



Divulgence of racial apartheid and segregation in Subalterns: An overview of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Dr. Geeta Sharma, Rsvika Tripathi

Dept. of English, Akal College of Art and Social Science, Eternal University, Baru Sahib, Sirmour, India

Received: 11 Nov 2023; Received in revised form: 09 Dec 2023; Accepted: 16 Dec 2023; Available online: 25 Dec 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— In her renowned autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou provides a detailed account of the hardships faced by racial subalterns. Born during the Jim Crow Laws Era, Maya experienced profound racial segregation in Stamps, Arkansas, leading to animosity between Americans and subalterns (Blacks). As a subaltern and African American, Maya encountered oppressive patriarchal dominance, with limited opportunities for females in a male-dominated society. Subaltern women, constrained by societal norms, found their dreams curtailed and suffered from the dominance of their counterparts. The marginalized status of African Americans in society serves as a thematic backdrop. Despite these challenges, Maya shattered the glass ceiling and emerged as the voice for racial subalterns in her community, achieving the historic feat of becoming the first subaltern woman to serve as the conductor of a cable car.



Keywords— Subaltern, Racial segregation, Female subjugation, Racism

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Subaltern emerged as a distinction between social classes. This term was coined by Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci in 1926, as it is recorded in his book *Prison Notebooks*. The term Subaltern is referred to the groups of people of inferior rank or low class, who are socially and politically suppressed under the supremacy of dominant classes. A subaltern class is a group that exists within a dominant hegemonic order but does not have its political place and whose views are not taken into account. When Gramsci theorizes hegemony, he suggests that hegemony is established through the willing consent of people. Subaltern people are not part of a hegemonic project; their opinions are not even heard, but the project of politics is to bring them to hoist or to retrieve their history which is erased or silenced under the dominant history. The conditions under the hegemonic control led to the division of power over the colonized social groups. Post-colonialism, the aftermath of colonization in certain parts of the world as varied as South America, India, West Indies, and Africa.

For example, the Indian subcontinent suffered from partition after colonization, which forced the continent to part into two different nations: India and Pakistan. This was the period when the colonized were being subjugated by the colonizer and were pushed into marginalization towards invisibility. Subordination based on class, caste, gender, and age was prevalent in South Asian society. In the larger structure of colonialism, there is always official history, mostly written by Europeans. The entire project of 'Subaltern Studies' is the reclamation of the silenced history. Subaltern groups can work as a collective and can exist as groups but if we discuss Gramsci, the one who has coined the term 'subaltern', they do not have politics or a political voice. Gayatri Spivak exclusively talks about the term subaltern in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak". She firmly counters the issues of self-representation and political strategies. She brought up the struggling histories of the underclass, women, and postcolonial subjects. Colonization also affected the specific race (Black) of African people who were colonized and were transported, enslaved, and made

diasporic by slavery. During colonization, African Americans had gone through a devastating phase, which especially affected women. By definition, a race is a group or a community of human beings formed on common physical attributes and shared social qualities and is generally viewed as a distinct society. The rise of colonialism was pertinent, particularly in race because division in human society was based upon racial origin and colonialist supremacy that took over dominant subjects.

According to Immanuel Kant's, German phrase for races of mankind in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) used, "this term explicitly refers to biological or physical distinguishing features of human races. Though race is defined on the scientific grounding and application, the term is regarded as an established means of explaining the simplest models of human variations". Racial segregation in the United States of America had enforced the separation of Native Americans and racial subaltern people because of the African-American's roots in slavery. Slavery was still considered a legal practice in South America, although; the American Civil War had put an end to this brutal practice. Even after the civil war, the situation for African Americans was not favourable. The American ruling class of the United States promoted segregation under the deceiving slogan of 'separate but equal'. Separate schools were established for Subalterns and Americans, such as bathrooms, restaurants, hospitals, drinking fountains, prisons, churches, theatres, and even separate cemeteries. The racist laws that made it possible were the infamous Jim Crow laws that were not interested in equality, but in keeping the racial subaltern population in an inferior position.

