Navigating the "Nigger Moment": Racial Trauma and Its Impact on Identity in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Sultana Musfika Rahman

Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel the intricate relationship between trauma and identity formation focusing on the impacts of the "Nigger Moment", a distinct category of trauma experienced by the protagonist in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Concentrating on the conviction that racial identity is a learned set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, the study explores how they are constantly reinforced by the "Nigger Moment", forcing the community to negotiate their existence. As a device of narration and character development, the impressions of these encounters on the mind of the narrator are scrutinised to examine their effects on her deposition towards the community and herself. Employing trauma theory as a framework, the analysis concedes that the psychological ramifications induced by the systematic racism and the harsh dehumanizing encounters faced by African Americans often act as defining moments of the chrysalis of their psyche; eventually distorting their sense of self and identity. Angelou's experiences of disarticulated identity, memory or meaning, and the re-articulation of lost individuality reveal how she eventually obtains redemption and rebirth while working through the traumatic experiences. Thus, the analysis highlights the urgency of addressing the role of these distressing events in malforming the individual's congruence with their self-perception and their frequent manifestation in African American literature.

Keywords: Trauma Theory, Racial Identity, Nigger Moment, Systemic Racism, African, American Literature

1. Introduction

As Akpala (2023) states, "Racial violence has been felt throughout the Black Community since their presence in America was manifested by the sin of slavery, causing a ripple effect of trauma intergenerationally" (p. 1). Their lives have always been a constant struggle of asserting and maintaining identity and conceptions of self in their attempts to defy an ascribed status, resulting in a succession of cultural and internalized trauma through generations. A common theme of African American life and writing is the race-based social arrangements which oftentimes determined African American life (DeGruy, 2005); and the autobiographies written by the African Americans act as written accounts of their life and experiences. The phenomenal serial autobiographers such as Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright

*Senior Lecturer, Department of English, International Standard University

have recounted their experiences and plights aggregated by systematic racism in a predominantly white community. Following their footsteps, Maya Angelou published her serial autobiographies, namely I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970), 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). The last and the seventh volume, Mom, Me & Mom (2013), was published before she died on May 28, 2014.

Maya Angelou, originally named Marguerite Angelou, is one of the most celebrated African American women, recognized for her remarkable resilience in overcoming the hardships life presented, emerging stronger after each instance of neglect and abuse imposed by society. Having suffered through several traumatic experiences, Angelou rises above her pain and is known today as a poet, singer, producer, actor, feminist, and human rights activist; moreover, one of the most influential women in the world. In her autobiographies, she appears as someone determined to find herself by discovering and rediscovering her strengths that define her and establishing her unapologetic identity as a strong, Black woman in spite of belonging to a marginalized community. Her works have been studied from multiple angles to shed light on the experience of the Black community in culturally discriminatory settings, focusing exclusively on the exploits of women and their struggle to retain their identity and freedom.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is one of Angelou's most admired works as it presents "a powerful and authentic significance of African American womanhood in her quest for understanding and love rather than for bitterness and despair" (Gonzalez, 2003, p. 124). While in this journey, she encounters multiple racial injustices reminding her of her despair of being an African American woman in a racially prejudiced country. These moments not only present obstacles in her journey towards finding her voice but also inflict severe traumas that she needed to overcome in order to finally achieve the sense of belonging. This paper specifically traces these distinct and intense traumatic experiences or encounters labeled as "Nigger Moments" by Elijah Anderson (2011) to explore and unravel their relevance to the identity formation of the young Maya and how she navigates through the trauma with the help of her community and with the strength she possesses within. Furthermore, it examines the impacts of these moments on a person's disposition towards their community as well as their perceptions of self.

Theoretical Framework

Feagin (1996) contends that racism can be defined as a "socially organized set of practices" (p. 7) that often deny the dignity, opportunities, space, time,

positions, and rewards to African Americans in a country ruled by white Americans. Such prejudices have evidently caused deteriorations in the academic, behavioral, social, and psychological outcomes in the lives of the victims (Morrison, 1970; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Taylor, 1990). These racial encounters insinuate race-based trauma, which has been referenced in numerous literature in several names such as intergenerational trauma, racist incident–based trauma, psychological trauma, and racism (Bryant-Davis, 2007). Although systematic racism and the trauma resulting from it affect the whole marginalized community, it can also be manifested in individual, separate, and subtle incidents in the daily lives of people, and their effects can be very subjective to its victims and their personal experience. And these subtle, daily "microaggressions" (Pierce, 1995) can be the reasons for different forms of "stress" that may impact the emotional and psychological state of the victims (Bynum et al., 2007; Sanders-Thompson, 2002; Williams & Williams, 2000). As Chester M. Pierce (1974) describes, these "microaggressions" may describe the subtle ways in which racism is communicated in everyday settings" (as cited in Jernigan, 2011, p. 129).

