

WOMEN QUESTION INTERSECTIONALITY: EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY IN *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* BY MAYA ANGELOU AND *THE BLUEST EYE* BY TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

The study focuses on the aspect of intersectionality in the novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. With these two novels, the experiences that the African American women go through and the roles of race, gender and class in constructing them are brought out. This paper aims to scrutinize how both Angelou and Morrison use their literary voice to convey experiences and perseverance of their first female main characters Marguerite and Pecola in a prejudiced world. The paper focuses on the important aspects of the postcolonial performance of each author and their approaches to address the complexities of the issue based on the binaries that construct and work on the representation of the characters as multidimensional based on intersectionality. Thus, by framing analysis within the contexts of Black female characters' experiences, the paper establishes the role of storytelling in the oppression of people of color and, more broadly, the manner in which the representation of minorities is a form of their subjugation. In this sense, this study also plays a part in having a better understanding and recognising the significance of Angelou's and Morrison's work to the present day discussions on intersectionality to the consideration of identity and justice.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Identity, Race, Black consciousness, Oppression.

INTRODUCTION

The term "intersectionality" was coined by Black Feminist scholar Kimberle Williams Crenshaw in her research thesis in 1990. Intersectionality is what people have in their minds to help them explain a number of aspects of one's life including the sociopolitical status. Such identities include accentuating physical traits, gender, caste, class, race, and religion. Altogether, these components may develop in one's life as different sorts of privilege and prejudice. This concept indicates that the categorizations of people are interrelated and symbiotic, and there can be layers of discrimination or marginalization entailing one individual or group of people. Thus, identifying these intersections helps the people not only to analyze the issue in its complexity but also to promote changes for the society to become more accepting of those with different backgrounds. Intersectionality moreover also was intended to highlight the fact that it is necessary to take into account the multifaceted character of identity when addressing social issues. Such an approach is the one that supports the change of unequal power relations and encourages the critical perspective on privilege and oppression.

Black women begin this movement to put an end to sexist oppression. Nevertheless, shortly they understood that white women were not much supporting them or even bothered about the difficulties faced by the women of colour. The racial isolation was so eminent that the word women just meant white women and the word blacks meant black men. This cruel

exercise of racial discrimination resulted in the emergence of the Black Feminist movement, one whose key goal was to end racism at first. The movement accentuated the truth that sexism, racism and class discrimination were intersectional and are also interlinked. The aim of black feminists was to create unity and cooperation amongst themselves.

Black women started this movement against sexist oppressions. However, in short, they realised that the white women were not giving them much support, in fact, did not even care for the troubles that the women of colour encountered. After this racial isolation was so explicit to a level that the word women just referred to white women and the word blacks referred to black men. This act of racial discrimination was vicious and led to the formation of the Black Feminist movement whose primary aim was to end racism initially. It brought out the fact that the war against women, the racism, the class discrimination are all crossover and are as well interrelated. Black feminist's goal was to build and promote solidarity for themselves.

Black women used literature as an advantage to let society know about them and to deliver their message, they made society privilege itself as having the authority to know them and to give Black women writers the ability to write about complex social issues and/or issues that are complicated in nature because they are both black and women. Their emotions included anguish, the wrongs they had suffered, and the repulsion of slavery. These may ask for the oppression they received from white people or Black males to be accounted for. Both African-American and

women's literature have intentionally obscured these authors among the works which demonstrates that their main goal was not the desire for authorship or fame. However, black women's works were deliberately excluded from literary criticism and other academic disciplines by the white female scholars/writers. One cannot deny that these writers have enriched the literature and given 'light' to the other black female writers of the future. Their ability to speak out is long overdue, and it brings the focus onto the fact that intersectionality has been lacking in the feminist movement. Thanks to their individual points of view and life experiences, the narrative of the Feminist movement has extended the stories of race, gender, and identity.

