial workers, a pride in themselves which survives despite the appalling working and living conditions which they have to endure, which is contrasted to the subservience, acquiescence and superstition of the rural poor. (ibid. 6)

Overall, 'Condition of England' novels sought to engage directly with the contemporary social and political issues with a focus on the illustration of class, gender, and labor relations, as well as on societal turbulence and the growing gap between the rich and the poor in England. Influenced by Carlyle's writings, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and many others like Charlotte Brontë and Charles Kingsley...etc, have proved through their literary works to be a major role player in the implementation of social reform in Britain, representing the underprivileged in society as well as attacking the oppressive nature of Victorian society and its failure to assist the poor, and portraying the extent of its call for reform.

Thus, when innovative literature is created, it can mold minds within the society and even influence politics. Not Surprisingly, Literature in a way or another affects society in many diverse scopes and frameworks, it can even inspire social groups and impacts their lives and the epoch and situations they are living in, as it might also influence women's world.

1.5 Literature and Women

For many centuries, women have strived for gaining equality with men as they have been held back and their opportunities taken away from them because of the fact that they were 'Women'. Women were not educated until the 19th century, so literature up and until that point is male dominated. In fact, writing could be done privately, at home; it was one of the few socially acceptable ways for women to express themselves.

Besides, the support of women's inferiority, from both religious and scientific authority which was masculine, clearly had a major impact on the status and success of the literary woman. Writing for women then, was to risk rejection and misunderstanding and to create a work of art to be willing to impose their visions in it and why not to change the awful situation they were living in. Through their writings, women tell how they felt as children, where they worked, whom they cared for, how they loved. They deal with birth, death, and everything in between. They talk about war, economics, politics, science, and religion. In a nutshell, the words of women can be found everywhere and in every reading room in the library. As such was the case for many women writers throughout the world who changed their horrible situations and positions challenging the prevailing idea that women were supposed to spend their lives engaged in housework and raising children. One of the most outstanding of these women is Marry Wollstonecraft, an influential liberal essayist of the eighteenth century, who was a keen proponent of political and social freedom.

Wollstonecraft extended the radical doctrine of the rights of man to include the rights of women by writing her most famous work 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women'. This controversial work argued for the need for more civil rights for women, a cause which Wollstonecraft believed could only be furthered by permitting women better education. Additionally, Reason was her starting point and she did not accept that women were not rational creatures, opposing Rousseau, who argues that a woman does not need rational education. Thereby, the *Vindication* draws on a sizeable body of enlightenment writings and debates about women's education, the nature of female subordination, and possible rights and social roles of women beyond marriage and motherhood (Barnard and Shapiro x). She wrote:

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women. (21)

Over and above, Wollstonecraft hoped for a better future when women would receive favorable treatment in some fields particularly education and employment and share the same rights and become as equal as men one day. With *A vindication of the rights of women*, Wollstonecraft is considered, for many people, the great writer who established the individualist roots of equal rights. Her writings potentially have deep and lasting implications in social, intellectual, political and literary arenas.

Wollstonecraft was not the only brave woman, who fought against women's inferiority but many others used the power of words and literature as a kind of weapon. They used literature to change the male dominated society or to start the road to catalytic conflict. Such was the case throughout all American history, literature played an important role in changing bad conditions of women and their writings even help change the awful past of the country and assist for its sustained development. The foremost example is Harriet Beecher Stowe and her best known novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which is considered, by many, the most influential American work of fiction ever published.

Throughout the novel, Stowe shows slavery as hurtful and harmful to individual slaves, physically and emotionally. She knows this will have a wrenching emotional effect upon her audience (Thornburg). In particular, she shows how masters treat their slaves and how families are torn apart because of slavery. Furthermore, the time of her novel's publication was very important. It was published at the peak of the abolitionist movement, in the 1850's. It proved to be very effective propaganda for abolition, which Stowe openly supported, and that led to the growth of new abolitionists.

Uncle Tom's Cabin gave a powerful and moving voice to the abolition movement and shook out northerners and southerners alike, and forced the whole country with its different social groups to look at the horrors of slavery.

