



# EXPLORING POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY VIA RACISM AND RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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**Abstract:** In a world shaped by the remnants of colonialism, women across diverse societies grapple with the complex interplay of postcolonial identity, racism, and resistance. This article unpacks the subtle and overt forms of racism, suppression and oppression in the selected texts that female characters grapple with. In the wake of postcolonial societies females fight with the complexities of identity formation amidst the persistent shadows of racism. By delving into narratives from the carefully chosen books we seek to unravel the layers of oppression, victimization, suppression and discrimination faced by the women. Through the lens of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* we will gain insights into the broader challenges faced by the women of marginalized and coloured communities in their quest for self-determination and cultural affirmation. The analysis of these selected books contributes to a profound comprehension of the enduring nature of women who defiantly fight against the constraints of a patriarchal society. Through the lens of these powerful narratives, we witness the indomitable spirit of female protagonists navigating the complexities of racism, postcolonial identity, and patriarchal oppression. Their stories serve as poignant reminders of the resilience inherent in women who confront systemic injustices, transcending societal expectations and reclaiming emancipation in the face of adversity.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Identity, Racism, Oppression, Patriarchy, Resistance, Emancipation.

## I: INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of existence, the man has been stereotyped to be superior to woman viz. God created Adam first and Eve was created from the rib of Adam to be his companion. The physical and mental attributes of man and woman are different. The masculine body is always projected stronger than the feminine. Women face various forms of suppression and suffering due to systemic, cultural, racial or individual factors. Women face discrimination in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and opportunities. Gender bias limits their access to resources and hinder professional growth. Women often suffer from physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Domestic violence, human trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence have severe and lasting effects on them. Economic disparities contribute to overall suffering and inequality. In some regions, cultural norms or economic constraints limit girls' access to education, depriving them of opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. Women face the distressing situation of forced marriages or child marriages, impacting their autonomy, well-being, and mental health. Male dominated society impose restrictions on women's freedom, choices, and roles, contributing to their suffering.

The reasons one could muster for the vain pelf of patriarchy can be neurotic dependency of battered wives or financially dependency, which sometimes force women to remain under stereotypical shed. The fact that they are so often financially dependent upon the men who beats them makes for a vicious kind of entrapment. It is emotional dependency, though that puts a double lock on the trap. There is a kind of panic that women have about being able to make it in anyway other than being dependent on their husbands. They have been taught their whole lives that they cannot. It is a conditioning process. It is just like, in such situations in which they have no effect on their environments, animals began to give up. The same thing happens to a victim. Stay long enough in a situation in which you feel you have no control, and you will simply stop responding. This is what learned helplessness is. Perpetrators of abuse often make their victims to believe that they are somehow responsible for their own abuse. Such misplaced notions shift the blame of the abuse from the abuser to the abuse.

The quest for empowerment and self-determination has been central to many women's efforts to define themselves in their own terms. Contemporary women continue to navigate the complexities of identity, seeking avenues for self-actualization, empowerment, and the assertion of their individuality. Women's pursuit of identity is intricately linked to advocacy and activism, as many women engage in efforts to challenge systemic barriers, advocate for representation, and promote inclusive spaces that validate diverse identities. In professional and personal realms, women strive to reconcile various aspects of their identity, such as career aspirations, family roles, and personal passions, in a manner that aligns with their individual values and ambitions. Empowerment involves the process of gaining the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to exercise influence and agency within societal structures. It encompasses efforts to challenge power imbalances, advocate for rights, and participate in decision-making processes that affect individuals and communities. Economic empowerment focuses on providing individuals with opportunities for financial independence, access to economic resources, and the ability to pursue livelihoods that align with their aspirations. While political empowerment entails fostering participation in governance, advocating for policy changes, and ensuring that marginalized voices are represented in the political sphere.

Research analysis by Jha, Sonora; Adelman, Mara on the topic “*Looking for Love in All the White Places: A Study of Skin Color Preferences on Indian Matrimonial and Mate-Seeking Websites*” throws light on the negative phenomenon of preferring a light skinned female is a global bias that affects all areas of human relationships, especially in marital mate selection. Further intensified by the meteoric rise in Internet dating and mate selection, this bias often serves an invalidating function for darker-skinned women. The above research papers make it convenient to understand the fact that how colorism has been affecting the existence of women and their identity since centuries and also how it stands as a hindrance in the path of black feminists to rectify the subordinate class notions, which are based upon the color of the women.

## II: OBJECTIVES

- a) To study the literature of selected novels and explore postcolonial identity.
- b) Tracing social and political background leading to women subjugation.
- c) To explore the inner turmoil and battles of female characters in the patriarchal society.

