



Manifestation of female subjugation and sexual exploitation: An analytical study of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract— *The study underscores the challenges faced by racial subalterns in America, with Maya Angelou's renowned autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, providing detailed insights into the hardships endured by this community. Born during the Jim Crow Laws Era, Maya faced severe racial segregation, particularly evident in the racial animosities prevailing in Stamps, Arkansas, between Americans and subalterns (Blacks). Maya became a victim of patriarchal oppression, a consequence of her status as a subaltern and African American in a society predominantly controlled by men. The subjugation experienced by subaltern women restricted their freedom to pursue their dreams, subjecting them to domination by their counterparts. The shared inferior and marginalized status of African Americans in society serves as a thematic backdrop. Maya, however, transcended these challenges, breaking the metaphorical glass ceiling to become the voice of her racial subaltern community. Notably, she achieved the historic milestone of becoming the first subaltern woman to ascend to a position of prominence.*



Keywords— *Racial subaltern, Racial segregation, Female subjugation, Racism, sexual exploitation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou's acclaimed autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, stands as a poignant and powerful narrative that delves into the depths of the female experience, particularly highlighting the manifestation of female subjugation and sexual exploitation. As a seminal work in American literature, Angelou's autobiographical masterpiece provides a profound exploration of the multifaceted challenges faced by women, particularly women of color, during a pivotal period in American history. Set against the backdrop of the Jim Crow Laws Era, Angelou's narrative unveils the harsh realities of racial and gender-based oppression. The study aims to dissect the nuanced layers of female subjugation and sexual exploitation embedded within the text, shedding light on the intricate intersections of race, gender, and power dynamics. The historical context of the Jim Crow Laws Era serves as a crucial framework for understanding the pervasive societal norms that subjected women, especially African American

women, to systemic discrimination and exploitation. Angelou's personal experiences, intricately woven into the fabric of her narrative, become a lens through which we can analyze the broader challenges faced by women navigating a landscape shaped by patriarchal dominance and racial hierarchies.

This analytical study seeks to unravel the complex threads of Angelou's narrative, exploring how female subjugation and sexual exploitation manifest and intertwine within the broader context of societal structures. By engaging with the text at a deeper level, we aim to gain insights into the resilience and strength exhibited by women in the face of adversity, as well as the lasting impact of such experiences on individual and collective identity. The first impulse in post-colonial struggles is to retrieve their history and then posit it against the dominant history of Europeans. Here comes the Subaltern studies group which was led by Ranjit Guha in the 1980s, for what they argue within the context of India is that even after the independence Indian

historiography is mainly known as mainstream historiography, which tells the stories of bourgeois classes and still does not account for the subaltern histories. "These histories elaborate on silenced people, vote-less people, and people who might be outside the caste that does not belong to dominant classes". (Bhagwat and Arekar 38)

"Guha's thought of politics in terms of subaltern may not comprise an autonomous domain, as it is not originated from privileged politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. Subordination within its various forms has always been the fundamental focus for subaltern studies". (Biswas 200-205)

Female subjugation is one of the topics, which has been in discussion for many years. Females are subjugated because of their gender. They are dominated by the opposite gender, which is male. According to Oxford Dictionary, subjugate means "to gain control over someone or something". The issue of women being under domination was highlighted when women felt the urge to come forward for their basic rights, because of legal privilege of specific sex was being turned down. Opportunities were denied to women just because they were females, and were reserved for men just because they were men. Patriarchy by definition is the domination of the male gender in society. In both public and private sectors, masculine roles oppress female practices. In a family where patriarchy rules, the control remains under the authority of males. Patriarchy in society upholds the dependence of women. They do not let women develop a sense of independence. Women are deprived of their basic rights, which limits their mobility and freedom. Suppressed women's voice gives the image of a stereotype running in society that women are subjected to a lower position. Society runs with the thought that household work is reserved for women and discrimination is a legal practice as women are subordinate. Subordination keeps women on the edge of society by the notion that women are inferior and men are more powerful. They are stripped of their voice and are treated the way others are treated from different demographics.

After going through so much degradation, females decided to raise their voices and fight for their equal place in society. During their quest for equality and identity as independent individuals, the term feminism emerged. 'Feminism' is generally defined as a response to the suppression of women. Oppression of women may include inequality in job opportunities, job salaries, and in many other fields. "Feminists fight for equality to eliminate the difference between men and women. To bring equality, they make an effort to put stoppage over the advocating words being used in our language, like mailman over mailperson. "Feminists are struggling hard to bring women into the public scenario, by demanding jobs in the political sector,

better healthcare for women, leadership positions in churches, and many more fields". (Ranjan, 2019) In the late nineteenth century, the women's movement came into effect with consciousness of feminism waves. The characterization of four waves of feminism originated on the justification that females will be treated equally socially and politically.

