
CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN BAMA'S *KARUKKU* AND MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

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Abstract

Autobiographies of Indigenous women are distinctively powerful testimonies which provide insight into their life as a subaltern and expose their struggles and age long of tribulations that they had suffered at the hands of the society. They are unacknowledged and are often treated as 'second class citizens', marginalized and neglected even the basic rights given to any individual or citizen of a country. These downtrodden people have stopped waiting to be acknowledged by the 'others' and have begun to break their silence by registering their history, culture and life struggles (stories), ideas and opinions. Linda T. Smith has framed a separate methodology for Indigenous research objecting western ideologies and perspectives attributed to Indigenous literature. However, one cannot overlook the impact of the domination of other cultural and religious groups which consciously degrades and inflicts much harm to the marginalized groups hindering their progress.

This paper proposes to foreground the cultural hegemony as presented by Bama in her autobiography *Karukku* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It also highlights the impact of such hegemonies when practiced on Dalits.

Keywords: *autobiographies, indigenous, subaltern, marginalized, cultural hegemony.*

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* states that the expression Hegemony was first used in the sixteenth century to mean "preponderance, dominance, leadership." However, the term was originally derived from the Greek term *hegemonic* meaning "leadership, a leading the way, a going first...the authority or sovereignty of one city-state over a number of others." The other Greek terms associated with it which changed in the course of time are *hegemon* and *hegeisthai* meaning "leader, an authority, commander, sovereign," and "to lead," ... "To track down,"... "to seek out, track down, trace" respectively. Hegemony is generally defined as the domination of

one social, political, the religious group over another. The dominant group forces its opinions, ideas, and notions as the only ideology to be practiced by all.

Thomas B. Rates in the article published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, “Gramsci and the theory of Hegemony” briefs on the origin and evolution of the term Hegemony. The imprisoned Italian Communist leader, Antonio Gramsci left behind a great Marxist ideology called ‘the theory of “hegemony”’ in his book *Prison Notebook*. However, his theory remains “fragmented and dispersed...like an old jigsaw puzzle” (351). Derek Bootham in his article on *The Sources for Gramsci’s Concept of Hegemony* states that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony rests primarily on the domination of the capitalist system where he drew inspiration for the same from “a fundamental text of Marx’s, the 1859 preface to A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy...”(202). Gramsci’s concept of the control of the powerful over the powerless or the other is viewed from different perspectives especially from the ideological and cultural point of view. Cultural Hegemony is yet another ideology attributed to Gramsci. The website on *ThoughtCo* states that

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of cultural hegemony out of Karl Marx’s theory that the dominant ideology of society reflects the beliefs and interests of the ruling class. Thus, Cultural Hegemony reflects the dominant ideologies shared by a particular society and are imposed by social, political institutions.

It is Autobiography which is the most influential form of writing which exposes the different types of hegemonic behaviors of various cultures. Laura Marcus in *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* explains that Antonio Gramsci has also incorporated an “Autobiographical Note” (1933) in his *Prison Notebooks*. The marginalized and indigenous literature have utilized and have experimented with the genre, ‘Autobiography’ to the extent that new forms of autobiographies are established according to the needs of their subject matter. Thus, Autobiography has become an adequate genre, medium for these underprivileged communities to break their silence and voice out their ordeals. Celia Hunt in *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* states that writing autobiography can be therapeutic and a means of outlet for those ‘repressed memories.’ Celia Hunt briefs on the process of the art of writing autobiography as:

A ‘writing voice’ or ‘writing identity’, then, in the internal sense, involves the development of a strong enough sense of self to facilitate ‘the internal gesture’, the mechanism of shelving the critical faculty, which allows ‘positive regression’ into the unconscious and the holding open of the ‘internal space’ where the imagination sets to work on the raw material of the unconscious and transforms it into art. (40)

This paper proposes to highlight the instances of cultural hegemony in Bama's *Karukku* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It also tries to expose the hegemonic nature of religion and its impact on individuals. Bama's *Karukku* is hailed as 'the first autobiography by a Dalit woman' and many of her works are translated into many languages. The website titled *Revolving* briefs on the biography of Bama and her literary achievements. Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a 'Dalit feminist, committed teacher, short story writer, and novelist.' Her novels and short stories include *Sangati* (1994), and *Vanmam* (2002), *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* happens to be the first in the series of seven autobiographies published in 1969. Her other autobiographies include *Gather Together in My Name*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, *The Heart of a Woman*, *All God's Children Need Travelling*, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, and *Mom & Me & Mom*. Maya Angelou is a multi-talented writer who has written many poems, essays, children's books, picture books and cookery books to her credit.

Both *Karukku* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* fall under the category of Autobiographical fiction or Autobiographical novels. Laura Marcus elucidates on the evolution and different forms of Autobiographies. Autobiographical fiction was popularized by writers like 'Mansfield, James Joyce, D.H.Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf' (111). The merging of fictional content into autobiography in the nineteenth and twentieth century gave an "aesthetic" touch to autobiography, yet it also "showed a growing skepticism about autobiography's powers to represent the self and to recapture the past" (111).

