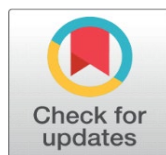
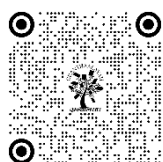


TRAUMATIC MUTISM AS COPING MECHANISM: DISSOCIATIVE BEHAVIOUR OF MAYA IN I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Chrisma S. Pearl , Dr. Joseph Dunston 

¹ Research Scholar, Research Department of English, St. Jerome's College (Arts and Science), Anathanadarkudy, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli 627012, Tamil Nadu, India

² Professor, Department of English and Centre for Research, St. Jerome's College (Arts and Science), Anathanadarkudy, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli 627012, Tamil Nadu, India



Received 07 November 2022

Accepted 20 December 2022

Published 21 January 2023

Corresponding Author

Chrisma S. Pearl,
chrisma.pearl97@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2SE.2022.241](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2SE.2022.241)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Trauma is a foremost theme of contemporary literature. The term “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) found its existence in the 1980s, exploring the shattering effects of trauma on the victim. Traumatic mutism is one such psychological disorder characterised by the victim's sudden inability to speak, following the trauma. The protagonist Maya in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is subjected to the horror of incest at the age of seven. Overwhelmed by the incident, she locks herself in a private cage of self-imposed silence for four long years. Applying Jennifer Freyd's “Betrayal Trauma Theory”, the article discusses the events that led to Maya's silence. She is dumbstruck, fearing the repressive consequences of this pathetic predicament in the community. And to wriggle out of the present pathos, the post-traumatic symptoms, such as psychic numbing, withdrawal and mutism are adopted by the victim. The article further presents the importance of external sources that help the victim out of these dissociative behaviours. The article concludes by stating the role of literature both as a therapeutic tool for the victim and as a narrative tool for the readers, providing an accurate understanding of trauma and its implications.

Keywords: PTSD, Traumatic Mutism, Trauma Theory, Coping Mechanism, Dissociative Behaviour

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

-Maya Angelou

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world that cannot stop talking, nobody would opt to stay mute even if given a chance. It is in the human makeup to express his/her thoughts and feelings through words (voice). In a normal setting, everybody is expected to speak unless a person is naturally mute. But truth be told, there exists a considerable population of

people who have been bereaved of their voice owing to traumatic experiences. Trauma can cause serious implications in the life of the traumatised, of which mutism is one. In such cases, the victim who has the natural ability to speak, stops speaking in all situations. This type of mutism is identified as traumatic/psychogenic mutism and is a component of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Maya is presented as a rape victim in *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, being subjected to the horror of incest at the age of eight by her mother's boyfriend. Unable to process the event, she develops mutism in all settings. This article would investigate the case of Maya as a traumatically muted child, thereby providing a better awareness of trauma and its implications. Also, this paper, by using the interpretative approach to research, attempts to understand the victims' frame of mind and their action by examining and interpreting a real-life character, Maya. It also uses Betrayal Trauma theory from psychology, thus making the study interdisciplinary [Walsh \(2012\)](#).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- 1) To understand the psychology of an incest victim through a careful study of Maya's behaviour, during and after the abuse.
- 2) To serve as an eye-opener to the readers, by providing them a better awareness on their perspectives and treatment of the victimised children.
- 3) To help the abuse survivors identify themselves with the character Maya, thereby letting them know that they are not alone in their struggle, and assertively hold on to a bright future.
- 4) To establish the role of literature in liberating both the writer (victim) and the reader.
- 5) To analyse the ways in which this study could contribute to the blooming field of psychoanalytic literature.

3. RESEARCH PROBLEMS OR QUESTIONS

- 1) How does sexual assault impact the development of the character of Maya?
- 2) What are the psychological theories that can be correlated to Maya's ordeal of trauma?
- 3) What are the techniques employed by Angelou to help Maya overcome the impediments that she undergo in her life?

By examining each of the traumatic incidents Maya is involved in one at a time, the article will also demonstrate how, with the support and friendship of various characters, Maya is able to emerge as a bold and empowered woman. After exploring the therapeutic process that Maya experiences, it goes on to record the findings of the research [Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart \(1995\)](#).

