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Intersectional Storytelling: Trauma, Resistance, and Healing in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Rajendra Neupane[1], **Pimala Neupane**[2]
[1]PhD Scholar at TU
[2]Bhaktapur Multiple Campus, Bhaktapur

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Corresponding Author: *Pimala Neupane,* ***Email****:* pimala.neupane@domc.tu.edu.np

Abstract
This paper examines how Maya Angelou's trauma, stemming from physical and psychological violence in her childhood, and how she expresses her resistance in her adulthood by writing her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. As she has tolerated unprotected situations since her conscious childhood phase, she is also deprived of legal rights and proper educational and medical opportunities. Her mother's boyfriend not only rapes her, but also threatens to remain silent. She is warned not to disclose any information about rape, and she is also laughed at during the courtroom hearing of her rape case, suggesting the deprivation of legal rights. Further, she is denied access to quality educational and medical services. All these events shatter her self. Therefore, she incorporates all those traumatic experiences and writes her memoir in her adulthood as a part of healing, which helps her shape a dignified existence. To scrutinize the memoir, the researchers have chosen Kimberly Crenshaw's intersectionality to analyze Angelou's trauma, highlighting systemic failure, and Henke's scriptotherapy to connect with her resilient situation that fosters healing. The thematic analysis of the data aims to find out Angelou's hostile situations, their causes, and the actions taken for healing. This research significantly supports those researchers and academics who have contributed to trauma and healing.
Keywords: Healing, intersectionality, resistance, scriptotherapy, trauma

Introduction
This paper explores the traumatic experiences of Maya Angelou in her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* and highlights her journey towards healing through writing. She has been the victim of physical and mental abuse. Mr. Freeman, her mother's

boyfriend, rapes her. She is deprived of proper parental care and undergoes a psychologically insecure life. Incorporating the traumatic experience, Angelou writes this memoir, which helps her to work through the trauma to an extent. She becomes able to form her identity by giving meaning to the fragmented story of her life. She is also recognized as one of the dignified authors in the history of African American literature. In other words, her writing functions as a powerful tool for cultivating resilience and facilitating healing.

Maya Angelou situates herself in the position of a caged bird to show her painful memories of her life as a Black girl from the American South, when there was the extension of the policy of institutional segregation as part of Jim Crow. Through storytelling, she has been successful in overcoming her trauma by reclaiming her fragmented past, which functions as a representation of the collective suffering that fosters healing. Her contribution is not only limited to an individual level, but also to the collective level, motivating the victims like her to dramatize and expose the ills prevalent in the concerned societies. The study takes the support of Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality from her "Mapping the Margin: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" to dramatize the intersectional problems of race, and gender exemplified in institutional failure, and Suzette A. Henke's theory of scriptotherapy from her *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* to expose those testimonies as a share of resistance paving the way towards healing, which is not clinical but psychological and cultural.

Theoretical Framework

Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality exposes the failure of feminist and antiracist discourses to "consider intersectional identities such as women of color," where these discourses fail to "interrogate race" and "patriarchy" (358, 360), respectively, compelling the Black women survivors to suffer twice, and weakening the black race. Dehumanization of black women is prescribed, for example, as Crenshaw cites Shahrazad Ali's controversial arguments about the benefits of patriarchy for the black community through "disciplining their women," even by exercising "physical force" so that they can "reestablish the authority over black women" (361), which fuels white supremacy. In this line of argument, Crenshaw deals with the issue "involving race-based accusations against black men," highlighting "assault on black manhood, demonstrating his inability to protect black women" (370), as a broader design to uphold white supremacy. This brings attitudinal and behavioral change in the black men to control and exercise power as perpetrators against Black women. Crenshaw specifically discusses the rape cases, trials, and the punishment of the culprits as she states that the "average prison term for a man convicted of raping a black woman was two years, as compared to five years for the rape of a Latina and ten years for the rape of a white woman" (368) suggesting the practice of dehumanization of black women, and existence of discriminatory laws for the people of color. Setting this framework, the present study employs Crenshaw's intersectionality of race and gender in Angelou's memoir, exposing the institutional failure as experienced by the author during her childhood in the American South.