Consequently, Stowe's novel changed forever how Americans viewed slavery, the system that treated people as property, it contended such liberty and equality principles that the United States is built upon and it led to the outbreak of the civil war. According to legend, Harriet Beecher Stowe was called the phenomenal woman who caused the war as greeted by Lincoln in 1862 by saying "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War" (quoted by Kytte 116).

Many other female writers attacked slavery in America and marked history with their pens, particularly, African-American writers who perfected one of the country's first indigenous genres of written literature, which is slave narrative. A woman who was considered nothing more than just a slave girl would give anything for the freedom for herself and her children. For instance, Harriet Jacobs, who used the pen name Linda Brent, compiled her life into a little book called "Incidents in the life of a slave girl". She shared with the readers the experiences of her family, friends, and others in slavery. Throughout the story of her own life, readers learn about a wide range of different slaves.

Jacobs then, decided to document her horrific experiences as an enslaved African woman, to argue and convince the world about the brutality and withering impact of slavery on women.

I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. (Jacobs 6).

With these words, she brings to light her motives behind reciting publicly her personal life as being a slave who suffered from sexual abuses and exploitation. The thought of being someone else's property is the one thing that Harriet could not handle. She then addressed the women of the North, who do not fully comprehend the evils of slavery. She made direct appeals to their humanity and "although she states that she is

not seeking sympathy for herself, it is apparent that she is hoping to expand their knowledge and influence their sentiments about slavery as an institution” (Washington).

After many years of fighting and contending against this institution, many slaves got their freedom and the whole country became one nation, as blacks and whites share the same rights in the United States nowadays.

In sum, literature helped women accomplishing their equal rights with men, they slowly gained independence from a male dominated society and even expanding their careers and businesses and thus there is no denying women’s life and their literary power.

1.6 Conclusion

Throughout the wide world, many writers marked history by their printed words and literary works and their literature was written for more purposes far from entertainment. They wrote novels, poems, and many other forms of literature, to inspire reforms and revolutions, to change hearts and minds. It was for a better change and sustained development.

The next chapter will be devoted to study one of those influential writers who have had a great and lasting influence on different and uncounted domains and arenas throughout the world. A female writer who came out of the southern United States, Maya Angelou is best known for her influential autobiographical novel *I know why the caged bird sings*.

Chapter Two: Maya Angelou and Her Influence

*“The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it
slides through the brain and goes straight to the
heart.”*

Maya Angelou

2.1. Introduction

Throughout all American history, literature played an important role and part in the shaping of America's culture, politics, society and women's position. Many writers, men and even women, were influential, their words were power and their books were the driving force for a better change of the country.

Maya Angelou is one of those powerful women who write and risk rejection and misunderstanding and change life through their powerful words, and through literature. Speaking aloud, writing down and discussing publicly all the hardships and experiences of her personal life enabled her to change her awful past in the segregated American South. Many people have got to know and love Maya Angelou through her successful works and great achievements, particularly, her best-known autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

2.2. Maya Angelou's Biography:

“Maya Angelou is her books” (quoted in Balachandran 189)

Maya Angelou's life is synonymous with her works; she published a series of five autobiographies, in each of these five works, she writes about particular and important parts of her life (Parini 60).

She was born Marguerite Ann Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928. She got her professional name from her brother Bailey, who was one year older, in which it was converted gradually from “Mya sister” to “Maya” (Kite 6).

When Maya was three years old, her parents got a divorce. She found herself then obliged to make a trip alone with her companion and protector, Bailey Jr., to the “Stamps”, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother Annie Henderson whom they called “Momma”. The children wore tags on their wrists that said who they were and where they were going: “We had arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed -To Whom It May Concern-”, she wrote (05).

From the beginning, living in Stamps with the lovely grandmother and Uncle Willie, who also lived with Momma, was a source of comfort. They

cared for the two children and taught them good manners and how to be respectful and always encouraged them about education. They all lived in the back rooms of the Store that Momma owned and they helped her at work.

Despite the warmth of her new home, Marguerite felt abandoned by her parents and throughout all her childhood she felt so, but fortunately, she had a lovely brother and friend who was the only person who could understand her feeling. She loved him so much and he was the essence of her life as she described him “Bailey was the greatest person in my world. And the fact that he was my brother, my only brother and I had no sisters to share with him, was such good fortune that it made me want to live a Christian life just to show God I was grateful” (22). Except Bailey, books were her second loyal friends.

