

ADAPTING CULTURES: A CASE STUDY OF THE SELECTED DALIT AND AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

As Maya Angelou writes ‘the caged bird sings, with a fearful trill, of things unknown, but longed for still, and his tune is heard, on the distant hill, for the caged bird sings of freedom’, the Indian Dalit and African American women from America are metaphorically ‘caged birds’ who sing a melancholy tune desiring to break the prison of the caste and the race. Marginalized women of all societies are very receptive and adaptable to the changing circumstances due to their large heartedness and forgiveness. Switching from one set of culture to another is really a tough task. Though change is inevitable and ‘law of impermanence’ is constant still adapting it to live life easily is a challenging task. Although untouchability and racism are banned in postcolonial and post-independent era Indian Dalit and African American women are the victims of both, domestic violence and gender discrimination. The two selected autobiographies would help to analyze and investigate the prolonged sufferings of the suppressed. BebitaiKamble, *Mahar* by caste, has pathetically suffered due to male dominance at home and in the society, domestic violence and insecurity. Her autobiography originally written in her mother tongue Marathi and later on translated by Maya Pandit as *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) is a loud cry for justice. The agonies of African American women are very similar to the Dalits. Maya Angelo’s *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is a story of her struggle to escape from racial exploitation and injustices done to marginalized women. The present paper is an attempt to show how marginalized women are portrayed as receptive and adaptable to the changes that are happening in transnational era. Lysgaard’s cultural adjustment theory can be considered to understand cultural change and adaptation. The paper is an attempt to describe the auto-biographers’ genuine efforts to assimilate and acculturate in the given set of culture. The paper is divided into four parts namely initial euphoria, frustration and cultural confrontation, cultural adjustment and adaptation and lastly acceptance by the auto-biographers.

Keywords: Marginalization, Caste, Race, the Dalit, the African American, Adaptability, autobiography etc.

INTRODUCTION

‘Impermanence’ is the law of nature. It is a saying that today’s fashion can become tomorrow’s pain. Nothing remains constant, that’s why adapting nature for a change is a way of living in the era of Globalization. Renowned scientist Stephen Hawking has stated that intelligence is the ability to adapt to change. We are living in transnational and cross cultural society with exposure to several new things every day. The diverse world around us asks us to cope with different races, classes, castes, creeds,

religions, cultures and so on. Diversity is a blessing because it helps us to understand and respect each other. How can one maintain indigenous identity in the world of inter-racial, international and cross cultural contacts? Maintaining indigenous identity is an unacceptable challenge today because hybridity is the fact of the present day. One has to follow indigenity while coping with hybridity in transnational encounters. Assimilation and acculturation of cultures is the need of the hour. H G Well has rightly pointed out that you have to adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature’s inexorable imperative.

The challenge becomes tougher to the marginalized section of the society. The marginalized is trying hard to adjust with the world around and adapt good things of the centre in order to have a mutual dialogue on the grounds of equality. Although it is the need of the hour it is not easy to go with the change. Sustenance of good practice and eradication of bad is a challenging task. The age old hierarchic power structures have to be diminished but it is like mission impossible. W. B. Yeats can be our path finder when he says through his poem *The Second Coming*, 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'. Cultural adjustment is an urgent need in postcolonial period. The Blacks from Africa when migrated to America and got established as American citizens it was a challenge for them to adjust and establish. The Dalits in India when got constitutional protection and came in the main stream it was not easy for them to adapt civilized way of living. The marginalized Dalits from India and the Black African Americans from the USA are trying hard to adapt social, political, economic, religious and psychological change that has been happening around. Especially Dalit and African American women are struggling hard to cope with the changing circumstances in the family and the society. Lysgaard's cultural adjustment theory can be considered to understand cultural change and adaptation. The paper is an attempt to describe the auto-biographers' genuine efforts to assimilate and acculturate in the given set of culture. The paper is divided into four parts namely initial euphoria, frustration and cultural confrontation, cultural adjustment and adaptation and lastly acceptance by the auto-biographers. A brief introduction of the auto-biographers would help to understand their struggle from a scratch.

