

ANALYSING THE POST-COLONIAL ASPECTS IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*.

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ABSTRACT

Susan Gilbert States, the famous critic states that "Angelou was reporting not one person's story, but the collectives". Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* portrayed the life of whole Africans who have been suffering in American land, depicted through the life and story of Maya, the counterpart of the novelist herself. Therefore, the novel can be assessed as her own personal experiences that she had faced while in America, included in the form of autobiography. Major themes that are presented in the work are common in the works of Black American women which includes a criticism of racism, a celebration of Black motherhood, the quest for independence and the importance of family, personal dignity and self-definition. Post-colonialism is all about the anguish of the colonized who have to deal with the aftermath of colonization. It includes both the narrative representations and modes of negotiation, adopted by groups of people like Asian-Americans and African-Americans when dealing with the colonial and imperial histories. The novel thus exhibits the theme of post colonialism since it carries an array of sufferings experienced by the Black people in America.

KEYWORDS: Post-colonialism, Africans, Americans, Racism, Colonial power.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the Post-colonial elements in Maya Angelou's autobiographical and the most celebrated novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

INTRODUCTION

The most celebrated fiction in the literary canon, Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* examined the personal experiences of the writer. It carries out the themes of racism, post-colonialism, identity, motherhood, travel and oppression and it narrates the story of a caged bird whose song is a protest, like her autobiography which had a strong base of hope. The plight and miseries that an African faced in the American soil is what concerned her the most. She had joined with Harlem Writers Guild in 1950's and met a lot of African- American writers whose interaction made her to lay deep compassion towards the African people living in America. The speech of Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, famous Civil Rights Leader, inspired her to live the rest of her life and to struggle for the Black people. The novel is autobiographical and revolves around the life of Maya, the counterpart of the author Maya Angelou. The critics placed the novel in the category of bildungsroman or coming-of-age story; whereas critic Mary Jane Lupton compared it with George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*, as they had the common theme of young strong willed women and the problems they had faced in their lives, also having a deep compassion with their own brothers.

Maya, the protagonist at the beginning of the novel is a young eight year old girl who had been sent to her paternal grandmother along with her brother Bailey. She is the representative of the African community living in the American soil and portrays the problems of colonization and its after effects on her life. Americans who saw themselves as the epitome of purity and considered themselves as Whites, exploited and often insulted the African people whenever possible. The novel consists of many such incidents which could be analysed through the post-colonial reading.

Post-colonialism or Post-colonial theory draws its key ideas and concepts developed in the anti-colonial struggle. Colonialism can be described as the process of settlement by Europeans in Asian, African and South American territories. It has found its climatic moments in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was an exploitative mechanism that exploits the economic resources, the use of native people, the conquest of territory and market included diverse class, race etc. of the colonizers and the natives. Thus post colonialism is a way of depicting of social and cultural situations of the colonial power.

SUBJECT

Marguerite Annie Johnson, also known as Maya Angelou a well-known woman writer among American authors who has contributed some of the most important poetry and prose of 20th century literature. She was also a singer, memoirist and a civil right activist born in Missouri, begins her career as a writer after a series of occupations such as sex worker, night club dancer, fry cook. She became popular after the publication of series of seven volumes of autobiographies which throws light into her own childhood and early adult experiences. The most important among them is her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It explores the power of white folks and their exploitation and dominancy over the Africans living in America. The work is a protest against the supremacy of White people over the Black people. As Pierre A Walker, a scholar describes Angelou's book as "a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression." The metaphor 'caged bird' in the title symbolised sufferings due to discrimination and subjugation. Also, it represented that the bird is struggled for singing, paralleled to the life of the protagonist,

