



Research Article

Beyond Oppression: Intersectionality And Self-Definition in Two Autobiographies

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Abstract

This research paper explores the intersection of race, caste, gender and identity in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and "Karukku" by BaMa. Using an intersectional framework, it examines how overlapping social structures intensify marginalization while shaping lived experiences. Both texts highlight themes of silence, labour, labor, faith, trauma and empowerment, revealing parallels across African American and Dalit contexts. The research paper argues that education, resilience and self-expression serve as powerful tools of resistance. Ultimately, these autobiographies reclaim marginalized voices and challenge systemic inequalities, offering profound insights into identity formation and social justice.

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INTRODUCTION

Intersection Of Race, Caste and Gender

Both narratives reveal how overlapping identities intensify oppression. Maya Angelou describes racial alienation as “a rust on the razor,” suggesting constant psychological harm. Similarly, Bama exposes caste humiliation, noting how Dalits are treated as “low and filthy.” Gender deepens this marginalization, placing women at the lowest rung within already oppressed groups. Angelou faces both racism and sexism, while Bama confronts caste and patriarchy. These intersecting identities create layered suffering, where discrimination is not singular but cumulative. Through their lived experiences, both writers demonstrate that oppression operates through multiple systems, making resistance more complex and deeply personal.

Subsistence And Labor

Labor in both texts reflects systemic inequality and survival struggles. Bama describes Dalit lives shaped by “hard work from dawn to dusk,” emphasizing economic exploitation and lack of dignity. Angelou similarly notes that Black women were expected to become “maids or washerwomen,” limiting aspirations. Such labor is not merely economic but symbolic of enforced social positions. Opportunities remain restricted, reinforcing generational poverty. Both authors highlight how marginalized communities internalize these limitations, often viewing dreams as unrealistic. Yet, by documenting these realities, they challenge the normalization of such labor divisions and expose how economic systems sustain racial and caste hierarchies.

Silence, Trauma, And Survival

Silence emerges as both a consequence of trauma and a survival mechanism. Angelou recounts her muteness after assault, believing “my voice could kill,” reflecting deep psychological fear. Bama similarly observes how Dalits “endure insults without protest,” conditioned into silence by oppression. But, both writers eventually reclaim their voices through storytelling. This transition from silence to expression becomes an act of resistance. Their narratives transform personal pain into collective testimony, breaking cycles of suppression. Silence, once imposed, becomes a space for reflection and eventual empowerment, proving that articulation of trauma is essential for healing and challenging systemic injustice.

Faith As Emotional Survival

Faith plays a dual and complex role in both works. Angelou finds solace in religion, describing God as an “anchor in the storm,” offering stability amidst chaos. In contrast, Bama critiques Christianity for sustaining caste discrimination, stating that “even in church, there was division.” Despite this, spirituality remains a source of inner strength for her. This paradox highlights religion as both oppressive and comforting. While institutions may perpetuate inequality, personal faith offers resilience. Both authors ultimately use spirituality as a coping mechanism, navigating its contradictions while drawing emotional support from belief systems in times of hardship.

The Paradox of Identity and Liberation

Identity in both narratives is both imposed and reclaimed. Bama reflects that to be free, one must reject labels that “brand us as inferior.” Angelou similarly resists racial stereotypes, striving to define herself beyond societal expectations. This creates a paradox: identity is necessary for recognition but also a source of oppression. Liberation requires redefining identity on personal terms. Both writers illustrate that self-definition is a powerful act of resistance. By challenging imposed categories, they create space for autonomy. Their journeys show that true freedom lies not in erasing identity but in reshaping it according to one’s own voice and experience.

Racial And Caste Inequality

Systemic discrimination is central to both texts. Angelou recounts incidents like a dentist refusing treatment, revealing normalized racism: “He’d rather put his hand in a dog’s mouth.” Bama similarly describes spatial segregation, where Dalits are forced to live separately, treated as untouchable. These examples show how inequality is embedded in everyday life. Access to education, healthcare and dignity is restricted. Both authors expose how such systems are maintained through social acceptance. By documenting these injustices, they challenge readers to confront deeply rooted hierarchies and recognize the structural nature of discrimination.

