

# “*Ain’t I A Woman*”: Exploring Femininities in Diaspora in Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*\*

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**Abstract**—Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why Caged Bird Sings* is significant because it unveils the diasporic identities of Black American women, challenging the essentialist notions of “blackness” and “feminine”. The representations of the women of color in the novel have been problematized because they were created on multiple axes of power. The present research focuses on unveiling these problematic representations, highlighting the subject and object positions taken by the women. The paper analyses the novel using Pessar and Mahler’s model (2003), *Gendered Geographies of Power*, concluding that the femininities in diaspora are created as a result of various socially stratifying factors, such as race, class, State ideologies etc which are variable and ever changing. Furthermore, the identities of the colored women could be a result of individual choices. Diaspora as such, appears as a site of various cultures, which can both empower/disempower these women. When looked at in this way, the study critiques the idea of fixed, stable and monolithic identity for the colored women in diaspora and favors the Postmodern notions of identity for these women.

**Index Terms**—diaspora, femininities, gender, women of color, maya angelou

## I. INTRODUCTION

Representations of women of color have been an issue of hot debate among feminists, Postcolonial and Cultural Studies’ experts. The publication of Angelou’s novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1970 explores the representations of the black women in diaspora. The novel deconstructs some of the typical notions of “blackness” and “feminine” which are propagated in the idiom of the colonizer. Helen notes that the Black women writers of nineteenth and twentieth century aimed at challenging the stereotypical representations of Black women. Being at the margins, they found it difficult to write about themselves as the central characters. Angelou’s autobiographical novel breaks away from the tradition and presents blackness from the inside out.

In the past, the studies on postcolonial literatures associate diaspora with melancholy and loss of homeland. The trend has its roots in the chronicles of slaves transported to far off regions and the tales of the mothers who loose their children in the auctions. Breaking away from the tradition, the Postmodern diaspora critical theory sees diaspora as a site of multiple identities resulting from being placed in various cultures. As such, diaspora is not only a tool of marginalization but also a site of empowerment for the Black Women. The present study focuses on how diaspora becomes one of the defining features in the (dis)empowerment of the women of color and also how the process of empowerment/disempowerment takes place.

The novel which falls under the rubric of postcolonial fiction reveals the protagonist’s experiences of being “caged” by various circles of marginality. Her representations are also significant because they point out how the women of color acquire the subject and object positions reciprocally. When looked at in this way, Angelou’s representations can be seen in contrast with the fixed colonial representations where “oppressed” is the only identity devised for the women of color.

## II. THEORETICAL ISSUES REGARDING DIASPORA CRITICAL THEORY

The term diaspora has been derived from the Greek words “dia” which means through and “speirein” means “to scatter.” The Webster Dictionary describes the meaning as “dispersion from,” so the word carries within it a concept of a home, a locus or a center from where someone is displaced. The word brings the concept of multiple journeys. It also connotes the dispersion of Jews from their homeland. (Brah, 1996) However, the diaspora in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century is a point of departure from the ancient diaspora.

Safran (cited in George, 1996) describes the following characteristics of diaspora:

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\* The title of the paper is inspired by Avtar Brah’s paper titled as “Ain’t I a Woman: Revisiting Intersectionality”

“The concept of diaspora can be applied to expatriate communities, whose members share several of the following characteristics:

- 1) They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original center to two or more foreign or peripheral or foreign regions
- 2) They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history and achievements
- 3) They believe that they are not—or perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partially alienated and insulated from it
- 4) They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal homeland and the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return— when conditions are appropriate
- 5) They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one place, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.”(p. 181-182)

Globalization has resulted in the expulsion of different communities from their homelands to the foreign lands. Consequently, an “other” is created, in contrast with “the self.” However, different communities are created every day on the basis of religion, culture and ethnicity etc. resulting in different diasporas. These diasporan experiences might vary significantly because of variable factors causing discrimination such as gender and racism. Consequently, tracing a universal pattern of all the diasporan experiences is ideologically and critically problematic, “for every new nation that is created, there will be a few people who find themselves outside the borders”. Still, a few critics believe that a common pattern of female diasporas can be studied through an elaborate frame-work (Pessar and Mahler, 2003) which aims at tracing the identities of the women in diaspora, as they are shaped by the power-politics.