Toni Morrison is one of the most famous writers in the history of world literature, being the first African American woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for literature. Her written works brought into the American mainstream discourse the black subject in general and black woman's often racist ordeal in particular, in fabulous, otherworldly prose that no other English author can match. The black people particularly the African-Americans are the focus of Toni Morrison books in terms of history and/or current times. While the literary style explores poignant subject matters, the distinctive narration shifts with every new novel in Toni Morrison's bibliography. In her first published work, a novel that came out in 1970 titled *The Bluest Eye*, will focus on using mystery to unravel women affairs.

In the first critique by Margaret C. Aldrich in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* was sharply criticized for professional wordiness and underemphasized themes. It is a tragedy of a black adolescent girl in search of acceptance, of belonging, of gaining this so important sense of normalcy, of staking out one's claim in the world. As a little girl from 1940s Ohio, the protagonist Pecola Breedlove cannot see past the desire for blue eyes, sprinkled with pure white love, whilst struggling to love herself in a society poisoned by patriarchy as well as overt racism. Pecola developing character and personality as a child, she had very low self-esteem. The audience can conclude that everybody hates her, from her parents to black people as well as white people. Black women must suffer all the fullness of their oppression, which forms the entire plot of *The Bluest Eye*. Seeing that her wish was to have blue eyes, Pecola can be considered to have internalized racism and self-hatred for wishing to become a better version of the standards set by hegemonic, white society. It also marked the opportunity for the black women to be associated with whiteness, which demonstrates how race and racism have impacted the black women's psychological well-being.

Going by the name Marguerite Johnson, commonly known as Maya Angelou, there are numerous accolades that can be bestowed on her. She was a director, performer, singer, novelist, poet, historian, composer, dramatist, dancer & producer of stage & screen & also a civil rights activist. She left a remarkable record in Hollywood history as the first black female director. The burning desire to come out of obscurity compelled her into writing after James Baldwin, who was also her fellow contributor and friend, encouraged her to write about her experiences in life. This led her to write her story in the book she titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a narration of her life experiences up to her early adulthood. In relation to African racial hatred, Angelou recollects horrific childhood and youth experiences and explores how she developed her strong, black woman's persona. Books in turn became her source of salvation for, apart from helping her gain knowledge and quenching the thirst for reading, they were empowering and re-birth giving.

Prejudice and segregation are the two themes that are focused on in the given book.

Sacrifice but presenting a brave face to the world is something that Angelou's reader identifies with as she was able to turn her pain into art. She remains remembered for her contribution in literature as well as the fight for equal rights for blacks. The words she spoke are still being repeated as a call to continue striving for a better world where the oppressed are freed from their suffering. The world now widely knows Maya Angelou and her contribution to literature and various movements have carved her as an everlasting voice in this world. Maya faces racism and responds with pride, courage and self-respect, and she does not allow racists' beliefs to dominate her. She says that the probability against Black women is not only the threat of sexism, racism and black powerlessness but also some of the common forces of nature that affect all children at a certain age in a coordinated manner.

Altogether, this study is carried out with the help of a comparative and analytical approach and is targeted at the identification of the ways in which both writers introduce the concepts of feminism into the selected literary works. While women of the current generation fight for independence as the beacons of their feminism, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison connect the western feminist definition of freedom to the construction and oppression of gender roles, as well as the oppression that follows the roles. From our perspective, two world renowned authors are focused in our study which enlighten us how they break the set gender roles and fight for the liberation of women. Through a reflection on the approaches that feminism and literature seventy-seven ideas in their works, our goal is to eventually reveal the relevance of their ideas today.

Race and gender relations are an essential factor in deciphering the suffering of black American women in society and how they are treated. Maya Angelou, in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, also underlines this concept of 'double oppressions' and how Black American women have to suffer due to this reason.

Through the recantation of her own experience as a young black girl living in the segregated society in the American south, Angelou brings to the fore the plight of marginalized women and girls due to societal prejudice. By doing so, she is able to raise the question of just how black women are capable of overcoming these barriers, and be able to assert themselves in a society that tries to deny their voice.

In the autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou portrays exploration of the limitations of black American women living in the South. These expectations, which often involve both gender and race considerations, therefore play a part in the double burden that is placed on black women. Using her ability to convey stories, Angelou has revealed the aspects of race and gender wherein black women struggle most in society. She teaches others to come out of the channels and restrictions of society and be more true to themselves as she narrates instances in her life.

