

**BREAKING THE SILENCE OF CAGED BIRDS:
MAYA ANGELOU'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY,
BLACK FEMINISM AND THE #METOO MOVEMENT**

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Abstract

The paper offers an analysis of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969 as an expression of some of the major ideas of the black feminist movement and a precursor of the contemporary #MeToo movement. The argument is that Angelou's autobiography verbalizes several major concerns of black feminism and the #MeToo movement, thus drawing attention to group experiences through a personal account. Furthermore, Angelou's narrative is also considered a part of a broader tradition of African American women's autobiographies, with a special emphasis on Angelou's reappropriation of the genre. It is argued that she uses her autobiography to speak for all the oppressed through a personal account, similar to contemporary #MeToo activists and public testimonies of sexual abuse. The theoretical background is provided by the works of well-known black feminism theoreticians, activists and critics such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Joanne Braxton, Tarana Burke, etc. An attempt is made to trace the tradition of "silence-breaking" across several decades: starting from one of the central ideas of the 1968 protests, Angelou's autobiography as a forerunner of the black feminist movement and the contemporary #MeToo initiative. Maya Angelou's narrative is considered both as a medium of speaking out about and against abuse, racism, segregation, gender oppression, as well as a literary masterpiece with a peculiar and powerful style – even termed "literary autobiography" by some critics, in line with both the black feminist tradition and contemporary feminist initiatives and efforts directed towards (self)empowerment.

Key words: Maya Angelou, black feminism, African American studies, American literature, #MeToo.

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КАДА ПТИЦЕ У КАВЕЗУ ПУСТЕ СВОЈ ГЛАС: АУТОБИОГРАФИЈА МАЈЕ АНЂЕЛОУ, ЦРНИ ФЕМИНИЗАМ И ПОКРЕТ #МЕТОО

Апстракт

Рад представља читање аутобиографије Маје Анђелоу „Знам зашто птица у кавезу пева“ објављене 1969. године као израза неких од најважнијих идеја црног феминизма и претходницу савременог покрета #MeToo. Главна теза је да наведена аутобиографија исказује неке од главних идеја црног феминизма и покрета #MeToo јер кроз лично искуство описује и скреће пажњу на искуства читаве групе жена. Такође, аутобиографија Маје Анђелоу се посматра и као део шире традиције аутобиографија афроамеричких ауторки а посебна пажња придаје се њеној употреби овог књижевног жанра. Наиме, Анђелоу кроз своју аутобиографију приказује не само сопствено искуство, већ и говори у име свих који су прошли кроз сличне трауме, баш као и активисткиње покрета #MeToo кроз своје исповести о претрпљеном насиљу. Теоријски оквир заснива се на увидима чувених теоретичарки црног феминизма, активисткиња и књижевних критичарки, попут Анђеле Дејвис, бел хукс, Патрише Хил Колинс, Џоан Брекстон, Таране Берк, и сл. Покушавамо да традицију „проговарања о трауми“ испратимо у периоду од неколико деценија, од протеста 1968, преко аутобиографије Маје Анђелоу која је претходила црном феминистичком покрету у САД, све до савременог покрета #MeToo. Аутобиографија Маје Анђелоу разматра се и као медијум којим се разоткрива и критикује сексуално насиље, расизам, сегрегација, родне предрасуде, али и као књижевно ремек-дело писано особеним и импресивним стилом (неки критичари називају ово дело и „књижевно аутобиографијом“) у складу са традицијом црног феминизма и савременим феминистичким иницијативама усмереним ка самоостарењу.

Кључне речи: Маја Анђелоу, црни феминизам, Афроамеричке студије, Америчка књижевност, #MeToo.

INTRODUCTION

The work of Maya Angelou¹, an African American writer best known for her autobiographies, poems and political activism is characterized by a strong personal note, but also by her remarkable public influence. On the one hand, her writing is firmly rooted in the female African American literary tradition and the activism of the 1960s and 1970s; on the other hand, it strongly resonates with the present moment and contemporary issues and movements. This is why this article considers her first autobiography published in 1969 as a link between the female tradition in African American literature, the era of protests which started in 1968, some of the basic tenets of black feminism and the contemporary

¹ Born Marguerite Johnson, 1928-2014. She was the first African American female poet invited to recite her poetry at the Presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993, the second ever poet after Robert Frost in 1963 to be awarded such an honor.