II. DIVULGENCE OF RACIAL APARTHEID AND SEGREGATION IN SUBALTERNES

Minority races face the issues of dispossession, such as Subalterns (African- American) in the United States. Blacks are considered to be a stigmatized group and are controlled by affluent groups of societies. Natives pushed to the suburbs of the country, for their race identification are called subaltern people. Subaltern is the term used for minority groups due to their status and rank in the society. Spivak has targeted "the concept of a constituted subordinate ability of the subject to express her political concerns". (Spivak 111) Her thesis on subaltern subjectivity is that there is no act of disagreement or struggle because of the minority group. This subjectivity arises outside the dominant discourse as this has control over the language and intellectual conceptions, whereby the subaltern voice speaks. In this study, the researcher will bring out the issues addressed by Maya Angelou in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged*

Bird Sings through the study of the terms subalternity and displacement. "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay..." (Angelou 3)

From the start of her work, Maya Angelou starts her autobiography by saying, "What are you looking at me for? "I didn't come to stay. This clearly states the devastating condition of the family destruction and displacement". (Manora 359-375) This condition of the family refers to subalternity because Africans were already uprooted from their homeland and now again the family had to go through this devastating situation. The reason subalterns decided to move from their homeland searching for a better life because they were already staying in the colonized country. These subaltern people were already suppressed, but unfavorable conditions in America made them more oppressed. An autobiography delves into the concept of 'home' as well as the sorrow and perplexity of relocation, and it does not merely relate to Maya Angelou's personal experience, but also to the historical experience of Subaltern Americans (African-American) in general. Displacement is thus demonstrated to be an integral aspect of growing up subject to racism. Even though Arkansas is Bailey's home, he is compelled to leave due to severe prejudice. Relocation and the difficulty in getting a proper home to stay in play such a large role in the lives of the book's characters, who are thoroughly concerned with politics and the history of subalterns' oppression. African Americans are still dealing with the effects of slavery and finding a home in America, is proving particularly tough. An autobiography gives us the true picture of the treatment faced by subaltern people. They were treated with inhumane behaviour and hate by racists. The following quotation from the book talks about how scared the people of Stamps were of the Ku Klux Klan. It was because of the supremacy of the dominant group and the hooliganism they had spread in the community.

"If on Judgement Day I were summoned by St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be-sheriff's act of kindness, I would be unable to say anything on his behalf. His confidence that my uncle and every other Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear. Without waiting for Momma's thanks, he rode out of the yard, sure that things were as they should be and that was a gentle squire, saving those deserving serfs from the laws of the land, which he condoned." (Angelou 20)

Ku Klux Klan is a hate group of American supremacists living in South America, spreading hate against African Americans, Jews, Latinos, Asian Americans, Catholics, and Native Americans. It is hurtful to come across the kind of hate subalterns become reconciled to. They literally terrorized the subalterns taking full advantage of their status in society due to which Momma; Maya's

grandmother had to put Uncle Willie in a safe place by hiding him in the potato bin. Uncle Willie was disabled and had encountered much more oppression and discrimination due to his disability. His persona exemplifies how many forms of racism and biases he must have faced that complicate a person's identity and experience in numerous ways. Lynching was common for Americans because they thought they could do anything they wanted just because they had power. It is unfortunate to know that in the 21st century, the concept of racism still lingers in America. Americans have not yet overcome the hatred towards African Americans. The book goes beyond just documenting and chronicling racial disparities between Americans and African Americans. It had established a complicated hierarchy between light-skinned and dark-skinned individuals inside the community. Maya is indeed jealous of the town's other children, who either are bi-racial or the offspring of light-skinned parents, and in her opinion, they are superior to her, since she is dark-skinned. Because of this unwanted feeling, Maya develops insecurity about her skin color.

