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Exploring Subaltern Agency in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

The research paper investigates on the representation of American society that is constituted by the hegemonic social, political and cultural structures of oppression to delimit the identity of African-American women in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: An Autobiography*. Despite being subordinated by the whites; black women have gained central position in the socio-political spheres in America. This research paper analyzes the bitter experiences of a black girl, Maya Angelou, who is continuously dominated and sexually exploited by white people, and her struggle to overcome the constraints in the existing prejudiced society. The paper uses analytical method and library research in data collection. To analyze the experiences and overcoming of constraints on the part of black women, the research applies the theoretical insights of Gramsci, Fanon, Abrams and Tamen on subaltern, identity, agency and resistance. Broadly, the paper explores the subordination of African-American women and their sheer willpower to resist socio-cultural oppressions for their self-definition as well as social change in America. The research concludes that identity of the subaltern always remains in flux. Proper representation of the subaltern is essential to redefine their identity and to establish them as autonomous individuals in the society.

Keywords: autonomy, identity, interpretation, resistance, subjectivity, subordination

Introduction

The research explores the voices of the subaltern i.e. African-American women in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)*. Angelou presents the oppressed and subordinated position of African-American women in America. They are discarded by the mainstream and they do not find any right on the discourse of power to express themselves. This research attempts to answer "How have subalterns been represented

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in Angelou's Autobiography?" What are Angelou's perspectives about subalterns and their subordination in America?" And "How do subalterns like African- American women overcome injustices in Angelou's autobiography?" The research aims to prove that though subalterns are marginalized and discarded people of the society; they can speak at times and rise against injustices done upon them. Subalterns have strength and strong willpower to overcome their subordination.

This research paper claims that Maya Angelou's autobiography assigns black women an agency to dismantle and overcome injustices faced by them in the existing society. Angelou uses her autobiography to transform herself and many marginalized black women from victim of racism lacking identity to independent women who are strong enough to overcome injustices prevalent in the society. The paper focuses on the life and living of the marginalized black women in America. It also analyzes the emotional, sexual and intellectual development of black girl in the racist society, complexity of her familial relationships, and her struggle to overcome prejudices. To this end, I have applied Gramsci (1992) and Fanon's (1967) ideas on the subaltern and their identity. Besides, Abram (1999) and Tamen's (2012) notions of formation of agency and forms of resistance are used to show the way black women dismantle their exploitation in America. Broadly, the paper analyzes subaltern character Maya Angelou's journey towards knowing one's self.

Literature Review

Multiple dimensions of the text have been explored by various critics and writers. They basically have focused on the exploitation and discrimination faced by black women in American society. But not any of the studies has concentrated on these black women's overcoming of constraints with the help of their agency. Thus the paper concentrates on the politics of African-American women's agency to overcome various constraints set by the whites in America. Angelou, in her text, focuses on the severe punishment faced by African-American women in America. Angelou resists the discrimination and brutal nature of white Americans both overtly and covertly. Zenebe (1996) states, "black women have been dominated and oppressed by cruel and ignorant white men and culture" (p.35). The first part of Angelou's text presents African-American women as helpless and marginalized who are unable to speak against the discriminations prevalent in the society. Even Angelou has not been treated as a human because she is a black girl.

Koyana (1996) writes, "Angelou is special in the use of humor, self-mockery, linguistic sensibility and the skill of balancing the quest for human individuality. He is successful to show that racial, class and gender oppression affect the experiences of motherhood in a great extent" (p.42). African-American women have been developing

a lot throughout the novel. They have developed their confidence and selfhood. Maya Angelou, after being raped by the young man, goes into the world of silence but later on she resists various discriminations and exploitations with the help of her agency. The violence done upon the black girl shows the way she is engendered in the experiencing of race. This incidence of rape shows the exploitation of black women in the racist American society. Angelou becomes disheartened and traumatized after the incidence. In spite of being raped by the cruel man she remains silent. Angelou is unable to resist the discrimination in the beginning. But later on, she becomes successful to overcome injustices by being collective with other women from her society.