Maya. Maya a Black American young girl at the very beginning of the novel was sent to Stamps, Arkansas along with her beloved brother, Bailey by her own parents to live with their paternal grandmother whom they call as momma, along with handicapped uncle, Willie. Momma had a general store at the centre of Black Community in Stamps. The problem Maya came across in her childhood is with the stem of overt racism of her white neighbours. The young innocent mind of Maya draws thus an imaginary border of classification among Blacks and Whites. The often insults she used to face by her White neighbours made her depressed all through her life. In a humiliating incident a girl among the whites showed her pubic hair to momma and the public. Similarly all such humiliations and insults was quite often from the white people to their family. Maya had a strong tormented feeling that she was dirt and not reached to the level of aristocracy when compared with the white girls. One Easter Sunday, at the church she was unable to finish reciting a poem which made her ridiculed by the white children that made her feel that she was below the white community. Thus white children and people often causes problems for their family in one or another ways. Similar incident she faces is from a dentist who refused to treat her when she approached him with a rotten tooth. She also had seen Momma hiding her uncle from the Klu Klux Klan raiders. This can be seen as the oppression that is forced upon the Black people by the colonial powers. This is what Edward Said had said in his *Orientalism* (1978), considering East as 'Other' and also inferior to the West.

The name of the work was suggested to Maya Angelou by the popular Jazz vocalist and Civil Rights Activist, Abbey Lincoln and which was actually derived from the third stanza of Dunbar's, an African-American poet, poem 'Sympathy', though his writing inspired and admired Angelou. The metaphor 'Caged Bird' became true in her life after Maya, the protagonist was taken by her father from their paternal grandmother to her own mother's home. Maya's life had faced its turning points while at her stay at mother's place. Vivian, her mother was working in gambling parlours and had a lover named Freeman. Mr Freeman at first sexually molests her and then rapes her. He was punished for his deed aftermath. After those dark incidents Maya was depressed and she became quiet, seldom talks to Bailey only. The post-rape trauma hangs above her. She suffered from blame and contempt made by rape. As a great relief, they was again sent to her Momma's place where she regained her positivity and energy through the wise actions of her grandmother. Momma had introduced her to a lady named Mrs Bertha Flower a well-learned woman who encouraged Maya to read literary books and also gave to her a book of poems to regain her voice. Thus soon she became active and realises the incapacity and stability of her own community into different approaches. Maya had gained spiritual strength during a sermon at church where the priest speaks implicitly against white hypocrisy. After these, no oppression that she faced made her weak. At the age of ten, she had worked for a white woman, who called Maya as Mary which disgusted her. She took the effort to break women's oppression. In addition, in her eighth grade graduation ceremony, the white man demolished the black community by saying that the black students have to become victims and slaves that made her feel angry towards him. Bailey once encountered with a dead rotting body of a Black man, while seeing the body, he notes the satisfied reaction of a White man which hurts him more.

After some years the family moves to San Francisco, along with her mother Vivian and there Maya struggled with the racial hierarchy in the wartime. In San Francisco she had become the first black street car conductor at the very early age of fifteen. Maya becomes strong and self-assured in San Francisco, during that time she became pregnant in a relation with a teenage boy and she hides her pregnancy from her family as per the decision of her own brother, Bailey. At the end of the book she gives birth to a baby.

Thus the book gives the reader a strong account on the facts that African people faced in American soil. Post-colonial criticism began with the works of Franz Fanon especially his *The Wretched of the Earth*, first published in French in 1961. Fanon disagreed with two things initially, the colonised people were struggled to find a voice and identity of their own and another one is strictly follows the ideologies of the colonizers in which their culture has no value. The apt descriptions about Post-colonial criticism came with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), focussed on the Eurocentric notions in which the superior power as the Europeans makes the inferior as the 'other'.

