Insecure Attachment and the Misreading of Love in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Buchi Emecheta's *Gwendolen*

Khardiata Ba
Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis (Sénégal)
ba.khardiata@ugb.edu.sn

Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture comparative de I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings de Maya Angelou et Gwendolen de Buchi Emecheta à travers le prisme de la théorie de l'attachement (Bowlby, Ainsworth) et de la psychanalyse freudienne. Il examine comment l'absence parentale, l'incohérence affective et la négligence affective produisent des styles d'attachement insécures — anxieux, évitant ou désorganisé — qui faussent la perception de l'amour, de la protection et du danger. En analysant la confusion entre affection et domination, l'étude montre comment Gwendolen et Maya en viennent à associer la tendresse à la soumission, et le silence à la sécurité. Des concepts tels que la répétition, le transfert et l'identification à l'agresseur éclairent la manière dont le traumatisme d'enfance structure leurs relations ultérieures.
En replaçant ces dynamiques dans un cadre postcolonial et genré, cet article montre que, chez Angelou et Emecheta, la quête d'amour devient une stratégie de survie psychique façonnée par la peur de l'abandon et par l'intériorisation de l'obéissance comme expression du soin.

Mots-clés: attachement insécure, dépendance affective, traumatisme, psychanalyse, rapport père-fille

Abstract

This article offers a comparative reading of Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Buchi Emecheta's Gwendolen through the lenses of attachment theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth) and Freudian psychoanalysis. It explores how parental absence, inconsistent caregiving, and emotional neglect generate insecure attachment styles—anxious, avoidant, or disorganised—that distort the perception of love, protection, and danger. By analysing the confusion between affection and domination, the study reveals how Gwendolen and Maya come to equate tenderness with submission, and silence with safety. Concepts such as repetition, transference, and identification with the aggressor elucidate how childhood trauma structures later relationships. Situated within a postcolonial and gendered framework, this article demonstrates that in Angelou and Emecheta's narratives, the search for love becomes a psychological

survival strategy shaped by fear of abandonment and the internalisation of obedience as care.

Keywords: insecure attachment, emotional dependence, trauma, psychoanalysis, father–daughter relationship

Introduction

The emotional architecture of childhood determines the relational grammar of adulthood. From Sigmund Freud's exploration of early desire and prohibition to John Bowlby's and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory, psychologists and psychoanalysts have repeatedly shown that the patterns formed in infancy persist as unconscious blueprints for later bonds. Secure attachment, sustained by consistent and affectionate caregiving, provides the child with a stable sense of worth and safety. In contrast, erratic, neglectful, or absent parenting engenders insecurity, anxiety, and the compulsive search for approval. Contemporary attachment research confirms that early caregiving is internalised into working models that bias attention and appraisal in later intimacy, intensifying anxious vigilance where care has been inconsistent (Mikulincer & Shaver 2016). As Bowlby and Ainsworth observe, the child deprived of reliable affection learns to read love through loss, equating proximity with protection and compliance with care.

For Bowlby, the attachment system seeks proximity to a preferred caregiver to regulate fear and distress; Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" operationalised this in infancy, distinguishing secure from insecure (anxious/avoidant) patterns. Later research elaborates the idea of internal working models—implicit expectations about whether others are reliable and whether the self is worthy of care—which shape attention, memory, and appraisal in close relationships. When the caregiver is simultaneously a haven and a threat, children often develop disorganized attachment, marked by contradictory approach–avoidance behaviours and later difficulties integrating affection with safety. This vocabulary underpins my readings of Maya and Gwendolen.