According to Barnwell (2005), blues has been used repeatedly in this text. The excessive use of blues shows the typical feature of blackness of the text. Barnwell argues, “Angelou’s masterpiece got prominence since it is special for the universal sense of self it portrays. The text owes to the other elements in the African-American cultural tradition such as, Negro spirituals, the blues, black vernacular and of course black poetry” (p.49). The text starts with the expression “What you looking at me for?” (Angelou, 1). This expression in the beginning of the text attempts to make the readers feel Angelou’s bitter experiences. Angelou identifies the women who share her plight in America to assign value to her being. It helps Angelou to overcome her bitter experiences.

Maya Angelou’s autobiography typically presents the sufferings and struggle of black women in America, as Cudjoe (1990) puts it, “a powerful, authentic signification of African-American womanhood in her quest for understanding and love rather than for bitterness and despair” (p.46). Angelou addresses African-American women’s experiences in America, basically in white racist society. Angelou tries to unearth the sufferings of black women in America by presenting her experiences through her autobiography. She raises her voice against racism, gender discrimination and classism in America. Angelou’s autobiography unearths not only her personal history, but the collective history of all black women.

The aforementioned ideas from various critics on Angelou’s text show that the previous writers and critics have focused on the sufferings of the African-American women in America. These studies do not talk about African-American women’s overcoming of constraints. In this study, I analyze black women’s position and politics to overcome various social, political and cultural constraints prevalent in the society to establish them as autonomous human being in America.

Methods and Procedures

This research is analytical in nature as it critically analyzes the bitter experiences of black women living in the prejudiced society in America and their hard fought struggle

to overcome the injustices. The paper uses library research in data collection. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected from Angelou's (1969) Autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and secondary data was collected from different books and journal articles on agency, identity, resistance, Angelou and her works. To this end, I have reviewed various research and theoretical articles. The study claims that black women successfully transform themselves from victim of racism and gender discrimination with an inferiority complex to autonomous individuals with the help of their agency in America. To substantiate this research claim, I have applied Gramsci's (1992, 2007) concept of subaltern, Fanon's (1967) ideas on how black skin like Angelou is marginalized and undermined, and how superficial identities are imposed upon black women in the racist American society. In addition, Abrams' (1999) notion of forms and formations of agency, and Tamen's (2012) perspectives on different ways of resistance have been taken into consideration. Basically, Gramsci and Fanon's ideas are applied to analyze the subordination and bitter experiences of black women in America. Moreover, Abrams and Tamen's notion of agency and resistance are taken into account to unearth the formation of agency of the black women and their overcoming of injustices prevalent in the society.

Findings and Discussion

Subaltern and Identity

Black women in America have been subordinated in the name of race, gender and class. The autobiography presents African-American women as helpless and marginalized. Gramsci defines such characters as subalterns. In Gramsci's (2007) words, "the subaltern classes fundamentally refer to any 'low rank' person or group in a certain society" (p. 66). All the black women have been given marginal place in the society in America. Angelou herself has not been treated as a human because she is a black girl. In the text, Angelou presents herself as the symbolic character representing every African-American woman growing up in America. Angelou tries her best to achieve her identity and struggles a lot to transform herself from victim of racism with an inferiority complex to an autonomous individual. Angelou (1969) confirms:

When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn't thinking so much about my own life. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking about that time; I used myself as the central figure to show how one person can make it through those times. (p. 153)

She resists sexism, racism and gender discrimination without any fear to give identity to the black women in America. She does not remain child and she creates her white self in order to adjust in the racist American society.