The first wave of feminism denotes women's suffrage and their right to vote. The first wave of feminism was introduced in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Women in the West fought for their acknowledgment of work in the same field as men. They fought for education for women. Equal rights were the main reason for the first wave to be formed. Subaltern (Black) women in America were fighting for both, equal rights and recognition. Though they also contributed to feminist movements, they were hardly given any attention. Sojourner Truth, a women's rights activist, influenced Subaltern women to fight for their rights through her speeches. Gerda Lerner has recorded in her book that "Subaltern women had a lot of potential to fight for them to bring change in the society for equality. In the case of Subaltern women, the colour of men was given rights, but the colour of women was kept deprived of their rights. This notion of mindset made the colour of men superior to the colour of women, which was disappointing to see". (Lerner 5-14)

The second wave of feminism covered important issues faced by women such as pay equality, reproductive rights, female sexuality, and domestic violence. This wave was influenced after the Second World War when women were expected to lead their normal lives as subjugated housewives. Women refused to continue the roles of wives and this led to the second wave of feminism. Through this wave, feminists also brought up the matter of gender equality. "Considering the status of women of colour, it was still under the shade, and they were left out from the agenda because the wave was being led by American women. Subaltern women were fighting their own battle of racism as well as gender equality". (Sultana 1-18) The third wave of feminism was directed towards celebrating differences among race, class, and sexual orientations. This wave highlights its fight against pornography. Sexual activity had become instigation towards violence. Women wanted prostitution to come to an end. They also fought against abortion laws and birth control. Women defended the opinion of having been making choices on their bodies. The fourth wave of feminism, based on viral campaigns, protests, and movements supports feminism. "The movement like #MeToo, which went viral on the internet and encouraged women to speak up about the sexual exploitation. The four waves of feminism are to eliminate inequality among men and women. Waves were established to let women know their potential and stand

up for their rights against the odds". (Murphy 1-3)

Feminism is influenced by the factor of race. Racism plays a big role in subjugating women of colour. For many years, in the United States of America, Subalterns (Black) faced heavy rejection from the Whites and felt oppressed and subjugated. They did not only keep themselves in a position of repression but also suffered the loss of identity. If we generally look into the whole scenario women are marginalized all over the world but if we specifically discuss "Subaltern (Black) women they are profoundly affected by the marginalization". (Crawley 172-184) Things happening in society are perceived differently by African-American women and American women. For example; African-American women may react to racist issues as well as sexist issues, whereas American women will only react to sexist issues. So, African-American women face the double attack of racism as well as sexism in comparison to American women. The latter was the reason African-American women wanted to commence their movement. Women of the nineteenth century like Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sojourner Truth took upon the challenge to speak against slavery to support African-American women. They became the activist to ignite the fight for anti-racism and anti-sexist movement. This thought further took the name of Black Feminism. "Black feminism is the term that exists beside the term feminism. This term has been taken with the notion because African-American women were subjected to oppressive lifestyle". (Simen 234-257) The term originated with the philosophical idea that African-American females' life does not depend on someone else lives, rather she lives for her existence as a human. The subjugation of African-American women dates back to the time when they were forced into slavery without a choice. After freedom from slavery, they were expected to work as domestics at home taking care of family and doing chores. Even after voting for their rights, their social status was still pushed to the lowest grounds in society. African-American women did not agree with the civil rights movement and feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s because they still felt the limitations on their rights. "Civil rights movement mainly focused on fighting for oppression faced by African American men. So, African American women wanted this movement to also bring forward the subjugation being faced by them". (Sunday and Ekpo 41-53) Through second-wave feminism, women wanted to exhibit the connectivity of racism and female subjugation in society. African-American men dominated the power, whereas African-American women were left to torment the oppression.