Maya Angelou was an influential writer, poet and a critic of twentieth century. Never say die is the moral of her inspiring autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) which was followed by six volumes. Her literary career is outstanding with three collections of essays and many volumes of poetry. She was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Obama and was honoured by more than seventy universities throughout the world. She had a lifetime appointment as a Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University of North Carolina. She fought for the civil rights of the Blacks

and especially women. She worked with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prison We Broke* (2008) is an inspiring journey started from a poor Dalit girl that became the director of Ashramshala at Nimbure. Although born in a low caste Mahar family she received formal education till fourth standard due to her father. She became a member of Mahila Mandal at the very young age, later on became the president of Mahatma Phule Dynan Prasarak Sanstha, got married at thirteen, and wrote her memoir while working in the shop nearly in her thirties. Women were not allowed to search their identity so Baby did not disclose her creative writing to her family. She came in contact with Maxine Berntson, a sociologist who was working on the scheduled castes, who read her primary draft and handed it over to Vidya Bal, the editor of the Marathi magazine *STREE*. Finally her memoir was serially printed in the magazine. It has been published as an autobiography in her mother tongue Marathi and Dr Maya Pandit translated it into English. Turning to the first stage of Euphoria that is known as a period of excitement is the best stage of one's life.

Initial Euphoria: It is said that a child is a flower of heaven's garden. Childhood is a pure joy because it is without agony of the past and fret of the future. A girl, being a daughter initially does not understand man-made walls of discrimination and segregation. She lives with a dream of having her own world of a fairy tale with her own little kingdom. Her songs of innocence are far away from the songs that come through varied experiences of life. Marguerite Johnson/ Maya Angelou, an African American girl, depicts her childhood joys in the company of books that make her a sensitive day dreamer. Her world moves around her brother and her grandmother 'Momma'. Her biological parents whom she has got separated at the age of three due to divorce of her parents she always craved for their parental love and affection. When she was in Stamps with her Momma she describes her Euphoric state,

During these years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston, Hughes, James Wedon Johnson and W.E.B. Du

Bois'Latiny at Atalanta. (Angelou, Maya. IKWTCBS. 1984: p. 16)

Turning to the childhood memories of Baby Kakade/Kamble, the second selected auto biographer who was born as a Mahar by caste in an Indian Dalit community whose childhood joys are no less than the girl of any race and class. Her brother and her grandmother are her true companions. She finds herself very close to her father who is large hearted and broad minded. He serves needy and poor throughout his life. His daughter wants to be like her father. She wants to do all pranks of boys and likes to imitate the world of adults. She and her friends used to play a game in which they imitated the upper-caste women with their typical third rate treatment to the low caste women. The father of the low caste daughter used to bring a long piece of white cloth that was used to cover a dead body of the upper caste. It was given in begging to the Dalits and ironically it became a property of children's play. Small children portray the cunning world of segregation by imitating the adults by draping the white cloth as a Saree. She describes their mimicry as,

“A lengthy piece would be given to the young daughter who would be related to get it. She would drape it around herself in various styles and perform a kind of fashion show. One moment she would drape it around her shoulder like a Brahmin kaki and imitate her accent, ‘Hey you, Mahar woman, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don't touch anything. You will pollute us and our gods and religion’. The next moment she would be a Gujar woman, draping the pallav in the Gujrati style, and finally, a Mahar daughter-in-law, pulling the pallav from head down to her nose. ... they, like anybody else, aspired for a better life. But they were bound by the chains of slavery. It was on the Mahar'slabour that these idle parasites lived. The condition of the Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, those beasts of burden, who slogged all their life for a handful of dry grass.” (Kamble, Baby. TPWB. 2013, p. 88)

Cultural Confrontation: The clash between the centre and the margin has always given rise to cultural conflicts and encounters. The Dalits and the African Americans were treated as slaves in the past. Although slavery is completely banned by the law, indirect practice of it is still continued. In case of Maya Angelou, who came in contact with Martin Luther King Jr. and decides to live life for the Blacks'

cause. She experienced segregation and exploitation of the Blacks due to their colour. The blacks are condemned as slight better than monkeys which she hates the most. They were kept away from the city centres. She kept her life book open by narrating inhuman and aghast experience of rape at just seven, immature teen age pregnancy and single parenthood at a very early stage of life. She and her sisters have to confront on all steps of life due to segregation. Black men and women were not trusted and allowed to share public places. She says,

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well-dressed. I remember never believing that white were really real.(Angelou, Maya. IKWTCBS. 1984: p. 27)

Maya decided to fight for human rights and dedicated her life for the upliftment of the marginalized.

