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### The Singing Cure- healing Process in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird"

Abstract: Do Boi in his famous book 'The Souls of Black Folk' called slavery as "a national trauma, and an intensely personal trauma" (Boi 1967). The pain and suffering of slavery was such that it became the part of the unconscious mind. For Maya Angelou, growing up as a black and women, in such times, in the rural south; there was no escape from racial prejudice.

However the first volume of her autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" not just shows her own past but also shows a collective past of blacks in American Society. She uses a powerful medium of life narrative and through this reconstructs the history in a way which gives a healing process. It could be sensed through the title, where although the bird is still caged like it was caged in Dunbar's Symphony, but Anglo's bird sings, has a voice and a self-realisation. This paper would try to explore the healing elements in her first autobiography and how it reconstructs the history.

Keywords- Healing-process, Slavery, African American Literature, Life Narratives.

Introduction: ".....to all the strong black birds, who defy the odds and go, and sing their song." (Angelou 1969)

Maya Angelou starts her book with these lines, as dedication. It is such a powerful statement to start with. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first part of the seven-volume series of Angelou's autobiography. It shows the transformation and an overcome, from racism and trauma of slavery. It is an attempt to revisit the history that she had in her memory, it becomes a testimony of slavery. The question arises why she needed to revisit the painful childhood. The whole first part of her autobiography is about her childhood, from the age of 3 to until she completes her high school and gave birth to a child. She wrote this at the age of 40. Her life in Arkansas had a lot of suffering. It shows the racial and patriarchal suppression of 1930s in America. The paper argues that her attempt to revisit those first seventeen years of her life, is also an attempt of healing.

#### Memory of childhood

The book starts with Marguerite (Maya) and her brother Bailey are on the train from California to the southern American state Arkansas. Their parents had ended their relationship and decided to send (or in Maya's word shipped) them to grandparents.

“wearing tags on our wrists which instructed “To Whom It May Concern” that we were  
Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach, California, enroute to Stamps,  
Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson.....And tickets were pinned to brother's inside coat  
pocket”

(*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, pg 5)

Just after that Maya mentions that thousands of children had same fate and forced to travel to south like luggage. It was just a start of a journey for 3 year old Maya. Gradually reader gets to know more her new life in the south.

Mamma, her grandmother is now the in-charge of children. She teaches Bailey with the Negro experience she had for years. There are numerous events which involve the conflict between Maya and her grandmother, over how to deal with racism.

Maya says that her mamma never get the idea-

“That white folks could be talked to at all without risking one’s life. ....  
...And certainly they couldn’t be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their  
absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet  
‘They’.”

Through her story, she creates a background of the slavery era.

“She explained that when a person is beating you, you should scream as loud as possible; maybe the whipper will become embarrassed or else some sympathetic soul might come to your rescue.”

(I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, pg 47)

“I couldn’t understand whites and where they got the right to spend money so lavishly. Of course, I knew God was white too, but no one could have made me believe he was prejudiced.”

(I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, pg 50)

Angelou shifts positions from mother to grandmother and end up becoming a mother. The mother-child relationship is fractured in slavery, as mentioned by Krumholz (1992) who argues that it is impossible to have motherhood in slavery.

She explains her childhood pain and suffering. She was sexually abused and raped by Freeman when she is just eight years old. She was in a state of desperation until she met Mrs Flowers who introduce her to poetry. The first step of her healing process after her rape comes in form of Mrs Flowers.

It's a narrative that covers all issues one has to go through in slavery, constant suppression, discrimination, pain and suffering, patriarchy and racialism, Loneliness and despair, and a recovering.

#### The memory and healing

It is not just a narrative but an important document that reconceptualise American history. Maya, through the individual character creates a larger American society. The individual memory becomes the collective memory of black people. There is a parallel theme that goes throughout in the book, "a collective past that lives right here where we live" (Krumholz 1992). Du Boi raises an important question that the existence of America cannot be without the Negroes. His text 'The Souls of Black Folk', which is also called "the political bible of the Negroes" (Ferris 1913), talks about the black consciousness.