When Marguerite was seven years old, her father, Bailey Johnson, “came to Stamps without warning” (Angelou 54) and returned them to their mother’s care in St.Louis. Vivian (Baxter) Johnson was living with her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman.

While living there, Angelou was sexually abused and raped by her mother’s boyfriend. Freeman threatened the little girl to kill her lovely brother if she would talk; she was very frightened and did not tell anyone. However, falling sick obliged her to tell the truth to Bailey who told the rest of the family. The man was found guilty and arrested for one day and then had been killed by her uncle.

Believing that she had caused the man’s death with her words, she thought her evil voice killed the man. Angelou became mute and refused to speak for five years after that. The children were sent back to the Stamps where they lived in peace with Momma and Uncle Willie. There, with the encouragement of Mrs. Flowers, an educated black woman from Stamps, Angelou spoke again. She introduced her to many books and authors like Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and many others, “they were my friends” she said of these authors (quoted by Egan 14).

Mrs. Flowers emphasized the nature and importance of the spoken word and the importance of education and instilled in her a love of poetry which affected her whole life and career.

Regardless of the racial discrimination that was the legally enforced way of life in the American South, the young girl attended public schools in Arkansas and later in California. She absorbed as well the deep faith and the old-fashioned traditional African American values and life.

When she was 13 years old, as she regained her voice and her confidence over again, Maya and her brother rejoined their mother in San Francisco. Angelou then, returned to high school and won a scholarship to study dance and drama. She loved the arts which inspired her whole life.

In San Francisco, she became the first African American streetcar conductor. After graduating from school, at the age of 17, she gave birth to her son Guy. Hence, she had to find a way to make money for her new family. As a young single mother, Maya had many different jobs to support her son as working as a waitress and a cook. However, she never gave up her talents for music, dance and poetry.

In 1952, she married Anastasios Angeloupulos, a Greek sailor. Despite the fact that the marriage did not last long, she took her professional name Maya Angelou, which was a combination of her childhood name by her brother Bailey and her former husband's last name. Then her performing career flourished and she toured many places all over Europe and Africa, performing with a production of opera *Porgy and Bess*, she tried to learn the language of any country she visited: "I wanted to travel, to try to speak other languages, to see the cities I had read about all my life, but most important, I wanted to be with a large, friendly group of black people who sang so gloriously and lived with such passion"(quoted by Shapiro and Cox 37).

She emerged as a singer and dancer in the 1950s as for instance she recorded her first album *Miss Calypso*. Then, she became a writer and editor in the 1960s and she began exploring her talents as an actress, director, poet and screenwriter in the 1970s.

Maya Angelou has received many distinctions in her life; she has many awards and achievements from writing books, poetry and acting. For instance, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000, as well as the Lincoln Medal in 2008. Angelou has also received 30 honorary degrees or more.

As a big loss for America, Maya Angelou, the child of the Jim Crow who rose to international prominence as a legendary writer and beloved poet passed away at the age of 86 in 2014.

2.3. Maya Angelou and Political Activism

In a career spent in many activities and different domains, Angelou has never shied away from politics. De facto, Maya wanted to help protect the rights of African Americans. Living in New York, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild; it was a group of young black writers who wrote articles and books that encouraged equality (Brown Agins 34, 35), where she met James Baldwin and many other writers who were such a big influence on her.

During this time, she had the opportunity to hear Martin Luther King's speech. Inspired by his powerful words, she started to think of a way to be a part in the struggle of civil rights. By his request, she became the northern coordinator and ran the Southern Christian leadership Conference in 1960. It was a great honor for her to join the civil rights movement and fighting against apartheid. She then wrote and directed a show called *Cabaret for Freedom* which made much profit that went to Dr. Martin Luther King organization, SCLC (Brown Agins 39). She was also politically active during this period helping the organization to rise and succeed to fulfill its objectives to help the African Americans obtain some rights.

After that, she fell in love with the South African civil rights activist, Vusumzi Make. The couple moved, with Angelou's son, to Egypt, where she worked as an editor for the *Arab Observer* (Kite 87). After a while, the relationship with Make ended, she and Guy moved to Ghana.

