

# A Correlation between Psychology and Literature in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify the various theories in Psychology and bring forward a correlation between Psychology and Literature in the reading of a literary text. In the reading of a literary piece of work, it is evident that Psychology and its theories can play a major role in understanding it and the various possible explanations that is required in the reading of Literature. It is crucial to understand that Literature is inter-disciplinary in its form. The world we live in is not limited to a subject in itself, but also requires the help of various other aspects and understanding that explains a situation in many ways. This paper brings into light a few theories that can aid in an explanation which proves Psychology can be read and can go hand-in-hand with Literature, particularly in Maya Angelou's first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. Published in the same year, 1969, the two women writers from different geographical locations i.e. United States of America and Canada respectively, their works shed light on a plethora of issues faced by women at the time. While one comes from the perspective of a Black American woman, the other is a White Canadian woman who share similar struggles, though worlds apart. Looking into the Psychological aspect of writing in Literature, this paper will allow for a broader cognizance of how both can be read together to further understand a literary work. It will reveal how theories in Psychology can be read into the analysis of a characters' intentions, behaviour, and relationships that can provide further insights into human psychology.

**Keywords** Literature, Psychology, Developmental Theory, Inter-disciplinary, Human Psyche

## INTRODUCTION

Psychology is the “the science of mind and behavior” as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary. It also literally means the “study of the soul”. The Soul “is the invisible divine essence of the individual, of which the body, mind and intellect are the instruments for action in the world”, according to Ramesh Bijlani in his blog writing titled, “Psychology: Study of the soul, mind or behavior?”. Likewise, Literature also studies the “human soul” in many ways. While Psychology focuses mainly on the behavioral aspects of humans, Literature depicts this very behavior through writing. According to Kagan and Havemann, Psychology is “the science that systematically studies and attempts to explain observable behavior and its relationship to the unseen mental processes that go on inside the organism and to external events in the environment”.

Literature and Psychology are closely intertwined in their study of human behavior as seen in the study of literary works. Literature reflects and describes human beings in their element - wholly as a person in their thoughts, behavior and feelings. This very description and portrayal in Literature reflects a certain psychological condition of the characters. Literature and Psychology are interrelated in this manner - by depicting the human condition that is shaped by a psychological condition. Literature uses personal and subjective experiences. Emotions expressed in literary works reveal the relationship between Psychology and Literature that mutually coexist and reveals the interaction and various psychological truths that pertain to the two disciplines. Psychology is often reflected and appears in various literary works - in fiction, poems, stories, etc. Though, it is only mostly observed explicitly in those works that deal primarily with a character's experiences, thoughts, feelings etc. It is in Catharsis, (the purgation of feelings), that brings the two disciplines together from which this interrelationship can be found. Studying a human character in Literature primarily observes and portrays a wide array of experience. They can be observed and analyzed using a variety of psychological theories - particularly psychological developmental theories - that can explain a character.

Below are a few Developmental Theories summarized briefly to observe the interaction between psychology and the reading of Literature that this article deals with. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory deals with the growth, change and development through social interaction and conflicts that arise over the course of life, which he believed played decisive roles in a child's developmental process. Jean Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory is concerned with the development of thought processes and how it influences one's development and their interaction with the world. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory believes that children learn through hands-on experiences. Vygotsky's view is that learning is an "inherently social process". Through interacting with others, learning becomes integrated into an individual's understanding of the world.

With an understanding of these few theories, it is evident that Psychology can be read along with Literature in many ways. The reading of a character, or a situation in Literary works are made easier to understand, observe and gain more accessibility revealing the multi-faceted character of Literature, and thereby Psychology itself. This very correlation is inter-disciplinary for which Humanities as a subject or topic is valued and therefore our view of the world and situations are weighed in a more balanced, and critical way with the help of approved and established theories, helping us solidify our concepts and understanding.

