**FROM *CAGED BIRD* TO *PHENOMENAL WOMAN*: CAPABILITY APPROACH IN FEMINIST LITERATURE**

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**Abstract:**  Interpretation of feminist literature with the help of Capability approach unveils different possibilities. It authenticates the truth of the capability theory that stands for the empowerment of human beings. It underlines the necessity of individual and collective journey of women for their liberation. It brings forward the role of personal narrative while aiming for emancipation. Moreover, the approach offers a better way of interpreting feminist literature which reveals the shattered and shining aspects of women’s existence.

**Key words:**  capability approach, empowerment, literature, development

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Empowerment is a core concept that is discussed in association with different social realities. Whatever may be the social realities, when we attach the word empowerment with it, we mean to have a change that betters the social reality in consideration. This change is viewed in terms development. Amartya Sen opines that the characteristic feature of human development[[1]](#endnote-2) is not an exercise of evaluation on the economic progress. Human development depends on a methodical exploration into the fact of how human beings are living in a particular society. When one explores into that s/he meets with shattered and broken human lives. It means recognition of deprivations suffered by human beings is a prerequisite for development or empowerment. Secondly, there should be initiatives from the part of the people to remove blocks in order to achieve well-being. In the words of Sen[[2]](#endnote-3), human lives can go much better in order to bring about betterment by strengthening of human agency and capability. Agency is the ability to pursue goals that one values and reason to value and capability is the various combinations of functioning that the person can achieve[[3]](#endnote-4). From these we can derive the thesis that recognition of deprivation and specification of capabilities are necessary for empowerment, empowerment of women in this case. In order to analyze this thesis, I have chosen two poems written by Maya Angelou, an African-American feminist activist, instead of a case study. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Phenomenal Woman* are the two poems that I have opted for the purpose of exploring the theme. Literature is a weapon in the hands of the human being to inspire and impact[[4]](#endnote-5).

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* makes a methodical investigation into the facts of an African-American woman and presents her battered and diminished existence in the society. Angelou presents the metaphors of a free bird (symbolizing white race) and a caged bird (symbolizing African-American woman). The free bird enjoys unrestricted movements whereas, the caged bird is enslaved as its wings are clipped and feet are tied. The free bird is untroubled while the caged bird is subjugated. The free bird dares to claim the sky while vision of freedom is absent for the caged bird and it is helpless. While the free bird selfishly wishes for more freedom, the caged bird produces fearful trill. However, in the midst of harsh realities of life, the caged bird continues to persist and persevere and is unwilling to surrender. Though being controlled by the oppressive structures, the caged bird longs for freedom.

Angelou brings into light the negative impacts of Jim Crow Laws that dominated in America between the periods of 1890-1965. The African-American women had to undergo inhuman treatment as the result of them. Freedom which is the birthright of human beings was restricted due to the color of skin. There she cried out for the freedom she deserved. In other words, Angelou explored into her particular cultural situation in order to present the battered existence of her and other black women in the society. Her exploration helped her to recognize the deprivation underwent by her and other black women.

Why did she focus only on the theme freedom while investigating into the kind of deprivation she suffered? Sen will answer to it, because freedom is the real opportunity that one has to accomplish what one values[[5]](#endnote-6). He introduces freedom with the aspects of opportunity and of process. The opportunity aspect specifies the ability of a person to achieve those things that she has reasons to value. The process aspect stresses the freedom involved in the process itself. It is the ability of a person to follow and fulfill the aims she cherishes[[6]](#endnote-7). In the words of Simon de Beauvoir, a subject attains its freedom by surpassing towards other freedom. The only justification for existence, according to her, is its expansion into an open future[[7]](#endnote-8). In other words, Beauvoir underlines that freedom is the aim of human existence. Moreover, she says “to will oneself free is to will others free.” It’s an assertion from the part of Beauvoir to bring out the double perspective of freedom: perspective individual freedom and perspective of collective freedom[[8]](#endnote-9).

Combining the reflections of Sen and Beauvoir, we can state freedom as an existential necessity to accomplish what one values and to promote the same in others. As a result, transcendence takes place in the individual and in the group. *The Caged Bird* was a presentation on how an African-American woman tried for accomplishing what she valued and promoted the same for the members of her community. In *Phenomenal Woman* we see the transcendental existence of the same woman who once was caged.

In *Phenomenal Woman*, Angelou who underwent intense oppression of racism declares her confidence in her bodily type and inspires women not to fall in super model classifications. She believes that women possess a seductive power over men and as a result men swarm around her like a hive of honey bees. She emphatically states that men cannot grasp her inner mystery and she claims her power lies in the way her body expresses her self-belief as a woman. She holds her head high and she does not bow to any form of oppression. As a *phenomenal woman*, she urges other women to realize their inner beauty and show their confidence.