In Ghana, she worked as the assistant administrator of the school of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana and also contributing to the Ghanaian Times Newspaper. Indeed, she met there some of the most influential

people of her life, like W.E.B. Du Bois, Julian Mayfield and Malcolm X. The latter was such a close friend and another source of inspiration. She remained deeply invested and engaged in struggles for freedom and civil rights in both Africa and the United States.

In 1964, Angelou returned to America to help Malcolm X build his new Organization of African American Unity, but unfortunately, shortly afterward he was assassinated. Three years later in 1968, she was asked by King to organize a march. However, Martin Luther King was also assassinated on her 40th birthday (April 4) which was a mighty shock for her.

During these rough times, inspired and supported by Baldwin, her writing career shove off with a big and full force. Moreover, she gained later more reputation with her poetry as the peak of her fame may have come in 1993, when she wrote her poem entitled “On the Pulse of the Morning”, and recited it at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton:

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens,
[...]
Armed for slaughter
The Rock cries out to us today,
You may stand upon me,
But do not hide your face.
[...]
Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes,
And into your brother's face,
Your country,
And say simply,
Very simply
With hope
Good morning.

With these inspirational words, she successfully proved her skills as speaker and a real politician, stating her feelings and thoughts which call for hope, change and equality; she spoke for and to the Americans. She, thus, marked a returning to the oral traditions and great speeches of such heroic leaders like Martin Luther king, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X. In

addition to this, with her spoken and written powerful words she influenced many politicians, political parties and arenas across the United States as whole and gave a literary and political voice especially to women like Oprah Winfrey, Alicia keys and Martin Luther King’s wife...etc

A former singer and dancer — as well as once being the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco — she also put her imprint on the new world of celebrity, mentoring Oprah Winfrey, instructing Alicia Keys in “lining out,” a call-and-response form of singing popular in Southern black churches. (Associated Press)

Oprah Winfrey proclaimed repeatedly that, far from being her mentor, Angelou was a mother, a sister, friend and a teacher who was one of the greatest influences in her life. She also declared that she felt connected to Maya Angelou when she first met her on the pages of her autobiography *I know why the caged bird sings*: “Meeting Maya on those pages was like meeting myself in full,” she [wrote in her O Magazine](#). “For the first time, as a young black girl, my experience was validated”, and she added, after Maya’s death, “She will always be the rainbow in my clouds.” (quoted by [Killoran](#)).

Angelou campaigned for the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential primaries, giving her public support to Senator Hillary Clinton. In the run up to the January Democratic Primary in South Carolina, the Clinton campaign ran ads featuring Angelou’s endorsement, attempting to rally support in the Black community. But Obama won the South Carolina primary. When Clinton’s campaign ended, Maya Angelou put her support behind Senator Barak Obama, who became the first African American president of the United States. She stated: “We are growing up beyond the idiocies of racism and sexism” (quoted by Ubani 240).

Angelou’s political activism was filled with her engagement and devoting herself to help liberate black Americans and to spread out freedom and equality all over the world as her unique voice was heard worldwide. She received the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barak Obama who said: “A childhood of suffering and abuse actually drove her to stop speaking — but

the voice she found helped generations of Americans find their rainbow amidst the clouds, and inspired the rest of us to be our best selves” (quoted by Jackson).

Yet her influence was not restricted only to politics or the civil rights but encompassed more than that.

2.4. The Influence of Maya Angelou’s *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:

Hailed as one of the great and eminent African-American writers, Angelou is best known for *I know why the caged bird sings* (1969), one of the greatest pieces of literature which inspired many people and mainly Black Americans to this day.

She also has published five other autobiographies, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), which all detail her encounters with Southern racism and her struggle to achieve identity, self-esteem and equality.

Inspired at a dinner party she attended with James Baldwin, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, and his wife Judy, and challenged by her Random House editor Robert Loomis, by saying that it is nearly impossible to write an autobiography as literature: “Miss Angelou, I won’t bother you again. And I must say, you may be right not to attempt an autobiography because it is nearly impossible to write autobiography as literature. Almost impossible” (quoted by Stamant 60). Angelou, then, could not resist the challenge and wrote her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which brought her fame and international acclaim. Additionally, the work was nominated for a National Book Award in 1970 and it made the nonfiction best-seller list just a week after. It represents how the strength of character and a love and power of literature can help overcome racism, violence, suffering and trauma.