Elijah Anderson, in his book The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life (2011), has termed these moments of unexpected and segregated racially prejudiced encounters as "Nigger Moments," which was later developed as a framework and applied in Christopher Viscuso's paper titled "Understanding Racial Encounters in African American Literature: Trauma, Identity, and Literary Analysis in African American Narrative" (2024). In the book, Anderson describes a peculiar phenomenon that he observes during his ethnographic work on various public spaces in Philadelphia, where a moment of racial discrimination, disrespect, or humiliation results in a shock to its victims (p. 44). The conceptualization of this "Moment" was mainly based on the unfair racial discrimination faced by an informant named "Shawn," who studied in a law school in Washington, D.C., and was a victim of racial profiling. After a shooting nearby, while the D.C. police were inquiring about the incident, a bystander pointed out Shawn as the suspect based on his attire and skin color. Based on the claim of the bystander, Shawn was repeatedly harassed by the police department, who did not clarify why he was being investigated or detained. He was released only after the actual perpetrator was caught, who turned out to be a white male. However, even after this revelation, Shawn's neighbor asked the police to keep an eye on him as he suspected that Shawn might be involved in some sort of "funny business" (Anderson, 2011, p. 251). This treatment from his own neighborhood left him stung and disappointed, and later on, he describes this experience as something that crosses his mind ever so often and has resulted in a distrust that he feels towards the white community, as well as reminding him that he is incapable of getting the respect he deserves in a place which is dominated by whites (Anderson, 2011, p. 252).

Anderson observes that such a moment often occurs in "trusted social spaces or in other publics where the subject may otherwise safely assume that they are protected from such disrespect or humiliation by social stricture and thereby engender a degree of comfort in those who occupy the space" (Anderson, 2011, p. 252). Hence, he contends that the "Nigger Moment" tends to "reinforce preexisting suspicions and distrust of the wider white community;" sometimes manifesting an orientation of pessimism and disillusionment towards the world (Anderson, 2011, p. 253). It makes the victim realize how they are susceptible to the aftereffects of such moments regardless of their social standing, income, occupation, or appearance, and how all their attempts at acquiring equality dissipate, solidifying and reinforcing the status of Black people as second-class citizens in a predominantly white community.

Christopher Viscuso, in his paper, expands on this concept and treats the "Nigger Moment" as a distinctive trauma experienced by African American people and develops this framework to be used in literary analysis in order to understand how African American writers use this sort of racial socialization as a narrative device and a tool for character development (Viscuso, 2024, p. 28). Furthermore, he implies that racial identity and the discriminations that come with it are not a creation of nature; rather, they are a learned set of beliefs and behaviors whose origins can be traced back to such "Nigger Moments" in the lives of African Americans. Locating such moments in the African American narrative, as Engeman (2004) states, can reveal "the possibilities of human knowledge and action" as art can be a guide for "ordinary" human experience (p. 91). Writers and poets are capable of revealing the "hidden realities by asserting their existence" (Ellison, 1995, p. 737). Therefore, in his paper, Viscuso looks closely into the experience of Picola Breedlove as she faces harrowing incidents of racial bias and traumas in those "Nigger Moments" and how she functions as a trajectory of Claudia's rebirth in The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison; as well as how such moments are depicted in Ta-Nehisi Coates' Between the World and Me, resulting in the main character's pessimism and disillusionment towards the world (Viscuso, 2024, p. 29).

The significance of looking into these "Nigger Moments" as a literary device lies in the fact that they provide a direction to understand the disarticulation of the character's identity and can also be prescriptive in figuring out how the said character navigates those moments to construct or rediscover different aspects of their personality previously affected by this phenomenon. Therefore, this paper uses this framework to unearth how such moments have been crucial in the life of Maya while growing up in a community dominated by the preconceived notions of Black people being inferior to their white counterparts.