She thinks that she looks ugly because of the colour of her skin. Maya talks about the present given to her by her parents on Christmas Eve. A present from one's parents is usually a reason for joy and celebration. Maya and Bailey, on the other hand, see it as a reflection of their relocation. All they can think about is why they were thrown away as youngsters. It's reasonable that Maya is afraid of being transported. She had worked hard to make herself comfortable in Stamps, and the prospect of having to relocate scares her. She wanders between places, much like thousands of other subaltern youngsters discussed at the beginning of an autobiography, searching for a safe and acceptable environment. These painful glimpses of home and society are once again rendered inaccessible, and racism finds its way into Bailey's existence; tempting and excluding him at the same time. Fate does not seem to be on Bailey's side. It appears that he can only travel the train if there is someone with him because of the danger he has experienced. Maya met an elegant woman named Mrs. Bertha Flowers after she was cruelly assaulted by her mother's friend. Maya was so affected by that violent assault that she decided to keep quiet and stayed depressed most of the time. "Maya felt that Mrs. Flowers was her first lifeline after going through this depressing situation. Mrs. Bertha Flowers was a woman of grace. She was a well-educated and aristocratic African-American woman in the Stamps. Though she belonged to a subaltern community, she carried her aura in a very confident manner". (Widjayanti 143-148) Mrs. Flower's persona was an answer to the racist community who thought that subaltern people couldn't do anything to compare to them. With so much negativity

around her, she still promoted education and also taught Maya the value of books and said that there is a sanctuary in books, novels, and poems that may follow and soothe her wherever she goes, and she takes this move better than any other so far. Maya's sole connection to 'home' is through books. African Americans may not face problems like slavery and poverty, but they are still pressured by the persecution upon them in the form of mental assault and violence. Today, one may witness the changes in the African-American communities themselves. Upper-class African Americans may not have to experience what a poor subaltern has to go through. Poor-class Africans still express frustration and rage towards the paradoxical system they live under. The upper-class Africans experience less discrimination than their counterparts. All in all, it cannot be said that racial segregation has been fully eradicated from America because we come across many incidents that are related to racial discrimination.

Separation within subordinate races like subalterns (blacks) and Americans is known as segregation. Subalterns are the ones who were extremely affected by the segregation. African Americans have grown accustomed to receiving biased treatment over the dominant class. In America, African Americans cannot socialize anywhere they wish, but they must still satisfy all the requirements of American citizens as the victims of the government law which treated their right to equal public duty as a hegemonic class. Discrimination against African Americans is a challenging topic in America. For instance, segregation laws rob black people of their human and citizenship rights. Nationality, racial and ethnic discrimination, regional discrimination, religious discrimination, sex and gender discrimination are all examples of discrimination. According to the United Nations, discrimination is defined as "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, nationality or ethnic origin that has the purpose or effect of mollifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing of humanitarian law in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life." Maya Angelou's definition of segregation of race refers to African Americans and their appearance in public places as it tends to draw suspicion, even when they are not doing anything wrong. Because of their differences and appearance, African Americans are not socially accepted. As a result of their skin tone and the negative stereotypes, they are associated with their demeanor. The outcome of this is followed by racial discrimination, which is defined as the exclusion of African Americans from society as a whole. They are forced to live their life in poverty because they are only allowed to perform the grunt jobs since they can't afford to pay the tax with the government's treatment and living a regular life is

inappropriate.

Maya Angelou has grown up in the segregated South America. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is more than a study of segregation's history and after effects. It's a sharp and honest look at injustice and inequality towards subalterns. Maya's grandmother inculcates the habit of patience and avoidance of dominant people, as well as the belief that they are godless and untrustworthy. At the same time, she also instills in her grandkids the importance of never speaking insensitively to an American, although that person is 'povhitetrash,' that is an American with low height and low thinking. Maya Angelou meticulously discusses and notes how perilous it is for a subaltern to interact with a dominant individual in segregated South America in her autobiography. She has made us acquainted with the scene where people of her town had to go into the field to work. Working as a labour class was popular in South America, where slaves worked on cotton plantations and were forced to work under the heat of the sun. She claimed that Negroes became accustomed to their status as slaves. However, no one deserves to be referred to as a slave and treated harshly.