Maya Angelou's first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, reveals the impact that racial discrimination and sexual abuse has on her identity that makes her question her own self. Margaret Atwood in *The Edible Woman* reflects a pitiful aspect of Canadian women subjected to rigid moral codes, and also an attempt to reconcile her need for personal autonomy against gendered expectations. One primary difference between the two books is that one delves into the female identity and societal expectations while the other focuses on the trauma, racism and the Black experience in America. However, the similarity that both literary works share is that of the search for identity and societal pressures as a woman that both face in different situations.

Maya Angelou has contributed vastly to American Literature with her autobiographical writings. Angelou's autobiography deals with a vast number of experiences that shape her childhood and life, dealing with the "profound effects which trauma had upon her identity and the continuous

struggle for the reconstruction of the fragmented self" according to Nina Maria Roscan, in her journal article "Trauma and Memory in Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Fiction". The narrative of Maya Angelou's recollection of her past trauma and memory through her childhood to adolescence into adulthood helps her rediscover herself and her identity. It also explores the resilience of human spirit in the face of adversity. Using Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory, we can observe the thought processes of Angelou growing up in the years she has described in detail in the book. She is raped by her mother's then-boyfriend at the age of 8, after which she chooses to go mute because she believed her voice killed the man. It is Mrs. Bertha Flowers who aids in her healing through the reading of Literature and instilling in her self-confidence through their daily interactions. This selective mutism as young girl of 8, went on for the next five years.

The book is written in a childlike manner while at the same time balanced and relays her childhood poignantly in retrospect. The conflict that she faces, that of racism and sexism around her, and also understanding her identity and eventually overcoming the insecurities over her own self and her Black community at large. Maya Angelou's journey in this book is marked with a continuous journey of navigating systemic racism that was rampant in Stamps, where she grows up with Bailey and her grandmother. She finds herself constantly questioning her identity, her displacement and abandonment by her parents at a young age, left to herself to fight societal battles on her own as she learns self-reliance and independence. Maya Angelou at this young age, continues to learn about sexuality and its complicated aspects, finding herself pregnant after she sleeps with her neighbor to subdue her fears of being a lesbian. This experience also helps in her decision-making abilities and explore the resilience and grit she has in her to be able to overcome the array of challenges that life has brought her all these years.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an exemplary book in itself, showing how Maya Angelou looks at her past in retrospect, narrating her childhood (8-16 years of age) in a childlike tone, all the same tracing how she has grown over the years in maturity and strength despite the many forces that tried to subdue her, making her question her own abilities, identity and sexuality amidst rampant racism, trauma and discrimination she faces

everywhere she goes. The climax of the book where she discovers her strength and resilience is when she runs away from her father's house and finds herself in a junkyard in San Francisco, living with a group of homeless teenagers for a month. This experience teaches her to be self-reliant, overcoming her fears of abandonment and displacement. She finds joy and fulfillment and experiences a new type of independence and freedom from the shackles of fear that she was bound to all her life up till this time. The book ends with a sense of hope and joy that she finds in this new phase of motherhood, with a sense of independence and self-reliance.

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory plays a vital role in the understanding of this psychological journey that she embarks on. It focuses on the growth of the character, their change and development through social interactions and conflicts that arise over the course of life, which Angelou is exposed to at this stage of her life. Written in 1969, Maya Angelou reflects and looks back in to her past with a maturity that comes with age and experience. Her first autobiography, although documenting only a part of her growing childhood into adolescence, explores her growth, the society at large which played a vital role in shaping her thinking and behavior – not without a heavy dose of racism, discrimination in all areas be it school, work or community – and the way Maya discovers her identity, slowly establishing her foothold in dealing with trauma, sexual abuse and societal pressures. With an understanding of these few psychological theories, it makes the readers gauge a situation or a character better, thereby the how and why of psychological aspects that affects the reading of Literature.