## III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Post-colonialism is an eclectic and a sort of an umbrella term under which multiple approaches fall. It has developed by conceptualizing processes of reconstructing economic and cultural health in the period after colonial occupation. Post-colonial theories reveal the depth of harm done by the process of creating a colony and offer models of reconstituting identity. The study will delve into the life and struggle of the selected authors Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. As in the selected texts women are from different backgrounds, class, race, the study will explore the social and political circumstances leading to their subjugation. The study will look into the problems faced by women in the postcolonial social milieu which is strictly racial, patriarchal and overwhelmed with narrow-minded outlook and rigid beliefs. In order to understand feminism in terms of theory the insights from the important works of feminist writers will be taken.

## IV: EXPLORING POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY VIA RACISM AND RESISTANCE

Racism is a general term used to describe a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human races. It is a policy, system of government, etc., based upon or fostering such a doctrine; discrimination; hatred or intolerance of another race or other races. Williams, Lavizzo-Mourey & Warren defined race as a socially constructed category of identity with its roots in an ideology that situates human beings within a hierarchy of social value. Race is not a biological fact but rather a socially constructed concept that was created and is maintained to establish disparities in the distribution of resources and power (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The roots of inequities within structures, systems and individual behaviours are deeply embedded in

erroneous beliefs about innate differences between groups of people. This is particularly evident in relationships between people of European ancestry and Indigenous peoples in North America. Racism exists in several, often intersecting, forms including: negative and stereotypic attitudes about 'racialized' groups, the dominance of western knowledge systems, overt aggression and more subtle discriminatory behaviours, as well as structural inequities and social exclusion. Term Postcolonial Literature has come into trend to represent the literature in English from India, Africa, Australia, West Indies, New Zealand, Malaysia, Philippines and many other countries. *The Empire Writes Back* makes a broad statement in this regard: "...we use the term post-colonial to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression" (Ashcroft, 25). Postcolonial literature is primarily concerned with the process of decolonization. This refers to the dismantling of colonial structures and the attainment of independence by formerly colonized nations. The literature arising from this context is shaped by the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of the colonized people. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw naming "*Beyond Racism and Misogyny*", Chapter 13 clearly indicates how domestic violence and rapes like crimes still prevailing in our society are been presses down by the families of the victims considering that their personal matter. In this article, an intersectional framework uncovers how the dual positioning of women of color as women and as members of a subordinated racial group bears upon violence committed against us. This dual positioning or as some scholars have labeled it, double jeopardy, renders women of color vulnerable to the structural, political and representational dynamics of both race and gender subordination.

Maya Angelou and Celie, the protagonists of the novels *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Color Purple* respectively, are two remarkable literary figures who have captured the essence of postcolonial identity through their powerful narratives. Both characters navigate the challenges of racism and oppression while striving to reclaim their identities. In this section, we will delve into the postcolonial identity of Maya Angelou and Celie, examining the ways in which their experiences shape their sense of self. Maya Angelou, in her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, chronicles her journey from childhood to adolescence, highlighting the racial prejudices and societal barriers she encounters. As a young African-American girl growing up in the racially segregated South, Angelou grapples with the internalization of white beauty standards and the struggle to find her voice in a world that seeks to silence her. Her experiences of racial discrimination and the complex intersectionality of her identity as a woman of color are central to her postcolonial identity. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou takes readers on a profound journey of postcolonial resurgence, where racism and the reconstruction of identity intersect in intricate ways. Through the lens of Maya's narrative, we gain a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized individuals as they navigate a society marked by racial prejudice. The novel becomes a testament to the enduring spirit of those who, in the face of oppression, embark on a transformative quest for self-definition, cultural reclamation, and the resurgence of postcolonial identity. Similarly, Celie, the central character in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, embodies the postcolonial identity of a black woman in early 20th century America. Celie endures the trauma of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and systemic racism, all of which contribute to her struggle for self-actualization. Through her letters and personal growth, Celie demonstrates resilience in the face of adversity, ultimately reclaiming her identity and finding empowerment in her own voice. The exploration of postcolonial identity in both novels provides a rich understanding of the complexities faced by marginalized individuals in a colonized society.