When on the radio everyone in Stamps listened to the news of Joe Louis's win, all the people of the subaltern community were pleased, but all the happiness faded because of the violence which was more likely to break between the two communities if African-Americans had celebrated the win. Joe Louis was a famous African-American boxer. He made the African-American community proud by winning the World Championship against an American. He was an inspiration to his community, as men and women of colour were the ones who were hired at the last and were always the first ones to be fired. He made an impact by winning and paved the way for his community. African Americans were on the war front at the time of World War I and later on, demanded better living and citizenship in America. Because of these, Subalterns had to often come across this kind of hate during segregation for the reason that Americans feared that subalterns would come to power if we did not suppress their voice. Maya's relationship with Mrs. Flowers is revived when she meets Miss Kirwin. Miss Kirwin is an American teacher teaching at George Washington High School in San Francisco. Maya has been admitted to this new school. At first, she was in doubt about what kind of treatment she would get there because it was an American school. But when she met Miss Kirwin her doubt was gone. Maya admired Miss Kirwin a lot because of her equal treatment of American and subaltern students. Maya felt lonely and insecure there, but Miss Kirwin became her hope and light in that foreign land. Maya wanted that all the subaltern children should be treated in the same way right from their childhood. If they got such

fair treatment, they would have never felt insecure and inferior. It is significant to have teachers like Miss Kirwin because they share a positive impact on society.

The historical context of the Jim Crow Laws Era provides a stark backdrop to the narrative, setting the stage for the racial strife that defined the subaltern experience. This era, characterized by legalized racial segregation in the Southern United States, laid the foundation for institutionalized discrimination. As Angelou weaves her tale, the readers are transported to a time when racial animosities were not only deeply entrenched but also codified into law. Stamps, Arkansas, emerges as a microcosm of the broader societal dynamics, where racial hatred and social division were rampant. Angelou's vivid descriptions of her hometown provide a poignant illustration of the consequences of racial segregation on interpersonal relationships. The enmity between Americans and subalterns, particularly African Americans, was not merely a product of personal biases; it was a reflection of a deeply ingrained societal structure that perpetuated inequality. Patriarchal domination further exacerbated the challenges faced by subaltern women. The intersectionality of race and gender subjected them to a unique set of hardships. In a society controlled by men, the scope for African-American females was severely limited. The thematic elements in Angelou's narrative reveal the harsh realities of subaltern women, whose dreams were curtailed and freedoms restricted under the weight of systemic oppression. Despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them, Angelou and other subaltern women emerge as symbols of resilience. The narrative transcends the individual and becomes a collective voice for racial subalterns, challenging the status quo and defying societal expectations. The glass ceiling, a metaphor for systemic barriers, is shattered as Angelou becomes the first subaltern woman to break into uncharted territory serving as the conductor of a cable car.

At an early age, Maya is transported away from her parents to reside with her grandmother is one of her first recollections of displacement as she is being taken away from her home. She and her brother Bailey are frequently perplexed as to why they were exiled, as they felt abandoned. Maya equates her grandmother Momma with her homeland and is disappointed when she and Bailey depart Arkansas for St. Louis. Maya finds the change from Arkansas to California difficult, but she understands. Maya compares Grandmother Momma with her homeland because since her childhood looked after her and taught her a lot of life lessons. Maya was dependent on Momma because she felt safe with her as she was there to console her every time. The reason Momma wanted Maya and Bailey out of the town is because Maya's brother Bailey was once blackmailed by an American who forced him to assist in

transporting the body of a deceased subaltern man discovered in the lake. Momma makes it plain that the kids will now have to move after this occurrence. Out of fear, Momma had to make this decision; she felt that kids were unsafe in that area. Since Maya and Bailey were growing up, they were exposed to many unusual events. Momma being the concerned one wanted them both out of danger.