II. MANIFESTATION OF FEMALE SUBJUGATION AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

While the slave system entrenched racism, this ideology took on a value that was specific to an institutionalized racial system referring to subalterns living in America. As a result, the destruction of the plantation slave systems, and the oppression of subaltern women which had been justified on a racial basis, endured in various institutional forms. The political and social system that was brought by the American invaders with them from European Homelands included sexism, which had a significant influence on the condition of enslaved subaltern women. Before, the trade in slavery focused more on the subaltern men because they had more value than the subaltern women. Later because of scarcity of the slave workers, subaltern women were forced to have sexual relationships to produce new workers. The concept had been created and internalized that people of colour were inferior to Americans and suffered merited oppression as a result of their race, rather than the slave structures that typified an American system. As a result, even in the absence of slavery, the permanence of their colour would result in the perpetuation of enslavement. African-American females have suffered the double backlash as the victims, facing racial discrimination by whites and sexual stigmatization by their counterparts. According to Spivak, "third-world women are segregated doubly. They are kept apart. They are oppressed both by their males and by the American superior class. They are deemed inferior not only because of their gender but also because of their class and caste. The category of subaltern women also falls under subalternity, as they also did not have the power to speak for themselves, and were constantly oppressed by the superior class and their counterparts". (Spivak, 66-111) The subjugation continues over the subaltern women which affects their fundamental political power and social, economic, and cultural structures. The predominance of racism in the American political system was evident with the loss of control, and status became clear as it was the fundamental and distinguished element of the system. The analyses of the prospects of association among subaltern women and American women, who differ in terms of power holders, have been stated through cultural issues. It is a typical occurrence for subaltern women in the United States. Bell Hooks says, "To both parties, I expressed my belief that the fight against racism and sexism were inextricably linked and that to separate them would be to ignore a fundamental truth of our existence: gender or race both are unchangeable aspects of our identity". (Hooks 1984) Subaltern women unlike American women or subaltern men have their unique universe and experiences. They battle not just white patriarchy and racism by American women, but also face internalized sexism by subaltern men. In America, being recognized by colour and as a female means facing three

forms of oppression for example racism, classicism, and sexism. Subaltern women who are subjugated and under oppression must begin their fight for uniqueness and recognition of their status, which generates the protest against injustice. Subaltern women fought for an antislavery society, which encouraged them to raise their voices. The feminist movement in America was born as a result of this. The main intention of the work is to highlight feminism regarding women of colour and the oppression undergone by subaltern women.

the characters of Momma and Maya in an autobiography are the womenempowering characters in the community divided on the racial basis and the society where women are dominated. In this way, we see in one of a few occasions in an autobiography when comedy (and occasionally hilarity) comes over and, like with the time Maya can't stop laughing in church, it's because of something Bailey says to her. Maya's brother Bailey says

"I laughed because, except that she was white, the big movie star looked just likemy mother and it was funny to think of the white folks not knowing that". (Angelou, 1997, p. 118-119)

Her brother was one of her childhood's greatest sources of amusement and his only trusted companion and it was especially amusing that day because Bailey was amazed to see their mother's likeness to an American actress. Maya found it amusing that "white folks" might be "unaware" of something as stunning as a subaltern lady looking as nice as a popular female American actress. Maya often uses humour and internal monologue to break free from the way, other people see her and her colour specification skin tone and perceive things in an entirely different light; in this particular instance, the realization isn't so much that a subaltern woman can be beautiful, as it is that American people either don't know or won't acknowledge it. To put it another way, Maya had found how American people's hubris can blind them and leave them vulnerable. This incident in an autobiography tells us about how beautiful must Maya and Bailey's mother be, but they were too naive to compare their mother to an American actress rather than appreciating her beauty. In *Phenomenal Woman*, Maya explores her mental health in the poem's lines by saying that she is not adorable and not like some supermodels. She claimed that she was an over-sized subaltern woman with curls. She had an idea of beauty in her mind that was only related to white colour, rosy cheeks, yellow hair, and blue eyes. That is why she claims that pretty women are curious about their secrets, such as the fact she is not as attractive as they are, although when she reveals the truth, they assume she is lying. These phrases also demonstrate how white society views her as ugly and

unattractive due to her colour.