4. POWER AT PLAY – THE ABUSER'S POWER WITH SILENCE

The narrative of the rape account begins in Chapter 11, where Maya and her brother Bailey had come from Stamps, Arkansas to stay with their mother in St. Louis. Mr. Freeman, Mother's boyfriend, was living with her. Maya observes him to be a big and flabby Southerner. He seemed harmless until one day he decides to take advantage of this little girl in the absence of her mother. It is interesting to note that Maya feels "at home" ([Angelou \(1984\), 79](#)) when he held her closer to him. This little

soul, which was already longing for a place to belong, finds solace in Mr. Freeman's arms. She was so enamoured with the new feeling that this act offered, that she ends up wanting more. From a psychological viewpoint, the child was not even aware of the abuse happening to her, since she had not faced anything like this earlier. Also, how could the child be aware that anybody close/familiar to her could harm her? In this case, Mr. Freeman was a father figure to her. Could a child expect hurt from her father? Maya was no exception. She not only likes what Mr. Freeman was doing to her, but also fantasises about him being her long-lost real father (79). While Mr. Freeman threatens that he will kill her brother if she discloses to anybody what they did, she questions in her childhood innocence, "What have we done? We?" (80). Thus, Mr. Freeman's act was not just a threat to Maya's physical body, but it also served as a threat to her childhood innocence [Van Der Bill \(2022\)](#).

The victim's silence during the abuse encourages the abuser to continue their behaviour. The abuse can continue when the victim remains silent, with no harm to the perpetrator. Hope, who was born and raised in an apocalypse cult, says, "Because of the nature of childhood abuse, the abuser has power with the silence. When you lift the veil of silence, with that you lift the inappropriate shame that the abuser puts on you, and he loses his power over you" ([Hope \(2021\), 19:03-19:32](#)). In this novel, the abuser has clearly had power over Maya's silence. She remains silent about the act as Mr. Freeman manipulates her into believing that she was in the wrong. The first time he takes advantage of her, he makes her believe that she peed in the bed, although she was quite sure that she did not. Although she is confused and she wanted to confront him about it, she is also worried about the probability that he might hate her for asking so. Maya is thus made to feel shameful for an act she was innocent of. Also, this is the first secret that she ever had to keep from Bailey. With the inclusion of physical contact into her world, her relationship with Bailey now seemed growing apart. The child had so much confused love with physical contact that she longs for Mr. Freeman to notice her. She even feels hurt and lonely when he stops talking to her for a few months after this act. Thus, she was made to feel punished and guilty for wanting 'love'. This was again an added advantage to Mr. Freeman who attempts to abuse her for the third time, all the while threatening to kill her if she screams, and to kill Bailey if she tells it out. Survivors' silence may be significantly impacted by shame. Survivors could think they contributed to or were at blame for the abuse. Additionally, individuals could feel humiliated or ashamed for being unable to defend themselves.

5. BETRAYAL BLINDNESS AS COPING MECHANISM

It was only during this third attempt that Maya realises that something is wrong. Although she could not completely comprehend the act as to why Mr. Freeman wanted to kill her or her brother, she had developed a visible dislike towards it by then. She tries to resist him this time but in vain: "The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot" (84). Mr. Freeman continues to both manipulate and threaten her, at the same time: "I didn't mean to hurt you, Ritie. I didn't mean it. But don't you tell ... Remember, don't you tell a soul" (85). He also asks her to "act natural" (85) following this incident, which is oxymoronic in itself. Thankfully, Maya's family finally comes to know about the rape when she falls sick after this incident. The scene shifts from the hospital to a courtroom where Maya is brought face to face with the accused. This was the second instance after the abuse where 'silence' comes into play. The readers could find the dilemma of the victim in accepting the fault of the accused. This type of behaviour is

quite common in cases of incest trauma. Jennifer Freyd, a psychologist, introduces a concept called “Betrayal Trauma Theory” to explain such effects of incest trauma. It helps us understand why a child chooses not to disclose all the details involved in the rape. Unlike any other cases of rape, incest involves attachment endangerment, which makes it difficult for the victim to acknowledge the act. Under these conditions, the victims are either oblivious that they are being abused or they would defend the abuse or even take the blame. In extreme circumstances, victims frequently have little to no recollection of the abuse, leading to betrayal blindness. Betrayal blindness could cause the victim to deny the truth, or to fully engage with reality, in a fear that the information they provide could threaten their relationship with the abuser [Lawson \(2022\)](#).

