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You may write me down in history
With your bitter twisted lies
You may trod me in the very dirt,
But still like dirt I'll rise...
... Into a daybreak that’s wonderously clear
I rise
Bring the gifts that my ancestors gave
I rise
I rise
I rise

Maya Angelou, dancer, singer, writer and poet is a woman who has realized her own power. A Black ‘shero’ of our times. In the three volumes, *I know why the caged bird sings*, *Gather together in my name* and *Singin and swinin and gettin merry like christmas* that form her autobiography Maya Angelou demonstrates how the harsh struggles and happiness of her life which might have defeated a less courageous person, have in fact provided an opportunity for her to bloom into the obviously talented, bold personality that she is.

The first two books of her autobiography cover her early years, spent mostly in Stamps, Arkansas with Momma (her grandmother). The two books show the cruelty and racism which is a common feature of life in the South, show how Black people live under the constant threat of death, and make intense reading. The uneasy fear of white cloaked Klu Klux Klan riding over the hill to burn the small store that her Momma ran and where Maya and her brother Bailey lived. The threat of death to the men of her family when her ‘beloved’ Bailey is witness to the recovery from the river of the body of an unknown Black man, bound and castrated; a ‘normal’ incident as far as the police were concerned.

He said ‘When I passed the calaboose, some men had just fished him out of the pond. He was wrapped in a sheet, all rolled up like a mummy, then a white man walked over and pulled the sheet off. The man was on his back but the white man
stuck his foot under the sheet and rolled him over on the stomach... The colored men backed off and I did too, but the white man stood there, looking down grinning. Uncle Willie, why do they hate us so much?...

Who would be next? Perhaps Bailey or her crippled Uncle Willie. The threat posed by such an incident was enough to have Maya and Bailey sent back to their Mother in California. Even more pernicious was the insidious daily threat of death, it was also most destructive. The threat posed by talking back to white people, being 'sassy', The careful juggling of word and emotion to keep the vengeance of white people at bay. I know why the caged bird sings is full of these small encounters. The double lives that Black people are forced to live, needing to keep a sense of themselves, their integrity and value while still knowing it was unsafe to step out of their 'place'. They knew that their oppressors would have them dead if it served to maintain their power. There were positive things too. Maya shows her Momma standing up to the taunts of children of the 'white trash' (the poor white farmers in the local area). Being refused dental treatment by a white dentist to whom she had loaned money. Getting through each day without dying from heavy, dirty work in the cotton fields, from hunger or any number of other pressures was enough. A triumph in itself but at a cost. Those triumphs caused Maya to leave Stamps for California and not to see her Momma alive again. After a visit to the local town she challenged the racist attitudes of the shop keepers but put herself and her family at risk.

'Speak up' she said. 'What's your name? I clenched my reason and forced their faces into focus. 'My name — here I drew myself up through the unrevenged slavery — is Miss Johnson. If you have occasion to use my name, which I seriously doubt, I advise you to address me as Miss Johnson. For if I need to allude to your pitiful selves I shall call you Miss Idiot... Miss Stupid, Miss Fool or whatever name a luckless fate has dumped upon you.'

Maya's headstrong, principled stand may seem correct in a fair world but Stamps was not that. There were too many risks in such a stand for her Momma, whose protective support could only be realized by taking the potential danger that Maya represented out of their small community.

'It was the principle of the thing Momma' — I didn't even see the hand rising, suddenly it swung down hard against my cheek... 'You think because you've been to California these crazy people won't kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won't try to catch you in the road and violate you? You think because you all-fired principled some of these won't feel like putting their white sheets on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you're wrong. Ain't nothing to protect you and us except the good Lord and some miles. I packed you and the baby's things and Brother Wilson is driving you to Louisville...'  

Maya's life in San Francisco with her Mother was also full of incidents. She gave birth to her son Guy at the age of 17 and became the first Black person to work as a conductor on the street cars. During her time in San Francisco she was a waitress, cook, singer, chauffeuse and dancer. Eventually her talents were appreciated and after some appearances in some of the most fashionable night clubs, dancing and singing Calypso, after a while using her own words with traditional rhythms. In 1953 she joined an all Black opera company on a successful tour of Europe and Africa with Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. In each country she toured she made a point of learning enough of the language to be able to converse with the indigenous population.

This self assured woman has always been self supportive for both herself and her son. A role she sees that Black women have always fulfilled; Maya sees this as our feminism. There are big differences between the politics of Black and white feminists.
Black women cannot afford the luxury of separatism; Black people suffer the effects of racism.

Maya Angelou hopes her influence will be to 'encourage courage'. This she does by talking, writing and being herself. An example of a Black woman taking control of her life. She also shares her love of poetry, literature and music. She dips repeatedly, during all three books, into the vast repertoire of Black poets such as Gwendolyn Bennett, Alice Dunstan Nelson as well as appreciating the classic white authors eg Shakespeare and the Brontes.

The final volume of her autobiography shows her as a mature woman at twenty-three years old. She is still refusing to let the world get the better of her. A broken marriage went some way to lessening the quest she shows in all her books for 'her man' who would look after and cherish her and to whom she could be the perfect wife.

When our marriage ended completely, a year later I was a saner, healthier person than the young, greedy girl who had wanted a man to belong to and a life based on a Hollywood film, circa 1940.

In February this year Maya Angelou came to England for a short visit to promote the British publication of I know why the caged bird sings, and she participated in an evening of poetry with a group of Black women poets. Her power and vitality came over in her performance where she recited poetry from Black women of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. This reflected the harshness of Black people's experience as well as the love existing within Black communities. Maya Angelou stressed the importance of unity with our Black brothers and emphasized that the struggle cannot be won without a sense of the wider world struggle of Black people.

Maya Angelou at 56 has packed more into her life than most of us do in two lifetimes. I hope she continues writing and performing for as long again.

Ingrid Pollard

Contributors

Valerie Amos has contributed to several publications on Black women in Britain. She was a member of the Race and Politics group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. She was involved in setting up the Birmingham Black Women's group and is currently living in London. Her favourite passtimes are cooking, eating and holidaying.

Yaba Badoe was born in Ghana and now works as a freelance journalist for television in London. She studied at the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex University and did research on women in development, particularly in Africa.

Urvashi Butalia has been active in the women's movement in India especially in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns. She was a founding collective member of Manushi, an Indian feminist journal. She has written and published on women in India both in Britain and abroad. She is involved in publishing and has recently returned to India after one year's stay in Britain to set up Kali: Third World Women's publishers in Delhi.

Parminder Dhillon works at the Asian Women's Resource and Refuge Centre with young Asian women. She has been a member of Southall Black Sisters and loves to write fiction and poetry.