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## "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings": An Illustration of Patriarchal Oppression

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the issues of sexual violence, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and sexual politics in the text of 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' by Angelou (1969). And all these issues signal towards the major issue of female exploitation at the hands of patriarchy. The proposed study is qualitative in nature and uses framework of the great black feminist writer Collins (2004) which gives a clear insight into the male psychology exposing us how men make themselves superior by suppressing and repressing the identities of women and by exploiting them sexually. Collins (2004) is of the view that female exploitation has been used as the basic ingredient in the formation of masculinity of males. The findings of the study indicate that the various experiences of women throughout the selected text helped unveil the ways of patriarchal oppression, female exploitation and sexual harassment at the hands of patriarchy through the miserable condition of the character of 'Maya' who suffers at the hands of black man who continuously exploits her in order to fulfill his evil deeds. The findings also reveal that the after-effects of patriarchal oppression and sexual harassment lead the black women towards the rebellion against these obnoxious crimes. This study will go a long way in helping black women in their efforts and attempts to eradicate the evil crime of sexual harassment done by the men of their own communities. Moreover, applying the same frameworks, other texts produced by the same or other Black writers can also be investigated by the future researchers.

KEY WORDS: Sexual harassment, Female exploitation, Male psychology, Sexual Politics, Patriarchal Oppression.

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## "Sé por qué canta el pájaro enjaulado": una ilustración sobre la opresión patriarcal

### RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo examinar los temas de violencia sexual, abuso sexual, explotación sexual y política sexual en el texto de "Sé por qué canta el pájaro enjaulado" de Angelou (1969). Y todos estos problemas señalan el problema principal de la explotación femenina a manos del patriarcado. El estudio propuesto es de naturaleza cualitativa y utiliza el marco del gran escritor feminista negro Collins (2004) que da una idea clara de la psicología masculina exponiéndonos cómo los hombres se hacen superiores al suprimir y reprimir las identidades de las mujeres y explotarlas sexualmente. Collins (2004) opina que la explotación femenina se ha utilizado como ingrediente básico en la formación de la masculinidad. Los resultados del estudio indican que las diversas experiencias de las mujeres a lo largo del texto seleccionado ayudaron a descubrir las formas de opresión patriarcal, explotación femenina y acoso sexual a manos del patriarcado a través de la condición miserable del personaje de 'Maya' que sufre en las manos del hombre negro que la explota continuamente para cumplir sus malas acciones. Los hallazgos también revelan que las secuelas de la opresión patriarcal y el acoso sexual llevan a las mujeres negras a la rebelión contra estos crímenes desagradables. Este estudio contribuirá en gran medida a ayudar a las mujeres negras en sus esfuerzos e intentos de erradicar el malvado crimen de acoso sexual cometido por los hombres de sus propias comunidades. Además, aplicando los mismos marcos, los futuros investigadores también pueden investigar otros textos producidos por el mismo u otros escritores negros.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Acoso sexual, Explotación femenina, Psicología masculina, Política sexual, Opresión patriarcal.

### Introduction

Most of the critics give their consensus on one point that the Angelou's novel under investigation 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (1969) mostly illustrates humiliation, disgrace, atrocity and forces that are imposed on the Blacks by social conditions of the white community which is depicted through the seclusion of the black girl who is imprisoned in a cage like a bird. Moreover, the novel under examination is significant

because Angelou points out how racism greatly impacts the identities of 'Black women' or women in general. In the beginning of the story, the character Maya declares:

*"The town reacted to us as its inhabitants had reacted to all things new before our coming. It regarded us a while without curiosity but with caution". (Caged Bird, p. 6)*

The text under study, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" describes women as the relegated beings and it also paints them as entangled in the prevailing issues of their identities in Western and Patriarchal society. Many Afro-American feminists raised questions regarding issue of identity crisis due to marginalized and traumatic experiences of 'Black Women' in many of the postmodern writings, but how these questions will be dealt with and how their declarations will be heard of are questions to be addressed in detail.

In the novel under study Maya as a woman demonstrates the traumatic experiences of the 'Black Woman.' She declares that men use 'Rape' as a specific tool in their hands to provide them pleasure and to make all women repressed. So, it is high time to explain the main purpose of Maya Angelou behind writing this novel. The main objective which she had in her mind was to show the pains and sufferings of all women in the mirror of her experiences.

### 1. Literature Review

Tesefalidet (2007) analyzed that the novels contain ample examples of typecast images of women when these abnormal and stereotyped attitude of men towards women crossed its limit and had a great impact on their real lives. Angelou highlights the same thing in her novel when Marguerite's father Mr. Johnson brings her to her mother's house rather taking her with them. Moreover, when Mr. Freeman threatens her, the situation becomes worse because due to that threat, Marguerite becomes a stereotyped personality unable to speak anything to anyone.

