

Resisting Patriarchy: A Study of Maya Angelou's Life-Writings

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Abstract:

Maya Angelou is a celebrated poet, writer and artist in America. She has contributed her entire life for the cause of Blacks (especially Black women) in America. Angelou in her life writings articulated woman's aspirations, her soul-searching and inconsistencies, her professional endeavours, her sexual radicalism, her disapproval of tradition, her newly formed relationship to man and her changed vision of motherhood. She has presented various modes of resistance to patriarchal norms. The paper focuses on how Angelou has used resistance to overcome patriarchal humiliation and discrimination. The paper takes Angelou's first three autobiographies for analysis namely, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name* and *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas*.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Gender Discrimination, Marginalization, Black Americans etc.

In a patriarchal society, woman is defined as a marginalized creature. She is never an autonomous self; but just incidental, the essential and an appendage to man. As long as she fulfils this condition she becomes powerless and causes a serious threat to a person's liberation. It is the patriarchal indoctrination that shapes woman's psyche and makes her believe that she is really the big other. De Beauvoir writes, "Women are a female to the extent that she feels herself as such" (69). She means that "woman can be defined by her consciousness under circumstances dependent upon the society of which she is the member" (80). Literary texts express the authors' experiences and reveal the truth about their world and they provide the readers access to universal dimension of human nature. Women's experiences, both domestic and social, were used as a resource for critical discussion, making it possible for the women to share dimensions of their lives they had kept secret or felt too insecure to confront or even recognize. The only solution to these problems of Black women is the 'resistance'.

To a varying degree, Maya Angelou has thematized the expediency of self-representation, protested against the limitations of women's lives and emphasized on textuality

and its uneasy relationship with patriarchy, creating the space for resistance. The process is marked by a desire of women to regenerate herself. In our socio-cultural value system, such acts may be conceptualized as transgressions but some of these transgression practices like cross-dressing, crossing the boundaries from one sphere of activity to another, remaining unmarried, adulterous love and economic independence do not always remain suspect. In time some of them cease to be viewed as transgressions and become socially accepted acts. In the present context women has become the site of contending ideologies and women writers like Angelou are confronted with the profound paradox of maintaining the balance between progressive vision and cultural specificity.

Talking about the representation of gender and culture in the context of African-American writing, Maya Angelou asserts that one may transcend the body and its desire or ignore it, but one cannot get out of it. Angelou portrays her protagonists from silent sufferers of oppression to optimism by allowing them to step out of the patriarchal control, satisfying the claims of their sexuality and savour freedom and construct narratives of resistance. Angelou through her works proves that individual consciousness help deconstruct the hegemonic notions of power and renegotiate and reconstruct the power relations in order to resist patriarchy. Angelou in her works lets her women characters experience the baffling and worrying silence within, get a glimpse of their inner being and empower themselves to confront the power politics, comprehend the situation and get control on their lives. Their intention to assert and rebel is clearly evident in that and this is how the writings resisting patriarchy are born.

Resistance cannot be performed in a vacuum rather is governed and controlled by socio-cultural constructs because theorizing relations or showing gendered seclusion without contextualizing them would mean running the risk of reductivity. Maya Angelou in her volumes of autobiography embodies three modes of resistance—silence, rage and balanced rejection of patriarchy. The experiences of Black women reveal the condition of the marginalized section of society which is deprived of economic, political or religious power. They are often segregated and exploited by the men both from their own community i.e. Black Americans and the White Americans. Their exploitation is also communicated through physical violence which wounded their psyche and prepared them for struggle for self-definition. Her autobiography may serve as an example of how an African-American gendered subaltern attempts to survive male prejudices at social and psychological levels, even in the absence of any power and authority.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings reflects the struggle of every Black girl growing up in American hostile environment. Maya Angelou says, “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl and being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult” (5). Angelou is concerned with the question of what it means to be a Black in America and that too of a weaker sex? Angelou's autobiography contains a series of lessons about resisting oppression. The series she describes leads Angelou, as the protagonist, from helpless rage and hatred to forms of subtle resistance. She makes her life tolerable for herself by developing a strong feminist sense of gender solidarity and thus destabilizing the victimizing male structure. By rejecting social and cultural norms and trying to survive the odds, Angelou attempts to create a female space in the male dominated society, thus achieving

freedom from patriarchal socio-cultural structure in the society. The self-determined Angelou becomes a role model for the whole community of Black women.

