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Honors English 10

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Invisible Cages Still Make the Bird Sing

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a 1969 autobiography by Maya Angelou. The protagonist, Maya, experienced a difficult and traumatic childhood during the 1930s. Maya's story begins with her parents abandoning her when she was three years old due to their divorce. After the divorce, Maya and Bailey, Maya's brother, are sent to their grandmother living in the black section of Stamps, Arkansas. At first, Mary and her brother live a peaceful life under the protection of their grandmother. However, as a young child, Maya struggles with the traumatic memory of her parents' abandonment. Maya also experiences the overt racism of the Deep South. She witnesses terrifying lynch mobs and experiences discrimination on a daily basis, deepening her depression. Amidst these difficulties, Maya's father suddenly visits Stamps and takes Maya and Bailey to their mother, Vivian, who was living in St. Louis, Missouri. At that time, Vivian was living with her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. A shocking incident then occurs: Mr. Freeman sexually assaults and later rapes Maya. As a result of this trauma, Maya does not speak to anyone but Bailey. Maya and Bailey return to their grandmother in Stamps, where she gradually recovers. Maya develops a broader view of society and, as she recovers from a concussion, observes that racism makes society fragile. Gaining strength and confidence and growing in her will to oppose racism, Maya becomes the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco by defying racist hiring policies. The narrative concludes with Maya becoming a confident mother at the age of sixteen to her newborn son.

The central themes of this book are the effects of racism and segregation in American society and the resistance thereof. In *Stamps*, Maya witnesses multiple instances of extreme racism. Black people are despised and occasionally lynched just because of the color of their skin. Maya quickly learns that she will never be treated as equal to white girls. She internalizes this and despises herself as an ugly black girl. As Maya becomes older, she faces more various and specific cases of racism. For example, when Maya got a job at the age of ten, her white female boss dismissively called her “Mary.” Out of frustration, Maya intentionally breaks her boss’s favorite china. During Maya’s eighth-grade graduation, a white male speaker tells black students that they can only become athletes and servants. Maya feels anger towards the speaker. When Maya has a rotten tooth and goes to a dentist, the dentist affronts her, saying he would prefer touching a dog’s mouth to touching hers. Maya encounters numerous other instances of racial discrimination throughout her time in *Stamps*. This was a period of legalized racial segregation in the United States. Harsh policies of racial segregation were specially enacted in the southern states that had maintained slavery until the 1860s. Maya describes the segregation in *Stamps*, saying, “In *Stamps* the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like” (Angelou 25). This clearly illustrates the severity of racial segregation in the United States during Maya’s childhood. The book also explores the themes of Black resistance to society. Maya personally challenges racism by smashing her white boss’s fine china and protesting for equal hiring policies for streetcar conductors in San Francisco.

In modern days, racial discrimination and segregation no longer take place out in the open. Overt racial discrimination and segregation were largely eliminated in the mid 20th century by scores of civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. There is now a social

taboo against such human rights violations based on skin color. However, indirect racism remains endemic in our society. Although views towards minority races have improved greatly from the 1900s, incidents of racism, such as the case of George Floyd's murder, frequently occur in the modern-day United States and worldwide. This is because subtle and indirect racism still exists in people's minds. For example, although people now have the right to live anywhere regardless of their race, many members of minority races are still poor, leading to a persistent de facto segregation. Many still hold prejudices in their minds that members of minority races are more prone to commit crimes. These subtle prejudices lead to unfair treatment against members of minority groups. Therefore, racism and its solutions should be more openly discussed in our communities. As a result, I strongly recommend this book to all students, especially those who are planning to study in the United States, a very diverse nation, because it helps readers understand more about the different ways that racism can occur. This book vividly depicts actual events experienced by the author from the first-person point of view. It would help students understand and empathize with victims of racial discrimination in modern times.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Ballantine Books, 2015.