In literary and psychological terms alike, this distortion of affection reveals itself most starkly when parental love is withdrawn or corrupted. Sigmund Freud's metapsychology of development, particularly his analysis of the Oedipal constellation, and Anna Freud's catalogue of defence mechanisms, demonstrate how unresolved conflicts between dependency and autonomy shape the adult psyche. When these conflicts remain unintegrated, they return as repetitions—what Freud called *Wiederholungszwang*—in which individuals unconsciously recreate the conditions of their first attachments, even when those attachments were sources of pain. In the language of attachment theory, such subjects are organised by an anxious-preoccupied or disorganised attachment style, oscillating between the craving for intimacy and the fear of rejection.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and Buchi Emecheta's *Gwendolen* (1989) dramatize the psychic legacy of parental inconsistency and emotional deprivation. Both heroines, Maya and Gwendolen, grow up separated from their parents, idealising the figures who abandoned them and longing for paternal validation. Their eventual reunions with their fathers—Mr Freeman as surrogate in Angelou's memoir, Winston in Emecheta's novel—become scenes of repetition rather than reconciliation. The girls' yearning for affection is exploited by men who embody the very contradictions of their childhood: protectors who become predators, caregivers who wound under the guise of love. The result is a tragic confusion where tenderness and terror are indistinguishable, and where silence becomes the language of survival.

This article combines psychoanalytic criticism (Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, and Melanie Klein) with attachment theory (John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth) to examine how insecure attachment structures the emotional lives of Angelou's and Emecheta's protagonists. It argues that both writers expose the psychological mechanisms through which abandonment and betrayal engender dependence, self-blame, and repetition. By situating these novels within the intersecting frameworks of gender, family, and postcolonial identity, the study demonstrates how the personal drama of attachment mirrors broader

cultural hierarchies of obedience and authority. In both cases, the search for paternal love becomes a quest doomed to repetition, a cycle in which affection is mistaken for control and love for submission.

Methodologically, this study adopts a psychoanalytic–developmental approach that combines Freudian and Kleinian insights on defence and repetition with Bowlby's and Ainsworth's attachment framework. In this perspective, early caregiving generates internal working models—procedural templates about self and others—that guide later bonds; inconsistent or frightening caregiving fosters insecure (anxious/avoidant) and, when the caregiver is also a source of fear, disorganized attachment. This double lens allows us to read Angelou and Emecheta's texts as dramatizations of how parental absence and ambivalence distort the perception of love, protection, and danger.

The discussion unfolds in two main sections. The first analyses the origins of insecure attachment in the protagonists' fractured relationships with their parents, tracing how early neglect breeds anxiety, idealisation, and vulnerability to exploitation. The second explores the misreading of violence as affection, revealing how both girls reinterpret domination as care and silence as devotion. Ultimately, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gwendolen* illuminate how the hunger for love, when shaped by absence and fear, transforms into a script of self-erasure, a pattern that only narrative itself can begin to break.

1. Parental Absence and the Genesis of Insecure Attachment

1.1 The Wound of Abandonment and the Birth of Anxiety

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1973; Ainsworth 1970) posits that reliable, emotionally available caregiving furnishes a secure base from which the child explores the world; erratic or withdrawn caregiving breeds insecure attachment, marked by anxiety, hypervigilance and an overdependence on approval. Bowlby, Ainsworth, Boston and Rosenbluth (1956) note that "a break in the continuity of the parent–child relationship at a critical stage in the development of the child's social responses may result in more or less permanent impairment of

the ability to make relationships" (211). Read psychoanalytically, this anxious seeking quickly becomes repetition (Wiederholungszwang): the child returns to an unmastered scene (the unreliable parent) in the hope of retroactive mastery. In the adolescents' later bonds, this takes the form of transference—paternal longings and fears are displaced onto new figures (Mr Freeman; Winston), who inherit the affective charge of the original wound. Freud's developmental metapsychology complements this claim by explaining how early frustrations within the Oedipal constellation organise desire and prohibition; when unresolved, those conflicts return in later bonds as symptomatic repetitions.

In both narratives the Bowlbian prediction holds: early disruptions of caregiving (prolonged separations, erratic reunions, and emotionally unavailable parents) are legible in the girls' hypervigilance, appeasement, and approval-seeking. Ainsworth's anxious-preoccupied profile is visible in Gwendolen's idealisation of a "full-time Daddy" and Maya's longing to be Mr Freeman's daughter, while moments of dread in the presence of the father figures signal disorganization—the caregiver as simultaneous refuge and threat.