Fekadu (2005) shows how women are victimized on the basis of gender and class oppression in their respective cultures. Women's role is only confined to passive sexual object for man's pleasure. All women in one way or the other confront male-dominated cultural oppressions.

Hence, Angelou's novel under investigation describes numerous incidents of subjugation of Black women and since it is narrated by the first person, it is quite appropriate to describe the process of downgrading faced by Black women. Moreover, through her involvement with the Black community of Stamps, she displays the offensiveness of Southern white attitudes toward African-Americans and vibrant and truthful racist characters.

As Mersha (2004) in the works of different writers from Africa, United States of America, and the Caribbean tries to explore the self-defined, Black, and female consciousness by applying postcolonial feminist approach. Moreover, he emphasizes "to enrich the knowledge of Black feminism, to show the common experiences of Black women almost in the world and to give insight to the development of Black feminism".

In the opinion of Collins (2004), the Black-made autobiographies are the demonstration of breaking away the chains of slavery to get rid of the severe oppressions they face. Angelou discusses that the dominant white and male group impose the same condition on women. It is stated that the socially accepted white notions of domesticated house-wives, issues like child-bearing, sexuality and the experiences of women as mothers and wives in general are depicted by Angelou, as a working-class mother. Besides this, Angelou's novel tries to simplify the complex relationship between families and society.

According to Wilson (2011), women should be taken as 'instruments' of social change and they can challenge, resist and transform systems that disseminate 'unfreedom' and social inequalities, as long as they choose to do so. The description of resistance of Negro Women is mentioned in the novel in two forms: active protest and subtle resistance. Both forms of conflict against racism respectively are depicted through the character of

'Maya'. It starts with submissive objection against maltreatment of the white followed by explicit protest by the black against racial acts. The very action of exploring how people are empowered and change through resisting disciplinary power relations may also be used to strengthen their incorporation into the status quo (Korkmaz, 2009).

Tavossoli (2014) explores the specific term of melancholia in Colonial and Post-Colonial theory. In his opinion, the experiences of 'marginalized women' are marked with the sense of depressions and frustration resulting from the whirlpool of the past and the present. Post-Colonial Feminist concept of gender equality is different from the Post-Colonial description of the marginalized experiences of an individual.

Angelou explains the same thing in her autobiography through the depiction of the experiences of the young girl 'Maya'. She opines that a woman must be judged according to her own cultural and ethnic differences and not through the typical framework of the Colonizers and Patriarchy.

Mills (1995) holds a view that women as a group are treated tyrannically and differently from men and that they are subject to gender discrimination. Moreover, she also believes that society is organized to work, in favor of men rather than women.

Angelou raises the same point that all men take benefit equally from the society and oppress women in different ways and she also implies that all men take part in the continuance of that oppression despite opposing the oppression of other groups. Now at that point Maya Angelou in 1969 asserts that there lies a difference in the way that men and women are ill-treated in the society as a whole and in the way that they view themselves and others view them as gendered beings.

## 2. Methodology

In this article, a detailed description of the methods used in this study will be given. In fact, a framework of 'Black Feminism' to conduct this study will be introduced. Moreover, this article will cover the strategies of using these methods and frameworks while

conducting the study. For this study, the methodology of Qualitative Study will be used. Moreover, It will support the study with a significant number of historical and international articles to interpret the purpose of the study through the conceptual framework of 'Black Feminism'.

### 3. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Black feminists argue that oppression of women is based on their color and sex and white feminism fails to incorporate the voices of Black women writers. Hence, Black women's experiences are aptly dealt with by Black feminism. Briefly, it is not justified to analyze works of Black women through the framework of Western Feminism hence they recommend the use of Black feminist theoretical framework that enables to address special aspects of Black women such as racism, sexism and classism.

Western Feminists claimed in the very beginning of 1980s that they were working for the whole women in the world. They also believed that there the existed common forms of oppression of women. However, categories like nationality, race, language and religion form the basis of divisions among feminists. This is well stated by Collins (2004) that:

*"Western feminists have been criticized for universalizing their own particular perspectives as normative, essentializing women in the south as tradition-bound victims of timeless, patriarchal cultures, and reproducing the colonial discourses of main stream, 'male-stream scholarship the tendency of western feminism to the difference in universalizing ways is also problematic"*

Black feminism as a school of thought argues that sexism, racial oppression, gender inequality and colonialism are inter-connected with each other. The process through which these concepts are linked with each other is termed as 'intersectional'. The word intersectional was first used by famous scholar Mason (1990). In her work, she opines that Black feminism, not only argues that the experiences of a black woman can be understood in the sense of being black or of being a woman but also she explains the concept that must

be understood separately to include the interconnections that would frequently initiate each other in order to give the clear picture. Feminism, in the true sense of meaning is a well-known movement started to challenge the inequalities that usually women face. Many feminists argued in 1974 that the emancipation of black women optimizes the freedom of all people, but it would need the eradication of racism, sexism, and colonial oppression.