Racism, a pervasive and destructive force, plays a central role in shaping the postcolonial identity of Maya Angelou and Celie. Throughout their respective narratives, both characters confront the harsh reality of racial discrimination and its impact on their lives. In this section, we will examine the racism faced by Maya Angelou and Celie, shedding light on the systemic oppression they endure. Maya Angelou's experiences of racism begin at an early age. As a child, she witnesses the brutal lynching of a black man, an event that leaves a lasting impression on her and highlights the deep-rooted racism in her community. Angelou endures racial slurs, segregation, and the constant reminder that she is considered inferior due to the color of her skin. However, it is through her resilience and determination that she overcomes these obstacles, ultimately embracing her African-American heritage and celebrating her identity. Similarly, Celie's life in *The Color Purple* is marred by racism and discrimination. As a black woman in the early 1900s, she is subjected to both physical and emotional abuse, mainly at the hands of white men. Celie's experiences of racism are intertwined with her understanding of her own sexuality and the complexity of her relationships. Through her narrative, Walker explores the intersecting forms of oppression faced by black women and the transformative power of self-love and community support in overcoming racism.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a powerful memoir by Maya Angelou that delves into her early life and the challenges she faces as a young African-American girl in a racially segregated society. The memoir covers Angelou's childhood in the South, her experiences of racial discrimination, and her journey toward self-



acceptance and empowerment. Through her captivating storytelling, Angelou sheds light on the intricate layers of racism, sexism, and classism that shape her postcolonial identity. The memoir serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of literature to inspire social change. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel that unfolds through letters written by the protagonist, Celie, to God. It addresses the struggles of African American women in the early 20th century and their quest for self-empowerment. Although the novel is set in the United States, it can be read as a postcolonial critique. Walker examines the effects of colonization on African American communities, focusing on the enduring trauma and oppression faced by the characters. The characters in *The Color Purple* grapple with questions of cultural identity, especially as they confront the legacies of slavery and the influence of white-dominated societal norms. Walker explores the process of reclaiming one's cultural roots and establishing a sense of self outside the oppressive structures. Both works engage with the postcolonial condition by examining the complexities of identity and power dynamics within the context of African American experiences. They contribute to the broader discourse on post-colonialism by shedding light on the lasting effects of historical injustices and the resilience of women in navigating and shaping their identities within these challenging circumstances. The story revolves around Celie, a young black woman who endures abuse and oppression, both at the hands of her stepfather and her husband. Through a series of letters addressed to God, Celie finds solace and strength in her own voice, ultimately breaking free from the chains of racism and patriarchy. Walker's novel is a poignant portrayal of the complexities of postcolonial identity and the transformative power of self-love and sisterhood. Thus these two selected texts offer profound insights into the postcolonial identity of marginalized individuals, particularly African-American women. Through their narratives, Angelou and Walker explore the themes of racism, resistance, and the search for self-empowerment. These two works of literature serve as powerful reminders of the enduring resilience of those who face oppression and their unwavering determination to reclaim their identities. By delving into the postcolonial experiences of Maya Angelou and Celie, readers are invited to reflect on their own understanding of identity, race, and the power of self-expression. Their stories are sure to inspire, enlighten, and challenge the understanding of postcolonial identity and the human experience.

## V: CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are two influential works in American literature that explore postcolonial themes and contribute to discussions on identity, race, and gender. They address the aftermath and lingering effects of colonialism, especially in the context of African American experiences. Angelou's work is a coming-of-age autobiography that explores her childhood and adolescence. It depicts her experiences growing up in the racially segregated South and her journey toward self-discovery. Angelou grapples with the societal norms and prejudices of the time, depicting how these factors shape her understanding of herself and her place in the world. Angelou's narrative also explores the intersectionality of identity and reflects on the challenges of being a black woman in a society that often marginalizes and discriminates against individuals based on both race and gender. Maya Angelou's literary masterpiece, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* serves as a profound exploration of postcolonial resurgence, skillfully weaving together themes of racism and the intricate process of identity reconstruction. This analysis seeks to unravel the layers of Angelou's narrative, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between postcolonial resurgence, racial oppression, and the quest for self-definition. Set against the backdrop of 20th-century America, Angelou's autobiographical work delves into the enduring echoes of historical injustices, particularly the legacy of slavery and systemic racism. We explore how postcolonial echoes resonate throughout the narrative, shaping the characters' responses to a society steeped in racial prejudice and discrimination. At the heart of Angelou's exploration is the intricate interweaving of racism and the construction of identity. The novel's protagonist, Maya, grapples not only with external manifestations of racism but also with the internal struggles that define the journey toward selfhood. This analysis seeks to illuminate the points of convergence where the external pressures of racism intersect with the internal quest for autonomy and self-definition. Through Maya's experiences, we navigate the moments of resilience, self-affirmation, and cultural reclamation that mark the path of postcolonial resurgence within the narrative. Maya's narrative journey becomes a poignant reflection of the broader process of identity reconstruction in the face of racial adversity. Her story embodies the spirit of postcolonial resurgence as she grapples with personal challenges, embraces her cultural heritage, and defies societal expectations. By examining key moments in the text, we uncover how Maya's pursuit of self-discovery contributes to a collective narrative of empowerment and the resurgence of postcolonial identity.

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