Both Gwendolen and Maya are formed in the crucible of parental absence and inconsistency. Gwendolen idealises the parents who left her behind, imagining that proximity would have shielded her from harm. When Sonia summons her to Britain, the reunion produces elation and—crucially—an anxious fusion of need and fantasy: "She had never known what it was like to have a full-time Daddy… She pressed her Daddy's hand and smiled at him… [Winston] was beginning to realize he had to work hard and wake up fatherly feelings towards [her]. He was uneasy with her" (*Gwendolen*, 37–38).

The asymmetry is telling: Winston's unease meets Gwendolen's hunger for a "full-time Daddy." The colloquial label "Daddy issues" captures this attachment distortion. As Setiawan and Yuwono (2010) put it, it "refers broadly to the results of a female's turbulent, or abusive relationship with her father, or absence of a father figure during her childhood, and the way in which this problem is said to

hinder relationships later in life" (185). Her line—"'No, me no tired, eh, Daddy.' The word 'Daddy' sounded so reassuring to her that it felt like she had just acquired a new toy" (*Gwendolen*, 38)—exposes an anxious-preoccupied style: proximity is mistaken for safety; validation for love.

Sonia's instrumental mothering—bringing Gwendolen *"because she needed an extra pair of hands*"—amplifies this insecurity and mirrors the maternal incomprehension Emecheta herself has faced in her childhood. She recalls: "my mother did not understand me and did not see the reason for my wanting to stay long in school… Poverty and ignorance can be really bad for a mother and daughter who apparently loved each other but did not know how to react to each other" (*Head Above Water*, 25). In *Gwendolen*, constricted domestic space further erodes boundaries, priming an incestuous confusion later. As theorised by Cormier et al. (1962): "The father seeks to find in his daughter the young wife of his early years… in taking the daughter the incestuous father is trying to return to the mother" (216).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya's trajectory runs parallel. She, too, converts absence into idealisation and scours the environment for a father-substitute: "I would have pretended to be his daughter if he wanted me to… if I had been Uncle Willie's child I would have received much better treatment" (*Caged Bird*, 10). When her biological father reappears, reality cancels fantasy: "I was always afraid when I found him watching me, and wished I could grow small like Tiny Tim" (45). Meeting her mother repeats the same wound as shame: "I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called "Mother"'" (50). In Bowlby's terms, both children internalise models of the self as unworthy and of caregivers as unreliable; in Ainsworth's, this consolidates anxious-preoccupied attachment—cling, scan, appease.

Crucially, the father-hunger in each text is not a mere theme but a relational programme that organises later choices. Gwendolen's eagerness to please and to silence herself before Sonia and Winston,

and Maya's pressing need for paternal regard (first with Uncle Willie, later with her father and Mr. Freeman), instantiate the same attachment algorithm: seek approval to avert abandonment. Such seeking is fertile ground for exploitation, because the signifiers of "care" and "control" become interchangeable.

1.2 Repetition, Betrayal, and the Formation of Insecure Bonds

Freud's notion of *repetition compulsion* clarifies the pattern that follows: the psyche "remembers" by re-enacting early loss and betrayal in new scenes, hoping unconsciously to master what could not be mastered. Thus Gwendolen's longing for paternal protection delivers her back into paternal predation; Maya's father-quest culminates in the traumatic misrecognition of violation as care with Mr Freeman. In both novels, early neglect begets anxious-preoccupied attachment, which, in turn, scripts repeated encounters where abandonment and desire, protection and domination, are fatally entwined.

These repetitions are dramatized through the girls' own voices. When Winston first molests her, Gwendolen's paralysis mirrors the internalization of helplessness: "She would not make a sound. She would just lie there very still, suffering his anger and guilt. … She had no solid and protective Daddy to shield her anymore" (*Gwendolen*, 124). Her silence is not consent but the re-enactment of earlier disbelief—her mother and Granny Naomi's dismissal—now turned inward. What began as the fear of losing love mutates into the belief that obedience ensures safety.