James Procter (cited in McLeod, 2008) writes, “*Diaspora can appear both as naming a geographical phenomenon—the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or group— as well as a theoretical concept: a way of thinking or representing the world.*” Procter underscores the significance of the physical experiences of dislocation as well as imaginative spaces where the subject and the object positions for the dislocated are created.

Pessar and Mahler (2003) note that the number of women migrants is increasing consistently yet there experience is seldom mentioned in. For a better understanding of the diasporic identities of the women of color in the novel under discussion, we will use the model *Gendered Geographies of Power* given by Pessar and Mahler (2001, 2003). The model is significant for the present study because unlike many other critical frameworks, it does not see diaspora from the angle of Psychoanalysis. I argue that the Psychoanalytical models are developed within a similar cultural context of European colonialism. Consequently, they support the notions of identity which are propagated by European Imperialism. Referring to McIntrufs, (2000) I argue that Psychoanalysis offers a bleak picture of human nature which is in contrast with the revolutionary and liberality spirit of Postcolonialism. Pessar and Mahler’s model *Gendered Geographies of Power* studies the representations of diaspora as it is shaped by wider social structures such as home, kinship relations and wages. Furthermore, it keeps pace with the current practices in migration and gender studies in the analysis of the role of nation and state in politics of gendering. The model also takes into account the various socially stratifying factors such as race, class, ethnicity etc. which formulate or challenge the power hierarchies. We have previously used this model for analyzing femininities in “An American Brat” by Sidhwa (Imtiaz and Asif, 2011 b) The present study is significant because we have focused on how marginalization is created on the various axes in diaspora. The model demands the analysis of female diasporan experience on three scales which are “*Geographic Scales, Social Locations and Power Geometries*”. Geographic Scales refer to how gender operates simultaneously through multiple social and spatial terrains such as home, family and body. Social locations explore the advantageous or disadvantageous position, conferred on a human being by the virtue of being born in a particular family or culture. Pessar and Mahler (2003) describe it as follows:

“By social locations, we refer to person’s position within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship based and other socially stratifying factors. We underscore gender in the framework’s title, as gender organizes human actions such as migration yet is frequently ignored. For the most part, people are born into a social location that confers on them certain advantages and disadvantages.” (p.6)

Analyzing the social locations result in highlighting the fact that people exercise agency because of their positionality into a social and cultural setup. However, agency as it is exercised in its various forms and degrees is explored through the third building block of Pessar and Mahler’s model i.e. Power Geometries. According to Pessar and Mahler (2003), modernity has resulted in a globalized world where people are placed in distinct positions of power through controlling and mediating various resources. The people who are in-charge of these flows at one level do not necessarily acquire the same subject position at another level. The discussion generated through the above mentioned scales will help to unveil the representations of the women of color in the novel and how they contrast with the representations in the idiom of the colonizer.

### III. WRITING FROM THE MARGINS OF BLACKNESS AND FEMININITY

The novel explores how marginality is created on the axes of race, gender and class. It is pertinent here to highlight some of the theoretical issues involved in diasporan and gender studies. Eleanor Byrne (2008) explores the theme of melancholia in postcolonial and diasporic theory. According to him, the experience of diaspora is marked with the

blocked move, a sense of depressions and frustration resulting from the shuttling in the past and the present. Postmodernist diaspora is different from the diasporic description of dislocation of an individual and focuses on the condition of diversity resulting from being located simultaneously in various locations.

Diasporan communities even when they have culturally adopted the trope of the foreignness, associate themselves with their homeland, rather than the migrant community. Okamura analyses the case of global Filipinos who, according to Okamura, are a diasporic community rather than a racial or ethnic minority. He maintains that global Fillipinos send remittances and goods back home which had helped in developing the infrastructure of their home towns. Such circulation of goods and remittances show a difference between Fillipinos, who can rightly be called diasporan community and other racial and ethnic groups which can be labeled as minorities.