In order to lead a transcendent existence, one has to identify the capabilities that are valued by the society. Capability is the various combinations of functioning that human being can attain[[9]](#endnote-10). Functioning is different things a person may value doing or being[[10]](#endnote-11). Capability reflects person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another. They are the real actual possibilities open to a person.

The notion of capability lays more emphasis on the skills and personality traits of people in the writings of Nussbaum. She proposes the list of ten central capabilities: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play and control over one’s environment[[11]](#endnote-12). Once a human being comes to realize his/her talents, abilities and potential, s/he can improve the quality of his/her life.

*Phenomenal Woman* Sheds light onto the realization of talents and potentials. It describes a woman who is self-confident, follows her heart and has faith in herself and in her abilities. She draws strength from her inner self. She proclaims that the real beauty lies within the essence of being a woman, not in artificial canons of beauty. She elaborates her qualities – ability to achieve what she wants, the way she carries herself, her passion, her smile, her sensual movement and the grace of her style. She tells every woman to stand on their feet and not to bend down to oppressions. She extols the woman to be one’s own self and feel proud of their womanhood.

*Phenomenal Woman* covers the ten central capabilities adopted by Nussbaum. What does it suggest? It leads us to the second part of the paper, i.e., specification of capabilities is necessary for empowerment.

Development of the power within is necessary for empowerment. Theorizing power as a capacity to transform one self and others positively will increase resources, capabilities, effectiveness and ability to act[[12]](#endnote-13). It will help women to be liberated from their self-images as inferior and limited beings. It is therefore necessary to build on power-within. One can see the transformation in the *Phenomenal Woman* too. *The Caged Bird* that was oppressed by external forces becomes an extra ordinary *Phenomenal Woman* in the absence of restrictions, and is in the process of realizing the capabilities.

Real empowerment should not be limited with realizing only the power within an individual. In the words of Simon de Beauvoir, self-transcendence should lead to collective action. Then the individual will be able to change the power relations by making strategic life choices. Power, as a positive capacity, stands for strength to act in a collective and creative manner which will in turn change the world[[13]](#endnote-14). Transformation of the world is a shared responsibility[[14]](#endnote-15). The invitation of the *Phenomenal Woman* who was transformed from the *Caged Bird* is towards change. She invites the fellow women to celebrate their womanhood.

The process of empowerment should be seen as an individual and a collective journey in which external actors have a role to play[[15]](#endnote-16). Here too we will be assisted by the reflections of Sen and Nussbaum. Capability approach gives multifaceted possibilities of living. External actors have a great role in translating the central capability list into action. Policy makers can identify the capabilities that are valued by particular communities for empowering them. Moreover, feminist thinkers can use the objective value of having a good life and the capabilities that are associated with it to evaluate those activities where they are engaged in any culture[[16]](#endnote-17). As a result, the *flourishing* aspect of human life which is borrowed from Aristotle by Nussbaum finds its place in capability theory. In order to have the flourishing of the rational being, societies have to be organized to enable the development of women’s capabilities[[17]](#endnote-18). When Jim Corbet Laws were abolished by the external actors of US, the policy makers, we see the *Caged Bird’s* emergence into a *Phenomenal Woman.* The central capability list of Nussbaum could be made use to support and introduce a universal yardstick for monitoring and evaluating local ways of life[[18]](#endnote-19).

Analyzing capability approach from the perspective of recognition of deprivation and specification capabilities contribute to Black Feminist Literature. Black Feminist philosophy centers on the concept of oppression and experiences of Black women.[[19]](#endnote-20) They view oppression as a social phenomenon. The system based oppression is multileveled and only by experience based analysis, one will be able to bring forward possible ranges of oppression. Capability approach will then be of help for a proper analysis of the themes of oppression and freedom that are embedded in the experience of black woman and black feminist literature. It will not only unveil the oppression but also help them with universal set of principles to empower them.

Capability approach could also be used as tool a for interpreting feminist literature, especially black feminist literature for recognition of deprivation and specification of capabilities of woman. Language has alienated, excluded and annihilated woman. Therefore, Cixous invites the women to write. According to her, women must write about women and bring women to writing[[20]](#endnote-21). By writing by women what she wishes is a continuous chain that allows women to present their cultural history. To liberate oneself from the clutches of oppression it is necessary[[21]](#endnote-22). It will help women to resist already established ideas about them by different factors and sources of power. Such writing will bring out the repressed and deprived elements[[22]](#endnote-23). Capability theory helps in considering injustices experienced by people in their cultural and historical situations[[23]](#endnote-24). Therefore, one can see the commonality in feminist literature and capability theory. Both are supporting tools to explore and evaluate the injustices toward women. While interpreting the feminist literature[[24]](#endnote-25), especially the black feminist literature, it secures a place for the feminine by bringing forward their deprivations and capabilities. There are people who write for the sake of entertainment and fun. Writing with the background of the capability approach will bring in change, change for a sustained development. By unveiling her own deprivations and capabilities Maya Angelou was making use of literature as a platform for liberation and empowerment.

