



Issues From Subaltern Autobiographies: Maya Angelou's 'I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings' And Bama's 'Karukku'

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is going to deal with two autobiographies Maya Angelou's 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' and Bama's 'Karukku'. Both are the first autobiographies of their writers representing their community's voice. These deal with social issues like religion, gender and racial or casteist discrimination. The present paper explores self and ethnic identity and focuses on the causative role of individual in constructing ethnic identity. It will also investigate how their writers negotiate Black female and Dalit female identity. We are going to deal with notion of sociological approach from Bouvoir, Gupta, Wood and Feldman's perspective for analysis of texts.

KEYWORDS : feminism, patriarchy, marginalisation, social-construction, self-identity.

Theoretical Framework

In the literary field of research, gender and race issues have occupied an important place of investigation. Sociologists like Gupta, Wood and Feldman agree that gender is constructed rather than made earlier. As Simon de Beauvoir says about woman in *The Second Sex* "One is not born a woman, but becomes one (Cvikava)." They believe that individuals are naïve of their creation. Social theory examines the social structure how it works and affects social behavior. Unger emphasizing the idea of society as artifact argues that "classical social theory was born proclaiming that society is made and imagined and not the expression of an underlying natural order, but at the same time its capacity was checked by the equally prevalent ambition to create law-like explanation of history and social development (Ottoh-agede, 23)" Social identity theory seeks to examine the truth behind the things. How individual perception is created and directed. What factors are responsible for social change and which inhibit it. How society is constructed and imagined by men. The same is applicable to race or caste identity created in society. Therefore, it won't be inappropriate to argue that "social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong while others are marked out as trespasser ... who is politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed as being out of place" (Kumar, 17).

Hence, political space of global politics is not simply a domain in which we speak out according to our wishes. Instead, it is the space in which certain subjects are produced, while other subjects are rendered as mute and unintelligible. So exclusion, be it of caste, race or gender is the result of what Judith Butler says, "a normative violence." This hegemonic framework of normative violence works in such way that enables certain actors to speak while silencing and marginalizing others. So these victims themselves become facilitators of its approval. Maya Angelou and Bama bring the truth of identity politics before us through the perception of these subalterns. Social identity theory will help in providing my argument that society is constructed by men rather than being made earlier and how individuals have the power to create self by life examples of these two writers.

A committed writer always brings to light social and ethical issues through his work. The autobiographical works of Maya Angelou and Bama Faustina explore a range of social problems related to their race, caste, gender inequality and homelessness. They create awareness in readers through their works by describing the suffering of the marginalized men and women of their respective society. Though they belong to different background yet we find commonality of themes in their autobiographies. That shows how they pave their way to life. The female selfhood of these writers deals with cultural issues and political structure in the U.S.A and South India. These autobiographies also reveal how caste, race, class and gender affect identity formation of these two writers for political representation.

Maya Angelou is most famous as a writer, editor, essayist, playwright and poet. As a civil right activist, Angelou worked for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Though she has tried her hands in many genres, but she is best known for her six autobiographies. These are 'I

Know Why the Caged Bird Sings', 'Gather Together in my Name', 'Singin and Swingin and Getting Merely like Christmas', 'The Heart of a Woman (1981)', 'All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes (1986)', and 'A Song Flung upto Heaven (2002)'. All these series of autobiographies cover different phases of her life.

The voice of the voiceless African American community and the African American Women is the main concern in the serial autobiographies of Maya Angelou. In her autobiography 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings', she records her marginalized experience and double consciousness. This recording leads her to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Her autobiography acts as resistance to those who denied the possibility of full life to the people in the Southern part of America. Angelou recalls her experience in Stamps Arkansas- a black segregated area in the Southern part of America. She expresses her life's experience from childhood to adulthood in her first serial autobiography 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970)'. The Caged bird refers to the trapped, helpless, imprisoning condition of the black self. Their political and hard life is the direct consequences of the political aspect of racism. The truth of this statement can be understood from what Momma says:

In Stamps the separation was so complete that most black children did not really, absolutely know that what Whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and ragged against the well dresses (Caged 25).

