



# Gender and Racial Discrimination in Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird: A Lament on Slavery*

Dr. Anita Goswami

Assistant Professor Department of English, COER University Roorkee Uttarakhand, India

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**Abstract**— The word “discrimination” is derived from the Latin word *discriminate*- meaning “to separate, to distinguish, to make a distinction.” In American English usage, discrimination often refers to prejudicial treatment of persons. Black feminism emerged as a challenge to the assumptions made by these white feminists regarding their prerogative to speak for all women in general. Black feminism insists that sexism and racism are imbricated in each other; the oppression of women cannot be understood and addressed without reference to racism. According to Claudia Jones, a Trinidad – born activist, “In the film, radio and press, the Negro woman is not pictured in her real role as a bread winner, mother and protector of the family, but as a traditional ‘mammy’ who puts the care of children and families of others above her own. This traditional stereotype of the Negro slave mother, which to this day appears in commercial advertisements must be combated and rejected as a device of imperialist to perpetuate that white chauvinist ideology that Negro women are ‘backward and inferior.’ Now a days, there are so many poems which is written by using discrimination and segregation as the subject because of the condition which appears in the society. Besides, there are some women poets who write poems by using feminism touches. For example, the image of woman in the society, the position of women among the men, and the discriminations which occur in the women’s life.



**Keywords**— Racism, Sexism, Discrimination, Negro, Feminism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Black feminism emerged out of history of activism, engaged in Mariya Stewart (1803-80), Harriet Tubman (1822-1913), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) delivered a forceful speech, ‘*Ain’t I a Woman?*’, in the Woman’s Convention held in Ohio in 1851, underscoring her ‘difference’ as an ex-slave. Black woman and contradicting the model of gender in which Euro-American women were both incarcerated and nurtured. In the 1060s and 70s, the black feminist movement emerged from the discontent with the civil Rights movement as well as the white feminist movement. In All the Women are White, All the Black are Men but Some of Us are Brave, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Smith explore the intersectionality of black women in the discourse of the civil rights movement and the contemporary feminist movement. This study analyzes discrimination toward

black woman which appears in Maya Angelou’s poems. In this case, the researcher chose three poems of Maya Angelou. Those are “*Still I Rise*”, “*Phenomenal Woman*”, and “*Caged Bird*”. In other to discover them, the study was conducted by using feminism theory and also historical and biographical approaches. It focuses on words, lines, and stanzas of the poems. The research was conducted with the following statement of problems: (1) What is the dominant type of feminism in Maya Angelou’s poems? (2) What are the reasons of using feminism perspective in Maya Angelou’s poems? (3) How are the images of black woman described in Maya Angelou’s poems?

The research design of this study is descriptive qualitative method because the researcher does not use statistical numerical but is requires descriptive analysis of the object. The research is conducted by descriptive

qualitative because the result of the data is word, sentence, and language. After collecting the data from the poems, the researcher put them into some groups which relates to the problem focuses. The researcher analyzes every datum by using content analysis. Based on the research questions mentioned above, the result of the study are as follows. First, the researcher concludes that the dominant type of feminism in Maya Angelou's poem is Radical Feminism because discrimination towards black women is related to the bad history of black people. Second, the reasons of using feminism perspective by the poet is the image of her bad life experiences. The last result is the image of black woman in Maya Angelou's poems which shows the discrimination toward woman in her era. The result of the study can be used as a reference in the research literature itself in educational institution and so on. It is also expected to be useful in several ways. This study gives significance for the researcher to understand and provide more knowledge about feminism. The study may be expected to give significance to the future researchers who conduct studies about literature focusing on feminism or on poems or in using biographical and historical approaches.

Marguerite Ann Johnson (1928-2014) popularly known as Maya Angelou, a prolific writer in African American Literary history, memoirist, famous poetess, etc. best known for her autobiographies especially the first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which brought her a universal admiration as a writer and recognition to the African American life and culture. She was a remarkable poet wrote several books of poetry and three books of essays. She helped creating a positive change to the people by giving a mainstream voice to women of color and the black experience in the United States during a tumultuous period of social change. She was also a phenomenal poetess, have written a critically acclaimed poem which was motivational and inspiring. She also had different occupational faces at an early age like sex worker, a night club dancer and performer, cast member of the opera *Porgy Bess*, coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, worked as a journalist in Egypt and Ghana, etc. She was also an actor, director, produced plays, movies and television programs. She was an activist, Civil Rights Movement, worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She received over 50 Honorary Doctorate Degrees. Maya Angelou was a great inspiration and a celebrated literary personality even today. The contribution of Maya Angelou's writings to African American Literature is not merely of literary works but also has deep inspirational and motivational aspects to the women of any region and country all over the world then and now. The writings of Maya Angelou, especially her

autobiographies record the birth, her childhood and adult experiences and struggles among the American society as a black woman.