Likewise, in *Caged Bird* after Mr Freeman's assault, Maya's reaction follows the same psychic choreography of shock, guilt, and false complicity. She describes the physical pain she felt without clearly pointing fingers at her abuser. It was as if it was her body's fault that the genitals of Mr Freeman could not fit it: "Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't" (*Caged Bird*, 78).

Furthermore, in the aftermath, she mistakes violation for affection: "I thought I had died—I woke up feeling ashamed. I had enjoyed the caresses he had given me" (80). This misreading of abuse as tenderness reproduces the earlier dynamic of craving and fear, the hallmark of insecure attachment.

As Judith Herman (1992) notes in *Trauma and Recovery*, "the traumatized person re-enacts the trauma not because she desires it, but because she cannot yet recognize it as past" (39). Gwendolen's compliance with her father's predatory impulses, and Maya's momentary longing for Mr Freeman's attention, reflect precisely this mechanism. Each girl unconsciously confuses mastery with surrender, believing that yielding will prevent renewed abandonment. In seeking safety in the familiar, they perpetuate the very conditions of harm.

The pattern resurfaces in subsequent relationships. Maya's discomfort when her biological father mocks her—"I was always afraid when I found him watching me, and wished I could grow small like Tiny Tim" (*Caged Bird*, 45)—shows how ridicule reactivates the primal wound. Gwendolen, for her part, clings to Emmanuel, projecting onto him the fantasy of a gentle protector who will not abandon her: "At the moment, I have his friendship and that is all that matters. The future will take care of itself" (*Gwendolen*, 155).

In attachment terms, an internal working model is the child's tacit map of "how love works" i.e. whether others can be trusted to protect and whether the self must comply to be kept. Both internalize what Bowlby terms the *working model* of love as conditional, approval-dependent, and always threatened with withdrawal. Freud's idea of *transference* further illuminates this repetition: the emotions once directed toward a parent resurface toward new figures who unknowingly inherit the weight of the original wound. Maya's fierce protectiveness of Bailey and Gwendolen's obsessive need to please Sonia or Emmanuel are displaced attempts to repair the first betrayal.

Ultimately, Angelou and Emecheta transform repetition into recovery. By narrating what once silenced them and other women, they reverse

the vector of trauma: writing becomes the symbolic act through which these women reclaim agency. The cycle of repetition, once a prison of pain, turns into a narrative ritual of recognition, where memory, finally voiced, begins to heal.

2. Emotional Entanglement and the Illusion of Safety

2.1 From Abuse to Affection: The Misreading of Violence

Both Gwendolen and Maya interpret abuse through the grammar of love. Years of inconsistent care have trained them to equate affection with domination. When Winston and Mr Freeman cross the paternal line, the girls' first impulse is not rebellion but compliance. They misread abuse as affection because the same figures who harm them once provided the only crumbs of tenderness.

Gwendolen's confusion is immediate: "She felt like going to him in broad daylight and assuring him that all would be right" (*Gwendolen*, 125). Her guilt translates into an attempt to comfort her aggressor, showing how profoundly her sense of love has been distorted. The incest functions not only as physical violation but also as psychic conditioning. Winston's alternating tenderness and threat mimic the ambivalence of Gwendolen's childhood: sometimes her caregivers were present, sometimes absent, always unpredictable.

Similarly, Maya's first experience of "love" is contaminated by coercion. Mr Freeman's assault is narrated in paradoxical language: "He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go" (*Caged Bird*, 61). The sentence's syntax fuses gentleness and terror, encapsulating what Anna Freud called *identification with the aggressor*: the ego adopts the abuser's logic to preserve a fragile illusion of safety. In this logic, submission becomes self-protection.