Though Mrs. Handerson (Momma) is respected by all the Blacks, she is mocked at by the White girls. This enraged the writer a lot. The Whites laugh at Momma for introducing herself as Mrs. Handerson. They feel embarrassed at calling a Negro woman with the title Mrs. They also have habits of calling Negroes in derogatory terms such as nigger, jigs, dinges, black, crows, boots and spoons. The interiorized inferiority and the fear are captured in the Joe Louis-harry Weight championship match. She describes the desperate mood of the community in the following words:

If Joe were lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than apes. True that were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty and unlucky stupid and worst of all that god himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawer of water, forever and ever, world without end." (Caged, 135)"

But at Joe's victory she feels proud and identifies herself with the community. At the end she proudly states "I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race (Caged 184)." Maya cites another instance of insult when she reproached the White dentist Dr. Lincoln for medical help. He insulted the whole race by saying, "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's (189)." Hegemonic culture of the dominant race altered the political, social and economical policies of the land to marginalize and segregate.

gate the African American. Prejudice and discrimination, Marguerite, the narrator, finds even in San Francisco as in Stamps. This is revealed through the incidence of the White woman who refused to sit beside the Negro civilian on the streetcar. Her reason was that being " a draft dodger who was a Negro as well (214)."The harrowing, hysterical historical experiences are documented by Maya Angelou.

During her childhood Angelou's consciousness is conditioned by sense of otherness because of her black color. White color becomes a synonym of beauty for her. Color becomes a bigger concern for these Black women with physical appearance and attractiveness. And a negative self image of being black takes place in her mind. This negativity is further intensified by her parental rejection. Her parents' divorce and separation from her brings her sense of loss and emotional displacement. In such circumstances Momma's protection and Baily's love become a great source of relief for her during her childhood. However, intrusion of both parents snaps these supports. Two factors, lack of emotional bond with her mother and being assailed by her beauty, lead her to estrangement. She considers herself ugly which makes her handicap inwardly leading her to lack of confidence and submissiveness. At the age of eight, she was raped by Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend. Here we see because of her gender, she becomes more vulnerable in comparison to her brother. This trauma of rape leads her to muteness of six years. Her rape also exposes the black male's cruelest game of violence of the Black female. As a spokesperson for Black feminism she asserts that "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 Black lack of power (Cage 273)."

Her speech is regained by Mrs. Flower through reciting the poetry. Later in San Francisco her dance and drama classes teach her to be less self-conscious. Through her journey from Stamps to California, St. Louis and San Francisco, she gains different experiences of life. Her trip to Mexico and handling her father's car down a treacherous mountain at night awakens her confidence in her potentiality. Her surviving a month in junkyard with other displaced pears brings her tolerance and strength to face the situations. And at last her job as first Black street car conductress in the restricted Whites' area, breaks the color line. It demonstrates her gaining strength and confidence. It is also an instance of Black person confronting racist white. This success leads her further into the political arena of resistance against oppression of Blacks.

Just months before the high school, she becomes engaged in a sexual encounter to prove her sexuality to herself and becomes pregnant. Her unplanned pregnancy is the result of society's insistence on heterosexuality. Vivian (her mother) supports her. It shows that after enduring centuries, illegitimate children due to master raping the slave women, Black Americans have traditionally become more compassionate in matters of sexual infallibility. But Maya's education enables her to face the consequence of her decision with endurance rather than being shattered before them. The decision of bringing up a fatherless child needs ample courage and self-confidence which Maya shows. Her philosophy of life lies in the words, " From disappointments I gradually ascended the emotional ladder of haughty indignation and finally to that state of stubbornness where the mind is locked like the jaws of an enraged bull dog.(Cage 266). The search of self leads her from ignorance to enlightenment, silence to speech from racial and patriarchal oppression and suppression to liberation. Despite being burdened by racism and sexism, she shows herself capable of forging positive personal and racial identity. At last she emerges as formidable character. Maya is transformed from a black rather unattractive, graceless, but a dreamy child to an independent young woman capable of facing racial prejudice and life's challenges . This transformation in her character places the novel within the favourite American literary themes of the 60's and 70's.

As a Dalit writer, Bama's first literary work is her autobiography 'Karukku'(1992) which means the searing edge of palmyra leaves. Here she focuses on caste based atrocities in her village, discrimination within the church, women's life and finally resigning from the post of the nunnerly. Through her autobiography she registers her protesting voice of a Catholic Christian woman who denounced the life in the convent. Bama started to write at a moment of personal crisis. Political and social atmosphere motivated her to write.

Bama stresses in her interview with Nair," My activism does not leap beyond the pages of my book. For me, writing was to liberate Dalits, women and children (Nair)." Both Maya Angelou and Bama are concerned with the suffering of their community. Karukku is a powerful critique of the Indian civil society, educational system, the church and bureaucracy. Revealing the abhorrence with which the Dalits are held by the so called upper castes , Bama writes, "How it is that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from some repulsive disease. Wherever we go, we suffer the same blows and pain"(Karukku,24).