Situation of Dalits was not distinct in India. Living outside the town, eating dead animals, bowing heads in front of the upper-castes and living in 'Pardas' was a humiliating life for Dalit women. Baby Kamble came in contact with DrBabasahebAmbedkar, the maker of Indian Constitution and messiah of the Dalits in India through her grandfather. Her father and brother were ardent followers of DrAmbedkar. It is because of him girls like Baby got formal education and life of dignity. She decides to dedicate her life to the Dalit's cause. She quotes DrAmbedkar in her autobiography who showed them the life of dignity. DrAmbedkarmotivates his people through his speeches. He says,

“This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution. Let three-fourth of our people die in this endeavor, then, at least, their future will be better. I appeal to you, my mothers and sisters, be the first ones to step forward for reform.” (Kamble, Baby. TPWB. 2013, p. 65)

Both the selected auto-biographers devote their life to uplift the marginalized socially, politically, financially, educationally, religiously and culturally.

Cultural Adjustment and Adaptation: Initial wrath of segregation was later on changed into adjustment.

Although they are the natives of their nations they are alienated and isolated. Compromise with the given circumstances is the only solution. There is a ray of hope that the day of reckoning will come and they will be accepted as a part of their culture. Maya Angelou takes help of books and the Bible, as her Momma calls it a 'Good Book', and tries to adapt the philosophy of 'forget and forgive'. She could survive after inhuman rap in childhood because of her religious and spiritual strength. She could successfully come out of depression because she got support of her brother and her darling Momma. When Joe Louis, the Black boxer wins the title of heavy weight championship Maya takes it as a positive sign and says,

"Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black mother's son. He was the strongest man in the world. ... It wouldn't do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world". (Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. 1984: p. 147-48)

Spiritual strength is needed to fight against adversities. Baby Kamble was a victim of domestic violence at home and physical abuse as a Dalit in the society. She finds inner strength in the philosophy of Buddhism and the principles that she adapted to live life happily. She utters following words,

"Sheel, pradnya, and karuna have been the founding principles of my life. What else does this humble servant of Bhim want when she has these three jewels in her possession? When one has this wealth, what does the ordinary world matter?" (Kamble, Baby. *TPWB*. 2013, p. 135)

Acceptance: This is the last phase in which a person accepts that he/she is inseparable part of the culture and he/she has to live and die for the nation. The acceptance of one's culture is possible only when one gets respect and dignity. If the selected auto-biographers would not have accepted their nation they would not have built a revolution in their society. Maya Angelou, for instance, transformed herself from a marginalized Black girl to that of an author, actress, screen writer, dancer and a poet. She worked as an activist and travelled all over the world. Baby Kamble spent her life for the Dalit women. She opened a residential school for orphans. She delivered lectures and sang songs for her Dalit community. She

opines that if our spiritual base is strong then we can't be the victims of failures. She shares her cultural initiation in following words,

"Many people believed that culture can be imbibed only from educated, rich and intelligent people. I can confidently tell you from my experience that it is not true. My house is located in an environment where all kinds of awful things happen all the time. But that does not affect us at all. It is not necessary to live in distinguished environment for one to be cultured and civilized. These are qualities you must have in your blood." (Kamble, Baby. *TPWB*. 2013, p. 117)

To conclude, both the auto-biographers have tried to change themselves. The slave past was left behind and the present is devoted to identity formation. Both have become respected citizens of their country due to their work for the down trodden. They have adapted the way of living of their superiors and role models. They are dynamic ladies with killer's instinct and followed the path that was shown by Mahata Gandhi who asks us, 'Be the change you want to see in the society'. They finally adapt happy and contented living in spite of all adversities.

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