Race and gender play a significant role which is beautifully narrated by Angelou, and how black American women suffer because of their race and color. In more detail, they can deliberate on the extent of difficulties that black women have to struggle with in America as presented in the memoir of Maya Angelou. Not surprisingly, her words are empowering for many people who are in similar circumstances, and give hope to those struggling. According to Angelou, whose writing has had a profound impact, Black women must be strong and work against injustice in order to change society. She is loved by the readers

and fellow activists because her work is sincere and genuine, depicting black women as they are in life. This work of Angelou empowers generations of women to decide on who they really are and for them to be accepted and be given equal rights as men. Some traditions that they have to endure are for example Black American women are expected to be obedient to men. This expectation is upheld by the existing social status of Southern society where males dominate over females and hold overall responsibility. "In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most black children didn't really, absolutely know what white folks looked like" (Angelou 18). This tends to show how black women were expected not to go out in search of better life elsewhere but to stay put in their places, thus their opportunities limited and relegated to a position of continued subjugation.

This observation by Angelou aptly captures the fact that black women have to continue facing systematic and subjection to ensure they liberate themselves truly from social norms and get an equal chance. Using the example of black children, she is able to expose the existence of such expectations and how they target these groups of people from their early childhood. Essentially, Angelou's insight makes one realize that everybody should strive to change these paradigms of the society and ensure that everyone is treated with equality and respect. With them, she reminds people of the fact that there is social justice only in the future and we still have to work on the change of the society where opportunities will not be provided according to the prejudices against people. Thus, the analysis of how Angelou considers the racism and sexism of black women from her work continues to enhance the understanding of how race and gender discrimination aftermaths black women's struggle for equality. Her call to action compels people into the positive process of engineering a better society especially for the unprivileged members of society.

Another example is the inability of black American women to deviate from certain racial norms and expectations. Nowadays, the representation of black women can be either of asexual and hypersexualized women or 'angry' black women which leads to harassment and discrimination. This is well illustrated in Angelou's writings particularly when she explores how white males demean black women. "White men's sex laments, black men's sex songs, the hunger in their bellies for the rhythm of the rape" (Angelou 154). What this shows is how black women are violated and treated unfairly by the society hence putting them at a risk of suffering more punishment. This is because, just like color, gender plays a significant role in the lives of black American women in terms of the social roles expected of them. Black women could also be denied a chance by the expectations that oppress them into mandatory adherence to certain tainted racial images and bowing to male authority. For this oppression to cease, it is important that society identify the extra challenges that African American females face and then work on dismantling the frameworks that reinforce these perceptions.

It can be done by promoting the understanding of Black women, gender representation and activism, and ensuring that they are empowered to fight against the various systems of oppression. It is only when society listens to what black women have to say and gets involved in empowering them, that it will be possible to dismantle the systems that allow this type of oppression. It shouldn't be forgotten that black women also took active roles in the fight for oppression as well as for equal rights in the society. The importance is for society to embrace these people, to give them their voice in today's society to ensure that everyone is given an equal chance in society.

One of the relationships depicted in the book is the friendship between Maya and her friend Louise. Maya, as a Black woman in the South, knows the challenges that Black woman like her face and thus, Louise understands that as well. Maya recalls,

Louise was the first absolutely beautiful black girl I had ever seen. Louise was the first black girl I had ever seen who was absolutely beautiful. Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged, but then no one would have thought of getting close enough to touch her to risk it (Angelou 68).

The sisterly relationship shown between Louise and Maya depicts how black women can be strong through their affiliation with one another. However, in terms of the relations and in the cultural aspect, the role and strength of Black American women can be seen in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. These connections allow the black women to have the feeling of belonging, acceptance, and emotional support which assists them to cope with the double oppression they undergo.

The relationship between Maya and Louise is a crucial example of how black women should support each other as they face different problems rooted in the racist society. This shows that when it comes to their relationships, they foster and empower each other despite the stringencies of the laws. The role of black women and their speaking up for themselves is also highlighted, underlining the necessity of being independent together with communitarian angles to it. Indeed, the coming together of black women where they support and encourage each other is a sign of the strive to ensure that despite the society that deploys all efforts to ensure that black women are invisible, they stand and fight for themselves.

