

Struggle of Gendered Subaltern: A Study of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

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Abstract

Black woman in America experiences triple suppression of race, sex and class. The paper tries to throw light on the oppression of women as subaltern in the hands of both Black men and White community. Racial prejudices against Black women and the response to the injustices will be discussed based on the nature of resistance from helpless anger to outright protest. A thorough study of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the paper voices the struggled subjugation from a racist and chauvinist society; as how a Black gendered subaltern attempted to create not only racial equality but also gender equality through her fearless courage and forbearance. The study also focuses on Angelou's phenomena of resistance in the background of post colonialism through exploring the current means by which people formulate their racial and gender identity. Angelou's autobiography is a vocalization of the struggle for national, racial, and self-identity; she addresses the incompatible difference between Black and White community, feminism and masculinity, inferiority and superiority complex in the governing male dominated society.

Key Words- Resilience, Resistance, Gendered Subaltern, Racism, Inequality.

Introduction

Maya Angelou is one of the best known Black women writers in United States today. Labeled as a poet, historian, author, essayist, autobiographer, actress, dancer, singer, playwright, civil rights activist, teacher, producer and director, she is best known for her series of autobiographies. She worked as a cook, prostitute, nightclub dancer/performer, and social activist etc before turning to writing. Known as a spokesperson for black people and women; her works have been considered a defense of Black culture. The motive of her writing is to evoke a social change through resistance. Reform is one of the major aims of her writings and is achieved through resistance which in turn is revolutionary in nature. The themes of gender, race and resistance in Angelou's autobiographies are a case in point to the current research article. The nature of Black resistance in her autobiographies is mainly provided in two forms: subtle resistance and active protest against racism and sexism. The struggle begins with passive resistance against maltreatment of Whites followed by overt objection from Blacks against racial and sexist acts of oppression and discrimination. Beyond an exploration of racial and feminine experiences, the research paper aims to show the quality and real nature of African-American literature also. Angelou in *I Know why the caged Bird Sings* questions herself, "Am I woman first, or Am I Black first?" (4). She in her autobiography is seen occupying a subaltern position which goes in harmony with her social status in terms of race, class and gender. Thus, through her writings mainly autobiography, she attempts to give voice to the subaltern— Black women. She is mainly concerned with the question of what it means to be a Black in America and that too of a weaker sex. Her autobiography contains a series of lessons about resisting oppression and may serve as an

example of how an African-American Subaltern Girl attempts to survive male prejudices at social and psychological levels, even in the absence of any power and authority. Angelou's first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* uses the metaphor of a bruised caged bird which yearns, longs and craves for freedom, struggling to escape its cage from imprisonment of racism, sexism and gendered oppression. Inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" she chooses to name her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and sets herself as its central image and subsequently throughout her series of autobiographies:

The caged bird sings with fearful trill / of the things unknown but longed for
still / and his tune is heard on the distant hill / for the caged bird sings of
freedom. (Final Stanza of the Poem, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*)

Through the metaphor of the caged bird, Angelou explains the condition of African- Americans in the United States. Angelou's struggle is not her struggle alone and can be viewed as the struggle of the entire race of Black gendered subaltern. She wants to break all the obstacles and shackles of the society which has caged every Black woman behind bars of poverty, racism, sexism, gender discrimination and oppression; and fly high in the sky which is free from the chains of race, gender and class which can be clearly seen in her later series of autobiographies as well. Angelou explores the subjects like rape, racism, gender discrimination etc. As she grows old she experiences the more blatant instances of racism, such as a white speaker's arrogant statement at her eighth-grade graduation, where he says, "Black students will be hired in labor oriented jobs only because they lack mental brilliance of the White so they couldn't be like the known scientists e.g. Edison, Madame Curie, Galelio and many more." She says, "The Black Female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of Male Prejudice, White illogical hate and Black lack of power." (Angelou 265)

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* challenges the essentialist conception of womanhood. She asserts that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (xix). She says that woman has no value or identity of her own—she is defined in relation to the man— she is defined as what man is not. De Beauvoir states that, "thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being . . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xvi). In the autobiography also Maya is defined in relation to her brother Bailey, father, grandfather, uncles etc. She does not exist as Maya but possess her identity defined by the patriarchy. Women as subaltern in America suffer dual threat from the White and the male hegemony. Angelou's representation of the rape incident in the autobiography portrays the real grief of many subaltern Black women and she being the victim of rape succumbs and submits to the illicit lust of Mr. Freeman—her mother's lover and her step-father. From the moment she was abused, her sexual identity becomes a question as she gets confused between sex/lust with love, she wanders between womanhood and childhood, and do not know which way to choose. He very cunningly asks Maya to play with him without elucidating the intent of any lewdness:

We were just playing before. He released me enough to snatch me down and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning the radio up loud, too loud, he said, "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you.