*The Edible Woman*, in contrast, is a book that deals with consumerism and traditional roles of femininity that surrounded Margaret Atwood in Canada in the 1960's. Also published in the same year as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Atwood's protagonist is Marian McAlpin who is introduced as living a content, and conventional life until her engagement to her boyfriend Peter, when she begins to grow anxious and begins to dissociate from the world around her. The traditional femininity and the societal gendered roles of being a woman begins to throw into her a sense of displacement and a feeling of being "trapped" in society's expectations of her. This feeling expresses itself in her unable to eat anything, constantly comparing herself to food, like steak or eggs or canned foods, revealing

the despair she is facing. Any mention of her future, Marian evidently starts panicking and imagines a future that traps her. She suddenly feels “quite depressed” and bothered her at the mention of the Pension Plan by Mrs. Grot at work.

It wasn’t only the feeling of being subject to rules I had no interest in and no part in making: you get adjusted to that at school. It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn’t think about it. Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting, preformed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. A pension. I foresaw a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater. [...] I thought of my signature going into a file and the file going into a cabinet and the cabinet being shut away in a vault somewhere and locked. (21)

Peter and Marian’s relationship takes a turn when Peter decides to embrace his traditional role of becoming a husband and marrying the person he loves. It is when Marian finds herself unable to verbalise her feelings but her body starts to react against her rationale. In the beginning, she runs away from Peter who tells her that she is simply “rejecting” her “femininity” by escaping the reality of their impending marriage. Then on, her aversion to certain foods begins as she imagines herself as one of them, trapped and unable to do anything of her own which ultimately leads to her unable to swallow anything anymore. Her psychology changes, imagining that decisions for vegetables and meat should not have been made by restricting their choices. “She became aware of the carrot. It’s a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn’t die right away, it keeps on living, right now it’s still alive...”

Marian sympathizes with food and begins to narrate in third-person, reflecting her dissociation from the self that she knew. Duncan, the university student she meets, serves as a mirror of her inner self – of the one whom she wants to become, free from societal pressures and the freedom he has to live life on his own terms without being dictated or expected to do. Imagining that Peter wants to consume her and control her, she uses the cake baked in the shape of a woman to let him eat it and this act

leads to her finally breaking herself free from Peter and the engagement. The society at the time that Atwood writes in, portrays the life of women defined by their traditional roles as a wife, mother, controlled and dictated by their male counterparts without any say for themselves. Clara, Marian's friend, serves as an example of the typical woman that Atwood is trying to show. Marian, on the other hand, though she tried to follow the traditional life she was expected to, she serves as a metaphor for the women at the time who also struggled to free themselves from their gendered roles and live life according to their desires. After she begins to think in the first-person narrative, her attraction to Duncan, whose personality and freedom attracted her to him, has now seemingly faded away. She quotes, "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first-person singular again, I found my own situation much more interesting than his."

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory believes that learning is an "inherently social process". Through interacting with others, learning becomes integrated into an individual's understanding of the world. Margaret Atwood's portrayal of her characters, Clara in particular, serves as an antagonist to Marian's character. Their relationship is in complete contrast to one another, whereby the former is seemingly unaffected by the gendered role she plays, content and uncomplaining while the latter looks at her in a very negative light, unable to accept her life choices, and not wanting to be like her.

## CONCLUSION

Jennifer R. Bernstein in "Why Literature Needs Psychology", writes, "If we want literature to inhabit the full measure of human experience, it must stretch to accommodate new ways of knowing the world." There is a stark difference between the two disciplines, in her observation. "Psychology is oriented in the direction of health; the artist's fuel is sickness, strife. The artist dwells in his suffering in order to make something from it; the clinical psychologist explores her patient's pain only to the extent necessary to move past it." A literary work expresses a character in their wholeness – their moods, thoughts, feelings – that bring in the psychological aspect. Goksen Aras, in his paper titled, 'Personality and Individual Differences: Literature in Psychology- Psychology in Literature' writes that "the common feature of psychology and literature is each discipline's capacity

to employ different methods and approaches to analyze human nature and existence". He goes on to say that authors portray life according to their "perceptions, ideologies, and value judgments" and also open doors of various unknowns to readers "arousing feelings and emotions" but "helping them to discover the meaning of life and existence". Bridging this gap, Literature and Psychology can be read hand in hand, to appeal to the readers' intellect, emotions, and most of all, attempt to understand the human psyche.

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