#MeToo movement. As one of the most important demands of the 1968 protests was for the voices of the oppressed to be heard, a highly popular book on breaking the silence about a personal trauma seems like a forerunner of more contemporary forms of expression on social media and elsewhere, directed towards exposing violence and celebrating survivors. Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (hereafter cited as *CB*) is appreciated and read as a peculiar case of genre reappropriation in which a mode conventionally used for portraying an individual is used to voice a collective experience, thus creating a community of fellow-survivors very much like the #MeToo movement of the 21st century. Furthermore, an attempt is made to trace some of the major ideas and concepts of both black feminism and the #MeToo Movement in Angelou's book and create a critical dialogue stretching across several generations up to the present moment.

ANGELOU AND WOMEN'S ACTIVIST MOVEMENTS

Black Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s

Angelou's writing and activism have often been connected with the concerns raised by the proponents of black feminism, although her first autobiography precedes some of the most important writings by black feminist critics. Nonetheless, the themes she deals with in her books mostly fall within the scope of black feminism and its area of interest and activism. It is also possible to trace a connection between Angelou's autobiography and contemporary activism directed towards empowering the survivors of sexual abuse.

One major distinguishing feature of the black feminist movement has always been "the convergence of race, class and gender oppression," i.e. the emphasis on the mutual conditioning and interconnectedness of these points of discrimination for the African American women in U.S. society (Collins 2002: 4). Consequently, a significant portion of African American women's writing illustrates the racism and discrimination African American women had to face, and Angelou's testimony of growing up in segregated America is no exception. At one point, she describes the segregation as so complete and unequivocal that she even doubted the very existence of white people: "I remember never believing that whites were really real" (*CB*: 25). By her own admission, Angelou wanted to deal with the detrimental effects of racism, sexism and poverty on her life using the medium of memory (Braxton 1999: 7).

The power of self-definition is another important concern of black feminist activism. The quest for identity and self-validation in African American literature and culture stems from "the 1960s ideology that promoted cultural and racial self-discovery and self-awareness as well as the celebration of blackness" (Williams 2009: 72). Whether it entails finding

a voice and speaking out, or examining mutual relations of black women, the oral and written traditions of African American women, or the strategies for improving self-valuation, self-definition is a major step in the process of de-victimization and challenging, deconstructing, decoding and re-coding negative stereotypes (Collins 2002: 97-121).

Rape, violence and sexual abuse have been common themes in both African American (women's) literature and black feminism, given the socio-historical circumstances from the earliest periods of American history, including the practice of institutionalized rape and its twofold purpose: fortifying a master's absolute physical and psychological dominance over his (female) slaves and securing him profit from the sale of the slaves' offspring. Angela Davis' (1983: 177) well-known thesis that sexual coercion as an expression of a racist ideology was in fact a "weapon of mass terrorism" has been reiterated by many feminist writers because it emphasizes the connection between two oppressive ideologies: racism and sexism. bell hooks (1982: 52-3) further develops this idea, claiming that years of unpunished sexual abuse of African American women contributed to "a devaluation of black womanhood", promoting the controlling image of the Jezebel – a negative stereotype of black women as promiscuous and "fallen" women. Therefore, few authentic preserved slave narratives that testify of rape were among the pioneering female narratives in which the victims finally had their voices heard.