Postcolonial theory of black feminism stresses on the idea of social justice, emancipation and democracy to challenge oppressive structures of reason, discrimination and exploitation. It basically concentrates on the sufferings of African-American women in white racist societies in America. Walker (1983) states, “Black women experience different and more intense form of oppression than that of white women” (p.37). Angelou develops inferiority complex for not being gifted with white body which is considered beautiful and pure in America. She develops a sense of shame at her own black body. This sense of self-hatred makes Angelou transform her body. Angelou writes:

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about “my daddy must of been a Chinaman” (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. (p.2)

Young Maya tries her best to achieve beautiful body and tries her best to distance herself from what Americans considers an ugly body. Angelou experiences herself as a subordinated individual with so much of confinement in the society in the name of gender, color and race. But the well-grown lady, Angelou, becomes successful to overcome these injustices. At the end of the autobiography, Angelou appears as the independent woman. She establishes herself as the independent woman despite various insults and discriminations. Angelou states, “This is an unnecessary insult” (p.4). Angelou rejects that “unnecessary insult,” and moves ahead in the path of struggle for her freedom.

The last part of Angelou's text deals with the teenager girl who is trying to extend her role in the society though she faces identity crisis at that stage. When she compares her own body with other matured bodies in the society, she believes that she lacks the essential qualities of a woman. She writes, “For a sixteen-year-old my breasts were sadly undeveloped” (p.274). Indeed, she wants to make sure she is not lesbian. She writes, “then the question began to live under my blankets: how did lesbianism begin? What were the symptoms?” (p.274). She is doubtful about her sexuality because she is called lesbian by white women. Angelou is teased by white woman because of her unique body structure. In order to make sure she is a normal lady, she makes physical love with a young man and gets pregnant.

Fanon (1967) presents the way black skin is marginalized and undermined the racist American society. He argues, “mask, skin and veil emphasizes how the historically determined surfaces of race, gender and culture objectify the colonized

as well as how the colonized may counter and overcome these superficial identities imposed upon them by colonization” (p.15). In San Francisco, black women were not allowed to work as a street car conductor before Angelou becomes the first Negro girl street car conductor. Maya Angelou started working as a street car conductor not to challenge the system or trend of the society but to survive and become independent. This profession leads Maya to continue her study as she is able to afford it now.

Even after realizing the impossibility of being street car conductor, Angelou continues to struggle for the job. Even after being mistreated by the white secretary of the San Francisco street-car company, Angelou does not lose her hope and tries to give her best in the job interview. Maya presents this incident as:

The incident was a recurring dream, conceded 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, 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. (p.260)

Hereafter Angelou realizes that the rejections, which have occurred due to her race, also have everything to do with her personality. She also realizes that there is no possibility to separate her personal identity from her racial identity. She had to bargain a lot with the white receptionist, to become the first ever black girl streetcar conductor in San Francisco. There is serious racism in San Francisco. Angelou getting the job of the street-car conductor shows not only the victory for civil rights but also a personal victory for Angelou’s sense of self. The overt resistance and outright protest on the part of Angelou and all the African-American women break the ‘color line’ and discrimination prevalent in America.

According to Fanon, the colonized trying to wear “White Masks” is an effort to avoid their inferiority. Black skin, white masks shows Fanon’s search for, and failure to find, available means to overcome subordination and objectification of blacks. In black skin, white masks, the black woman challenges the discriminations by manipulating the colonizer’s domination through silent revolutionary action. For colonized, Fanon argues that, “identity that the mask, skin signifies is alternately that of their wearers’ objectification by colonial discourse and of their wearer’s false consciousness” (p.17). The ‘black skin’ of the Fanon’s title is singular whereas ‘white masks’ is plural. Black people who make the use of French language possess the power in the society in America.