Brah (1996) believes that the concept of diaspora focuses on the “homing” desire instead of a “homeland” desire. The two concepts are different because not all the diasporas focus on returning back to the home. Brah (1996) believes that the concept of diaspora should be understood after comparing various diasporan experiences as they shape identity, subjectivity and social relations. Hence, diaspora is not a fixed reality, rather it keeps on fluctuating and changing. Furthermore, diasporan identity is not a fixed construct of oppressed or oppressor, rather diasporan identity should be constructed *within diaspora space*, as structured by social, familial and cultural factors. Diaspora, hence, is performance based phenomenon. Ponzanesi’s (2008) reading of the Ondaatje’s “The English Patient” is done in the light of the works of Brah and Gilroy. Brah (1996) believes that diasporic belonging results from performance. The four characters in the novel perform themselves through migration, memory and forgetting. As such, the domain of home is not located across physical terrain, rather it is created through imaginative spaces.

Brah (1996) notes that diaspora is not only a journey rather it is a construct which either challenges or reaffirms the power relations. Furthermore, while comparing various diaporas, their points of similarity as well as differences, should be considered in terms of power relations. For example, African diaspora may be different from South Asian diaspora. Comparisons within various diasporan experiences can be drawn on the basis of how they negotiate power relations. Brah (1996) speculates on the concept of “border” which according to him is a political construct as well as an ideological theory. The concepts of border and diaspora, usually refer to displacement, which needs to be challenged because it diminishes the possibility of location through diaspora.

The border theory brings to forefront the issue of how power operates in constructing the identities of the individuals in diaspora. Brah (1996) calls the concept the politics of location. She unravels the concept in the light of the critique of two autobiographies of women writers, delineating upon the operations of power which naturalize the identities and the costs involved in it. “Diaspora space” according to Brah (1996) results from the conceptual grid structured by the theoretical debate relating diaspora, border and politics of dislocation. Our present study underscores gender in the diaspora as it is shaped by various factors such as race, class, religious and ethnic identities.

According to the feminists gender is a social construct which implies that the role relationships assigned to men and women vary according to different social contexts, hence the femininities and masculinities constructed are fluid. People are socially conditioned to view the way the gender is constructed as natural. *Gender work* refers to negotiating relationships and conflicting interests through practices and discourses. Mahler and Pessar (2006) believe that gender cannot be viewed in isolation. Hence, it is pertinent here to discuss some of the theoretical issues which construct gender in relation with other socially stratifying factors.

The multiple identities created across these socially stratifying factors empower the women by negating the monolithic identity of the colonized women. Gates and Macay (1997) narrate the historical speech of Sojourner Truth, an African American slave. The speech was entitled as “Ain’t I a Woman.” The speech challenges the essentialist notion of a woman- more specifically, a black woman.

“Well children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter, I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North- all talking about rights—the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this talking about? The man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as any man—when I could get it – and bear the lash as well. And ain’t I a woman. I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain’t I a woman?...” (cited in Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p. 77)

The speech is significant because it deconstructs every single notion of black womanhood, criticizing the patriarchal norms which represent the black woman as a sexed subaltern. While drawing attention to the process of marginalization, Sojourner Truth points out the key notions which are attributed to the identity of the slave women, revealing that such representations are highly motivated. Taking up Mohanty’s (1994) notion, we need to un-learn the idiom of the colonizer to relearn the gender norms. Furthermore, Sojourner Truth deconstructs the representations of diasporic experience of the African American women, who are always in the subject position. Such representations by the White feminist are far from the true representation of multiple identities of the Black women, as they are shaped by the power politics.

According to Brah and Phoenix (2004) feminists have argued for studying “intersectionality” as it causes de-centering of the normative subject of feminism. Various political and social movements have contributed towards the

tendency of such a critique such as Combahee River Collective and Black Lesbian Feminist Organization. Such movements challenge the concept of oppression as a fixed, monolithic experience. Rather, they point out that various political, social and cultural systems which are interlocking and contributing towards creating the subject position for the marginalized. Cornell West (cited in Brah and Phoenix, 2004) notice that race, when it intersects with the systems of gender and class, creates multiple subject and object positioning in diaspora.