Contemporary Contexts: the #MeToo Movement

An important thread that connects Angelou's autobiography, black feminist movement(s) and contemporary contexts is empowering the victims by hearing their voices and their sides of the story. In our contemporary society, speaking out against sexual abuse and harassment has taken center stage, especially in social media. A popular social media hashtag #MeToo, the phrase initiated by African American women's rights activist Tarana Burke (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018: 236), has come to stand for an entire movement against the abuse of (male) power, attracting thousands of followers (of all genders) around the world. According to her own testimony, Burke, herself a survivor of two sexual assaults, found Angelou's book a source of comfort during difficult times as it reminded her that "she was not alone" (O'Brien, 2018). Burke coined the phrase in 2006 with a twofold purpose of warning the public of an almost everyday presence of sexual violence in the lives of (especially) women of color, and empowering the survivors "through empathy" (Ohlheiser, 2017). In 2017, Hollywood actress Alissa Mylano turned the phrase into a viral Twitter hashtag #MeToo thus initiating a series of confessions of mostly female victims of sexual violence usually perpetrated by men in positions of great power. This resulted in numerous accusations, court cases and verdicts against sexual predators all over the world, bringing

down some very powerful Hollywood officials and public figures (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019: 4). Some authors describe the snowball effect of dozens of accounts of sexual abuse in Hollywood and elsewhere as a “whisper network” (Jaffe 2018: 81) which started from individual hush-hush reports, but became a widespread action-oriented, vocal and global movement which has brought down many high-powered executives. What is more, new reports and accounts are constantly emerging, as survivors’ stories continue to encourage more and more people to come forward. The fact that the primary focus of the #MeToo movement is on sexual abuse, a notion inevitably connected to gender issues, makes it somewhat different from the black feminist movements in the previous century which highlighted the interplay of race, gender and class as the decisive factors of discrimination. However, many contemporary authors also point out the importance of race and class in the contemporary contexts, especially bearing in mind the fact that the phrase itself originally came from an African American activist, but only became viral and universally popular when it was used by famous rich white women to describe their experiences (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019: 6).

The whispers have grown into loud cries for equality similar to Angelou’s silence growing into a powerful account of a personal experience which has been an inspiration for many generations of young women to come. The most important result and the greatest victory of the #MeToo initiative is, however, enabling the victims to become survivors – “renaming” itself was a particularly powerful and empowering symbolic gesture – who can speak freely of their traumatic experiences and be sure their voices are heard all over the world. The fact that many survivors of sexual violence chose to share their stories finding both comfort and support in their mutual traumatic experiences, while at the same time opening an important public debate with tangible repercussions for the perpetrators makes this movement one of the most successful and most important ones in recent history. This achievement very much resembles that of their 1960s and 1970s counterparts, (black) feminist activists, who opened both public and intellectual debates on the discrimination of women of all colors, ages and marital statuses and managed to make that subject an ever-present concern in all spheres of human existence.

The initiator of the #MeToo movement emphasizes that the entire idea is about including as many different people as possible, transcending gender, color, or any other barrier, focusing on the survivors and claiming agency (Rowley, 2018; Brockes, 2018). In their study, Mendes *et al.* (2018: 238) report of a woman who started to identify herself as a feminist only after sharing her #MeToo story on social media; and report their findings that “solidarity often transforms into a feminist consciousness amongst hashtag participants, which allows them to understand sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem.” This shows a con-

nection between a personal traumatic experience, the ability to talk about it, and a sense of connectedness to other humans with similar experiences enabled by the process of silence breaking. Angelou's narrator goes through a similar experience – she manages to break the silence and tell her tale of survival, and in the process becomes a spokesperson for other survivors as well, thus uniting the personal and the collective. At one point, she announces that intention when describing a typical segregated Southern town: “The answer must be the experience shared between the unknowing majority [they] and the knowing minority [you]” (CB: 20). The idea of bridging the gap between the “unknowing majority” and the “knowing minority” can also be considered as one of the key intentions of both the black feminist and #MeToo movements. bell hooks (1989: 43) insists on “women finding a voice” as a key black feminist concern. This is in line with both Angelou's autobiography and the #MeToo movement which place the utmost importance on the very act of speaking from the position of an active subject and on being heard (and believed).