Meanwhile it also represents the life and struggles of every black woman in the American patriarchal society. Her verbal skill has created identity and respect not just to her work and to the nation she dwelled, but has also credited self-identity to every woman's heart. In Maya Angelou's first book of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)* narrates her life from her birth, her childhood with her grandmother Annie Henderson and her elder brother Bailey Johnson, her life in Arkansas and later with her mother Vivian. Her adolescent experiences go on with the troubles and struggles she had and the book ends with rose of her confident and her state of being with her new born son; Whereas in her second book, *Gather Together in My Name (1974)* focuses on her working experiences and the life of single mother. She tries to provide for her young son and find her place in the world. Both books dealt with her life story as a black girl who grew up with the same issues of discrimination, race and racism, domination and as a woman among the patriarchal white society.

## II. THE HISTORY OF FEMINISM

The history of feminism should be grooved from the history of western feminism because feminism as the reaction of women discrimination comes from there. According to Korokke and Sorensen (2005: 24), the history of feminism is divided into three waves. Each wave deal with different aspects of the same feminist issues. continuation of and a reaction to, the perceived failures of second-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s. Lipstick feminism, girlie feminism, riot girl feminism, cybergirl feminism, transfeminism, or just girl feminism. Born with the privileges that first- and second-wave feminists fought for, third wave feminists generally see themselves as capable, strong, and assertive social agents: "The Third Wave is buoyed by the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism" Third-wave feminists are motivated by the need to develop a feminist theory and politics that honour contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking. Third wave feminism is also inspired by and bound to a generation of the new global world order characterized by the fall of communism, new threats of religious and ethnic fundamentalism, and the dual risks and promises of new info- and biotechnologies. A common American term for third-wave feminism is "girl feminism," and in Europe it is known as "new feminism."

This "new" feminism is characterized by local, national, and transnational activism, in areas such as violence against women, trafficking, body surgery, self-mutilation, and the overall "pornification" of the media.

### The Types of Feminism

There are many perspectives about feminism. Rosemarie Tong on her book *Feminism Thought A More Comprehensive Introduction* third edition, there are some types of feminism, those are Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist and Socialist Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Care-Focused Feminism, Multicultural, Global, and Postcolonial Feminism, Ecofeminism, and Postmodern and Third-Wave Feminism. In this research paper the researcher presents four types of feminism, they are Liberal feminism, Radical feminism, and Marxist and Socialist feminism:

#### Liberal Feminism

The liberal feminism rose in the seventeenth centuries. Liberalism gives intensity for the equality rights in occupation or education. The feminist believe that democracy is naturally capitalist society. This perspective speaks out to issues such as unequal pay, obstacles to achieving tenure or excelling in certain fields, and the frequent lack of family-friendly policies at many of the institutions and national organizations of higher education. Gender -Inequality theories recognize that women's location in, and experience of, social situation is not only different but also unequal to men's.

Socialist feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labour. Socialist feminists see *women as being held down* as a result of their unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere. Prostitution, domestic work, childcare, and marriage are all seen as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system which devalues women and the substantial work that they do. Socialist feminists focus their energies on broad change that affects society as a whole, and not just on an individual basis. They see the need to work alongside not just men, but all other groups, as they see the oppression of women as a part of a larger pattern that affects everyone involved in the capitalist system.

#### Radical feminism

This type of feminism spreads out in the United States since 1960s-1970s. They consider that both women and men must be educated to see the tradition as one of oppression and be encouraged to create a new one based on a female perspective.