Maya finds “silence” as a cocoon that could keep her from developing any hateful thoughts against Mr. Freeman. Although she hates him for what he has done to her, she does not want to lose him at the same time. In this love-hate dilemma, it is not just her words that are silenced, but also her ability to “think” for herself. Also, she is afraid that she is at the risk of losing her relationship with her family, especially her brother Bailey if she discloses the truth. In her innocence, she believes that she had a part in letting the abuse happen to her and that she is to be blamed as well. Her thoughts run to an extreme where she equates herself to the harlot in the Bible: “... because she responded warmly to those brief moments of physical intimacy, Ritie fully expects to be punished as a biblical harlot” ([Henke \(2005\), 112](#)). Thus, the brief silence that lingered after the question was a result of all these loaded irrational thoughts. “Marguerite, the stunned rape victim, is so severely traumatized that she tries to keep the abuse a secret even from herself since the only “means she has at her disposal are frank denial [...] and a legion of dissociative reactions” ([Henke \(2005\), 111](#)).

6. SILENCE AS A SELF-DEFENSIVE WALL

When the lawyer repeats the question as to if the accused had touched her before the occasion on which she claims to be raped, everyone in the court except Mr. Freeman and Maya knew that the answer had to be No. But Maya could not help but lie. She said No. The fact that she was made to lie surges in her an instant hatred towards Mr. Freeman. Maya’s psyche receives the next huge blow when she learns that Mr. Freeman was found dead later that day. She believes that a man was dead because she lied. Out of her overwhelming guilt, she decides to stop talking to people other than Bailey. She feels that if she talked to anyone else that person might die too: “Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they’d curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended. I had to stop talking” (93). She learns to achieve what she calls the “perfect personal silence” (94). In the first few weeks, her family accepted this behaviour as a post-rape, post-hospital affliction. But as days went by, and as Maya refused to be the child they knew, she was called impudent and her muteness, sullenness. For a while, she was even punished for being so uppity that she would not speak. Fed up with the grim presence of this constantly morose child, they finally send Maya and her brother back to Stamps. It is no surprise to the readers that they fail to understand the needs of a traumatised child. Kate Rose, a Sociologist, puts it better. She says, “The gap between those suffering from traumatic memory and those who are not is wide, and often survivors are blamed for behaviors that are determined by patterns neurologically linked to trauma” (1). Thus, Maya had to “compensate for the failure of adult care and protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defenses” ([Henke \(2005\), 111](#)).

While events like natural disasters, war and genocide are “normal” traumatic events that attract the attention of the public, rape and incest trauma “are private events, sometimes known only to the victim and perpetrator” (Brown (1991), 101). This provides the answer for the commonly asked question to rape/incest survivors – “Why did you not inform anyone when it happened?” It is a “secret trauma” (Brown (1991), 101) as Diana Russell calls it, or a “speechless terror” (Kolk and Hart 172) as van der Kolk calls it. It is impossible to attract attention to the invisible. Often, it is the little children who are subjected to this kind of trauma, and so it would be difficult for them to process it. Such children develop a tendency to turn mute:

“Incest translates into the unsayable which is all the more sayable by very virtue of one’s muteness before it” (Henke (2005), 117). While Maya’s family mistakes her muteness to be sullenness, psychology calls the same a ‘coping mechanism’. The survivor usually adopts some dissociative behaviours to prevent themselves from literally dying from the emotional state of too much trauma, due to an excess cortisol and adrenaline provoking a heart attack. These dissociative behaviours include avoidance and numbing, through which the survivors’ become strangers to themselves. Psychiatrist Salmona calls it an “emotional anesthesia” (Rose (2020), 7) for the survivors that will protect and relieve them.