Angelou struggles hard in America to break the patriarchal norms with resistance as a powerful tool in the process. She rejects every male ideology by questioning the constructed social and cultural norms and values. By reworking and narrating her own story, Angelou shows the procreative power of the narrative form to renovate itself and make women the subject of 'her-story' or history. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the use of language and an assertive tone have the loud energy of a fundamentally determinant subject who has taken upon herself the radical and intricate responsibility to dismantle the structure of ideology that has silenced females and to replace the male voice with an authoritative female voice. Angelou through her life and narratives has made the silenced gendered subaltern speak for herself and get heard by crossing the barriers of gender and culture.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* challenges the essentialist conception of womanhood. She asserts that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (xix). She says that woman has no value or identity of her own—she is defined in relation to the man— she is defined as what man is not. De Beauvoir states that, "thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being . . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xvi). In the autobiography also Maya is defined in relation to her step-father Mr. Freeman as his daughter. She does not exist as Maya but possess her identity defined by the patriarchy.

Maya is raped at the age of eight by her mother's husband/boyfriend-Mr. Freeman. She has been abused many times in these eight years mostly by the racial haters but this very incident of abuse is of a more serious nature which leaves her silenced for whole five years. She is physically abused by a member of her own Black community just because she is a Black girl. As Angelou herself mentioned at the very beginning of the autobiography, it is quite destined to be woman in racist and sexist society of America. Black women in America face dual threat from the white and the male community. Women of colour are abused and harassed by the patriarchy, be it White men or Black men.

Maya considers Mr. Freeman as her father though not biological. He proves to be the worst father figure since he rapes his own stepdaughter Maya. She unaware of Mr. Freeman's intentions, searches for love and warmth of a father in him. Angelou describes:

One morning she got out of bed for an early errand, and I feel a sleep again. But I woke to a pressure, a strange feeling in my left leg. It was too soft to be a hand and it wasn't the touch of the clothes. Whatever it was, I hadn't encountered the sensation all the years of sleeping with Momma. It didn't move and, I was too startled to. I turned my head a little to the left to see if Mr. Freeman was awake and gone, but his eyes were open and both hands were above the cover. I know as if I had always known, it was his "thing" on my leg (*Caged Bird* 72)

Maya is unable to speak for complete five years after the incident but Mrs. Flowers comes to her rescue. She helps Maya learn resistance as a solution to come out of the trauma of patriarchy i.e. rape.

Through this rape incident Maya Angelou works out an entire patriarchal structure that has gendered the whole value-system. One questions the efficacy of a man/a male shunning out his responsibility (of protecting his child) and setting out in search of sexual favor only to be found in his own step-daughter, an eight year old child. He is not punished for the crime and this is how the male is overlooked in his abandonment, his position is exonerated and the burden of the rape falls upon the girl just because she is a Black girl. Gradually, Angelou gives us a peep into the life of the whole generation of silenced, sufferers, tolerant Black women who choose to resist when life becomes optionless and unbearable like in case of Maya.

Mrs. Flowers helps Maya in budding her mental capabilities so that she can understand life better and analyse the world. She introduces her to the world of resistance—resistance from gender oppression. In *The Masks of Maya Angelou: Discovered, Discarded, and Designed* critic Collette Simone Mangeau-Marshall defines the bonding between Mrs. Flowers and Maya as:

Maya's and Mrs Flowers connection through the world of muteness, loneliness, and isolation awakens to the powers of the written and the spoken word. Words Maya comes to discover give her personal power. Mrs. Flowers represents a significant treasure that Maya discovers in her quest of identity. Now empowered with a voice, Maya can create through speaking, listening, reading, writing, sharing, expanding, and reflecting on language- singing her song. She returns to speaking with a sense of the power of language both to console her for her powerlessness and to give her a new power: this caged bird has learned to sing. (34)

Therefore, Maya learns resistance from Mrs. Flowers and no longer feels herself inferior to anyone else. Mrs. Flowers becomes a symbol of resistance, of her factual power and helps Maya to regain her self-confidence. She bridges the gap between Maya's inner world and her outer world after the rape. She assists her in gaining the power of words and helps her sing her painful songs.

The oppression that began in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* takes on a much sharper focus in *Gather Together in My Name*. To be sure, Angelou is still concerned with the questions of what it means to be Black and female in America and exactly where she fits into the scheme of things. But her development is reflective of a particular type of Black woman, located at a particular moment of history and subjected to certain social forces that assault the black woman with unusual ferocity. Thus, when Angelou arrives in Los Angeles she complains bitterly that her mother "hadn't the slightest idea that not only was I not a woman, but what passed for my mind was animal instinct. Like a tree or a river, I merely responded to the winds and the tides" (*Gather Together* 23).