The growth and transformation of Maya originally depicted as "too big Negro girl with nappy black hair broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil" (Angelou 05). It appears as though Angelou's autobiography ends with Maya, 'the Caged Bird', spreading her wings up, up into the brilliant sky and flying towards the bright shining, the free domain of mother and child love. Before all this, Maya was a black girl child confined within a cage created by her own mentally perverted perception of herself and locked from the outside by natural and social prejudices. The butterflies symbolize the liberation of women from the traditional expectations of society, and Maya herself comes to symbolize personal struggles and triumph. The process of transition from the rather low self-esteem to self-acceptance, as it can be traced in Angelou's life, belongs to the bestselling archetypal search for personal growth. By presenting the biography of this remarkable woman and her ability to overcome difficulties, Angelou shows the methods to escape from the vicious circle of victimization and self-enclosure. This represents a shift from the Caged Bird as an imprisoned creature and the narrative stresses the possibility of redemption and transformation of the human spirit. The protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola Breedlove, an 11-year-old black girl living in Lorrain, Ohio. The novel starts in the year 1940 and she, like many of the other characters, is poor and their family is struggling with financial problems. She suffers from child abuse at the hands of her father Cholly, who is an alcoholic and lives in a chaotic home. It seemed that Pecola desired blue eyes because she is aspiring to be like the white mainstream Americans.

The desire for blue eyes that Pecola has represents racist and self-hating desires, as her beauty and acceptance from others can only come from Europe and whiteness. Pecola Breedlove's pathetic tale reveals the issues of racism and here, the physical attractiveness as an essential prerequisite in the given society

creates the major conflict and sets the lesson in the book. It educates and highlights the detriments of racism and prejudices toward women and the pressure put on women to meet an ideal standard of beauty. Morrison's novel thoroughly explores issues of race, beauty and identity that speak volumes about the plight of people of color in America.

How hegemonic white standards of beauty impact Black women is most applicable to *The Bluest Eye* as a result of the numerous depictions of white images of this beauty and how the Black girls have to respond to them. This search for acceptance and worth escalates the suffering of characters, as they have incorporated internalized standards making them hate themselves and yearn for ideals they can never achieve. As we walk through Pecola's tragedy, Morrison demonstrates the extent to which the socially constructed power relations and racism undermine the emotional well-being of the black females, leaving them to suffer from an inferiority complex. While *The Bluest Eye* presents the triumph of the protagonist over the prejudice implied by the American mainstream culture, there is no doubt that Morrison's focus on race, beauty and individuality is compelling and chilling, which encourages the readers to open their eyes to the consequences of idealization. Analyzing the detail of Pecola's story, Morrison exposes the roots of those problems and how the phenomenon of life under oppression affects an African American individual. Understanding the Pecola's complexity of her character recognition is vital to understand the difference between Morrison's Pecola and Frieda and Claudia. The commonalities of poverty, race, age, and gender are characteristics that are evident in all of them. It implies that in the intersection of such and similar categories that the nature of their difference is expected to emerge, thus to get the understanding how three such rather generic characters might experience their lives in a different way because of specific categories of their identity it is necessary to recognize the fact that all that might change in the intersection of such categories. For instance, Frieda and Claudia also suffer the fates of racism and poverty in addition to Pecola; however, Pecola's racism is obvious to the point of thinking that obtaining blue eyes would provide her with all the solutions she requires, showing the self hatred that she possesses.

However, what makes Pecola's reality unique from that of the two sisters is that her father is an alcoholic who burnt down the family house and thus the girls have no where they can call home. This is depicted through the narration from Claudia, who is Pecola's sister and it is narrated in the second person. In the book, readers are able to learn about Pecola through Claudia's narration to understand her plight as a victim of domestic abuse. Her family loses the house they were living in, which further contributes to Pecola's marginality. The condition of Black women, as reflected by Pecola, is an example of systemic racism and shows how more privileged people like Claudia can easily ignore or fail to notice such issues despite having been exposed to it. All these elements enable a more profound analysis of the characters' states and their ability to survive in conditions of extreme pressure.