2. Racial Trauma: "Nigger Moment" and Its Psychological Effects

There have been an ample amount of studies focusing on the effects of racial trauma on African Americans within the psychological construct of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Alim et al., 2006; McCart et al., 2007) since people living in the American inner-city neighborhoods are constantly pummeled by uncongenial treatments owing to the fact that they are the minority, and the effects of these traumas are manifested in different manners, including community violence (Horowitz, Weine, & Jekel, 1995; Jipquep & Sanders-Phillips, 2003). Such research almost always focuses on the behavioral patterns of the victims, including their academic outcomes, community relationships, and their sense of self resulting from the emotional turmoil they face as a community or as individuals (Horowitz et al., 1995; Jenkins, Wang, & Turner, 2009; Jipquep & Sanders-Phillips, 2003; Overstreet & Braun, 2000; Thompson & Massat, 2005). However, the incidents faced by individuals can have very distinct effects on them depending on the intensity of the pain and humiliation they face in a particular situation; especially in a situation where the victim is likely to be trusted and welcomed. There could be stark differences between the effects of collective trauma and the trauma faced by an individual as the aftermath of individual trauma manifests itself within the domain of the sole subjective, while cultural or collective trauma is pluralized and collectively oriented. Examining the "Nigger Moment" in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, therefore, is an attempt to uncover the effects of racism on the protagonist and how she works through these experiences to reclaim her position and sense of belonging in the world.

Maya and her brother moved to Stamps to live with her grandmother when she was three years old. The place welcomed her "warmly but not too familiarly," and the feeling of not belonging started festering in her mind since a young age (Angelou, 1969, p. 7). While recounting her childhood in Stamps, she provides a picture of the segregation between the black and the white community as a 'complete separation' (p. 23), where the black children did not even know what the white kids looked like. The southern part and the northern or high rise were divided by the experience shared by the "unknowing majority" and the "knowing minority" (p. 19). Consequently, a binary opposition was created in her mind, and she envisioned the relationship between the black and the whites as a transaction between the "powerless" and the "powerful"; the "ragged" against the "well-dressed" (p. 25). Her grandmother, an African American woman, owned a merchandise store for the people of the slavery plantation, which was the only "Negro store" in Stamps (p. 12). She is described as a woman of profound grace and wisdom and respected by the locals. Yet, Maya recounts how the white people took liberties in the store that she would never dare, and how her grandmother is mocked by the "powhitetrash" (p.

23) girls, reminding her how their position in society is not determined by their honor and honesty but the color of their skin. Maya remembers how the insults faced by Mrs. Henderson set forth a course of "lifelong paranoia" for her (p. 26). Even though she and her family were privileged enough to have powdered milk and eggs, they were not spared the humiliation of belonging to the Negro community when the Judge, a member of the judiciary and a symbol of authority, laughed at Annie Henderson as she introduced herself as Mrs. Henderson (p. 39). Thus, the "harshness" of their "Black Southern life" constantly manifests itself in spite of nature's blessed "grogginess" and the "soft lamplight" (p. 9).

Even though Maya tried to familiarize herself with substantial ideas that inspired her to read, such as the writings of Shakespeare, Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray, Lawrence, etc., her encounters with racially biased attitudes kept reminding her that she had a long way to go before she could finally make an identity for herself. Even in the house of God, i.e., the church, the Reverend Thomas never bothered to remember her or her brother's name, which she found "insulting" (Angelou, 1969, p. 29). The white people in her town showed such prejudice that it was almost impossible for them to fathom that a "Negro" could buy vanilla ice cream. And eventually, to her, "God was white too" (p. 40).

Maya felt the looming presence of racism manifesting all around her through tiny moments and recurrent encounters. She felt the collective trauma of her whole race while watching her people desperately trying to symbolically assert their identities as human beings rather than slaves through a boxing match. For them, winning the game was as important as winning their freedom because if they lost, they would be "back in slavery beyond help" and the accusations that they were "lower types of human beings, only little higher than the Apes" would all come true in the midst of their minds (p. 106). Furthermore, she realizes that the win in the game did not beget them the symbolic freedom when she sees the fellow black people afraid to be walking on a "night road" during a night when Joe Louis had proved that "they were the strongest people in the world" (p. 107).

The confrontations with the "Nigger Moment" continued when Maya went to school. Her inspiring academic journey with Mrs. Flowers could not save her from being affected by the naked racism in school, as depicted in the instance of the graduation ceremony at the Lafayette County Training School. There, she realized how the white kids "were going to have the chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies" and the black children "were not even in on it" (Angelou, 1969, p. 139). She witnessed the nonchalant demeanor of the white speaker, the hegemonic attitude of Mrs. Edward Donleavy, and the helplessness of being a black girl graduating eighth grade at 12 years old, which weighed over her even more, scarring her for life.