The impact of colonization reverberates through the narrative, affecting not only African Americans but also other colonized groups around the world. The aftermath of colonization in regions like South America, India, the West Indies, and Africa led to varied post-colonial experiences. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, the scars of partition remain etched in history, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of colonial rule. Within the larger structure of colonialism, official histories were predominantly written by Europeans, overshadowing the narratives of the subalterns. The Subaltern Studies project, in which Angelou's work can be situated, becomes a crucial endeavor in reclaiming the silenced histories of marginalized communities. These communities, though existing collectively, lacked a recognized political voice, a point emphasized by Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist who coined the term 'Subaltern.' Gayatri Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," further probes the challenges of self-representation and political agency for subalterns. She brings attention to the struggles of underrepresented groups, women, and postcolonial subjects, underscoring the importance of acknowledging and addressing their histories. The impact of colonization on specific racial groups, such as African Americans, extends beyond geographical boundaries. The forced diaspora, enslavement, and marginalization of African Americans during colonization created a devastating legacy that particularly affected women. The narrative of racial subalterns, therefore, becomes a complex tapestry woven with threads of historical injustices, intersectional oppression, and ultimately, triumph over adversity.

III. CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou was born during the Jim Crow Laws era when there was heavy segregation being practiced in South America. Maya has recorded all her experiences during that period in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In her autobiography, she has shown how subalternity has affected the lifestyle of subalterns. The life experiences shared by Maya in her autobiography are disheartening. Subalternity and displacement go hand in hand, as Maya has shared her memories of getting displaced during her childhood because of her divorced parents. She spent her early years at Stamps, Arkansas. Her life in Arkansas was

full of highs and lows, as she had to face numerous difficulties because of her skin colour. The discrimination in the South was based on the skin colour of subalterns. We can still see the discrimination prevailing in America because of the recent brutality against the subaltern community. "The cases of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are scathing examples of racial discrimination in America. Many protests were carried out for Black Lives Matter to support the voice of the racial subalterns". (Dastagir 2021)

REFERENCES

- [1] Abinaya, R. (2017). The injustice of racism in Maya Angelou's *I know why the caged birds sing*. *International Journal of Creative Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 5(4), 110-113.
- [2] Adhikary, R. (2020). Gender and racial trauma in Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings*. *AFRREV LALIGENS: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies*, 9(1), 1-12.
- [3] Angelou, M. (1997). *I know why the caged bird sings*. Bantam.
- [4] Ansari et al., (2019). Critical analysis of the narrative autobiography, "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" by Maya Angelou. *International Journal of English Research*, 5(3), 42-47.
- [5] Aslam, H. (2021). A study of endurance and aspiration in Maya Angelou's poems *The Caged Bird* and *still, I Rise*. *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends*, 3(1), 54-65.
- [7] Awasthi, P. K. (2018). Politics of Agency in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: An Autobiography* (Doctoral dissertation, Central Department of English).
- [8] Bambara, T.C. (1993). "The writers" forum: Toni Cade Bambara", contribution in *black studies*, 11(8).
- [9] Beauvoir, S. (1997). *The second sex*, translated by H.M. Parshley, London Vintage.
- [10] Bhagwat, H., & Arekar, M. (2018). On the margins: theorizing Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?". *Paragon International Publishers*, 38.
- [11] Bindu, Dr. (2016). Quest for identity Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings*. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(11), 13-19.
- [12] Biswas, & Amrita. (2009). A research note on subaltern studies. *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies*, 1(2), 200-205.
- [13] Bloom, H. (1996). Maya Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- [14] Brigham, J.C. (1993). College student's racial attitudes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 23, 1933-1967.
- [15] Corrêa, C. M. F. (2010). Through their voices, she found her voice: women in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 41(1).

- [16] Crawley, R. (2006). Diversity and the marginalization of black women's issues. *Policy Futures in Education*, 4(2), 172-184.
- [17] Daigle, Leah. (2021). Special issue: research on sexual violence in the #MeToo era: prevention and innovative methodologies. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46.
- [18] D'Angelo, I. (2020). Subaltern and marginal figures in literature: Spivak's reading of postcolonial Novels. *Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities*, 5(1).