Fanon (1967) argues that, “colonialism drives the colonized to madness by rejecting any individuality claims of the native” (p.20). In the text, the act of dominating the black students’ future happened at the time of Maya’s eighth grade graduation by

the white man invited as a guest speaker. The white man named Mr. Edward Donleavy from Texarkana gives quite racist speech in front of the black crowd during the commencement address of the graduation:

He said that he had pointed out to people at a very high level that one of the first-line football tacklers at Arkansas Agricultural and Mechanical College had graduated from good old Lafayette County Training School. Here fewer women were heard. Those few that did break through lay dully in the air with the heaviness of habit. He went on to praise us. He went on to say how he had bragged that “one of the best basketball players at Fisk sank his first ball right here at Lafayette County Training School.” ... The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises. (p.174)

The white man speaks against the black crowd undermining their strength and ability. The white man humiliates blacks saying that black students will be hired in labor oriented jobs only. They lack mental brilliance that is why they cannot perform the work requiring critical thinking.

Maya's discussion of the “common forces of nature (p.265)” foreshadows her journey of survival and how it has overcome adolescence, sexuality, and teenage pregnancy. These obstacles are faced by all African-American women. Angelou writes:

The black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and blacks' lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance. (p.265)

Angelou presents the discriminations and insecurities faced by black women in America and the way they challenge them with the help of their will to act to get equality in the white racist society. The last part of the text deals with Angelou's sense of insecurity on mothering an 'illegitimate' child. But Vivian and her family turn out to be acceptant of the child which also develops self-confidence of Angelou.

Early twentieth century American society was complicated due to racism, gender, and discrimination and slavery system. Many black people had to get separated from their members of the family due to this system. African-American women were taken as inferior and barbaric but whites were superior and civilized. In addition, there

was hierarchy in the naming pattern. According to Burnard (2001), “Every year, slave owners responsible for managing estates were required by American law to submit, slaves and livestock on their prosperities. Whites were listed by firestone and surname; slaves were denoted by modifier referring to his, occupation or ethnicity; and stocks were merely enumerated” (p.329). Name is the identity of an individual. Changing name affects individual’s identity. Whites change Angelou’s name from ‘Marguerite’ to ‘Mary’ do dominate her. This is an unethical act as they change her name without her consent. Black women lack their identity in the prejudiced American society and they struggle a lot to establish themselves as autonomous beings.

Subaltern and Agency

Angelou presents multiple incidents of racism in the text. Black people are not allowed to share even drinking water with the white people. Angelou always stands against the discrimination and subordinations. She does not allow anybody to take advantage of her. Angelou goes against the renaming of African-Americans by the whites. Angelou takes her master’s renaming as “hellish horror of being called out of her name” (p.106). When Angelou realizes that she has been insulted, she rebels by breaking Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite dish. In this regard, Abrams (1999) argues that, “agency manifests itself in various terms of self-definition and self-direction” (p.811). Angelou challenges her subordination and she does not feel the need of following white women’s instructions. Young Angelou does not want to tolerate mistreatment of any kind. She is so much careful about her identity and dignity. Her dignity and pride make her forget about the job and money. When she gets insulted from her employer, she breaks her employer’s favorite piece “china from Virginia” (Angelou, 1969, p.107). This act shows Angelou’s resistance against the discrimination, domination and subordination. Maya got angry with Mrs. Cullinan because she changed her name. This incidence shows how Marguerite expresses her resistance without any hesitation. After few discriminatory names, Mrs. Cullinan correctly pronounces her name, but still she pronounces as Margaret. Maya, with the active resistance on her part, gets her favorite name.

African- American women were dominated and tortured by whites by misinterpreting their names. Black people are given different names by the whites according to their will. Burnard highlights on the names given to African-Americans where white people take black people as the slave and some of the names recorded in white-generated sources. As Burnard (2001) remarks:

An analysis of naming pattern can help to determine the extinct to which African cultural practices were retained and transformed in the movements of Africans to America and an explication of the rules governing the distribution of names shows the way whites slaves and animals were differentiated in America. In

particular, the names given to blacks indicated that white Americans thought Africans as Negroes. (p.325)

African- Americans get their names in the white racist society on the basis of the slave naming pattern followed by the whites. African-American people are not allowed to choose their names and they have to accept the names given to them by the whites. This shows African-Americans' inferior position in a society. African Americans were given bitter nick names by the whites. Angelou challenges these discriminations without any fear to achieve her proper identity in the society.