Bama's *Karukku* covers the life of Bama from her childhood to her middle age, from being ostracized as a Dalit at the social and religious level. Bama's *Karukku* is a phenomenal piece of writing which can be attributed myriad terminologies associated with autobiography. It is an Autobiography, with Autobiographical fictional elements and features of memoirs where Bama gives clear-cut scenario about her life at the nunnery. Maya Angelou's Autobiographical fiction captures the emotional struggles of a young girl who is a rape victim. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is presented in a chronological order where two painful, traumatic incidents stand out, i.e. when she is raped as a young girl and when she becomes pregnant in her teens.

Maya Angelou's narration in many parts of her autobiography appears to be humorous, in spite of the traumatic events that she had experienced. There are many instances of hegemonic situations in the autobiography. Maya Angelou vividly registers the racial differences that excited in the southern parts of America.

Bama in her autobiography records the uneven laws and injustice meted out to the Parayas (Dalits). Bama is punished and insulted both by her teacher and the priest who firmly believe the accusation against her without even verifying it. The headmaster accuses and slurs

her in the morning assembly in front of her school mates, "You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya." The Priest who should have defended her, who have been unbiased, insults her without analyzing the situation and accuses her based on her caste. "After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it"(19).

Maya overtly describes the dominant socio-political-racial-religious ideologies which the African American were forced to abide naturally. They were treated as slaves and inferior and eventually, irrespective of age and creed, they were compelled to serve the whites. This has become psychological instinctive behavior of the Marginalized people to act inferior and subservient to the whites. In Maya's autobiography, Momma, Maya's Grandmother is insulted and abused by a group of white children, who are treated well by Momma. Maya is furious when they create a rampage in the front of their shop which was just cleaned and for insulting Momma but stands helpless and cries over it. Momma, on the other hand, accepts her status in society and keeps murmuring and singing prayers. However, this creates a negative impact in Maya who states that,

I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? The mean nasty things. (35)

The social and religious discrimination and domination of the dominant class and caste are evident in Bama's *Karukku*. There are communal riots and it is the Dalits who are targeted by the powerful communities. Dalit men are forced to abandon their houses and seek sanctuary in the woods. Those who got caught were physically assaulted leading to the death of a Dalit. However, no justice is served to them. One could find that social and religious discrimination is deeply rooted in the educational institutions when Bama is especially denied permission to attend her siblings' First Communion. However, she rebels against the decision of the authorities and gains permission to attend the function:

I saw with my own eyes that they were giving permission for the wealthy children to go home... I lost my temper and challenged them head-on, 'How is it that you are allowing these others to go; why is it that you only refuse me? The reply that I was given: 'What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion?' They told me, in their domineering way, that they could not let me go to attend minor occasions like these. (22)

Maya Angelou's autobiography also provides insights into the domination of representatives of the religious group. An example of hegemony in terms of religion can be witnessed in the form of Maya Angelou's description of an overindulgent 'presiding elder', Reverend Howard Thomas, who visited their church every quarterly and "stayed at Momma's"; gave a 'passionate sermon'; 'collected money from the preceding months and left.' Reverend

Howard who should be loved and admired for his spiritual service, is loathed by the children. His visit appears solely for the purpose of collecting money than serving the people of his church.

His obesity, while disgusting, was not enough to incur the intense hate we felt for him. But the crime that tipped the scale and made our hate not only just but imperative was his actions at the dinner table. He ate the biggest, brownest and best parts of the chicken at every Sunday meal. (37-8)

There are other instances which show spiritual enthusiasm among the churchgoers. Maya narrates instances of possessed churchgoers like Sister Monroe who would knock down the preacher shouting "Preach it. I say, Preach it" in a state of trance and create a riot in the church much to the amusement of the children. And some visit the church to show-off their high financial status. Religion dominated their lives but it was only a few who were true in their worship and there were others who merely pretended. Unfortunately, the power lies in the hands of the pretenders who have hegemonic control over the others.

Bama poignantly narrates the events that led to her leaving the nunnery. Bama dreams of serving the poor, downtrodden communities and hence, decides to become a nun to realize it. However, she finds the nunnery ironically serving the upper-class rich students than the underprivileged. The Nuns who should lead a pious denounced life was leading a luxurious and complacent life contrary to the teachings of the Bible. Finally, Bama manages to free herself from the hegemonic clutches of religion and liberates herself after many struggles.

Thus, the two autobiographies from two different cultures stand examples of cultural hegemony which includes domination of social, political, and religious institutions etc which frames up the mindset of the marginalized that there are powerless, inferior to them. However, Bama and Maya Angelou have broken up these hegemonic boundaries and have emerged successful in establishing their identities. Their autobiographies are evidence enough to prove that they have broken the shackles of cultural hegemony and stand tall against it, as liberated women. The ideologies introduced by the dominant communities which are imbibed by the underprivileged in terms of caste, class, race, and religion are exposed by Bama and Maya Angelou in their autobiographies.

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