Radical Feminism is a branch of feminism that views women's oppression (which radical feminists refer to as

"patriarchy") as a *basic system of power* upon which human relationships in society are arranged. It seeks to challenge this arrangement by rejecting standard gender roles and male oppression. Radical feminists argue that being a woman is a positive thing in and of itself, but that is not acknowledged in patriarchal societies where women are oppressed. They identify physical violence as being at the base of patriarchy, but they think that patriarchy can be defeated if women recognize their own value and strength, establish a sisterhood of trust with other women, confront adaptable to equality for the women and men. Every human being is created with the same rights and every woman must have the same opportunity in developing their future.

Liberal feminism is trying to make women and men equal, corporate, independent and free to decide their own future. Liberal feminism asserts the equality of men and women through political and legal reform. It is an individualistic form of feminism and feminist theory, which focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Liberal feminism looks at the personal interactions between men and women as the starting ground from which to introduce gender-equity into society. According to liberal feminists, all women are capable of asserting their ability to achieve equality; therefore, it is possible for change to come about without altering the structure of society. Issues important to liberal feminists include reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting, education, "equal pay for equal work," affordable childcare, affordable health care, and bringing to light the frequency of sexual and domestic violence against women.

Liberal feminists argue that women have the same capability and capacity as men for moral reasoning and agency, but that patriarchy, particularly the sexist patterning of the division of labour, has historically denied women the opportunity to express and practice this reasoning. Women have been isolated to the private sphere of the household and, thus, left without a voice in the public sphere.

### III. MARXIST AND SOCIALIST FEMINISM

**Marxist feminism** is growing up in the second wave during late 1960s and 1970s, in Britain especially. Marxist feminist analysis as the identification of the structural elements that determine the quality and nature of our experience. Guerin (1979:202) states that "Marxist feminists attack the prevailing capitalistic system of the West, which they view as sexually as well as economically exploitative. Marxist feminist thus combines study of class with that of gender". Marxist feminists argue that the path

to gender equality is led by the destruction of our oppression critically, and form female separatist networks in the private and public spheres.

Radical feminism is the breeding ground for many of the ideas arising from feminism. Radical feminism was the cutting edge of feminist theory from approximately (1967-1975). It is no longer as universally accepted as it was then, and no longer serves to solely define the term, "feminism". This group views the oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression, one that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. This is a movement intent on social change, change rather revolutionary proportions. Radical feminism question why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on gender. Radical feminism attempts to draw lines between biologically-determined behavior and culturally-determined behavior in order to free both men and women as much as possible from their previous narrow gender roles.

#### ***Caged Bird: A Lament on Slavery***

'*Caged Bird*' is a 1983 poem by the African-American poet and memoirist Maya Angelou (1928-2014). The poem originally appeared in Angelou's collection *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* The poem uses the image of a caged bird to explore issues of confinement, oppression, and restriction. The poem is divided into six stanzas. In the first stanza, Angelou describes a free bird leaping in the wind, floating through the air until its wing appears to touch the rays of the sun. She likens this to the bird 'claiming' the sky, like someone claiming a particular territory as their possession. By contrast, the second stanza describes the caged bird which provides the poem with its title. This bird's horizons are far narrower than the free bird's: he (Angelou describes the bird as male) has been rendered almost blind by his anger at having his wings clipped so he cannot fly away. His feet are tied together to limit his movement further. All he can do is sing – so he opens his throat to do so. The third stanza tells us what the caged bird's song consists of. He sings in a frightened manner, about things he doesn't know or hasn't experienced (such as freedom, we assume) but which he longs to have. Although he is imprisoned in his cage, the bird's song can travel beyond the bars of his cage and be heard on a hill far away.

In the fourth stanza, Angelou returns to the free bird, who, she imagines, thinks of the territory of the air and sky which he had claimed as his own in the opening stanza. This bird also thinks of the worms waiting for him on a lawn somewhere, which he will be able to eat. The fifth stanza once again contrasts this free bird's existence

with that of the caged bird. The caged bird stands upon a grave which represents the death of dreams (for instance, of a better life, such as that enjoyed by the free bird). The bird's shadow is cast upon the wall behind it where it stands in its cage, its feet tied and wings clipped, and it once again prepares to sing. The sixth and final stanza is a word-for-word repetition of the poem's third stanza, in which the caged bird sings in a frightened manner, about things he doesn't know or hasn't experienced but which he longs to have. Although he is imprisoned in his cage, the bird's song can travel beyond the bars of his cage and be heard on a hill far away.