Anna Freud's catalogue of defence mechanisms explains this paradox. The ego, unable to face unbearable reality, mobilizes denial (it did not happen), repression (erasing memory), and identification with the aggressor (internalizing the abuser's logic). Maya, in her muted longing for Mr Freeman's presence even after the rape, and

Gwendolen, in her desperate wish to console Winston, exemplify this psychic reversal. Their silence is not passivity but an unconscious negotiation with danger.

This misreading of violence as affection stems from what Bowlby called *disorganized attachment*, a condition in which the caregiver is simultaneously the source of comfort and the source of fear. In both novels, the paternal figure oscillates between protector and predator. Gwendolen's line—"He was my Daddy, and if I loved him, I would not deny him the little favour"—distils the catastrophic confusion between obedience and love. Maya's muteness after Mr Freeman's death mirrors the same fracture: "Just my breath, carrying across the air, made my guilt louder" (*Caged Bird*, 85). She equates speech with culpability, as if silence could undo the transgression.

By transforming terror into tenderness, both girls maintain psychic coherence in an incoherent world. They need to believe that love remains possible, even if that love is violent. Their apparent complicity is thus the tragic outcome of defensive idealization, a way to survive emotional annihilation.

2.2 The Cycle of Silence and the Illusion of Safety

Silence follows as the final defence, the ultimate symptom of an insecure attachment gone awry. In Angelou's memoir, Maya stops speaking for nearly a year—a radical form of repression that converts unspeakable trauma into muteness. Her silence, however, is eloquent: "I thought I had killed a man, because I told his name" (*Caged Bird*, 87). Speech becomes lethal, so the child sacrifices voice to restore psychic order. Anna Freud would describe this as *reaction formation*—a defence that replaces unbearable guilt with exaggerated virtue. Maya punishes herself by erasing her presence, translating shame into obedience.

In *Gwendolen*, the heroine's stillness functions the same way: "She would just lie there very still, suffering his anger and guilt" (124). Her muteness and immobility are bodily equivalents of repression; she freezes between approach and flight. Bowlby interprets such paralysis

as the hallmark of disorganized attachment, where proximity to the caregiver triggers both comfort and terror. Studies of disorganized attachment link child muteness, immobilisation, and contradictory approach–avoidance to caregiving that is simultaneously a source of comfort and alarm (Main & Hesse 1990; see also Schore 2019 on dysregulated affect).

Emecheta and Angelou expose this logic of compliance without moralizing it. The girls' submission is not weakness but an adaptive survival strategy. By idealizing the aggressor, they preserve an illusion of safety in a world that offers none. This illusion, however, perpetuates dependency. Gwendolen, after each assault, still addresses Winston with filial tenderness, saying "Yes, Daddy," as if naming him could restore their bond. Maya, too, dreams of being loved purely by a man who will finally protect her—a fantasy that haunts her adolescence and early motherhood.

Melanie Klein's concept of *splitting* and her later notion of *depressive realism* illuminate this paralysis. The child cannot integrate love and cruelty within the same object; she divides them to survive. Neither Maya nor Gwendolen achieves this integration. To admit that the beloved father figure is also the abuser would shatter their fragile internal world. Thus, they choose illusion over truth. As Emecheta writes of Gwendolen's coping, "She believed everything would be all right if she kept quiet" (*Gwendolen*, 126). Angelou echoes the same psychic economy when Maya declares: "If I spoke to anyone, the words would lead to death" (*Caged Bird*, 86).

Yet both texts also chart a movement toward articulation. Writing becomes the symbolic opposite of silence, the space where trauma is re-experienced but also re-ordered. By retelling their stories and that of other women, Angelou and Emecheta turn repression into expression. Language becomes both testimony and therapy, recalling Caruth's formulation that "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the

one who experiences it" (Caruth 1996, 4–5). Through narration, these women reclaim the voice that violence once confiscated.