Krumholz (1992) takes the question of what was in the past or memory and why it had such a deep affect. The years of slavery were so cruel and deep that it became the part of the unconscious. The pain and suffering have killed black slaves intellectually and spiritually. It is like a living dead. That's why Boi had called slavery as "a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma."

This traumatic and painful memory can be used a tool for healing. The ritual becomes the way of healing process. It is quite connected to African-American culture. The activities like dance, song, story, etc. becomes the medium to spiritual connect the self. (Moreover it also in a way helps in preserving the culture as well).

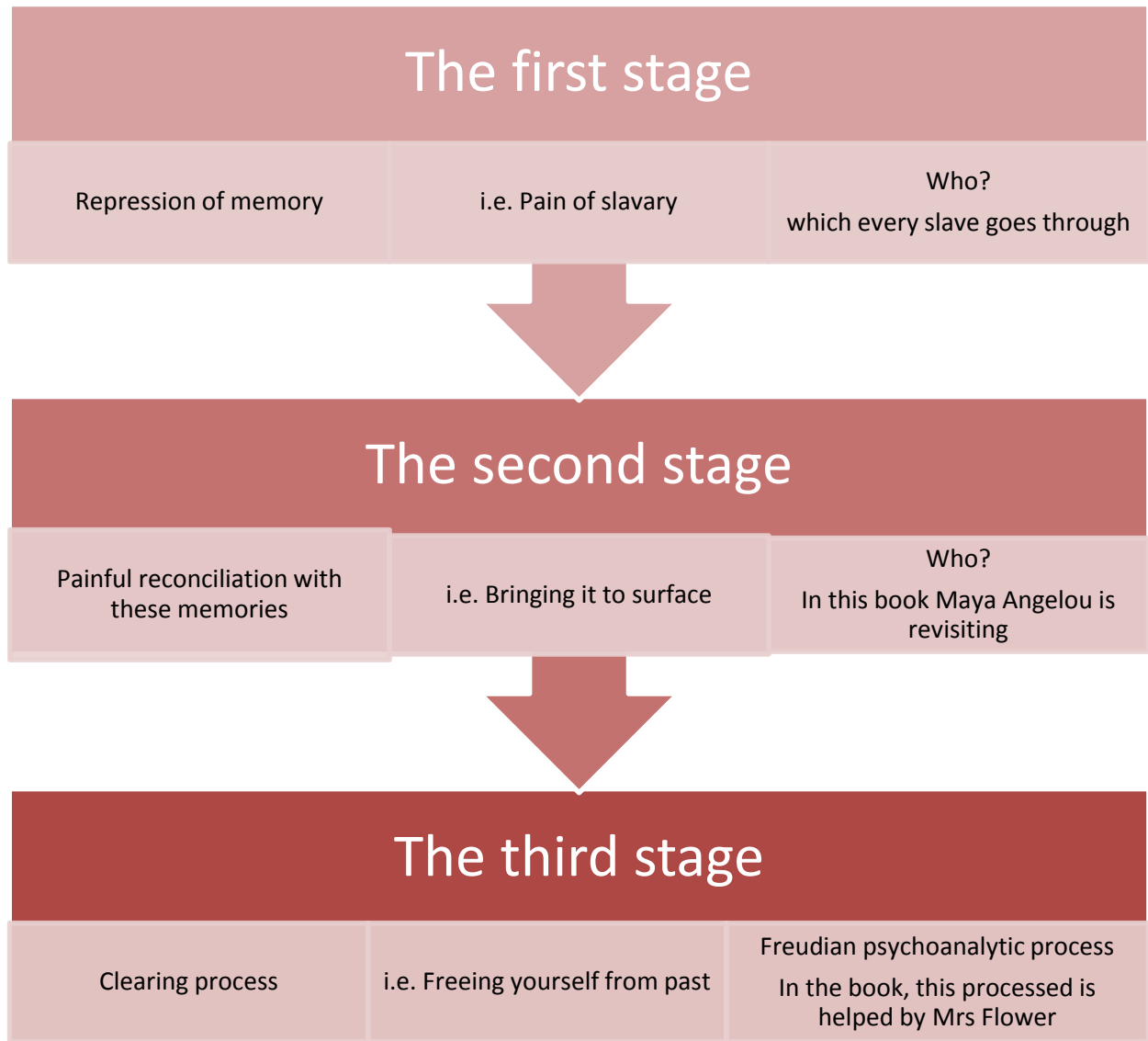
The idea of Freudian Psychoanalysis (Freud 1966) is works here. Krumholz (1992) applies Freudian Psychoanalysis on black writings. She says healing takes place on two parts, first on characters and second on the reader.