Maya enters a black and white world as she steps into Stamps. She says that “the barrenness of Stamps was exactly what she wanted, without will or consciousness” (96). She welcomes “the obscure lanes and lonely bungalows set back deep in dirt yards” (96). In the process, she becomes emotionally detached with purposelessness and low self-esteem doing their part. She has not yet given up her decision to remain ‘mute’, and she continues to practise her tactic of gobbling up all the sounds around her. Initially, her unwillingness to talk was accepted by people except for Momma and Uncle Willie as a natural outgrowth of a reluctant return to the South. Little did they know that Maya’s little heart has now been hardened, by making itself a wall of protective silence as a self-defense mechanism. It was the survivor’s way of sending a message that she does not want to be vulnerable again. Thus, these self-made walls can serve both protective as well as destructive.

7. BREAKING THE SILENCE - THE NEED FOR EXTERNAL SUPPORT

However, Maya’s first lifeline comes in the form of a woman named Mrs. Bertha Flowers. In Maya’s words, she is the “aristocrat of Black Stamps” (101). It is Mrs. Flowers who helps Maya to break out of her muteness by using her love for literature as a catalyst. She plays a major role in Maya’s recovery. Herman notes that because post-traumatic recovery must necessarily entail the “empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections,” it is understandable that contact with a single “caring, comforting person may be a lifeline” (133). Words of affirmation were needed to break down the callousness of Maya’s traumatised heart. Mrs. Flowers does this well in her very first conversation with Maya by acknowledging her good performance in her school written work. She adds the report of the teachers who have trouble getting her talk in class. For the next few minutes, she elaborates on the importance of language in communication. Here is her five-line mantra that changed Maya’s perspective on speech:

‘Your grandmother says you read a lot.

Every chance you get.

That’s good, but not good enough.

Words mean more than what is set down on paper.

It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.' (106) Mrs.

Flowers also suggests Maya to read books aloud. Not only does she suggest it, but she also shows her how to do it. She opens the first page of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Maya hears poetry for the first time in her life. Her reading was a wonder in her ears. She bids her goodbye with a note that she must hear her recite the next time. The way Mrs. Flowers treated Maya made a positive impact on her. Maya, following Mrs. Flowers' advice, uttered the words from a poetry book and heard the poems come alive from her own lips. The beauty of the poetry coming from her own lips broke the silence. She began to speak again. And when she freed her voice, it grew powerful enough to move and inspire millions. The contribution of Momma, through her bonding with Maya is immense as she makes her realise her self-worth to a very large extent. Maya recalls Momma's response during her silent years: "Sister, Momma don't care what these people say, that you must be an idiot, a moron, 'cause you can't talk. Momma don't care. Momma know that when you and the good Lord get ready, you gon' be a teacher" (Moore (2003)). Maya also recalls the advantage her brain had in memorizing poetry during those years:

"I memorized poetry. I would test myself, memorizing a conversation that went by when I wasn't in it. I memorized 60 Shakespearean sonnets.... So, I believe that my brain reconstructed itself during those years.... And so, I've been able to develop a memory quite unusual, which has allowed me to learn languages, really quiet a few."

This ability helped her career later on as a Professor and an Orator. Thus, what was meant for evil, eventually turned out for her good.

8. FINDINGS

The victim's ignorance of abuse brings disorientation to him/her. In Maya's case, she feels responsible for the abuse: "Any gratification that the child is able to glean from the exploitative situation becomes proof in her mind that she instigated and bears full responsibility for the abuse" (Henke (2005), 112). This, of course, is completely illogical. To avoid such unreasonable thoughts, it is necessary to provide sex education to children. Also, it is important for the parents and adults not to overlook an abuse, but to take efforts to learn the various psychological treatments available for an abused child. This would ensure a quick recovery of the victim.

The coping mechanisms that the survivors use to escape the world, eventually launch them into their purpose. In this case, Maya uses her love for literature as a coping mechanism, spending time in vast reading. No doubt, Maya turned out to be a renowned writer later, encouraged by author James Baldwin and Robert Loomis. Traumatically muted children also develop observation skills during their years of muteness. The ability to notice and pay close attention to things, flavoured with a vivid imagination is important for a writer. Maya's detailed description of characters and incidents in her books stands as an evidence for this.