Maya's interest and effort to join the job interview is not respected by the white secretary street-car company in San Francisco. Coole (2005) argues that, "agency is a necessary ingredient of politics, while eliminating the Cartesian presupposition that have, for example, rendered the agency structure debate irresolvable and supported a subjectivist account of agents that is no longer tenable" (p.136). Angelou goes against the discriminations and spread awareness among all the black people about their subordinated position in the white racist society. Black people master various resistance techniques and they are also forced to do so to overcome their subordination a racist society in America. Angelou writes, "the standard questions reminded me of the necessity for dexterous lying" (p.269). The autobiographer focuses on how she "wrote quickly the fable of Marguerite Johnson, aged nineteen, former companion and driver for Mrs. Annie Henderson (a White Lady) in Stamps, Arkansas" (p.269). Maya gets the job as the street-car conductor and breaks the boundary set for the black women in the racist society. Maya dismantles the racist white society's discourse on black people. Maya's mother helps her lot to achieve her goal. Maya's mother, Vivian Baxter encourages Maya to get the job of her choice. She supports Maya to fight till she was employed as the street-car conductor. Vivian Baxter assures Maya that she is no less beautiful and intelligent than the white people. She also helps Maya to understand her maturing physicality. This encouragement from the family and her group give Angelou deep agency to dismantle various social, racial and political constraints prevalent in America.

Subaltern and Resistance

Black women have questioned and resisted various gender and racial discriminations prevalent in America. They struggle in the society to get rid of them. Angelou gradually develops her confidence to challenge each and every kind of discrimination in American society. She acts confidently to dismantle the discriminations and tortures faced by black women with the help of her ability to act independently. Tamen (2012) believes that resistance is not possible without agency. In this regard Tamen argues, "there are two forms of resistance to hit the weak structures of the

society: overt resistance and covert resistance” (p.12). Overt resistance is obvious whereas covert resistance is subtle. Overt resistance is easily recognizable but covert resistance is hidden as it is not openly displayed. Both overt and covert resistances are tools of social change for the marginalized and subordinated people in the society. Angelou challenges her subordination and she does not feel the need of following white women’s instructions. She writes:

I dropped the empty serving tray. When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, “Mary!” I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor. I could never absolutely describe to Bailey what happened next, because each time I got to the part where she fell on the floor and screwed up her ugly face to cry we burst out laughing. (p.110)

Angelou’s act of breaking the utensils shows her resistance to the dominations of the whites. The act of destroying the white lady’s most prized things shows the threat to her sense of identity. The act of breaking the most valuable utensils of the white lady also shows that Angelou has gained enough strength to challenge white woman’s attempt to take control over her by renaming her. Angelou does not like renaming her and says, “My name wasn’t Mary” (Angelou, p.111). Now, at this stage, Angelou is able to confront the racist and sexist society around her. At the end of the narrative, Angelou is ready to stay in the white world not with hatred but with a pride as a black woman.

When people are self- determined and have strong will to act, they can easily dismantle the inequalities. In this line, bell hooks (1989) Argues that, “individual commitment when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves a new (p.60).” There is one resistance in this narrative that is different from the rest. Through the italicized text, it is shown that Momma directly confronts the dentist and orders him to leave the town as soon as possible:

“I didn’t ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don’t want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown.” “Mrs. Henderson, I can’t get my equipment ...” He was shaking terribly now. “Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be a vegetarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?” The saliva ran down his chin and his eyes filled with tears. “Yes, ma’am Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson.” (p.190)

This text shows Maya's wishes for her grandmother. She wants her grandmother to resist racist dentist. Maya's grandmother does not go for the open confrontation against the racist dentist. Maya realizes that overt resistance is not her Momma's philosophy. According to Maya subtle resistance is not enough. She believes that covert resistance which is basically indirect confrontation cannot respond to racist oppression properly. Angelou chooses outright confrontations to overcome discriminations.