3. Distortion of Identity

America had already witnessed the illegalization of slavery by the time Angelou was in Stamps, but it did not provide any relief to the Black community as racism was still on the rise. The Great Depression and the economic turmoil paired with it intensified segregation and lynching instead of creating a pathway for the harmonious coexistence of people of different races. Racial discrimination was evident in the everyday encounters between the white and Black communities even though the Black people did not belong to the whites anymore. Hence, the dehumanization and distortion of identity continued into later generations, carrying on a legacy of cultural and historical trauma. Maya Angelou also recounted how she stumbled across these moments of microaggressions or "Nigger Moments" in and around her own spaces, and the adverse effects these had on Angelou's sense of self.

Young adulthood is a pivotal part of anyone's journey of life as it is a period of exploration that involves both the discovery of self and its relation to a larger social context (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). However, growing up as "people whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction" in a place chiefly dominated by the white community can have a profound effect on a person's psyche and self-perception (Angelou, 1969, p. 95). Furthermore, accepting the African American identity entails the awareness and acceptance of specific cognitive and evaluative factors shared by the members of the community (Allen & Bagozi, 2001; Phinney, 1990; Sellers et al., 1998; Tatum, 1997). But the sense of meaning borne out of collective generational trauma keeps perpetuating its memories and develops a reluctance to close the door to the past, ultimately becoming the center of group identity as well as the personal one (Hirschberger, 2002).

Angelou also reminisces how her journey toward establishing her identity has been constantly hindered by the feeling that, even after achieving proper education and growing up as a dignified person, she would still be one of the "maids" or "farmers," and how awful it was for her to "be a Negro" and "have no control" over her life (Angelou, 1969, p. 140). She describes how, while working as a househelp for a white woman, Mrs. Cullinan, she is constantly called "Mary" or "Margaret," and it reminds her of the "hellish horror of being called out of her name," which is born out of the trauma of being called "nigger, black birds, jigs, dinges" for centuries (p. 85). She realizes that after all the learning from school and Mrs. Flowers, it is "a white woman's kitchen" that becomes her "finishing school" (p. 82).

Angelou recounts another dreadful incident of racial injustice as she goes to the dentist with excruciating pain. Yet, the pain of being Black outweighed her physical distress as the doctor tells her grandmother, "Annie, my policy is I'd rather

stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (p. 146). The dentist's refusal to treat her and claiming her to be even more untouchable than a dog comes forth as a shock to her, and her sense of self shudders as a result of such ruthless conduct. Moreover, she develops a painful understanding of the social reality that neither her grandmother's help to Dr. Lincoln nor her economic status was enough to get her the respect she deserved. This incident not only intensifies the dehumanization toward the Black community but also shatters their dream that they are capable of achieving their deserved places in society with hard work and resilience; thus, emerging as a "Nigger Moment" in Maya's life.

4. Defying the "Nigger Moment" and Reclaiming Identity

Even though the microaggressions that minority communities or groups undergo have been normalized over time and seem like regular occurrences, these events are not just simple power struggles; rather, their effects can be long-lasting. Over time, segregation and discrimination can result in an inferiority complex and a profound sense of powerlessness among those who experience it. Especially in the lives of Black children, racism is a "reality-based and repetitive trauma" (Daniel, 2009, p. 126), and even supposedly neutral figures can act as complicit in inflicting it. These painful experiences, if not navigated in the correct manner, can lead to a distortion of identity and negatively affect the relationship between self and community. Maya Angelou dreamed of a world in which she could define her own identity and rise (Najpal, 2017), but systematic racism and constant encounters with "Nigger Moments" made her feel lost. As she asserts, "I didn't want to be White, I wanted to be good. But I didn't know what being good meant" (Angelou, 1969, p. 19).