'Scriptotherapy' is a term coined by Suzette A. Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing (1998),* as E. Ann Kaplan, in the review of *Shattered Subjects* (223), proves. Henke defines scriptotherapy as the "process of writing out and writing through a traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (xii). She, citing Pennebaker, states that writing about traumatic suffering helps people to "bring together the many facets of overwhelmingly complicated events" and when people "distill complex experiences into more understandable packages, they can begin to move beyond the trauma" (xi-xii). It clarifies the logic that writing to express the

painful experiences of trauma is purely therapeutic which follows the process through resistance, as Henke theorizes that, “The act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and, in so doing, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world. (xix). Henke, taking ideas from Judith Herman, argues that the trauma-infected events “shatter the construction of the self” and "cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (xvi-xvii). Scriptotherapy, therefore, is possible through ‘life writing,’ which primarily includes “memoirs” (xiii) that support addressing existential crisis. In the journey to scriptotherapy, any author's effort to reconstruct a story of a psychologically disturbed individual could “offer potential mental healing” (xii). This clarifies the understanding that the re-memory and its reenactment through writing are required for the therapeutic ends to be met. Angelou’s experience of intersectional problems shatters her self, pushing her towards an existential crisis. Still, her reenactment of the traumatic self in her forties enables her to resist the segregators’ policies that harm her and pave the path towards healing, which is psychological as well as cultural.

Review of Literature

Crenshaw’s intersectionality has received critical acclaim. Devon W. Carbado et al. consider the theory of intersectionality to be a method and an analytical tool. Being “[r]ooted in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory,” Crenshaw critiques the legal institutions and feminist and antiracist movements that “[legitimize] marginalizations” of Black women (303-04). These resistance movements were supposed to favor black women, but unfortunately, they highlighted white women and black men, respectively. For Carbado et al., Crenshaw’s “social change” as the production of “fruitful knowledge” (312, Phoenix 187) becomes possible by critiquing and dismantling the marginalizing social structures, and by producing knowledge for clean politics to spread awareness among the victims.

Jennifer C. Nash talks about the requirement of flexible inclusion of various other aspects of intersectionality. She interrogates and exposes some of the limitations, including “intersectional methodology, the use of black women as prototypical intersectional subjects,” which gives an ambiguous definition of the concept (4). Ahir Gopaldas states that intersectionality was introduced and practiced before Crenshaw by the social resistance movement of “black feminism” (90). Although the notion was rooted in black feminism, its evolutionary growth goes beyond including “age, attractiveness, body type, caste, citizenship, education, ethnicity, height and weight assessments, immigration status, income, marital status, mental health status, nationality, occupation, physical ability, religion, sex, sexual orientation” and the list continues (91, Phoenix 189), functioning to address to Nash’s debates. Ann Phoenix’s open-ended conclusion of “ongoing organized political articulation” (191) supports Gopaldas to answer Nash’s debate.

In a similar way, although Collins and Bilge consider the existence of intersectionality before Crenshaw, they find her central to the intersectional praxis that lets a “broader group of legal scholars and practitioners share social justice sensibilities” (38). Additionally, they discuss the issue of human rights to be one of the centers of intersectionality that they prove by setting the background by citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948’s Articles 1 and 2 affirming “all human beings ‘are born free and equal in dignity and rights’” by their birth, and their entitlement of the “rights and freedom . . . without distinction” of any of the dimensions of evolutionary intersectionality respectively (45-46). They give a remarkable leap on the idea that intersectionality began its wider spread “after 2000” (64) to encompass all the rational debates. Although the critical study of the literature suggests the novelty in the theory of intersectionality with the

inclusion of new intersectional aspects, the present study will limit Crenshaw's intersectionality of gender and race to scrutinize Angelou's memoir.

Scriptotherapy has been a widely accepted theory in the discipline of literature. Not only Henke, but many other scholars have discovered the therapeutic impact of writing. Richard J. Riordan uses 'scriptotherapy' to "denote the various forms of writing used for therapeutic purposes." He talks about the terminological blending, arguing the term 'scriptum' as 'things written' and 'therapia' as 'to nurse or cure,' arguing therapy to be the product of writing (263). An author's use of scriptotherapy, for E. Ann Kaplan, is "to heal or cure herself of damaging traumatic experiences" (223). Similarly, Soumia and Yasmina, echoing Henke, state that scriptotherapy is the process of "writing out and writing through a traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic healing" (241), which Smyth and Greenberg approve, arguing writing therapy is "psychotherapeutic" having an ultimate connection with "traumatic experiences" (110). Hussain, paralleling scriptotherapy, talks about "expressive writing" that "leads to higher emotional awareness and fosters better regulation of emotion and coping with distress" (20-21). This discussion clarifies that Henke uses scriptotherapy for the psychological healing of the traumatic gap, addressing the effects of psychosomatic status.

Angelou's memoir has received various scholarly critical readings. Suchandana Bhattacharyya finds Angelou's being "mutilated beyond repair," for which she practices "selective mutism," and "reverts her situation into her creative strength of resistance through her activist and protest writings" (141). This study tries to capture Henke's essence, but it contains a gap in the thorough dramatization of the intersectional problems and their exposure for resistance and healing.