The story opens with a three years old Maya and her old brother Bailey are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live in peace with their paternal grandmother, and ends when Maya becomes a mother at an early age, 16 years old, and must fight to support her baby. It documents and records her life up to age sixteen, starting with her youth in rural, segregated south Stamps with her grandmother and later with her mother in St.Louis, Missouri.

Maya's antagonist was the difficulty for her to learn about racism, sexism and violence at an early age, since she was abandoned by her parents in her childhood, being a black American in the time of slavery and being raped at the age of seven by her mother's lover. The latest was her biggest and fearful nightmare which caused her the biggest trauma she ever experienced; she became mute and speechless for five years as she thought that if she spelt a word again she would kill someone else since her attacker had been killed by her uncle, and thus her voice would kill people. "The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people...if I talked to anyone else that person might die too" (87).

Dr. Angelou regained her voice and found it through literature and the power of words of famous and other renowned writers as William Shakespeare and many others who influenced her whole life and later her career. Creative writing and poetry brought back her voice, she wrote:

I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray, and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B Du Bois. (Angelou 13, 14).

Moreover, the title of the book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* comes from the poem "Sympathy" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who was also a source of inspiration and great influence for her:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings
I know why the caged bird sings!

(Laurence Dunbar)

Thus, when reading the autobiography, the impact of literature on Maya Angelou is very clear and through the pages, there is no doubt that literature saved her in her childhood and her whole life later, arriving to become herself a renowned poet and a great writer who influenced many people throughout the United States of America and the whole world as well. Her love of literature also pushed her forward to write one of the most influential books ever, which impacts many arenas starting with racism, politics and feminism.

I love it, I love, I love it. I believe literature has the power, the ability to move men's and women's souls. The work is so tedious, but I love the feeling of putting together a few nouns, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives and rolling them together; I just do. (quoted by [Kanner](#))

Maya read a lot as she was child and even sometimes ran to literature to escape from real life and this is very clear in her work as she said "She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance" (95), or when she announced "To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood for a cup of mead with Beowulf or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist" (100). Even if literature, papers and books were not always with her all along, the meanings are always there and she developed that into writing herself and became a famous writer and a teacher with her own wise words, lessons, effects and influences.

As a matter of fact, when the work was published, it was acknowledged widely since it touched one of the major issues that the country was living in for many years, which is racism. Angelou's first impact then is on segregation and racism; the work shows how Maya survived racism which was a constant presence in her life as portrayed in the autobiographical novel. Angelou then

uses a metaphor of a bird who struggled to escape from its cage which is the racist world that she was living in during her dwelling in “Stamps, Arkansas”, which was divided into two worlds between Black and white, women and men; that is to say good and evil. She was involved with the Black community in Stamps, criticizing her racist characters by showing the Southern white vulgarity and bad attitudes towards the blacks and how to fight the injustice of racism. As best illustration, Mr. Edward Donleavy, a white speaker at Maya’s eight grade graduation ceremony, who insulted the Blacks by being useless and incapable of holding good jobs except of becoming athletes for boys and did not even mentioned girls at all unlike the whites who afford professional careers (179). Angelou here shows that racism is not absent, in contrast, it is present even during the graduation day. Another example of such racist characters is Mr. Lincoln, a white dentist who refused to treat Maya’s tooth pain regardless of his debt to Momma during the Great Depression, he said: “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (Angelou, 189). This is one of the most outright, arrant and harsh illustration of racism so far in the story.

Depicting several events from the racist world in Stamps, she shows America and the world the effect of oppression on Maya and many other Blacks who struggled to overcome the malicious evil, racism and prejudice. Though the color of skin is not a big deal, it was a curse at that time and even Maya herself wished that she was born white and not black, since being black in America was very dangerous. As a case in point, she explained in the introduction of the book how race and appearances were very important as she wanted to be a movie star looking like “the sweet little white girls” (02). When Momma makes her a dress from Lavender taffeta, however, she describes her appearance as “a black ugly dream” (ibid.).