Firstly, it's 40 years old Maya Angelou who revisit the haunting memory and then confrontation with her past in the form of 3 year old Maya. Her repression under slavery and rape, then a period of depression and a healing.

The second part, is how it works on the reader. A reader personally feels the history of slavery by reading a narrative. Then reader is goes through the voices of despair. The clearing part comes in the part of when she came closer to literature. The process of healing also takes in the

three

stages



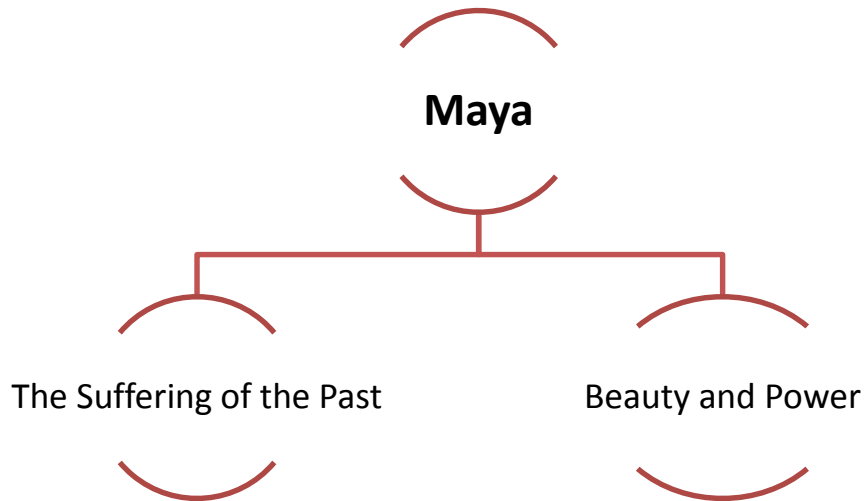
(Fig.1)

It is like if we are able to bring the unconscious on surface, it brings the cure. Unconscious memories have more control, and it stays even after years slavery has been over. Through the

character of this child Maya, the author Maya rejects formal religions, and shows the spiritual path “a free heart and imagination” .

The black writings show how “the reconstruction of the past makes possible a reconceptualization of the future, which is the power of history-making” Krumholz (1992).

It is similar to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where she used past in a similar way to reconceptualization it and used it as a healing process. She also showed the problem of white American society. ‘White people don't know "when to stop" as Baby Suggs says, slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering.’ Similar to Angelou, Morrison also showed the concept of motherhood in slavery as well as powerlessness of a man (black) in slavery (idea of patriarchy in slavery). Through the character of Sather, Morrison shows the healing process. Her repressed past, and coming of the pain on surface with the arrival of her murdered daughter; reader sees a whole process through her. Sather’s daughter Denver who was not even born in slavery, still becomes the part of the past and remain unable to move into the future.



(fig.2)

Through ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ one can explore how history is being used to cure the intellectual and spiritual oppression of African-Americans need to be cured. This past of slavery in America is ever-present in the minds and to healing it also not lesser painful, but important. The future lies optimistically in the spiritual poetic path of ‘a free heart and imagination’. Maya Angelou ends her book with these lines;

“See, you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then  
you do it without thinking.”

(I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, pg 290)

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