And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey." I could tell he meant what he said. I couldn't understand why he wanted to kill my brother. Neither of us had done anything to him. And then there was the pain. 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. (Angelou 79)

This act of rape leaves a deep scar upon her psyche and renders her silent for complete five years. What is more painful is that she is that she is raped by a member of her own Black community. This shows that the gendered subaltern is oppressed at the hands of both Whites as well as Blacks. She starts questioning her identity as to whether she has an existence of herself in this White patriarchal world, "All the women are White and all the Blacks are men" (Hull 1). For both men folk and Whites, gendered Black subaltern doesn't exist. Yet in another incident of racial and gendered hatred a White dentist refuses to treat Maya's pain without being obliged to the fact that her grandmother had helped him in the time when he was in dire need of money, telling Maya and Momma: "Annie?" "Yes, sir, Dentist Lincoln." He was choosing words the way people hunt for shells. "Annie, you know I don't treat Nigra, colored people." "I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and she ain't gone be no trouble to you ..." "Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people... My policy ..." "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's." (Angelou 183)

At the age of seventeen Maya becomes a mother of a son and faces all hardships to raise her child. She worked as a singer, as a bar-dancer, a prostitute, White's servant, a conductress and what not just for her baby. She faces gendered discrimination and racial humiliation to become a street car conductor. Her candidature is rejected multiple times but she resists every time and applies afresh. At the beginning, Maya knows from her mother that it is impossible to be hired as a conductor being a Black girl. "To her question of what I planned to do, I replied that I would get a job on the streetcars. She (her mother) rejected the proposal with: 'They don't accept colored people on the streetcars.'" (203)

However, she continues to struggle for the job. When the white secretary of the San Francisco street-car company repeatedly frustrates her attempts deliberately for a job interview, Maya is at first persuaded not to take it personally: The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all. The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere, I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer. (260)

Maya accepts the reality that her rejections have everything to do with her being a Black girl: "The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white" (206). After a long struggle and verbal scuffles with the white receptionist, she becomes the first Black girl streetcar conductor in San Francisco. "On a blissful day I was hired as the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars" (208). San Francisco is a place where there racism was at its peak. "A story went the rounds about a San Franciscan white matron who refused to sit beside a Negro civilian on the streetcar, even after he made room for her on the seat. Her explanation was that she would not sit beside a draft dodger who was a Negro as well" (207-208). Attaining the street-car conductor's job becomes a victory for the

whole Black community and women as well. By doing so, she creates a stimulus in the heart of both White and Black women who face similar biases in everyday acts of discrimination. Initially, in her autobiography, Maya is portrayed as what Spivak says “subaltern female [who] cannot be heard or read” and she as a “subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 308) but gradually she gathers the courage and emerges as a ‘subaltern who can speak for herself’.

Lift ev'ry voice and sing, / Till earth and heaven ring, / Ring with the harmonies of Liberty; / “Stony the road we trod / Bitter the chastening rod / Felt in the days when hope, unborn, had died. / Yet with a steady beat / Have not our weary feet / Come to the place for which our fathers sighed? (Angelou 178-179) Maya in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is also called names like Nigger, Big Black Girl, Ape, Beast etc during her life time and it is as abusive for her as not existing or existing but with no self-respect in the world which is of Whites and Black males. Though Shakespeare’s famous quote from *Romeo and Juliet* is quoted many a times that “What is in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Act II Scene II) but it is the very essence of our existence and Identity and if someone consciously changes our name then it is a big question mark on our real identity versus the replaced identity. Maya’s name gets altered easily by a White woman from ‘Marguerite’ to ‘Mary’ without her consent. The deed is totally inhuman on account of White people who do not respect the Black subaltern’s identity and uses the metonym as per their own convenience. It gave her the inferior feeling that white people did not treat her equally and it also talks about her of the slavery period when Blacks were named at the whims and fancies of their masters. While working with a White master named Mrs. Cullinan, Maya is called out with different names: ...she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway. “Mary?” Miss Glory asked, “Who?” Mrs. Cullinan, sagging a little, knew and I knew. “I want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall’s and take her some soup. She’s not been feeling well for a few days.” Miss Glory’s face was a wonder to see. “You mean Margaret, ma’am. Her name’s Margaret.” “That’s too long. She’s Mary from now on. (Angelou 105)

This way Mrs. Cullinan attempts to change Maya’s identity since she is a Negro girl. Maya’s sexist and racial resistance is depicted in the autobiography when she describes the employer’s renaming as the “hellish horror of being called ‘out of his name’” (106). Maya understands that she is being humiliated in a very cleverish way by her White master; she resists and rebels by breaking Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite dish. Maya is courageous enough to perform the act of resistance through breaking the favourite dishes of “China from Virginia” (107) of Mrs. Cullinan. It was the result of the frustration created out of her changed name and the discrimination towards Black females. Although she knows the consequences of breaking the dishes but she prefers self-respect and self-identity over employment and money. Resistance here, thus, is actually an answer through open confrontation to the racist and sexist discrimination of the White oppressors. As a result of this Maya has to leave the job with Mrs. Cullinan. Maya’s resistance to discrimination, oppression, prejudice, discrimination takes many forms in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and carves out a space for Blacks and women in the White and male dominated world. One of the dominant changes in her life and personality comes when she embraces her Black womanhood through Mrs. Flower’s help, who makes Maya feel liked and respected. “It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself” (Angelou 92)

She comprehends this truth with grace and accepts racism as pure and simple: " 'Lift ev'ry voice and sing / Till earth and heaven ring / Ring with the harmonies of Liberty ...' / ...It was the Negro national anthem" (Angelou 178).

Conclusion:

Thus, In Maya Angelou one can hear a subaltern speak for herself and for her whole community of Black women and assert her independence. Angelou through her writing attempts to give voice to subaltern women-Black in this case who have been silenced through history and this is possible mainly because of her resistance to gendered and racial oppression. Resistance emerges out a powerful tool for Angelou in gaining back her lost identity and self-respect.

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