Another important issue connected with the survivors of abuse speaking up and finding their voice is finding the proper language to share their stories and experiences. Angelou's narrator goes through a period of silence after which she emerges ready to tell her tale of survival. The very act of writing an autobiography is an effort to articulate one's memories and find the proper language to do so. Tarana Burke (Brockes, 2018) also draws attention to this when explaining the effects of the #MeToo movement she inadvertently started:

“When I first started Me Too, young people had no language to talk about this. And that's something I've seen change; young people have a way to talk about it now. Hearing the words ‘rape culture’ doesn't seem foreign to them.” (Burke in Brockes, 2018)

Some authors identify this as the “power of storytelling”, i.e. the idea that, once told and articulated, negative and traumatic experiences become a means of liberation (Villacorta 2019: 65). Thus, the former victim is transferred into a position of control, even resembling the Emersonian ideal poet – “the seer” and “the sayer”, and, we might add, the survivor.

ANGELOU'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND (SELF-)EMPOWERMENT

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Angelou wrote seven autobiographies but *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* remains her most often quoted, best-known and most critically acclaimed work. The title is a verse from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy* (1899) which metaphorically represents the desire of his African American ancestors for freedom, be it physical freedom, or the free-

dom of self-actualization. Angelou herself expressed her intention to write a story that resonates with the collective experience, rather than merely a personal account: "When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn't thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people" (quoted in Gilbert 1999: 105).

The book recounts the story of Angelou's fictionalized child-persona Marguerite Ritie Johnson from her earliest childhood memories up to the age of 17 and the birth of her son. The central spot of the autobiography is occupied by the account of the rape she had suffered at the age of eight by her mother's partner at the time, a man ironically called Mr. Freeman. Throughout the book Marguerite struggles to find her own voice, as well as her place in the society of both her African American peers and within a broader U.S. context. It is a coming-of-age story, but a very brutal and violent coming of age, accompanied by a number of worries and concerns she had to face, many of them directly related to the color of her skin: from physical violence, various manifestations of racism in everyday, educational and social contexts, teenage pregnancy, a lack of education and work opportunities, up to the idea of self-definition and empowerment, and the successful survival of a childhood trauma. What made the book extremely popular is the fact that Marguerite's deeply personal experience was also the experience of many young African American girls, and also, in a way, an echo of the group experiences of their African female ancestors taken by force to America and subjected to physical and psychological violence.

One peculiar quality of Angelou's book comes from the fact that it is told through a double-voiced narration. Many critics (see for example, Gilbert or Braxton 1999) notice that some parts of the autobiography are filtered through the perspective of a child slowly coming to awareness of herself and the world around her, whereas other parts are comments and afterthoughts of a grown-up Maya who has obtained a sort of a post-traumatic wisdom and knowledge of the world through experience. The book begins with an insecure narrator child-persona and ends with a grown-up narrator nursing her own son. This could also be interpreted as a powerful metaphor for the writer's proverbial "firstborn child" – a book that is both a testimony of survival and a successful attempt of articulating one's own voice. The path that Angelou's fictional narrator takes very much resembles the experiences and outcomes of both black feminists and #MeToo activists: moving from the state of silence and the position of the object to that of an active "sayer" and survivor.

Early on in the book, Angelou establishes a pattern based on the dynamics between the two narrator voices: first we see the situation through the eyes of innocent younger Ritie, who, just like the lamplight in her grandmother's store gives "a soft make-believe feeling to [the]

world,” (CB: 7) and then we hear a comment from a grown-up Maya who paints the picture of harsh reality without any embellishment. Thus, in Chapter 1, it is Ritie who describes the cotton-pickers in the morning as filled with hope, “touched with the supernatural”, whereas in the afternoon, grown-up Maya reveals “the harshness of Black Southern life,” because she “had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton balls, and [...] had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demands.” (CB: 8-9) Angelou succeeds not only in producing an effective narrative pattern but also in using it to represent both the development of her narrative self and the condition of the people in her community. This resonates with some of the major ideas of black feminism and the #MeToo movement as will be discussed further.