"Race matters, writes the African American philosopher Cornell West (1993). Actually class, gender and race matter, and they matter because they structure interactions, opportunities, consciousness, ideology and the forms of resistance that characterize American life. They matter in shaping the social location of different groups in contemporary society."

Postcolonial writers challenge the idealist descriptions of diaspora, and insist on seeing it as a ground for contesting identities and power relations. McLeod (2008) critiques the euphoric concept of diaspora as it appears in the writings of Bhabha. He cites the example of Zadie Smith's essay "White Teeth" as an instance of utopianism associated with the concept of diaspora, considering it as a source of freedom from the past. Favoring the contrasting concept of diaspora found in the writings of Philips, Smith calls it "progressive utopianism," where the critic recognizes the existence of a racial past but looks forward to the interracial encounters optimistically.

The novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reveals the diasporan identities of the women of color which are shaped by various socially stratifying factors such as class, race, family and kinship ideologies. The next section explores the gendering of diaspora, using Pessar and Mahler's model of Gendered Geographies of Power.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

The following sections present an analysis of Angelou's autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* using the model of Pessar and Mahler (2001, 2003)

##### A. Geographic Scales

The novel under discussion is significant because Angelou points out how marginality is created at multiple levels in diasporan space. Furthermore, various diasporas are depicted in the novel which share the characteristics of each other. Mrs. Henderson tells her grandchildren of Africa, a distant homeland.

"Mamma added that some people said that white folks had come over to Africa (she made it sound like the hidden valley on the moon) and stole the colored people and made them slaves, but nobody really believed it was true." (p.196)

However, most of the colored characters in the novel do not consider Africa as their home town so we will not direct on our analysis to see America as a *diasporan space* and Africa as the *homeland*. Diasporas are also created within the same town in South as it is divided between the homeland (the black part of the town) and diaspora space (the white part of the town). When Mrs. Henderson takes Marguerite to a dentist living in the white part of the town, Marguerite, even in her state of pain adopts a different gait and is immensely impressed by the surroundings.

"Crossing the bridge into whitefolks' country, pieces of sanity pushed themselves forward. I had to stop moaning and start walking straight. The white towel, which was drawn under my chin and tied over my head had to be arranged. If one was dying, it had to be done in style if the dying took place in whitefolks' part of town." (p.186-187)

Our analysis, however, primarily focuses on seeing Stamps, Arkansas as the homeland and St. Louis, California as the diasporan space as most of the discussion in the novel pertains to the experiences of Marguerite in the diasporan space of California, in contrast with Stamps, as the homeland. The multiple positioning results in creating multiple identities of the women of color which may be contrasting and conflicting in nature. The novel under discussion reveals the women of color both as powerful and powerless. Furthermore, the oppression does not result from the family system of the women of color or their religious or ethnic identities, rather it results from the power struggle within various groups in the society, which can't specifically be a feature of Eastern society only in the pre-migration phase. Consequently, it is necessary to understand how diasporan experience results in empowerment or disempowerment of women of color.

The colored people living in Arkansas feared racial exploitation because they belonged to a community consisting of economically disadvantaged citizens. The Negroes were forbidden even to have delicacies like ice cream very often.

"People in Stamps used to say that the Whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth. Other days, he had to be satisfied with chocolate."

Similarly, the institution of Law was not supposed to be respectful to the black women. When Mrs. Henderson was called in the court to provide information about the man who took refuge in her store, she was called "Mrs." by the judge mistakenly, because a black woman was not supposed to own the store.

"The judge had really made a gaffe calling a Negro woman Mrs. But then he was from Pine bluff and couldn't have been expected to know that a woman who owned a store in that village would also turn out to be colored. The whites tickled their funny bones with the incident for a long time, and the Negroes thought it proved the worth and majesty of my grandmother." (p.48)

However, Marguerite was empowered in that small town because of a close knit family structure at her home. She enjoyed the respect, love and recognition provided to her by the whole community who were the customers of Mrs. Henderson. When she was raped and assaulted in California, it was in Arkansas where she recovered from emotional and psychological trauma. She also had the chance of coming into company with and learning from Mrs. Flowers, who

inculcated in her the love of books. The point of commonality between the home and diaspora space is the familial love and ties which characterize the colored people. However, the representations of various kinship relations vary significantly across borders. Mrs. Henderson, a symbol of motherhood, believes that her grandchildren could be empowered if they stay away from white folks and follow the austere values of African American family system. In African American families, mothers are usually the leaders and decision makers because for hundreds of years, fathers were separated from their families on the auction stall and the children usually stayed with their mothers. Consequently, mothers were the symbol of endurance, hope and nurturing in the society. Mrs. Henderson, Marguerite's grandmother, is an ideal example in this regard.