Qudsia Zaini and Mohsin Hasan Khan focus on Angelou's exposure to existential crisis, with a sense of alienation. Parental separation and Mr. Freeman's "[taking] advantage of Angelou's innocence" (185) compel her to develop the sense of "[belonging] nowhere" (181), generating a "negative effect" (182) that shatters her life from her early childhood. The suggestion of "the struggles for recognition and self-awareness and developing onto a stronger woman pushed by her feeling of alienation" (177) is the conclusion of the paper. Here, the existential crisis tries to echo Henke's discussion, but the authors use the theory of trauma and alienation, setting them apart from the proposed paper.

D. S. Bindu discovers Angelou's quest for identity as a Black woman in the US, with the policies segregating people based on color. She argues that Angelou's "story speaks volumes about her unflinching faith in her identity and her strong appetite for the ultimate existence amidst the bitter realities in life" (14). The study is not based on a solid theoretical foundation, enabling the present paper to employ Henke's theorization.

Arwa A. Khayat and Dawla S. Alamri discover Angelou's efforts to attain freedom and empowerment, for which the authors examine "different forms of resistance and intersectionality" (13). As the article is directly oriented toward freedom and empowerment, Angelou's reliance on "community and solidarity [being] the role of Angelou's grandmother," works to function "as the beacon of strength and stability in the face of adversity to those around her" (16). They talk about the role of storytelling for empowerment, primarily focusing on community and solidarity, lacking a dedicated discussion about scriptotherapy.

The review of the theoretical framework suggests that the proposed theories of intersectionality and scriptotherapy contain contemporariness and inclusiveness. The employment of these theories helps to argue the dramatization and exposure of the intersectional problems suffered by young Angelou in the US South in the 1930s and 1940s as a stronghold of resistance to pave the path towards healing, which is sure to be an innovative reading since none of the available scholars have examined the memoir using the

duo of Crenshaw's intersectionality and Henke's scriptotherapy.

Dramatizing Intersectionality

The memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* narrates the intersectional problems of race, gender, and class suffered by Angelou in the US between the 1930s and 1940s. The systemic failure to protect her individual, legal, educational, and medical rights traumatizes her. She survives brutal rape by her mother's boyfriend at the age of eight. The legal system tries to laugh at her condition instead of protecting her rights and punishing the perpetrator. Her eighth-grade graduation ceremony turns out to be a matter of shame, suggesting the failure of academic institutions to protect the educational rights and motivation of the blacks. Also, she experiences medical racism when a dentist refuses to treat her because she is a black girl. In this context, the study primarily employs the intersectionality of race and gender.

With an extended continuity of postbellum Jim Crow segregation, Angelou experiences and suffers from discriminatory treatment in Stamps, a small city in Arkansas in the 1930s and the 1940s, as she writes that the "segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. . . . [T]hey were different, to be dreaded . . . the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked . . ." (25). This segregating experience suggests the intersections of racism and classism affecting Black lives. As a result of the continued segregationist policy, she witnesses not only whites "lynching yet another Black man hanging on a tree," but also a Black woman being "ambushed and raped." Also, a Black boy being "whipped and maimed" and the Black maids being slapped "for being forgetful" (135) give a pathetic picture. Although these are some of the specific experiences of segregation, along with Angelou's, it was widespread among Black people in the then-US, as discussed by Crenshaw. They were segregated for being Black, women, and poor. Angelou's expression "Bailey and [her] being afflicted—he physically and [she] mentally" and her being "sweated through horrifying nightmares" (72) exposes physical and emotional hardships that the siblings go through.

Angelou's narrative of rape trauma is not beyond expectation. Angelou's parents got separated in her early childhood, compelling her to live with her brother and paternal grandmother. An unexpected visit from her mother, Vivan, and her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, makes the siblings go with them. During the nightmarish experiences, her mother becomes a caring mother, who "takes [Angelou] in to sleep with her," but fails to protect her eight-year-old daughter from being raped in her bed because of her limitations of being a working person. Mr. Freeman begins molesting her as suggested in the feeling of a "soft lump under [her] thigh" that "[begins] to move" that ". . . [twitches] against [her] and [starts] to harden" (75). Initially, there is no suggestion of sexual penetration as clarified by Mr. Freeman's saying, "We was just playing before" (78). But later, although Angelou defends saying, "No, sir, Mr. Freeman," he forcibly "pulls [her] between his legs" later. He begins raping her by [t]urning the radio up loud, too loud." He also threatens her not to "scream," warning to "kill Bailey," her only caring and understanding brother (77-78). The act remains so painful that she thinks of being dead. Among Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality, patriarchal ideology comes more dominantly than racial discrimination. But again, we cannot overlook the intersectionality of race affecting Angelou's life. A Black man raping a Black girl is a broader reflection of white supremacy, as suggested by Crenshaw, reflecting Black men's desire to be like the White men in controlling and exercising power over women.