Silence and Silence Breaking

Although finding one’s own voice is one of the major concerns of feminism in general, black feminism is rather focused on being heard, moving from the state of “being object to being subject” (hooks 1989: 33-4). The subject-object distinction here is, of course, the post-colonial theoretical concept pertaining to the state of transition from the state of passivity – object – to the state of active doing – subjectivity (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006: 201-2). As previously mentioned, the notion of articulating the subject’s own voice is also often described as central to the African American tradition in literature (Gates 1988: 239). The #MeToo activists also emphasize agency and “being heard” as the key goals of the Movement (Brookes 2018). Black feminist critics often draw attention to the fact that a lot of discriminatory behavior stems from within the African American community itself, e.g. the church. As hooks (1989: 23-4) points out, African American girls were usually not discouraged from speaking, but were seldom actually listened to and heard – their voices were considered to be irrelevant, and any kind of backtalk was discouraged and punished. Both in private and in public spaces (the church, for example), men were the ones encouraged to speak, whereas women had to go through a long process of struggle for recognition and under those circumstances acquiring one’s voice was considered to be “an act of resistance” (*Ibid.*: 12). Angelou’s fictional narrator goes through a similar experience, except that the direction is different – after the rape, she goes silent and although she is pressured to speak, even ostracized from her immediate surroundings, she refuses to speak until she feels ready. Partially motivated by the guilt she feels over the death of her rapist, presumably inflicted by her uncles, she suppresses her voice fearing it might bring about someone else’s death. Instead of speaking, she focuses on listening and reading and manages to find beauty in the sounds of other people speaking or in the words she reads on paper. Ultimately, just like the titular caged bird, she conquers her state of captivity by releasing her voice. What is more, her point of

view also becomes a basis for a “group-based, collective standpoint”, i.e. the idea that individual experiences that happened to many women also in a way shaped the collective standpoint of an entire oppressed group (Collins 2002: 24). In other words, she speaks for all of them, generations of rape victims, thus helping to break the silence of all the “caged birds.” Angelou’s repurposing of the autobiography genre so as to reflect a collective experience besides a personal one can be seen as a sort of precursor of Tarana Burke’s “community-based approach to healing,” directed towards creating “a built-in group of people who automatically gets you, who automatically believes you, who automatically wants to hear you. That’s the wildfire of it” (Rowley 2018). One of the purposes of the #MeToo movement is to focus on the individual who will voice the problem and concerns shared by many, so this dialectics between the personal and the collective in which an individual articulates a group experience is something that Angelou’s work has in common with contemporary activism.

Promoting black people’s silence by the church is introduced early on in the book when children are taught to pray to god to help them “put a bridle” on their tongues (*CB*: 7). As mentioned earlier, talking back, or simply talking, was not encouraged in children, especially female children and they were indoctrinated from the earliest age, both by the family in the private space, and by the church in the public space to “know their place” and not to overstep the boundaries imposed by their surroundings. Angelou effectively uses her grown-up narrator’s voice to express what she feels to be a collective strategy employed by the African American community in the South, condoned by the black church, of rejecting “whiteness,” and with it, the values associated with the segregated Southern society:

“They basked in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden. Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly – mostly – let them have their whiteness.” (*CB*: 131)

Yet, the discernible tone of irony reveals the narrator’s, and, arguably, Angelou’s opinion that such a strategy is ineffective and contributes to keeping the *status quo* in the society: in other words, the silence of the oppressed works in favor of the oppressors.

Silence becomes a key word in the description of the most traumatic event of her childhood. After being raped by her mother’s partner, Marguerite decides to remain silent and not to speak to anyone but her brother. The scenes describing the rape exhibit the above mentioned characteristic of Angelou’s writing: the episode possesses a dreamlike quality, so that at certain points the reader is almost uncertain as to whether it is a factual or a fictional account. This could be interpreted as the author’s