Sexually traumatised children exhibit symptoms of dysphoria, characterised by "diminished responsiveness to the external world" (Henke (2005), 112). The world becomes black and white to them adjoined by a lack of motivation to involve in the normal activities. They would be invisible strangers to their own selves. Though physically alive, they feel dead emotionally. Episodes of damage and pain numb their hearts to a stone:

A stone is dead. You can find no feeling in it. Talk to it; it will shed no tears of pity, though you recount to it the saddest tales; no smiles will gladden it, though

you should tell it the most happy story. It is dead; there is no consciousness in it; prick it and it will not bleed; stab it and it cannot die, for it is dead already. (Spurgeon (1862))

This heart needs a replacement, not merely a softening. It takes somebody to take this stony heart away and replace it with a heart of flesh. In Maya's case, this part was largely taken up successfully by Mrs. Bertha Flowers and Momma. The victims only need a tiny spark to kindle the fire in them. And when the fire is set, the rays flash towards every direction, radiating the locked up creative energy. The best governance of the Nations can motivate the health-care professionals to skilfully convert the disability into capacity building. Thus, they find a greater purpose for their existence, making their colourless world colourful.

9. FUTURE SCOPE OF EXTENSION

This study has been limited to the first book of the seven autobiographies of Maya Angelou, which tells of her life only up to the age of seventeen. Further research could be undertaken, taking into account the other books in the series as well. This could give a clearer picture of the traces of traumatic mutism found in the later part of her life. Also, a comparative study could be made, identifying traumatised characters from other novels. Furthermore, the findings of this research can be experimented and applied in real-life scenarios, thus adding value to the overall body of psychoanalytic literature.

10. CONCLUSION

Traumatic mutism is a victim's way of expressing his/her need for time and space to heal. It should neither be overlooked, nor be criticised. Just as any other physical impairment, abuse must be viewed and treated as an emotional impairment. Forcing a muted child to speak will only cause more damage to the victim. Instead, a gentle approach towards the issue will help the victim regain the confidence. The victims deserve to live a better life, pushing away the thick darkness that enclouds them. Writing can help as a tool for healing, allowing the victim to vent her repressed emotions down. With proper counselling and support, the victim could evolve from being hardened to being strengthened. When the victim finally begins to speak, the world would be taken aback by his/her strength.

Literature, especially novels can thus shed light on such neglected yet prevalent aspects of trauma. By heightening the awareness, it can also transform society by helping people understand and treat the victims better. They can thus help formulate more adequate detection, prevention, and healing from the devastating effects of incest and sexual violence.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Angelou, M. (1984). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Virago Press.

- Brown, L. S. (1991). Not Outside the Range : One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma. *Trauma : Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (1995), The John Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, 100–112.
- Henke, S. A. (2005). Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" as Trauma Narrative. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views : Maya Angelou - New Edition*, Edited by Harold Bloom (2009), Infobase Publishing, 107–120.
- Hope (2021, August 29). "I Grew Up in a Cult." Uploaded by LADbible TV. YouTube.
- Lawson, D. M. (2022, July 19). "Understanding and Treating Survivors of Incest." *Counseling Today*, The American Counseling Association.
- Moore, L. (2003, April 1). "Growing up Maya Angelou." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution.
- Rose, K. (2020). Sexual Violence, Traumatic Memory, and Speculative Fiction as Action. *Dignity : A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. 5(1), 5.
- Spurgeon, C. H. (1862, May 25). "The Stony Heart Removed." *The Spurgeon Center, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 8*.
- Van Der Kolk, B. A., and Onno Van Der Hart (1995). "The Intrusive Past : The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma : Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (1995), The John Hopkins University Press, 158–182.
- Van Der Bill, B. (2022, April 15). "Why Do Survivors Stay Silent about Being Abused ?" *Psych Central*, Psych Central.
- Walsh, S. (2012). *God Loves Broken People : and Those Who Pretend They're Not*. Thomas Nelson.