Despite the fact that the novel focuses primarily on the theme of desire, sexual exploitation is present in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison as a disturbing and pervasive theme. Through the portrayal of sexual perversion and the subsequent devastation in the lives of the characters, especially the little girls, Morrison makes the connections between race, gender, and power gracefully clear to the reader. One of the social issues portrayed in the novel is the issue of sexual exploitation and the author chooses the young Black girl Pecola Breedlove to represent that. A subtle hope is preserved in her delusional belief that blue eyes,

which suggests a Eurocentric aesthetic, are the ticket to happiness and inclusion. The beauty standard of white women definitely misleads the civilized reader by making them judge and feel contemptuous towards Pecola while ignoring the fact that their beauty standard only serves to victimize her and other black women. In this sense, the novel can be discussed as a highly effective socio-political statement for people of color, women, and marginalized gender, and as a testimony to the subjects' ability to resist oppression.

One key theme that represents the novel includes the effects of sexual abuse on Pecola and the overall theme of what happens when one goes through trauma. It's true that Pecola's sad story leaves the reader with the clear understanding that one has to fight against the system which allows the violence and oppression to continue. Through a focus on Pecola's identity and the anguish she experiences as a result of her appearance, specifically her breasts, Morrison's work becomes a wake-up call for society to actively address and remedy toxic systems that actively harm people. Analyzing race and gender relations as well as relations of power, Morrison sends readers a call for reconsidering their own roles and responsibilities in the construction of oppressive structures and inspiring them to strive for change for mankind.

Although both of the novels are related to the notions of race, trauma, and survival, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison extends the discussion focusing on the effects of beauty standards on Black girls like Pecola. Morrison's work also explores how self-loathing created through the social institution of race results in further generation of violence in minority groups. However, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the reader is exposed to the general experiences of black women as they live through racism, sexual assault, and their struggles in a world that doesn't accept their voice or wants to cage them. Each novel presents readers with interesting ideas about the nature of identification and means of subsistence in the context of supremacy. *The Bluest Eye* forces the reader to address painful questions of race and gender in human life and on this score, Morrison's work is both important and timely. Morrison's short stories and compelling personalities of the characters open up the question of the individual and the constant fight for the recognition of one's value and the right to claim one's identity within the social context that aims at the subjugation of the people by reducing their value based on the given standards.

Both authors hold up their narratives to show how these societies' relations and prejudices leave a lasting imprint on the victims while advocating for self-acceptance despite the adversities of life. Morrison and Angelou force their readers to face the raw, gritty side of existence and grapple with the effects of racism and sexism on our society and ourselves. These oppressions force one to question one's moral judgment and prejudices, demanding one accept the peculiar nature of everyone. Morrison and Angelou use the human experiences of their characters as per their everyday struggles and achievements to compel the change and to provoke the readers to think for a change to embrace the society which is more diverse and equal. They are the inspiring voices which make most people realize that freedom stems from self-acceptance as we fight for change with more understanding that the world will never approve who we are in our entirety because it will simply cease to exist.

CONCLUSION

The study of identity as well as worth with reference to literary works of African American writers and authors such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou gives an indication to how one is

made to feel about themselves depending on the cultural standards of the community. Due to integration into contemporary society, race, gender, and class are some of the themes explored by both writers in their works, thus provoking the reader to reflect on such issues. Using words and vivid descriptions, they create compelling narratives that challenge not only the reader to understand the lives of the characters, but also forces the reader to consider the validity and implications of their own ideology. In conclusion, their works strongly encourage people towards acting in a way that will generate positive change for the challenged segments of the population. For instance, the novel of Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, portrays desire to be beautiful and suffer of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove because of abdominalization of the stereotypes of racial difference. In the same way, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* complicated issues of race and gender as her life as an African American woman limits her freedom and choices during the time of Jim Crow Laws; thus, forcing the readers to rethink black women's statuses in society.

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