"Her world was bordered on all sides with work, duty, religion and 'her place'. I don't think she ever knew that a deep brooding love hung over everything she touched. In later years, I asked her if she loved me and she brushed me off with, 'God is love. Just worry about whether you are being a good girl, then He will love you.'" (p. 57)

Mrs. Henderson, other than being a symbol of endurance and hope also reinforced the austere values of African American families. She made sure that her grandchildren adhere to the accepted rules about speaking to the elders, laughing in church, dressing up, staying out of home, using only particular vocabulary and eating habits. In this way, she ensured the survival of her grandchildren in the racist society of the Arkansas. However, it alternately limited her grandchildren, denying them freedom of thought, expression or movement. On the other hand, the representations of motherhood were quite different in diaspora. Vivian Baxter's character is an example of it. She enjoys the liberty to be physically mobile, taking independent decisions about her sexuality and being engaged in gambling, singing and dancing. She is also represented as physically quite an attractive woman.

"To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow.....My mother's beauty literally assailed me. Her red lips (Momma said it was a sin to wear lipstick) split to show even white teeth and her fresh-butter color looked see-through clean. Her smile widened her mouth beyond her cheeks, beyond her ears and seemingly through the walls to the street outside. I was struck dumb. I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen as woman as pretty as she who was called 'Mother.'" (p.59-60)

In contrast with Mrs. Henderson, who always taught Marguerite to bear oppression, Vivian Baxter is a symbol of rebellion. She, along with her brothers, hits the man who abuses her. Unlike Mrs. Henderson, she believes in breaking free from boundaries and doing things her own way. She celebrates at mid night when her children come to live with her. She does not adhere to the Christian principles of mercy and charity. She shoots her partner in business twice who abuses her. She is also very open and honest about her gambling and drinking. The motive behind all her activities is that she values her self-esteem and liberty above everything else.

"Mother's beauty made her powerful and her power made her unflinchingly honest... Her work was as honest as the job held by fat Mrs. Walker (a maid), who lived next door to us and 'a damn sight better paid.' She wouldn't bust suds for anybody nor be anyone's kitchen bitch." (p.206)

In the home town, Marguerite's uncle, is crippled, a fixture, a gentleman and depends on her mother for keeping things in order for him. In diaspora, Marguerite finds Vivian's brothers who are violent, criminal, full of life and activity.

When Marguerite is raped by Mr. Freeman, he gets bailed out, her uncles find him and kill him. Like every black girl growing up in diaspora, Maya suffers from intense depression and frustration at her black skin and unattractive body, her uncles give her the confidence to have her way with the world around.

"He told me often, Rittie, don't worry cause you ain't pretty. Plenty pretty women I seen digging ditches or worse. You smart. I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind." (p.67)

The representations of brotherly care and affection also vary significantly across borders. Bailey is represented as kinder and more gentle towards Marguerite in the home town. He helps his sister in devising discursive strategies of empowerment. An example of it is the episode where Bailey advises Marguerite to break the china piece in Mrs. Cullinan's house. Similarly, her brother, Bailey, helps her in getting trained for the practical life, although, he is unaware of the possibilities and threats offered for women in diaspora.

"He taught me that once I got into a fight I should 'grab for the balls right away.' He never answered when I asked, 'Suppose I'm fighting a girl?'" (p.63)

The brotherly care is also depicted from the fact that Bailey taught her how to walk even when he himself was less than three years old.

"They reminisced over Bailey's teaching me to walk when he was less than three. Displeased at my stumbling motions, he was supposed to have said, 'This is my sister. I have to teach her to walk.'" (p.68)

On the other hand, Vivian's brothers are violent. They believe in fighting and killing. When a man curses Maya's mother, her brother, a fearsome character takes revenge for her.