own way of dealing with a personal trauma, and a means of informing the readers that the experience was so horrible that it was difficult to find the adequate language to describe it. Mary Vermillion (1999: 59) identifies this notion as “negation of the body,” a syndrome common in rape victims who, in order to protect their psyche from the detrimental consequences of the rape, often resort to denying their very physical existence during the act of rape, building a sort of alternate consciousness. Angelou here translated the post-traumatic behavior into a literary style. However, the scene also follows the previously mentioned rhythmical pattern of narration that Angelou establishes from the beginning: after a sequence told in “a soft make-believe [...] whisper” what follows is the harsh reality of pain and suffering described in vivid detail: “I thought I had died...” and foreshadowed in the chapter prior to the rape in which Mr. Freeman’s molestation is compared to “the inside of a freshly killed chicken” (*CB*: 7, 73, 78). The traumatized victim manages to find the words to describe a horrible crime committed over her body and her mind and resorts to the power of metaphor. Again, it is possible to draw a parallel between Angelou’s book and #MeToo activism: the previously mentioned social media “whisper network” also in a way represents a covert way of telling one’s story to the whole world (survivors are sometimes protected by their social media pseudonyms and the relative anonymity they provide), but also a powerful tool for producing specific political and legal consequences for the perpetrators.

It is significant that the rape was committed by an African American man, her mother’s partner, and that the punishment he received in court was almost minimal. It is, however, implied, that he was punished by being beaten to death by Marguerite’s cousins. What contributes to her decision to remain silent is the education she received in her early childhood. She feels that she had lost her place in heaven, blames herself for what happened and is unable to bring herself to publicly accuse her attacker: “I had sold my soul to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey” (*CB*: 87). It becomes clear that her religious education which discouraged public speaking affected her way of thinking and at least indirectly drove her to silence. She also realizes that words have the power to condemn and blames herself for having enjoyed the cuddling prior to the assault, mistaking it for a normal expression of fatherly love. Angelou was at times a target of severe criticism for having included the rape scene in her narrative. Her response was that she “wanted people to see that the man was not totally an ogre” (Moore 1999: 53), i.e. she wanted to warn any potential victim that it is not always easy to identify a potential attacker.

One important characteristic of her silence is that it is also, at least partially, a deliberate choice and a strategy of dealing with the traumatic experience, as explained earlier. Her self-imposed silence enables her to

focus on her inner life as well as to become more connected to the people around her. She spends her time reading Shakespeare and other classics and listening to people, thus becoming more sensitive to the world around her until she ultimately manages to find her voice in writing. She learns to listen to the sounds of spoken language around her, which makes her come into closer contact with her own community. Like Zora Neale Hurston, her predecessor and another important African American female writer, she listens to and collects various dialects and sayings of the African American vernacular. She realizes "That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations" (*CB*: 100). Extensive reading and listening to other people also make her more sensitive to the communicative function of language. Thus, her written account can be interpreted as an act of empowering the (former) victim, an act of rebellion, resistance and endurance, a deeply human act, but also an individual voice coming from the multitude of collective experience.

When it comes to spoken language, Angelou explicitly mentions the importance of the black vernacular for the education of young African Americans: "In the classroom we all learned past participles, but in the streets and in our homes the Blacks learned to drop *s*'s from plurals and suffixes from past-tense verbs. We were alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial" (*CB*: 226). She makes a distinction between the demands of formal education and the everyday context emphasizing the necessity to codeswitch and, similar to Hurston (1934), recognizing the importance of the black vernacular for the expression of black authenticity. Furthermore, this is in line with one of the original intentions of Tarana Burke when coining the famous phrase – creating a specific language, a specific phrase that would connect all those who survived through similar life circumstances.

Angelou approaches the subject of silence on several other occasions as well. In Chapter 25, Maya quotes an old saying: "If you ask a Negro where he's been, he'll tell you where he's going," in order to illustrate the African American collective strategy of telling partial truth or avoiding to fully disclose the information asked (*CB*: 194). She explains this as one of the consequences of a prolonged period of slavery during which it was often unwise to talk. Therefore, slaves and their descendants adopted silence and telling partial truth as protective strategies: "Thus direct denial, lying and the revelation of personal affairs are avoided" (*CB*: 194). This is a stylistic approach called "masking", also defined by Zora Neale Hurston in her autobiography and analyzed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as a literary strategy of "signifyin(g)" (Werner&Shannon 2011: 244). Gates (1988: 131) uses the examples of Hurston and Walker to illustrate this literary trope, focusing on the notion of "revision [that in Walker's novel] manifests itself as a literal representation of a protagonist creating her self by finding her voice, but finding her voice in the act of writing."