As she continually speaks out against racism through all the chapters of the work, she hopes and wants everyone to be treated equally and justly, she announced: “It was awful to be Negro and have no control on my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to the charges

brought against my color with no chance of defense” (180). So, Maya sees herself as symbolic character for every black growing up in America and attacked being inferior and being held back from freedom because of ‘the color’.

Although, the most prominent ‘cage’ for Maya was racism and discrimination, she shows how to survive and resist against it. For example, when she described "powhitetrash" girls mocking and taunting her grandmother Momma, Maya was very angry. In contrast, Momma advised and taught her how to deal with such racist attitudes, with dignity and pride; “they took liberties in my Store that I would never dare. Since Momma told us that the less you say to white-folks (or even powhitetrash) the better”, Angelou wrote. (28) Indeed, Maya claimed that even though they were crushed, they found the courage to keep trying through songs, poetry and sermon. This is shown when Momma reacted to the white girls who came to the store and were very rude and mocked her. However, she stood outside and did not say anything but “she sang on” and even called them “Miz” when they say goodbye (32).

She also confirms that songs were a weapon when they all sang the Negro national Anthem, which was the music composed by J Rosamond Johnson:

Lift ev’ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty... (Angelou 182)

These songs bring the Black people together and give them strength. They were hope for them under the worst and most painful conditions. Consequently, she gave a voice to the Black race, to African Americans and gives a proof that with determination, they can achieve many and great achievements and mainly freedom.

Angelou changed the face of the lower class in America which is “Blacks” or in other words African Americans, as said Arnold Rampersad, a literary critic and professor emeritus of English at Stanford University: “She brought an understanding of the dilemmas and dangers and exhilarations of

black womanhood more to the fore than almost any autobiographer before her time” (quoted by Brown).

Many women were marginalized in Southern America and, especially Blacks, before and after the time of slavery, and they suffered many abuses and brutality, including child rape, as what happened to Maya Angelou. They suffered the doubled oppression of race and rape but unfortunately, they did not dare to talk about, think of it or write about it, because of their fear not to be accepted in society. They do not have courage, strength and predominantly self esteem and identity, they just keep blaming themselves. In contrast, Angelou shows that courage, being strong and loving herself were her first solutions to fight and to survive her childhood trauma and suffering. Her message to Black women, was to stop being victims and to have courage to say loudly that “I am human” whatever happened. Whatever the problem is big and complicated, one must have self confidence and self esteem, one needs courage to create one’s self.

Throughout the whole book, Angelou shows how she was courageous as she resisted after being raped by Mr. Freeman, as she dared telling her brother about the event, also when she took responsibility being guilty of saying his name and at last becoming a mother. As well as, she illustrated that strength and self-esteem are keys to open the door of happiness and freedom for Blacks taking for a model Momma who did not fight or even answer the “powhitetrash” girls because of her strength and dignity.

Moreover, daring to write about it and make her life story being heard worldwide is no more than being the most courageous person ever. She indicates later in life that “It’s the most important of all of the virtues because without courage you cannot practice any other virtue consistently” (Kightlinger). Thus, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was a launching pad for many other women who were at a time of muteness and silence, to wake up and start their quest for their real identities, their self esteem, and all these come up with courage and self confidence.

Furthermore, with her rich words and majestic dignity and deportment, Angelou's success gave voice to African Americans and increased Black feminist writings. Being the first African American woman who was able to discuss publicly her personal life, Angelou influenced many others and paved the way to black females to write about their personal experiences and struggles as she freed many other women writers "to open themselves up without shame to the eyes of the world" (Als).

Black female writers were marginalized and their literary experiences were excluded from consideration in the literature of the white feminists. However, Maya Angelou came with her autobiographical novel to erase this and she waved and raised the black female writings as Toni Morrison said that Angelou's writing "gave license to a host of other African-American writers. It opened the door to our inside, our interior minus the white gaze or sanction." (quoted by Sachs)

Her influence goes further to arrive to the point that literature can be used to teach Development of psychology. Psychologist Chris Boyatzis argued that literature elucidates psychological concepts like: self-esteem, ego resilience, effects of abuse, gender issues, identity formation in adolescence...etc with real life examples while deepening students' appreciation for the complexity and diversity of human development. He used *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to achieve these goals, and called it an effective book in teaching the developmental psychology. He said that Angelou's childhood is a classic example of resilience, and "it seemed as if Angelou read the research before writing her story" (Boyatzis 07). He added also that Angelou's incredible story of survival moved one student to state "Angelou's powerful prose opened my eyes unlike any book I've read" (ibid 08).