"Uncle Tommy stood by the door, Uncle Tutti stationed himself at the toilet door and Uncle Ira, who was the oldest and maybe every one's ideal, walked over to Patterson. ... She crashed the man's head with a policeman's billy enough to leave him just this side of death. There was no police investigation, nor social reprobation." (p.62)

In California, Marguerite had to study in a school of white children which resulted in her close observation of racism, particularly, towards black women, however, the crime rate allowed the black community to settle the scores with men,

who assaulted their women. The protagonist faced persecution (in the form of rape) in a post-migration phase, which deconstructs the notion of migration as an all empowering phenomenon. On the contrary, it highlights the concept of Brah's multi-axial phenomenon of power where gender operates through various modalities.

Terhune (2011) describes the following strategies adopted by African American women to cope with the traumas faced in diaspora. "Self-efficacy", "ability to succeed", "laughter", "avoidance", and "concealing effects of racism by wearing masks and veils", "role flexing", "biculturalism" and "code switching" and "reliance on their faith" (p.549) We find out that Angelou explicitly describes all these strategies adopted by the protagonist to acquire the subject position.

The body of the women of color is a site where various gender ideologies are constructed and perpetuated. The concept of Machismo asserts exercising a complete control over the bodies of women. Similarly, confining the bodies of women to certain physical spaces, clothing them in certain ways can alternately result in the empowerment or disempowerment of the women of color. Marguerite had to dress up modestly, wash her feet every night for the fear of getting switches by her grandmother and apply Vaseline on her legs. Furthermore, growing up in a racist community was a trauma for every girl like Marguerite because the standard of beauty was "white skin" and the sense of belonging to her race could be affirmed by black skin only. Consequently, Marguerite had developed a split personality where she desired to be white but loved the black people. Furthermore, her confinement is reinforced by certain norms devised for speaking, addressing the elders, eating and drinking. In the opening lines, Marguerite is seen reciting Easter song, which she has forgotten. Her desire to look white and the repression of this desire makes her feel that she would die of "a busted head" (p.4). Her black skin, consequently becomes a symbol of her confinement by a specific set of laws, which results in a lesser self-esteem.

"Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty had turned me in to a too big negro girl, with nappy black hair broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil." (p.3)

Marguerite is painfully aware of her ugly confinement of "a dress made from the plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throw away", "with skinny legs, greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with Arkansas red clay." (p.2) Her true self was a white girl, with long and blond hair and blue eyes who is just the right person to be in the world. The desire to break the confinement resulting from her black skin was so absolute that she ran out of the church with the desire to pee. However, the confinement provided by the orthodox family set up, was quite empowering. Living in Arkansas, though she was denied the freedom, yet, she was provided the protection of the family. When she goes to California, she is provided the liberty to move out. When the protagonist goes to live at her father's place later, the fight between her and Dolores results in Maya's taking refuge at a junk yard. The experience proves to be liberating as it allows her to be confident and independent about her body.

"The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of frenzy could initiate me into the brotherhood of man." (p.254)

Her companions belonged to different nationalities, and they accepted Maya without being critical of her black skin or tall body. The vigorous dancing which won her second prize later was also an attempt to break free from the confinement posed by the virtue of her black skin and belonging to Negro race.

"The dance we performed could never be duplicated or described except to say that the passion with which we threw each other around the small dance area was similar to the zeal shown in honest wrestling matches and hand-to-hand combat." (p.254)

Various cultural signifiers such as clothes also signify the (dis)empowerment through diasporan experience. Marguerite is very much aware of the difference between the ways the whites and blacks dress themselves up. California introduced Marguerite to a fashionable circle where her mother used to wear lipstick, which was considered a sin in the idiom of Mrs. Henderson. Marguerite's mother cut her hair in bob, to make her a part of that fashionable circle.

"Mother had cut my hair in a bob like hers and straightened it so my head felt skinned and the back of my neck so bare that I was ashamed to have anyone walk up behind me." (p.65)

The clothes signify the class difference, rather than the cultural difference between the Whites and the Blacks. The Whites were used to dress up in expensive clothes in contrast with the Blacks, who were always making their clothes from the rags or wearing hand-me-down clothes.