The village Kadmapati which Bama describes and that represents South India is divided along caste, class and communal lines. Different religious and caste groups are there and upper and lower communities live separately in different parts of the village. As Bama says:

But they kept themselves to their part of the village and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had worked to do there. But they never ever came to our parts. The post office, the Pachayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the Church, the schools- all these stood in their street. So why would they need to come to our area? Besides, there was a big school in the Naiker street which was meant only for the upper-class children.(Karukku 6)

This shows how upper caste people keep all main institutions in their part. Whenever these Paraiya and lower caste people go to that side, they are looked upon. This can be seen as a symbolic representation of the wide gulf within the village community.

The harassment, both mental and physical under which these go through, is revealed by Bama in 'Karukku' when she tells the incidents of her childhood. Bama says in 'Karukku' "Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use us for cheap labour (p.16)." Even the headmaster is not free from caste prejudice. One day he accused Bama of stealing coconut from the school campus and told her, "You have shown us your true nature as a Paraiya (p.19)." When she approached the priest for a resolution of this problem his first response was, "After all you are from Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it (Karukku, 19)." The upper caste women refuse to sit with the Paraiya girls in the bus. The humiliating experience made her aware of her Paraiya identity from the childhood. The thought of inferiority is instilled in their mind from the childhood. These instances of humiliation at the hand of headmaster, the priest and the upper caste women represent the voices of the society. All these attitudes and prejudices are socially constructed. These are constructed in favour of dominants .By making them believe their inferiority and superiority of dominant caste, they want to rule over them. They keep them in subhuman condition for their own benefit. In this way politics of identity is played with them by hegemonic culture.

The Dalit woman is Dalit among Dalits. Brutal patriarchy is a major theme dealt in Bama's Dalit feminist writing. They work from dawn to dusk yet their hard work is not recognized. They suffer at the hand of the police, by Naiker, and by their husband at the home. For the same work they are not given equal wages. Women are not allowed to go to the cinema because, they say: "This was because the boys of the other communities who would pull our women about if they were seen in the cinema hall (Karukku 58)." This instance reveals Dalit women's vulnerability in their society which they experience. Patriarchy determines the value of culture and attitudes of male and female in society. Games like 'kabaddi' and 'marbles' are meant for boys. But girls are not allowed to play boys' games. They are taught the norms of being a female. So they play games like cooking or getting married. A boy child has to work in the field and a girl child has to look after the house. Through this division of labour their attitudes are moulded accordingly in the society. These attitudes favour men. Sexual difference is socially constructed not biologically based.

Bama's decision to remain unmarried and becoming nun to serve people is an assertion and affirmation of her feminine sensibility. In a Dalit lower community it is not easy to lead a single life for a woman. In contrast to Maya's lack of parental support and insecurity Bama gets parental love and family security in her childhood. Maya Angelou's narrator and Bama's narrator's position in comparison to other

community's women is better as they get job after education

Religion is a major theme in both writer's autobiographies. In 'I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing' faith and healing power of religion are major themes of the book. The whole book contains frequent references to religion. Maya's grandmother is a constant presence in the church. In her autobiography church is an element of support and solace for the African American culture and contributed to the shaping of their self-consciousness

While Bama's 'Karukku' points out how the church distorts the real teaching of Christ. The priest and the nuns frighten the Dalit children telling stories of Satan and Evil. After reading the Bible she understands the meaning of the teaching of Christ, "I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed it, nor pointed it out that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices oppose falsehood never countenance inequality (Karukku, 89)." Oppressed Dalits are taught meaningless ways about humility, obedience, gentleness, patience. She does not find religion as a source of relief in the hands of nuns and priests. Her leaving of convent becomes an act of resistance where she had a false existence.

Angelou experiences displacement in 'I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing' and takes a journey from Stamp to Franscisco. This journey explains her life from innocence to maturity to self-empowerment and self-assertion. In the same way we find Bama's journey from community life to the convent and then back to the community. This also brings a change in her personality and perception towards life and people in society. She shows her assertion of individuality in her decision of leaving the convent.

Both express their female consciousness in their autobiography. Their female consciousness only after testifying to the resilience over personal adversity becomes the muse of many women in the African American and Dalit female literature. Both project their protagonist who is in search of their identity and in this search faces displacement and dispossession. They learn to face life challenge without the help of other. Both writer's autobiographies reveal collective consciousness of the Black and Dalit community and especially women's predicament in America and in India.

However the point that they establish through their life's experience is that individuals are the architect of their lives. Though the society prescribes rules, yet the individuals, the female in particular, have the right to reconstruct their identities in the society that they are part of. They can reconstruct their identity either as assertive women or naïve female. Their journey leads them from naivety to self-actualization and realization.

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