Angelou does not make the birds 'white' and 'black', with the caged bird being the latter (unlike, say, Paul McCartney's song, 'Blackbird', about the Civil Rights movement). And through resisting such reductive symbolism, she allows '**Caged Bird**' to resonate as both a poem about racial inequality in the US and a more universal statement about inequality of all kinds, whether caused by race, class, or some other factor. They were marching for several reasons, including jobs, but the main reason was freedom: King and many other Civil Rights leaders sought to remove segregation of black and white Americans and to ensure black Americans were treated the same as white Americans. Slavery was now a thing of the past in the US, but a century on from the abolition of slavery, Black Americans were still not free in many respects. This is something Martin Luther King addressed in his memorable 'I Have a Dream' speech delivered that day at the Lincoln Memorial. In his speech, King outlined a dream or aspiration in which America was no longer a nation divided by racial segregation and discrimination, and African Americans were truly free, not just by being freed from slavery, but by being recognized as equal in the eyes of the nation's laws. Angelou's reference to the 'grave of dreams' in the fifth stanza of her poem may even be intended as an allusion to King, whose 'dream' of racial equality had still not been fully realized. King himself was dead, having been assassinated in 1968. Did the dream of an equal society die with King, Angelou seems to ask? Is it with King in his grave?

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had a voice back in Washington in 1963. And through singing, he can draw attention to his plight and the injustice of his condition. Perhaps Angelou is also recalling William Blake's memorable couplet from his '*Auguries of Innocence*'.

Angelou's poem is not strictly in free verse, because she utilizes rhyme at various points, and there is the ghost of a meter behind her lines. For example, the stanzas beginning 'The caged bird sings' are largely written in iambic dimeter, which involves two iambs per line. But the form is not stringently regular either, such as we'd find in a traditional sonnet, for example. The poem thus combines freedom and restraint, aptly echoing, through its form, the plights of the two very different birds – birds who are, in the last analysis, not different at all, of course, but merely subject to very different circumstances. Maya Angelou's life is filled with challenges but she also filled it with art and beauty. She rose up, indeed a phenomenal woman, and spoke of her experiences. Through her struggles with the world and with herself, she gave the world books, essays, poetry, music, and TV shows and films through which many people found, and continue to find, hope and inspiration. Angelou's works carry with them a wisdom that many people value. It is also undeniable that she has a way with language that enables her to craft works that pleasant to read and hear. This research paper explores how Angelou's contribution to literature, in particular, to Black women's place in literature is undeniable and affirms her reputation as a prolific and inspiring writer.

#### IV. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The objective of the study is eradicating the discrimination on the basis of Race, Gender and Ethnicity. It is said by Kimble Cranshaw in her book "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*"; She writes that an individual identity is scattered within the boundaries of Race and Sex. Therefore, she lays emphasis to create an identity beyond class, culture, Race and Sex, these are the barriers in the growth of human psyche and affect human's psychology. For the development of any nation, every individual's has different potentialities and caliber. They may contribute their country and lead society towards pinnacle of success.

#### V. METHODOLOGY

Descriptive method has been implemented in this research work, Through the description of natural symbols, the narrator has tried to make difference between slavery and freedom. Slavery is like in which human's soul and mind

are always trapped. He wants to release from these shackles.

The researcher analyzes every datum by using content analysis. Based on the research questions mentioned above, the result of the study are as follows. First, the researcher concludes that the dominant type of feminism in Maya Angelou's poem is Radical Feminism because discrimination toward black women are related to the bad history of black people. Second, the reasons of using feminism perspective by the poet is the image of her bad life experiences. The last result is the image of black woman in Maya Angelou's poems which shows the discrimination toward woman in her era.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the purpose of this research paper is to explore the psyche a woman who is trapped into the darkness of Crisis of identity, Gender issues and victim of Racial Discrimination. The quest of the poetess is to reconstruct her lost identity against the values of colonialism who demoralize the tribal culture and ritual values. Maya Angelou is one of the black writers who could support herself by her writing. She is praised for her ability to say what important was to millions of black people especially black woman. She is famous for her description of Black people life. She uses her works to praise voice concern about race and woman. She often writes poems and books about racial issues and feminism perspective.

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