"They had so many clothes. They were able to give perfectly good dresses, worn just under the arms, to the sewing class at our school for the larger girls to practice on."

Clothing, along with other signifiers together knit up a system of representations which defines the subject and object positions for the women of color. However, these power relations can be understood more clearly when studied in connection with femininities created across various social locations.

### *B. Social Locations*

As discussed earlier, social locations define the position of power or disempowerment by the virtue of belonging to a particular society, culture, family or race. In the novel under discussion, we find out that gender is constructed by the social structures in which the women of color are placed. Certain norms regarding sexuality, identity and professions are followed by the women, because of their social set up.

Diasporean experience makes the protagonist more aware of her own body and sexuality. Her mother gives her the courage to speak out of her private parts which she would not dare mentioning in Arkansas. "*Ritie, do you mean your vagina? Don't use those Southern terms. There's nothing wrong with the word 'vagina.' It's a medical description.*" (p.275) Similarly, she educates her about vulva with the help of Webster's dictionary and also in every day terms. Marguerite exercises a self-imposed control over her sexuality, which originated partly from her brought up according to the orthodox black values, and partly because of her rape in a tender age. Her grandmother had always taught her to close her legs. "*Keep your legs closed and don't let nobody see your pocketbook.*" (p.73)

When she is located in diaspora, she tries to define her identity by having sex with a man.

"What I needed was a boyfriend. A boyfriend would clarify my position to the world, and even more important, to myself. A boyfriend's acceptance of me would guide me into that strange and exotic lands of frills and femininity." (p.281)

The act of sexuality was more of taking than giving for Marguerite. She became sure that she is not lesbian. However, she also realized that she hardly felt the romantic love in her relationship. When her son was born as a result of an unexpected pregnancy, Marguerite realized that "*doing the right thing*" is not a problem with her any more. The act resulted in her self-realization and confidence development. Another example of the empowerment through sexuality was that of Joyce who knew a lot more about her body and sexuality than any of the other teenagers of her age. Taking benefit of her age and experience, Joyce became a subject, in her relationship with Bailey and made him steal things.

"*All he had to do was to keep the food coming in and she kept the affection flowing.*" (p.150) Finally, she ran away with a baseball player to get married with him. All her decisions about sexuality and marriage are guided by practical ends.

The women of color also seek empowerment by pursuing new literacies and modes of education. When Marguerite is living in Stamps, Arkansas, she has to learn to cook, sew, cleaning, crocheting and learning the intricacies of house-keeping by working as a house maid in a White woman's kitchen.

"While white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them... We were required to embroider and I had trunkfuls of colorful dishtowels, pillow cases, runners and handkerchiefs to my credit. I mastered the art of crocheting and tatting, and there was a lifetime's supply of dainty doilies that would never be used in a sacheted dresser drawer." (p.104)

In California, Vivian does not want to be any one's "kitchen bitch" so she earns by gambling. Collins (2006) postulates that the exploitation of black woman's labor is done by associating with her labor, the symbol of iron pots and kettles. The genius of Angelou lies in the fact that she deconstructs the stereotypical image African American women. When Marguerite goes to California, she goes to the school where she studies drama, dance and other skills which result in bridging up the gap between the whites and the colored people. Furthermore, she is far from the typical image associated with African American women who are ignorant or are capable of only being house maids. Similarly, Angelou also deconstructs the image of a plain farm woman associated with African American women. Marguerite and Bailey watch a movie in which the heroine is a White woman, but she resembles Vivian. Both the children are oblivious to the hateful jokes made on the black characters in the movie and their race in general because they could trace the similarity between the heroine and their mother.

"Except that she lived in a big mansion with a thousand servants, she lived just like my mother. And it was funny to think of the whitefolks' not knowing that the woman they were adoring could be my mother's twin, except that she was white and my mother was prettier. Much prettier." (p.119)

Collins (2006) points out that a series of images in popular media project a particular ideology about African American women. These images were the product of slave era, where the black woman was seen as a prostitute or a breeder of slaves.