This is exactly what Angelou's narrator achieves with her story told in writing. What sets the #MeToo movement survivors apart from Angelou's fictional persona is the insistence on unmasking the violence perpetrated by those who grew up and, often thrived, in a system based on violence, by using overt, rather than covert narration.

CONCLUSION

The importance of Angelou's first autobiography in the context of (African) American literature and for contemporary (black) feminist activism is manifold. Her autobiography can be read as a powerful personal testimony of survival and endurance, as well as an individual story that tells a collective experience, a part of a communal legacy. Transforming a deeply personal and extremely painful experience into a work of art, being able to find one's voice after a long period of silence and using silence as a strategy for survival are all means of self-assertion and self-liberation, which are some of the major concerns of (black) feminism. What is more, through her own liberation, Angelou manages to liberate and empower others who have been silenced. Angelou's goals are often appropriated by the #MeToo activists as the goals of the Movement. Thus, her personal effort and account provide means of survival not only for an individual, but also for an entire group of those who were discriminated against based on their skin color and their gender, which is a major legacy of both black feminism, the 1968 protests and the #MeToo phenomenon. Angelou's work can also be seen as a link between the 1968 legacy and contemporary feminist and activist movements focused on breaking the silence and enabling voices of the long-oppressed to be heard. She bravely challenges and exposes the racism and hypocrisy of the segregated South, as well as the shortcomings and delusions within the African American community itself: "The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power" (*CB*: 272). A silent young African American girl who manages to transform her silence and her pain into a means of speaking up against abuse everywhere, Marguerite becomes a powerful metaphor for the strength of individual efforts to change the world for the better. Angelou's double-voiced narrator makes a transition "from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware" (*CB*: 272), which can also be considered a major goal of black feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as of the contemporary #MeToo movement: raising awareness among people and identifying and exposing patterns of discriminatory and violent behavior in our everyday lives, while celebrating surviving individuals.

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КАДА ПТИЦЕ У КАВЕЗУ ПУСТЕ СВОЈ ГЛАС: АУТОБИОГРАФИЈА МАЈЕ АНЂЕЛОУ, ЦРНИ ФЕМИНИЗАМ И ПОКРЕТ #МЕТОО

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Резиме

Рад представља читање аутобиографије Маје Анђелоу „Знам зашто птица у кавезу пева“ објављене 1969. године као израза неких од најважнијих идеја црног феминизма и претходницу савременог покрета #MeToo. Главна теза је да наведена аутобиографија исказује неке од главних идеја црног феминизма и покрета #MeToo јер кроз лично искуство описује и скреће пажњу на искуства читаве групе жена. Такође, аутобиографија Маје Анђелоу се посматра и као део шире традиције аутобиографија афроамеричких ауторки, а посебна пажња придаје се њеној употреби овог књижевног жанра. Наиме, Анђелоу кроз своју аутобиографију приказује не само сопствено искуство, већ и говори у име свих који су прошли кроз сличне трауме, баш као и активисткиње покрета #MeToo кроз своје исповести о претрпљеном насиљу. Теоријски оквир заснива се на увидима чувених теоретичарки, активисткиња и књижевних критичарки, попут Анђеле Дејвис, бел хукс, Патрише Хил Колинс, Џоан Брекстон, Таране Берк, и сл. Покушавамо да традицију „проговарања о трауми“ испратимо у периоду од неколико деценија, од протеста 1968, преко аутобиографије Маје Анђелоу која је претходила црном феминистичком покрету у САД, све до савременог покрета #MeToo. Аутобиографија Маје Анђелоу разматра се и као медијум којим се разоткрива и критикује сексуално насиље, расизам, сегрегација, родне предрасуде, али и као књижевно ремек-дело писано особеним и импресивним стилем (неки критичари називају ово дело и „књижевном аутобиографијом“) у складу са традицијом црног феминизма и савременим феминистичким иницијативама усмереним ка самоостварењу.