Angelou displays that Momma's act of confronting the white dentist shows very strong approach to dismantle racism. This action shows Momma's active protest against white discrimination in particular and black people's resistance against white supremacy in America. Walker (1983) argues that, "...the struggle to end sexist oppression that focuses on destroying the cultural basis for such domination strengthens other liberation struggles. Individuals who fight for the eradication of sexism without struggles to end racism or classicism while supporting sexist oppression are helping to maintain the cultural basis of all forms of group oppression" (p.177). In the narrative Momma is presented as the person with patience, courage, and silence. She often chooses indirect resistance. Maya dismantles the race barrier and she becomes the street-car operator in San Francisco. She confronts the mistreatment done upon her by the white employer Mrs. Cullinan in an outright manner. Besides, strong and unified black community of stamps shows how African- Americans dismantle oppressive system in America.

Angelou's grandmother also goes for subtle resistance and active protest to dismantle racism and gender discrimination prevalent in America. Momma's active protest can be observed when she confronts white racist dentist. Momma resist white dentist who does not show interest treating Maya's rotten teeth. White dentist abuses her saying, "I do not treat nigra, colored people" (Angelou, p.189) then Momma resists. Angelou writes:

Momma walked in that room as if she owned it. She showed that silly nurse aside with one hand and strode into the dentist's office. He was sitting in his chair, sharpening his mean instruments and putting extra sting into his medicines. Her eyes were blazing like live coals and her arms had doubled themselves in length. He looked up at her just before she caught him by the collar of his white jacket. (p.189)

Momma's resistance begins with passive protest against cruel nature of whites. Her passive protest is followed by outright protest against racial discrimination. She confronts the dentist without any hesitation. This act of resistance from Momma shows that black women have achieved agency to counter discrimination and they are no more under the control of white people in America. African-American women

no more tolerate discriminations, tortures and injustices done upon them by racist whites. Momma's confrontation to dentist shows that black women have achieved solid identity and they can live their life the way they like to do. They are getting health and educational facilities like that of white people in America. This proves that black women in America have become successful to transform themselves from victim of racism to self-dignified women capable to challenge discriminations. They have developed themselves as autonomous beings getting equal right in the society. Now, they live in the American society not with hatred but with pride as they are taken as the valuable assets of it.

Conclusion

The research concludes that Angelou's autobiography is filled with African-American women's struggle and their voice against their subordination in the society that are unheard and ignored. Maya Angelou's autobiography presents the discrimination, domination and injustice imposed upon African-American women by the whites in the racist American Society. Angelou refuses patriarchy and racism in America. She suffered throughout her life due to the extreme form of racism, dominance of patriarchy and slavery system. The autobiography is concerned with the struggle of black women and their search for liberty. Angelou gives voice to the voiceless in America. She presents black women as strong humans who are able to resist discriminations and turn their victimization into triumph. Angelou shows the necessity of redefining subalterns' identity. She openly presents her suffering and brutal treatment of whites towards African-Americans and it becomes the story of resistance. The autobiography emphasizes on poor African American women trapped in the socio-cultural boundaries and their emergence as a dignified woman through resistance. They resist slavery, racism and their subordination fearlessly in America. Moreover African- American women use their agency to dismantle discriminations done upon them and transform them as the dignified women capable to rewrite biases. The research suggests that the identity of the subaltern always remains in the constant process of change and redefining their identity is essential to connect subalterns to the mainstream. The research encourages Nepalese researchers to carry out various research works on exploring Dalits, Adivasis and Janajatis' agency in Nepal to redefine their identity.

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