"From the mummies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever present welfare mother s of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression." (p.53)

The strength of character, honesty and courage which define their mother's character was represented in the movie as well. Food is another cultural signifier which differentiates home from diaspora.

"St. Louis introduced me to thin-sliced ham (I thought it a delicacy), jelly beans and peanut mixed, lettuce on sandwich bread, Victrolas and family loyalty. In Arkansas, where we cured our own meat, we ate half inch slabs of ham for breakfast, but in St. Louis we bought the paper-thin slices in a strange smelling German store and ate them in sandwiches. If Grandmother never lost her German accent, she also never lost her taste for the thick black German Brot, which hwe bought un sliced." (p.62)

Being located in various social positions, the women of color acquire the position of power or disempowerment. The following section discusses who controls the process of *time-space compression* (Pessar and Mahler: 2003) and how do the women of color benefit from diasporean experience.

### C. Power Geometries

Power Geometries, as mentioned earlier, refers to how the women of color exercise agency, when alternatively located, geographically and socially, in host country and in native country. In the last two sections, the women of

colors' position regarding their geographic and social locations were explored. In this section, I will further analyze the novel using Pessar and Mahler's notion of "being in charge of the process of time-space compression" which sees diaspora as a process where the flow of knowledge, information and resources is from one person or group of people to another person or group of people. Hence, power relations are established on geographic and social locations.

In the novel under discussion we find that Mrs. Henderson encounters three powwhitetrash children who insult the lady by imitating her. Marguerite observes the whole scene from the room inside and is shocked to find out that her grandmother does not in the slightest react. Through her endurance and self-control she bears the challenges posed by the racist society. interest on the loan he had earlier taken from her, though Marguerite wishes for a more violent response from her grandmother. Similarly, when Marguerite goes to work as a house maid in Mrs. Cullinan's house, she starts calling her Marry instead of her real name. When the situation could not change for her, she breaks Mrs. Cullinan's favorite China piece from the cupboard to answer her back in the same coin.

"Everything was happening so fast that I can't remember whether her action preceded her words, but I know that Mrs. Cullinan said, "Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret." (p.110)

Similarly, when Mrs. Henderson goes to leave her grandchildren in the care of their mother, she had to stay with them for some time to ensure they were well settled. Being placed in diaspora, she was not awed by the big city, rather she moved with complete confidence doing her job.

"An old Southern Negro woman, who had lived her life under the left breast of her community learned to deal with white landlords, Mexican neighbours and Negro strangers. She shopped in supermarkets larger than the town she came from. She dealt with accents that must have struck jarringly on her ears. He, who had never been more than fifty miles from her birthplace, learned to traverse the maze of Spanish-names streets in that enigma that is Los Angeles." (p. 203)

Living in the racist society of the United States demanded boasting up of morals of the people. At Marguerite's graduation ceremony, Mr. Edward Donleavy, a white minister came to deliver her speech. He assured his support to provide equipment for Home Economics building and "the *only colored paved playing field*" (p.180) in that part of country. The minister with his limited frame of mind suggested only sports or house-keeping as the only jobs available to the colored race. What is significant is the fact that in spite of all the harsh treatment that the students get from the White minister, they derive strength from their national anthem.

"We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful beautiful Negro race.

O, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or by the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?" (p.184)

Concluding, the representations of the women of color in the novel are emblematic of diversity and multiplicity. The women of color, as they exist, are seen exercising agency through a variety of means and their identities are contested by being alternately placed in the subject and object positions.

## V. CONCLUSION

Black feminist thought is characterized by fighting against inscribing certain roles for the women of color, colonizing her body and limiting her thought process. The genius of Angelou lies in the fact that she represents diaspora as a space where multiple identities of the women are contested placing her in the subject and object positions. While doing so, she investigates the issues of race, class and gender oppression, significance of self-definition for a black woman, the concept of motherhood and activism. These identities are not fixed, rather fluid and are defined by the culture, norms, customs and traditions. Angelou neither presents diaspora nor shows customs and traditions of African American life as a solution to the problem. Rather she reveals the various strategies adopted by the black women to exercise agency. It is the politics of gendering, its repercussions and dynamics that I have tried to uncover in this paper.

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