Gender And Vulnerability

Women in both narratives face heightened vulnerability due to intersecting oppressions. Angelou’s account of sexual violence reveals how Black girls are unprotected, stating she felt “like a caged animal.” Bama notes how men “gather around a lone woman,” highlighting constant harassment. These experiences show how patriarchy operates within marginalized communities as well. Women are subjected to both external discrimination and internal gender biases. This dual oppression limits freedom and safety. By voicing these experiences, both authors expose gendered violence and assert the need for intersectional awareness in addressing inequality.

Education As Empowerment

Education emerges as a transformative force in both works. Bama insists that “education alone can free us,” advocating learning as resistance against caste oppression. Angelou similarly finds empowerment through knowledge, which allows her to transcend imposed limitations. Education provides not only economic mobility but also self-respect and awareness. It enables individuals to question injustice and imagine alternative futures. Both authors portray education as a tool for reclaiming dignity and breaking cycles of marginalization. Their journeys emphasize that learning is not merely academic but deeply political, serving as a pathway to liberation.

Resilience And Recovery

Resilience defines both narratives, transforming suffering into strength. Angelou’s declaration, “We survived,” reflects collective endurance despite systemic oppression. Bama similarly portrays perseverance, showing how Dalit communities continue despite hardships. Resilience is not passive endurance but

active defiance. Both authors highlight emotional recovery as a gradual process shaped by community, self-awareness and determination. Their stories challenge the notion of victimhood, instead emphasizing agency and courage. Survival itself becomes resistance, proving that marginalized individuals can confront and overcome oppressive structures through inner strength and collective support.

Renaming And Erasure

Renaming symbolizes control and identity erasure. Angelou recalls being called “Mary” instead of her real name, reflecting how “names are taken to strip dignity.” Similarly, caste labels in Bama’s narrative reduce individuals to social status. These practices dehumanize and reinforce power hierarchies. Names carry identity, history and self-worth; altering them becomes an act of domination. Both authors highlight how such subtle acts perpetuate oppression. By reclaiming their names and stories, they resist erasure and assert individuality, emphasizing the importance of self-identification in the struggle for dignity.

Childhood And Early Socialization

Oppression begins early in both narratives, shaping identity from childhood. Angelou experiences racism at a young age, realizing that “the world had already decided who I was.” Bama describes Dalit children learning their place through daily discrimination and labor. These early experiences normalize inequality, embedding it into consciousness. Childhood becomes a site where societal hierarchies are internalized. Both authors reveal how such conditioning limits aspirations and reinforces systemic structures. By reflecting on these formative years, they expose how deeply rooted oppression is and highlight the need for change at foundational levels.

Community And Solidarity

Community plays a vital role in survival and resistance. Angelou finds strength in her family and Black community, describing them as a “home of resilience.” Bama similarly highlights collective Dalit experiences, where shared struggles foster unity. Solidarity provides emotional support and reinforces identity. In oppressive environments, community becomes a source of empowerment and resistance. Both authors emphasize that survival is not individual but collective. Through shared experiences, marginalized groups build strength to challenge injustice. Their narratives celebrate community as a foundation for resilience and a catalyst for social change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and *Karukku* by Bama powerfully illuminate the intersections of race, caste, gender and identity. Both narratives reveal how systemic oppression shapes lived experiences while

emphasizing resilience, education and self-expression as tools of resistance. Through their autobiographical voices, Angelou and Bama challenge dominant structures and reclaim marginalized identities. Despite differing cultural contexts, their works share striking parallels in struggle and survival. Ultimately, these texts stand as enduring testimonies of courage, asserting the importance of voice, dignity and the ongoing fight for equality and justice.

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