

**REFRAMING INTERSECTIONAL VOICES: RACE, CASTE, AND  
GENDER IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES**

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**Abstract**

This research paper re-examines 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 lens, it explores how layered systems of oppression shape individual and collective identities. While both narratives arise from distinct socio-cultural contexts, they converge in their portrayal of marginalization, trauma and resistance. This paper argues that voice, education and community function as transformative tools that challenge structural inequalities and enable self-definition. Drawing from intersectional theory, the study situates personal narratives within broader socio-political frameworks to highlight their critical relevance.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Identity, Resistance, Trauma, Empowerment

**Introduction**

Autobiographical narratives function as critical spaces where marginalized voices articulate lived experiences shaped by systemic inequalities. In the works of Angelou and Bama, personal histories become political texts that expose the realities of race, caste and gender oppression. These narratives align with intersectional theory, which emphasizes how overlapping identities create complex layers of discrimination (Crenshaw 1244). Both authors transform individual suffering into collective testimony, revealing how social hierarchies are internalized and resisted. Their texts challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding subaltern voices, echoing Gayatri Spivak's assertion about the difficulty of marginalized groups being heard (Spivak 66).

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**Layered Oppression and Identity Formation**

Angelou and Bama vividly depict how intersecting identities intensify marginalization. Angelou's metaphor of racism as "a rust on the razor" illustrates the constant psychological harm inflicted by racial discrimination (Angelou 85). Similarly, Bama's description of Dalits as "low and filthy" highlights the dehumanizing effects of caste hierarchy (Bama 27). Gender further compounds these experiences, positioning women at the lowest social rung. This layered oppression aligns with Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "matrix of domination," where multiple systems of power intersect (Collins 18). Both narratives demonstrate that identity is constructed within these oppressive frameworks, making resistance a deeply personal and political act.

**Labor, Survival, and Social Conditioning**

Labor in both texts reflects systemic inequality and social conditioning. Bama's portrayal of "hard work from dawn to dusk" underscores the exploitation of Dalit communities (Bama 41). Angelou similarly notes that Black women were confined to roles such as "maids or washerwomen," limiting their socio-economic mobility (Angelou 102). These labor patterns reinforce hierarchical structures and normalize inequality across generations. According to Gail Omvedt, caste-based labor divisions sustain systemic oppression by restricting access to opportunities (Omvedt 52). Both authors expose how such conditions shape aspirations and perpetuate marginalization, while also resisting these limitations through narrative documentation.

**Silence as Trauma and Resistance**

Silence in both narratives emerges as both a consequence of trauma and a strategy for survival. Angelou's belief that "my voice could kill" reflects the psychological aftermath of violence and guilt (Angelou 78). Similarly, Bama observes that Dalits "endure insults without protest," conditioned by systemic oppression (Bama 65). But, both authors eventually reclaim their voices through storytelling. This transition reflects bell hooks' idea that speaking out is a form of resistance against domination (hooks 14). By transforming silence into narrative expression, Angelou and Bama challenge structures that seek to suppress marginalized voices and assert the importance of articulation in healing.

**Faith and Its Contradictions**

Religion occupies a complex space in both works, functioning as both refuge and instrument of oppression. Angelou describes God as an "anchor in the storm," emphasizing faith as emotional support (Angelou 120). In contrast, Bama critiques Christianity, noting that "even in church, there was division," exposing caste discrimination within religious institutions (Bama 92). This paradox reflects the dual role of religion highlighted by Kancha Ilaiah, who critiques its role in reinforcing caste hierarchies (Ilaiah 33). Despite institutional flaws, both authors find personal strength in spirituality, illustrating how faith can simultaneously sustain resilience and perpetuate inequality.

**Identity, Naming, and Resistance**

The act of naming reveals power dynamics in both narratives. Angelou's recollection of being called "Mary" illustrates how "names are taken to strip dignity" (Angelou 5). Similarly, caste-based labels in Bama's work reduce individuals to social categories (Bama 23). Such practices erase individuality and reinforce dominance. Stuart Hall's theory of identity suggests that identity is continuously constructed and contested (Hall 222). Both authors resist imposed identities by reclaiming their names and narratives asserting autonomy. This act of self-definition becomes a powerful form of resistance against systems that seek to erase marginalized identities.

**Gendered Vulnerability and Violence**

Gender significantly intensifies vulnerability in both texts. Angelou's experience of sexual violence, where she felt "like a caged animal," highlights the intersection of race and gender oppression (Angelou 80). Bama similarly notes how men "gather around a lone woman," emphasizing the constant threat faced by Dalit women (Bama 71). These experiences reflect Sharmila Rege's argument that caste and gender are deeply interconnected in shaping women's oppression (Rege 45). Both authors expose how patriarchal structures operate within marginalized communities, reinforcing vulnerability while simultaneously calling for intersectional approaches to address such inequalities.

**Education as Liberation**

Education emerges as a central tool for empowerment in both narratives. Bama's assertion that "education alone can free us" underscores its transformative potential (Bama 110). Angelou similarly finds empowerment through learning, which enables her to transcend imposed limitations (Angelou 135). Paulo Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom resonates here, emphasizing its role in raising critical consciousness (Freire 72). Both authors portray education as more than academic achievement it becomes a means of reclaiming dignity, challenging injustice and envisioning alternative futures beyond systemic oppression.

**Resilience, Community, and Collective Strength**

Resilience and community play crucial roles in both narratives. Angelou's declaration, "We survived," reflects collective endurance in the face of adversity (Angelou 156). Bama similarly portrays the strength of Dalit communities, emphasizing shared struggles and solidarity (Bama 120). According to Arjun Dangle, Dalit literature often highlights collective resilience as a form of resistance (Dangle xii). Both authors show that survival is not merely individual but rooted in communal support. These networks provide emotional strength and reinforce identity, enabling marginalized groups to challenge systemic oppression and assert their agency.

**Childhood and Internalization of Inequality**

Both authors illustrate how oppression begins in childhood, shaping identity early on. Angelou reflects that “the world had already decided who I was,” highlighting the imposition of racial identity (Angelou 25). Bama similarly shows how Dalit children internalize caste hierarchies through everyday experiences (Bama 34). Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus explains how social structures are internalized and reproduced (Bourdieu 56). These early experiences normalize inequality, limiting aspirations. By revisiting childhood, both authors expose the deep roots of systemic oppression and emphasize the need for early intervention and structural change.

### **Conclusion**

The autobiographies of Angelou and Bama provide profound insights into the intersections of race, caste, gender and identity. Their narratives reveal how systemic oppression shapes lived experiences while highlighting resilience, education and voice as tools of resistance. Drawing on intersectional theory, this study demonstrates how personal narratives challenge dominant discourses and reclaim marginalized identities. Despite differing cultural contexts, both texts share strong parallels in their portrayal of struggle and empowerment. Ultimately, these works stand as powerful testimonies that advocate for dignity, equality and social justice reinforcing the importance of storytelling in resisting oppression.

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