Black feminism got popularity in 1960s, in reaction to the manipulation of the Civil Rights Movement and exploitation of the Feminist Movement. From 1970 to 1980, Black Feminists joined various groups that observed and addressed the sufferings of black women not only in black countries but also in other countries normally Western Countries. The use of the frameworks of Black Feminism by all the feminists in order to solve the issues of black women resulted in its popularity.

Most of the proponents of this theory argue that black women are entangled within the clutches of power primarily in different ways from white women. The theory of black feminism has challenged the typical tag "white feminism" that was only used to criticize those feminists who try to address the issues of intersectional. Critics who support the theory of Black Feminism opine that racial differences enfeeble the strength of the all feminist movements. However, Hooks (1982), Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2004) are the most leading theorists in the field of Black Feminism.

Many 'Black feminists' focus on 'identity politics' that can be termed as a way of knowing and acknowledging one's self-identity that takes into account both personal as well as the historical experiences of those people who want to revamp the whole system of society through the implementation of the new framework in order to reject the oppressive steps that are taken against the identity of one's group or community particularly in terms of political and social injustice.



Collins (2004), is a great Black feminist writer who used to believe that women are considered as 'outsider' within their own societies and this is done only through the domestic manipulation of women and moreover they are considered and perceived as a separate entity from the so-called White elite who imposed their sovereignty and dominance over them. They also observe that there is a difference between the suffering of the White women and Black women. So, as a corollary of Black women's suffering and White people's oppression it become necessary to take drastic steps in order to solve the issues of identity crisis regarding women of color prevailing in each and every society. And, therefore, due to the distinctive experiences of black women, it is essential for Collins to raise voices against the prevailing oppression

Moreover Collins (2004) has often raised questions against race, class, and gender as separate categories in order to exclude those who are not included in the dominant group of westerns. In her opinion, by ignoring these differences Western Feminists try to create more of a rift between all social movements and other feminist movements particularly in the case of torture against women where the purpose of torture is inter-related with the false assumptions of race and class.

Further Collins (2004) says that black women should raise their voices in order to separate themselves from the division of group identities and to form their own personal self-esteem. In this way, their personal identities will be restored and then through these identities they can also restore their self-empowerment as well as their collective identities to support themselves. According to her, assault on one's identity is in real the assault on the inner soul that is now wounded by the racial groups, women, and sexual atrocities that have used to suppress and oppress the identities in order to make one superior to all the other races. This provides a platform for the freedom of self-expression and a place to live in to those who feel dislocated in a colonized society. As a corollary, black women find solace in safe places that are given to them for the freedom to discuss the issues of identity and marginalization that would ultimately leads to the identity of Black women world- wide.

#### 4. Research Question

Q- How patriarchal oppression is reflected in the novel "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings?"

#### 5. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the examples and incidents of patriarchal oppression described in the novel, ten quotations from the different pages of the novel under examination have been collected by the investigator.

In the very next lines, the novelist tells about the painful living of the black women in general and Marguerite in specific. She, moreover, wants to make women aware of the fact that not only their living in their domains is afflictive but also their exile or displacement because of the patriarchal dominance in the society. As the character Maya states:

*"If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." (Caged Bird, p.4)*

Collins (2004) is of the view that the issue of identity crisis among women is mainly due to the patriarchal oppression due to which women consider themselves inferior to men in the so-called male- dominating society.

In the next lines, the novelist wants to tell that in the society of men no women even dare to speak out against any men. As it is mentioned in the novel:

*"It was the same old quandary. I had always lived it. There was an army of adults whose motives and movements I just couldn't understand and who made no effort to understand mine. There was never any question of my disliking Mr. Freeman, I simply didn't understand him either." (Caged Bird, p. 74)*

Moreover, Collins (2004) opines that a new framework should be adopted to challenge the generalized assumptions of patriarchy so that Black women might enjoy the freedom of choice and moreover they might walk, sing, live and move according to their own needs irrespective of the bondage of the 'Patriarchal Cages'.

In the next lines, the novelist gives the clear glimpse of the black, ugly remnants of Patriarchy through which black women lost their identity and felt themselves buckled down. As Angelou (1969) says in the novel:

*"If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey."  
(Caged Bird, p. 78).*

According to Collins (2004), it is observed that Black women are represented as oppressed and powerless victims only because they remain silent and never raise their voices against the inadequacies of Patriarchy. Hence, she is of the view that now it is high times to challenge the stereotyping roles of Black women at the hands of patriarchy.