Everyone in Momma's store was listening to the radio. The news was about one of the accomplished subaltern boxers, Joe Louis, who appeared to be on the verge of losing the heavyweight championship. By comparing Louis's failure to the horrific circumstances, subaltern people with no choice had to endure the problems in the segregated South, and Angelou depicts the agony of yet another loss for subaltern society. Repression, assault, rape, lashing, the pursuits of slaves, and the mistreatment of subaltern servants are all evoked here, as is the ferocity of Louis's boxing defeat. According to Angelou, Louis's loss is a major setback for "her race". It is another form of spiritual violence and invalidation. In an autobiography, Angelou has stated the fact that how she would be racially humiliated at any time, even at a happy occasion like her eighth-grade graduation ceremony from the college, in another deftly written and highly amusing paragraph that flips societal beliefs about specific color (black) and gender on their heads. Mr. Donleavy, an American Arkansas speaker, pushes subaltern students to admire Jesse Owens and Joe Louis. Jesse Owens was a celebrated Olympic runner who brought laurels to a country like America where he had to fight for his rights. Jesse Owens was not given much respect regarding his achievements in the sports field. Being a subaltern runner, he had to follow Jim Crow Laws, which included eating at a black restaurant and staying at hotels made for African Americans. He had to continue doing this even when he was traveling with his American teammates. During his career, he had to face lots of discrimination and had to work extra to deal with his payments because he was denied any

access to scholarships. Jesse Owens used his fame to protest against racial discrimination. Joe Louis was a subaltern African-American boxer known for acclaiming the world heavyweight championship. Achieving this prestigious title brought him recognition in the African-American community as well as in America. After this observation, the African-American society thought this would give them an equal opportunity. It is disappointing to say that the title did not change the American consciousness. There was a fear of subaltern supremacy. Mr. Edward Donleavy was an American speaker in an autobiography who was extremely biased toward subaltern students studying in the school. He was invited to the eighth-graders graduation ceremony, where he made a patronizing speech. He made a speech about fewer opportunities for subalterns in the racist community. He gave biased examples to the students according to their skin colour. He told the subaltern students that they could only be good athletes like Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, whereas encouraged American students to follow the path of Galileo

and Madame Curie. The saddest part of their life experience of Maya is that the subaltern girls were strongly denied. They weren't given any importance and were felt left out. This made Maya infuriated because subaltern girls weren't given any examples or advice. Mr. Edward Donleavy thought that subalterns did not have any future scope. This showed the suppression and ignorance towards the subaltern women at that time.

Maya Angelou, a female subaltern writer, and activist, became the voice of the subalterns and voiceless people, especially the subjugated women of colour. Whereas Maya highlighted the theme of racial segregation, she also focused on oppression which was heavily in practice at that time in her autobiography. According to Beauvoir, "Males have developed the societal concept of female inferiority, as she puts it: "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 282). Feminists believe that women should reject their roles as wives and mothers as never-ending responsibilities to write creatively; this is a viewpoint shared by Woolf in her novel *A Room of One's Own*. Further Woolf, "one of the famous feminists and a proponent of female oppression, believes that all advancement and enjoyment belong to males, but all domestic labour, mental responsibilities, child bearing, housework, and social oppression belong to women". (Woolf 2004)

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author illustrates the impact of sexism on black women's social position. Maya was motivated to create an autobiography on respective societal issues as a result of her experience. This autobiography explores how sex and gender shape identity and experience. Maya understands that being a female has its drawbacks and occasionally wishes she had been a male. Because the heroes and protagonists in the stories she read were mostly men and boys. She felt that a hero must be a man. She says the issue of the male hero being a protagonist of the film and earning more in comparison to a female co-star still exists. The question here arises whether is it justifiable for males to earn more than females whereas females also give an equal percentage of hard work in the movies. Maya is also pressured to be female and pretty, and for most of her youth, she has been plagued by her own "ugliness." In the film world, the subaltern women are given violent characters and are expected to even go nude. We can still sense the colourism and stereotypes running around subaltern female characters. In an autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya is a character shown as a confident girl but at the same time she is also shown as a girl with insecurities. Referring to the "ugliness" word used by Maya shows how insecure she feels about her skin tone.

III. CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou through various life experiences has very well recorded scathing incidents in her autobiography *I Know the Caged Bird Sings*. The researcher has discussed all the incidents in detail and also related them to the subjugation being faced by today's subaltern women. The incidents discussed are based on biases and patriarchal domination. Women are racially and sexually subjugated. Women are taken to be inferior subalterns and their human rights are curtailed by their counterparts as well as Americans. Females are given fewer opportunities than men, with the notion that they are only eligible to work domestically and are not eligible for white-collar jobs. In this memoir, Momma (Maya's grandmother) is shown as a powerful woman but submissive at the same time. To be noted, she wanted to be a rebel, but she chose to be patient because she was very well aware of the circumstances a racial subaltern would have to endure. On the other hand, Maya Angelou chose to be a rebel and speak against female subjugation. To, she is memorized as one of the female rights activists and eminent feminists. She became the voice of the racial subaltern women who were being unheard by society.

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