In this sense, *Gwendolen* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* complete the Freudian arc of working-through (*Durcharbeitung*): repetition gives way to recollection. The abused child who once mistook violence for affection now speaks (in Maya Angelou's case) or has someone who speaks for her (in the case of the girl in real life that Buchi Emecheta is relating her story in *Gwendolen*), finally able to distinguish love from harm. The illusion of safety dissolves but in its place arises the real safety of self-knowledge.

Formally, both texts stage this accommodation at the level of voice. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou's oscillation between child focalisation and retrospective adult commentary produces a double consciousness: the child's credulous wish "to be held forever" is gently corrected by the memoirist's cooler syntax, exposing how comfort becomes a rhetorical veil for coercion. In *Gwendolen*, Emecheta's pared-down dialogue and recurrent vocative "Daddy" enact the compulsory tenderness that sutures obedience to belonging; the very economy of the prose—short clauses, reported thought—mirrors the heroine's frozen affect. These stylistic choices make visible the psychic labour by which fear is re-named as love and muteness as care.

Conclusion

In both *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gwendolen*, the drama of insecure attachment begins in childhood, where love is experienced not as safety but as absence, volatility, or rejection. Bowlby's and Ainsworth's theories clarify how inconsistent caregiving leads to anxious-preoccupied bonds: the child clings to what hurts her, mistaking proximity for security. Maya and Gwendolen's longing for parental validation mirrors this dynamic; both are daughters of loss, whose emotional compass points endlessly toward the unavailable. Their early deprivation distorts the grammar of affection, transforming the simple need to be loved into a desperate strategy to avoid abandonment.

Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud's insights into repetition and defence illuminate how these early wounds dictate later relationships. What cannot be mastered is replayed: Maya's attachment to Mr. Freeman and Gwendolen's to Winston repeat the same pattern of seeking protection in the very figures who endanger them. Denial, repression, and identification with the aggressor enable the psyche to survive what it cannot name. The result is a tragic misreading of love, an emotional inversion where domination becomes devotion and silence becomes proof of loyalty. These patterns expose not psychological weakness but the logical consequence of relational deprivation: love, once corrupted, reproduces its own distortions.

Klein's notion of splitting and depressive integration further reveals the cost of this miseducation of love. Both heroines struggle to reconcile tenderness and cruelty within the same parental image; unable to do so, they divide the world into idealized affection and unspoken violence. Yet the novels refuse to pathologize this division. Instead, Angelou and Emecheta read it as the price of survival in patriarchal systems where the father's authority and the mother's resignation conspire to silence pain. The child's muteness—Maya's year-long silence and Gwendolen's frozen stillness—becomes the symptom of a broader cultural failure: societies that mistake obedience for virtue and endurance for strength.

The movement from repetition to narration marks the beginning of healing. By transforming silence into speech, both authors convert psychic defence into creative agency. Angelou's autobiography enacts the Freudian process of *Durcharbeitung*, working-through trauma by revisiting it through language, while Emecheta's fiction reclaims voice on behalf of the silenced. Writing thus becomes a corrective attachment: the word replaces the absent caregiver, offering the safety of articulation where none existed in life. To speak, in both texts, is to disentangle love from pain and selfhood from shame.

Ultimately, Angelou and Emecheta expose the paradox at the heart of insecure attachment: the very instinct that drives human connection can, under conditions of neglect, turn self-destructive. Yet they also

propose that recognition, the act of naming distortion, is the first gesture of repair. Their novels transform the misreading of love into an act of literacy: to read one's wound truthfully is to begin to heal it. In their pages, affection ceases to be submission; silence gives way to testimony; and love, finally disentangled from fear, becomes the language of survival.

Beyond literary diagnosis, this comparative reading clarifies mechanisms—idealisation under threat, defensive identification, silence as belonging—that continue to structure disclosures of intra-familial abuse. By naming how insecure attachment distorts appraisal (submission = safety), the article offers conceptual tools for educators, counsellors, and community leaders engaged in prevention and survivor-centred support, especially in postcolonial contexts where respectability and religious discourse can mislabel trauma as virtue.

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