The experience of rape traumatizes Angelou not only physically and psychologically, but also legally. A question, "Do you know if you were raped?" followed by a sound of

"laughter" at the courtroom during the hearing of her rape case (84) suggests racism. The lawyer questions Angelou whether it was Freeman's first rape attempt, but he does not let her think about answering the question. Therefore, she "[uses] silence as a retreat," but as the "tears [do not] soothe [her] heart as they usually [do]." Reacting to the situation, she screams, "'Ole, mean, dirty thing, you. Dirty old thing.'" Although the court finds Mr. Freeman to be a rapist and convicts him of one year and one day, "his lawyer" arranges for him to be released, "that very afternoon" (85). Later, Mr. Freeman is "found dead on the lot behind the slaughterhouse" (86). Laughing at and pressurizing an innocent rape survivor child in the courtroom is one level of racism, whereas convicting someone raping a minor only for a year, and releasing the prisoner with unethical setting is another level of racism, suggesting the lack of seriousness in perceiving rape cases of the Blacks not as seriously as those of the Whites. Not only the victimhood of Angelou, but also the murder of Mr. Freeman, after being released from prison, is not justifiable. The legal system is supposed to enact punishment for the perpetrator and ensure justice for the victims, which is lacking in the memoir.

Systemic failure to protect Black girls continues in academic institutions, too. Angelou mentions "the rudeness of [their] teachers" when being enrolled at "Toussaint L'Ouverture Grammar School," who argue that the "country children [make their] classmates feel inferior" (63). On another occasion, at her graduation ceremony, after securing the top position in grade eight, she is humiliated and belittled by Mr. Edward Donleavy, one of the speakers, who praises the white kids to become like "Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins" suggesting Blacks to be the heroes and athletes as if they lack intellect. In this reference, Angelou states, "His dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium," causing the proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads" (179). Donleavy exposes Blacks to be "maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen," and their higher expectations to be "farcical and presumptuous" (180). Angelou's preparations for the presentation in the ceremony fail her because of the segregation speech that makes her hate the color "black" (182), signifying an inferior status of the whole race. The school does not ensure Angelou's educational rights by boosting her willpower. This is the exercise of Crenshaw's intersectionality of race against Black students practiced in academic institutions.

The institution of medicine is listed for failing to provide human treatment to Black patients in the memoir. Angelou suffers severe toothache. Momma, the grandmother, takes her to the hospital for treatment. Holding discriminatory policies, some doctors did not treat black patients in the United States in the 1930s, the narrative setting of Angelou's memoir. Angelou narrates the bitter reality, "I couldn't aptly remember seeing Dr. Lincoln's name, nor had I ever heard of a Negro's going to him as a patient. It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness" (187-188). As expected, Dr. Lincoln's statement of his policy, "I don't treat nigra, colored people" and a rude response, "I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (188-89) are strong examples of medical racism, a form of racist intersectionality as theorized by Crenshaw.

Writing the Wound as Resistance and Healing

This study argues that Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* incorporates scriptotherapy, allowing the author to revisit her shattered life through writing. It enables resistance to the systemic failure that the persona is a victim of. The child Angelou is just a case to dramatize the collective suffering of black people, which is exemplified through Crenshaw's intersectionality. The memoir dramatizes the silence brought by systemic failure, and takes a forward leap to expose that failure as a bold form of resistance, paving

the path towards healing. Angelou gives voice to the guilt, shame, and confusion of her persona, which functions to reflect and repair Black people's collective experience in the 1930s and 1940s in the US.

Although Angelou did not intend the memoir to be a part of her healing journey, as stated in one of her interviews with Carol E Neubauer, saying she did not take the memoir "as a cathartic" and the "recuperative power," she tries to "let the new voice come through" (286). Observing superficially, the authorial intention seems to contradict the spirit of the present article's proposition, but the key lies in defining what healing is. Healing discussed here is not a cure-all practice. It is getting better from the state of discomfort. The way Jennifer Lynne Bird argues, healing is a "journey, not a destination" (86). Bird adds on it, saying, "No one can wave a magic wand and provide an immediate cure. Celebrate progress, no matter how small" (130). Not an expectation of perfection, but the celebration of progress is healing. Similarly, Lewis Mehl-Madrona considers healing to be "substituting a good story for a bad story" (para 8). Angelou's acceptance of giving a new voice through writing is the celebration of progress, which we call healing in the present context. The writing of this segment of a memoir, dramatizing her childhood trauma events, brought on by the institutional failure, gives justice to the collectivity of the Black readers who get motivated to contribute to collective resistance that steps towards healing.