As consequence, Angelou's story did not only influence politics, Blacks or women only but it also impacts anyone who reads the book because she broke many barriers by telling her personal trauma and by bringing any form of abuse to the open and makes it acceptable. Anyone who reads the book is going

to find a proof that with determination, strength, courage, self confidence, self-esteem, having an identity...etc he can or she can accomplish great achievements whatever the obstacles and the hardships that he is going to face. All this Maya Angelou summaries later by saying that “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you” (Stephens). Feelings, fears, desires, dreams must be shown and expressed.

2.5. Conclusion

Maya Angelou is a phenomenal woman because she was many things at the same time: a poet, a novelist, an educator, producer, and actor, musician, and civil rights activist. Her best-selling book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* gave her this fame and legacy.

It is an autobiographical novel that talks about her experiences as a child in the segregated south, and also in St. Louis and San Francisco with her mother. Maya suffered of being a little black girl at a time when the world was dominated by white people. As well as, she was raped at an early age, seven years old. However, being courageous and her love for herself, her own strong spirit and the ideas of great authors like Shakespeare, allowed her to be free instead of imprisoned.

That pioneering work influenced many people and arenas starting with politics, feminism, children and everyone who reads the book. She gives a literary voice to black women writers and became a reading list staple in America. She inspired many women all over the world who are looking to survive racism, sexism and traumatic childhoods and her work will remain an inspiration for today’s youth and generations in the whole universe.

General Conclusion:

Literature is a special kind of art. Its main content is life and the writer is the artist that paints his drawing and photograph with joy or sadness, smile or cry, beauty or ugliness, good or evil...

Holding a pen to create a work of art that will be called a type of literature is never an easy task since good pieces of literature did not come only to recount an event, document a history or to retell a story that happened at a specific period. However, a writer's success is when he tries to interpret the meaning of life and nature, to discuss the social ills, to convey a message and that happens when he tries to attend to reality with truthfulness and sincerity and then tries to communicate that view to others. So if the reader and the book or the text become partners in the process of communication, the aim will be no longer the meaning only but its impression and effect.

Reading a book should not be just for pleasure or entertainment at free time. In contrast, it should be something that affects deeply and even changes someone's attitudes and life as a whole.

Everything that is written by a known author should not be expected to be literature until it reaches its ideal purpose which is a lasting impression and most importantly change and development. Literature then should lift the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and encompass its reflection of society and its ills and go further to call for positive change. Few authors and writers accomplish that aim by using their pens to write very influential books that caused a revolutionary impact and a lasting impression.

One of those renowned writers is Maya Angelou, who overcame a troubled childhood marked by racism, abandonment, and violence to become one of the famous and great American writers.

Her best autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged BirdSings* gave her this fame. Throughout the work, she basically tells her life story in which she learnt to live and break the cage to fly and found out her place in this world in spite of the many obstacles that hampered her in her childhood like the struggles to overcome racism, rape at an early age, prejudice at its height at that

time for blacks, her quest for identity and the complexity of familial relationships.

Thanks to the literature of other great writers, Angelou becomes herself a famous writer that gives voice to Blacks, women and universal concerns. She gives a proof that with cultivating one's mind, striving for self improvement and being courageous, strong and dignified, whatever the difficult circumstances and obstacles that one goes through, they will be overcome.

Maya Angelou also breaks many barriers by bringing to the open such kind of abuse, 'rape', and shows how to survive whatever happens and still be joyful. Her incredible journey has influenced many people especially Blacks, women and even presidents. She, then, bridges the world of art to many aspects, starting with politics, women and children also.

With the influence of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, one might say that literature is a weapon in the hands of human beings to inspire, impact and predominantly, to change as its contributions were not only for Blacks and Americans but will remain an inspiration and influence for many generations to come.

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