In the next lines Maya gives the picture of heinous crime of rape by depicting the whole situation in the novel.

*"Then there was a pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot." (Caged Bird, p. 78)*

Collins (2004) opines that 'Black Women' suffer from rape and sexual harassment at the hands of patriarchy because they are categorically dependent and oppressed on men and this dependence usually removes the difference between the victims and the oppressors.

In the next lines, Angelou (1969) tells us the miserable condition of the raped victim.

*"In the hospital, Bailey told me that I had to tell who did that to me, or the man would hurt another little girl." (Caged Bird, p.83)*

Collins (2004) opines that men often threaten women not to tell about anyone about the evil crime of rape. Same is the case with the character Maya who becomes a silent being after being threatened by the male oppressor.

In the following lines, Angelou (1969) explains the vicious nature of men who remain stubborn after committing the evil crime of rape.

*"Excitement is a drug and people whose lives are filled with  
always wondering where the next 'fix' is coming from. (Caged Bird, p.83)*

In the above lines, Collins (2004) describes the bitter fact of how Black people especially women are entangled in the whirlpool of their lost identities as they are confused about this enigma. They want to solve that riddle of oppressive attitude of men and oppressor in order to get rid of all that mess.

In the following lines, the writer wants to give another example of patriarchal oppression where a man is asking questions from the raped victim about the criminal or rapist without taking into account the pains and worries of the victim.

*"You mean to say this man raped you and you don't know what  
he was wearing? He snickered as if I had raped Mr. Freeman." (Caged Bird, p. 84)*

These lines according to Collins (2004) give the clear description men look down upon the women. These lines refer to the incident of rape upon the character Maya and this incident clearly shows the bitter hatred of men towards women as women have their identities seem to be borrowed by the males.

These lines depict the clear picture of identity crisis when Maya wants to relieve herself she notes down that there is no place for a girl to relieve herself. As it is mentioned in the novel:

*"Signs with arrows around the barbecue pit pointed MEN, WOMEN, and  
CHILDREN toward fading lanes, grown over since last year. [...] So when*

*the urge hit me to relieve myself, I headed toward another direction.*  
(Caged Bird, p.139)

Collins (2004) is of the view that in the community of Black people mostly women suffer the process of internal identity crisis. If they want to remain children, their family members will make them girls; and if they consider themselves girls, the men in the society will make them women by committing the heinous acts of rape on them. Hence these women remain entangled in the whirlpool of identity crisis.

In these lines, Angelou (1969) describes how men show indifferent attitudes towards women while giving them fewer opportunities as compared to themselves.

*"He had enjoyed his Mexican holiday and still was unable to proffer a bit of kindness to the women who waited patiently, busying herself with housewifely duties." (Caged Bird, p. 237)*

Collins (2004) explains the same thing that men never pay any heed towards women. They themselves enjoy the holidays but women remain confined to their houses. They are not allowed to enjoy their holidays and this miserable condition is the extreme point of patriarchal oppression.

Angelou (1969) demonstrates that on one hand, Black women suffer the process of "common atrocities of nature" that confuses all children while on the other hand, they undergo the triple threat of sexism, racism, and Black powerlessness. As the result of many attacks in "her tender years", Maya had to grow up more quickly on her way towards becoming "a formidable character" but Angelou (1969) prepares Maya to counter the hindrances of sexuality, adolescence and teenage pregnancy to make her strong in the male- dominating society. As it is mentioned in the novel:

*"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 cross-fire of male prejudice, white illogical hate and black lack of power."*  
(Caged Bird, p. 272)

Collins (2004) is of the opinion that women in general and black women in specific suffer patriarchal oppression since the very start of their life till the end of their life. This is only due to the reason that they consider themselves inferior and less civilized to men and this is also the reason for their lost identities.

### Conclusions and Future Recommendations

The findings of the study reveal the fact that the under studied autobiography Angelou (1969) is a clear illustration of patriarchal oppression. The description of various experiences of women throughout the whole novel helped the researcher to explore the ways of patriarchal oppression and female exploitation at the hands of patriarchy. Moreover, the research has gone some way to find the answers to the questions raised by Maya Angelou in the novel and she also hopes to have given the best solution in the form of 'Black Feminism,' in order to redress the pains of patriarchal oppression. This study will go a long way in helping black women in their efforts and attempts to eradicate the evil crime of sexual harassment done by the men of their own communities. Moreover, applying the same frameworks, other texts produced by the same or other Black writers can also be exploited by the future researchers.

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