This sequel of Maya Angelou's autobiography is all about resisting patriarchy, breaking patriarchal socio-cultural norms and providing Black females a space in the White and male dominated world. Maya now sets her foot off in search of self-identity. This discourse of Maya's

fight for herself and many other Black girls like her and her refusal to be caged in patriarchy, is in itself a re-examination of history and an apt reminder of the resistance to patriarchy. Throughout the narrative, Maya is brave, repulsive, resistant, tenacious and hopeful in a way which transcends the unrealistic optimism of many contemporary autobiographies.

In San Francisco, Maya falls in love with a married man who promises to marry her after divorcing his first wife, pushes her into prostitution. Of all her relationships with men, her relationship with L. D. Tolbrook is the worst who takes advantage of her innocence and immaturity. He lures Maya into becoming a prostitute for his sake, a shortest way to earn money for him. Professing that he owes money to some hardened criminals who can even kill him if he does not return their money back, Tolbrook convinces the “innocent” Maya to turn into prostitution for his cause. Maya’s co-workers are clever and smart women who know the trade well. Clara, Maya’s boss-a pimp, advises Maya of how to work professionally, satisfy her customers and how to act and talk when she is with a man. Clara promises that if she is good in her profession and attracts more customers, L. D. (Daddy) will get her drugs and cocaine to smoke—a life of freedom from all worldly affairs and into pleasure. She gets suspicious of Tolbrook from the conversation of her fellow prostitutes and starts suspecting her lover, from the way the whores’ converse, that Tolbrook is really a pimp, someone who is hiring her out for his own profit and whose intentions Maya mistook as love for her. Getting suspicious of him Maya discloses Bailey how she met L. D. Tolbrook and falls for her and also how she is helping him earn money to pay his debt. Bailey gets enraged and forces her to quit the whorehouse and prostitution and orders her to warn Tolbrook that her brother Bailey is after him. On her brother’s advice and with silent resistance to the gendered abusive relationship she moves on in life.

After Maya walks out of prostitution and an abusive relationship she comes in contact with Mr. Troubador Martin. He introduces Maya to the world of drugs, takes Maya to a drug house where a lot many people are smoking marijuana and takes her on an unnerving tour of the underworld of drug addiction. Troubador makes her watch while he shoots up, makes her watch as the needle punctures a scab and “rich yellow pus” runs down his arm (180). Maya’s resistance and refusal, at Troub’s advice to taste and do hard drugs marks the end of her irresponsibility and the inauguration of new standards that help safeguard her and her son’s survival. Resistance emerges as a powerful tool which saves her from the menace of drug abuse.

In her next sequel *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting Merry like Christmas* Maya faces patriarchal hatred once again when she marries Tosh Angeou, a White man whose surname she uses. Maya’s mother, Vivian Baxter warns her against marrying Tosh because he is “poor white man” (24). Maya though, evades that problem by telling herself Tosh is really Greek, not White. The marriage is initially satisfying, but eventually Maya begins to resent Tosh’s demands that she stay at home and be the perfect housewife, the provider of suitable meals and “fabulous jelly desserts” (26). She is also bothered by what she senses as disapproval from her friends because of the interracial marriage. As Tosh takes greater control of her life, Maya, who “mistakes prison for security” (83) does little to challenge his authority. She becomes frustrated with his typical patriarchal attitude that women should completely identify themselves with their husbands and through them identify themselves with the world; should not step out of home and work and that

it is man's responsibility to earn for her and take care of her. The hegemonic structure is scared of making 'public' what is "private" because it's a threat for them if women step out of their houses and become independent. Then, after so many restrictions from her husband when life becomes suffocating she breaks free from the shackles of a meaningless marriage. Her silent resistance begins with her unenviable position at home.

Just before the break-up of their short marriage, Angelou conveys resentment of her typical patriarchal treatment by Toshi Angelou in terms of him being a patriarch and she a woman born to suffer at the hands of patriarchy. She says, "Who the hell was he? A White-Sheeted Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan? I wouldn't have a . . . man talk to me in that tone of voice. . . ." (36). After the divorce, although Toshi leaves her with whatever little they had accumulated, she complains bitterly that, "Again a White man had taken a Black woman's body and left her hopeless, helpless and alone" (38). Thus, Angelou's first marriage became just another adventure and betrayal. Using resistance as a powerful tool she comes out of the clutches of marriage-a patriarchal institution to exploit women. Therefore it would not be wrong to say that Angelou's autobiographies provide its reader with resistance strategies for survival and self-assertion.

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