Moreover, subjugation and racial discrimination happened due to the social and cultural situations, which transcended the individual or any historical period. Postcolonial is all about the anguish of the colonized who have to deal with the aftermath of colonization. Post colonialism includes both the narrative representations and modes of negotiation, adopted by groups of people like Asian-Americans and African-Americans when dealing with the colonial and imperial histories. European powers ruled over in continents such as Asia, Africa and South – America till mid twentieth century. Their rule took the form of political governance, economic exploitation and cultural exploitation. In the mid twentieth century freedom struggle results in political independence in continents such as Asia and Africa in other words, they were become postcolonial. Post coloniality describes the historical, material and actual 'living' conditions of independent continents like Asia Africa and South America with in the global system. It emphasizes the impact of globalization and economic shift upon material conditions in the Asian and African continents. Post colonialism captures the strategies of resistance, negotiation and cultural assertion that countries like India adopted to deal with increase in the neo-colonial interference. The term 'postcolonial' refers to a transformed historical situation and cultural formation which arise as a reaction to the political situations of the pre- colonial period. It gives a new experience of political freedom, new ideologies of development etc. The sovereign nation state tries to assert its independence by preparing its own economic and social development programmes and by generating its own cultural forms. The term 'Postcolonial' is problematic because European colonialism becomes the determining moment of the colonized county. All cultures are placed in history as 'before and after' European colonization. Thus the term indicates a degree of agency or resistance against cultural domination and acts as a transition period between modern nation state and its colonized path. Nowadays postcolonial has becomes a wide-range term to explain any kind of resistance, especially against class, race and gender-oppression. Post colonialism describes the political and cultural resistance dealt with the colonialism and present day neo-colonialism. Ultimately, it had a contact with the colonial approaches, pays attention to the difference among the native peoples. Theoretically, it cautions against any kind of homogenization of cultures or people.

Homi K Bhabha's emphasis on cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination suggests a common platform for all those who have to pay price of their 'difference' from the dominant culture or white people. Postcolonial literature was a framework emphasizes race, class and cultural oppression. The common themes in Postcolonial literature are "Assimilation, Appropriation, Hybridity, Diaspora and subaltern. The consciousness is due to the race and identity can be considered as a result of colonial and postcolonial settings. It included also the sufferings of the individuals for struggling to make a sense of understanding. So, colonialism was actually a continuation of civilization in which the colonial world have the superiority over the colonised people. In the colonial world, there exists colonizers and colonised, problems of cultural identity and economic situations which goes correspondence to the mortality. Decolonised people makes an interaction with the colonised people in terms of class, sex, caste and race. The writings of post-colonial literature were analysed the social and cultural attitude of the subaltern people, makes their subject matter as resistance to the colonial culture. It depicted that the East were constituted by the colonised people. Writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor etc. have been able to reconcile two cultures by seeking the past and making sense of it in regard to their present day lives. Black American woman writers were suffering from multiple levels of oppression. Patriarchy as well as hegemonic powers of class caste and colour oppressed them. These woman writers address and challenge all these forms of oppression in their writing. They also wrote about the colonial subjugation of the subaltern man and women, racism, identity, motherhood etc., for this they use narration as a source of power. Apart from them, Maya Angelou the prominent Afro-American woman writer, uses narration as a source of power in her celebrated autobiographical novel "I know why the Caged Bird Sings".

Thus, Postcolonial theory described about the manner in which colonial ideologies, racism were included in the literary texts. Postcolonial theory were emerged in the second half of the twentieth century among the colonised countries and people, struggled for the freedom and gained their political independence. The major postcolonial critics, Edward Said, Homi K Bhabba, and Gayathri Spivak are called the holy trinity of post colonialism. Therefore, the book urges to regain the earlier nationalism, glory of insightful Africa from the clutches of American dominance and thus is closely related to the Post-colonial writers' whose aim to recover the past life through their writings and live in full freedom.

CONCLUSION

The terrible lives of Black women in America is mirrored by Maya Angelou in her famous autobiographical novel *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*. It characterised miseries, sufferings and struggle that the protagonist Maya encounters throughout the novel. The experience resembled that of each and every Black women who has been silently suffering the dominance of the Whites in America over them. And through the seven volumes of her autobiographies she reconstructs the image of Black women. Maya Angelou's depiction of the oppressed people in the black community of Stamps exemplified how African-Americans were subjugated due to the racial discrimination by the colonizers. The protagonist had a strong desire for being like the White people at the beginning of the novel, finally she raised her voice and stood along with the black people. Post-colonialism in its all forms is evident in the novel hence it triggers the relevance of the work. The colonization and its after effects were serious issues that people faced all the time in one

way or the other. Therefore such a novel that protests and raises the voice against the harmful side of colonization in the society bears the value of great relevance and importance. It mirrors the harm that was caused to the Black people especially Black women who have been residing in American land by introducing a unique point in autobiography reveals that her life experiences is described through a narrator who is strong and reliable, growing as a black female from the South, going through the phases of child and also a mother.

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