Angelou's memoir begins with scriptotherapy, fostering resistance and healing from the selection of her title itself. Caged Bird symbolizes the status of the narrative persona, who is compelled to remain silent. The cage stands for the restrictions and limitations imposed upon her. 'Sings' is the exposure of the experience under discriminatory institutions. When the narrative persona works to represent the collective suffering of Black people in the memoir, it becomes the window to collective liberation. The narrative persona's narration of the separation of her parents in her early childhood and various forms of racial, patriarchal, and systemic violence functions to process trauma to make the pain manageable, which fosters healing, the way Henke argues. Angelou's journey begins from her state of being raped by her mother's boyfriend. The separation of her parents can be one of the causes that compels her to face the brutality. Mr. Freeman's "And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey" serves the purpose of silencing her with the fear of losing her caring brother. The situation pushes her to go into a state of confusion about why he wanted to kill Mr. Bailey. She narrates, "Neither of us had done anything to him," to exemplify her confusion as a child (78), but as an author, she exposes the systemic failure as a form of resistance. The family as a social institution is shown to have ruptured through this exposure. Angelou never expected her mother's boyfriend, a trusted member of the family, would do such a thing that would ruin her childhood. As already discussed in the analysis of the intersectionality, a Black man's exercise of power and control over a Black woman is the reflection of a racist patriarchal attitude that Mr. Freeman, as an example, enacts. But despite his warning not to tell about the rape case to anyone, Angelou tells it to the lawyer, screaming, '"Ole, mean, dirty thing, you. Dirty old thing"' (85), and demonstrates her resistance.

As a rape victim, the narrative persona is overpowered by the guilt, a form of self-blaming considering her share in the enactment of rape. Taking "silence as a retreat" (85), her life becomes shattered, but as an author, Angelou overcomes the guilt and writes, exposing her experience of being molested, manipulated, and raped. She exposes the failure of the legal institution. The court is responsible for ensuring the rights of the victims, but Angelou narrates the courtroom hearings to be a source of trouble in the sense that she is being laughed at, compelling her to be victimized further and remain silent. The authorial voice dramatizes this and exposes publicly through showing how unethical and illegal the

legal institutions were, exemplifying through the unnecessary pressure on the victim in "the lawyer wouldn't let me think" and Mr. Freeman's lawyer setting him to "[release] that very afternoon" (85) respectively. The narrative persona witnesses her grandmother threatening Dr. Lincoln by ordering him to leave "Stamps by sundown," and to quit "[practicing] dentistry," as a reaction to his treating a black patient less than a dog (190), whereas Angelou, as an authorial voice, exposes the fact publicly as a part of bold resistance. As part of a systemic failure, dramatizing and exposing the failure of an academic institution contributes to her act of resistance, suggesting that societies are less likely to be stable if these institutions prove to be a failure to protect the rights of the Black community. By revisiting the traumatic experiences of the past, resisting against the ills, and exposing them publicly, Angelou achieves success in healing her shattered self.

Conclusion

The duo of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Henke's theory of scriptotherapy facilitates the scrutiny of Angelou's memoir, which dramatizes the intersections of race and gender, witnessing, and exposing the systemic failure in protecting the rights of a minor Black girl. The memoir revisits Angelou's traumatic memory of rape, and the patriarchal and racial attempts to silence her voice by Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend, by a lawyer in the courtroom hearing, by a white speaker at Angelou's grade eight graduation ceremony, and by Dr. Lincoln at a hospital. By revisiting and exposing those trauma-causing discriminatory practices and the systemic failures, Angelou demonstrates a bold form of resistance, paving the path toward healing, which is not a cure from disease or absence of it, but a collective and cultural process that entails a replacement of a bad story with a good one. The witnessing of the narrative persona is a case, for example, to represent an individual as well as the collective experience of the Black community in the 1930s and the 1940s in the United States. The healing journey of the author is sure to be a great help to anyone who suffers shattered life due to traumatic experiences, being motivated to write the memoir as a path towards healing. The theoretical implication of intersectionality and scriptotherapy could be a potential lens for future scholars to scrutinize the narratives that interrogate trauma and facilitate healing.

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