In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou clearly depicts such struggles, and her success in reclaiming her identity in spite of the adversities and injustices she faces is a story of triumph and inspiration. She not only recounts the oppressions she faces but also displays extreme determination and resistance in navigating the traumatizing "Nigger Moments." From a very early age, Angelou acquainted herself with the literary works of canonical writers, using education as a tool to broaden her mind and achieve intellectual autonomy. The primary inspiration for Angelou, amidst all the adversities and constant pangs of discrimination and abandonment, was her grandmother, Annie Henderson, her "Momma," who stood as a symbol of resilience and loftiness. She found similar inspiration in Mrs. Flowers and compared her to Mrs. Henderson, saying that they were "separated only by formal education" (Angelou, 1969, p. 73). She gained a sense of pride and assurance from Mrs. Flowers, as she asserts that "she made me proud to be a Negro just by being herself," and going to her house was "equivalent to attending church" (p. 75).

It was with Mrs. Flowers that Angelou realized the meaning of individuality and began to feel like herself. She felt that she was respected "not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild" or "Bailey's sister" but for being "Marguerite Johnson" (p. 79). She found strength and a sense of belonging in her fellow student Henry's speech at the graduation ceremony, and the Negro anthem made her feel like a "proud member of the wonderful Negro race" (p. 142).

Angelou managed to stand her ground in front of Mrs. Cullinan when she broke the "Virginia dishes" as an act of resistance against the unfair treatment given to her (p. 87). The horrendous rejection at the dentist's office did not stop her from imagining that her grandmother, her idol, stood up to the doctor and made him treat her right. The uncalled-for incident created a sense of shame and pride in her at the same time, and she contends, "I was just a little girl, but I knew what she meant, and I knew what I meant. I was sorry, but I was also proud" (p. 80). Hence, the incident catalyzed her sense of injustice and her growing determination to fight back against the indignities imposed upon her.

Angelou does not fail to acknowledge the obstacles that life throws at her, and she recognizes the need to rebuild herself. Her desire to reclaim her true self shines through the cracks in her heart created by the blows of brutal racism. She perceives the importance of the "secret word," i.e., her books, that "called forth a Djinn" to serve her (Angelou, 1969, p. 155). She found affinity with marginalized people by reading books such as The Well of Loneliness. Through the exploration of herself and her desire to learn, Angelou discovered that she had the "power to choose" who she was and how she "would be seen" (p. 171). It was with the help of her community and the inspirational people around her that she began to realize that her self-worth was not defined by the racist world around her.

5. The Final Acceptance

When Angelou moved to Southern California with Daddy Bailey at the age of 15, she had already learned that "surrender," in its place, was sometimes as honorable as "resistance" when there was no choice (Angelou, 1969, p. 192). She realized that her strength lay within herself and described herself as "a loose kite in a gentle wind, floating with only will for an anchor" (p. 194). In Mexico, the unconditional acceptance by the other children and the absence of the racial dynamics she had previously encountered allowed Maya to see how race is a social construct, used to divide people. She admitted that her "thinking process has changed," and she hardly recognized herself (p. 196). She emphasized the importance of a society free of prejudices, asserting that "the lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me and set a tone of tolerance in my life" (p. 196).

This "unrestrained life" (p. 196) in Mexico helped her reconnect with her mother in mutual admiration, and she discerned that "in the struggle lies the joy" (p. 207). She went from "being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware" (p. 209). Angelou became conscious of the fact that a Black female emerging as a "formidable character" is "seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome" and that the struggles she and other women face are deserving of respect (p. 210). Therefore, she accepted her struggles and decided to withstand them in spite of the obstacles, as she concedes, "If you are for the right thing, then you do it without thinking" (p. 224). Thus, her emergence as a woman proud of her lineage and experiences proves to be more powerful than the traumatic events she has gone through, affirming that the key to achieving equity and justice lies in the individual as well as in the society that surrounds them.

6. Conclusion

In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou portrays a life lived within the restrictions of a racist society that breeds self-hatred and inferiority in the minds of the minority people. A society that envelopes its Black Community with daily encounters of "Nigger Moment" reminding them that they are not worthy of receiving the basic respect. This story of the daily turmoil resonates with the whole African American community and demands a closer look towards a resolve. Hence, Maya's story of resilience and her journey towards autonomy can be a pathfinder towards building an inclusive and tolerant society with mutual trust and respect so that the victims of racial injustice and the trauma survivors can be provided with a safe space to emerge as their best selves. By focusing on the notion of "Nigger Moment" and employing it in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, this paper illustrates the effects of the distinct microaggressions on the psyche of the main character and how these experiences have been addressed and worked through over the course of her life. Hence, this paper can open up more pathways towards the study of racial encounters in the everyday lives of the African American people struggling to assert and hold on to their identity and dignity in a place affected by racial and social injustice.

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