Conclusion

Woman is a person who has the sense of self-worth, respect and dignity. She has perfect control of her interior and exterior situations and can make choice for herself. Her status in the society is equal to every other human being. Such a woman will be able to break the silence and speak out the oppressive elements. Her authentic narratives will help the consciousness raising process in the society. Maya Angelou represents such a woman[[25]](#endnote-26). In the historical context of 1930s black women could influence only each other lives. Women had no power to question the social order as the Legislative, Executive and Judiciary were favoring racism. It was a time where civil rights were absent. If any black woman raised the voice for civil rights, she was found dead[[26]](#endnote-27). In this historical context, Angelou makes use of her capability to write in order to emphasis her inner voice. It was an attempt to find a way of being that is true oneself. In doing that, she presented to the society her experience, her experience of oppression and an alternative to come out of it[[27]](#endnote-28).

This should be the capability that should be developed to be a freer woman. Women’s distinctive experience as woman occurs in her particular spheres. Her personal narrative[[28]](#endnote-29) will help them to speak their experience out and to specify their vision of freedom. We need to give the woman opportunities to speak. Nussbaum presents the framework for capabilities that is related to good life, dignified existence. We cannot force an individual to select from a list. Generating abstract capabilities will often give little guidance. Policy makers have to listen to the other attentively considering the socio-economic context of that person[[29]](#endnote-30). Institutions have the role the role to determine the best capability as all capabilities cannot be resolved at the same time. As capabilities and functioning are the properties of individual, each person will have to be considered in any judgment[[30]](#endnote-31).

1. Sen, “A Decade of Human Development,” 17-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Sen’s Forward to *Readings in Human Development* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Sen, *Inequality Re-Examined*, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Permatasari analyses the poems of Maya Angelou from the Liberal, Marxist and Radical perspectives in her work “An Analysis of Feminism in the Works of Maya Angelou’s Poems by Using Historical and Biographical Approaches” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Sen, *In-Equality Reexamined*, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Sen, *Rationality and Freedom*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Scholz, “Sustained Praxis”, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Sen, *Inequality Re-Examined*, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 75 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Nussbaum, *The Quality of Life*, [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Oksala, “Feminism and Power,” 681. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Okasala, 680. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Many a times When human beings enter into the path of collective actions, it turns out to be violent ones. According to Frazer, de Beauvoir and Arendt present such violent outcome from the part of feminist movement as something natural. See Frazer, “Feminist Approaches to Violence and Vulnerabilites,” 696. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Robeyns, “The Capability Approach in Practice,” 353. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Superson, “Feminist Metaethics,” 532. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Dillon, “Feminist Virtue Ethics,” 574. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Jaggar, “Moral Justification in an Unjust World,” 505. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Dotson, “Introducing Black Feminist Philsophy”,120-131. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa,” 257. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Postl, “Language, Writing and Gender Differnce,” 293. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Daly proposes for new ways of naming woman by newly created words to escape from misleading ways of naming woman. However, her creative and funny suggestions do not represent the world of women according to Postl, 300. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Harding, “Women, Gender and Philosophies of Global Development,” 426 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Essentialist Feminism and Feminism of Identity Politics favor Capability approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. In comparison with the Indian ideal woman Savitri one can say that Savitri was also a woman of strong will, firmness and courage. However, she is a mythological figure who serves the patriarchal norms. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. It could be read in line with identity politics. In identity politics the demand is not for inclusion within the category of universal humankind and for the respect in spite of differences, but what is requested is respect for oneself as different. See Kruks *Retrieving Experiences of Subjectivity and Recognition as Feminist*, 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. However, there are authors like Pollitt who considers personal narratives as too confessional or subjective, and Kaminer who regards personal narratives as talks of growing up or immature complaints. See Yu, “Reclaiming the Personal”, 876. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. The Edited work of Cornwell & Edwards underlines this aspect. The elements that contributed to the empowerment of women differed according to the historic, cultural and economic situations of the women. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. The proposal of Robeyns is worth mentioning here. According to it, there should be unconstrained brainstorming followed by a test draft lit with existing academic, political and grassroots level literature and debate on gender inequalities to root the list in the local contexts and experiences of those whom the list concern. Then it should be engaged with other lists of capability and finally with debating it with other people. See Robeyns, “Sen’s Capability Approach and Gender Inequality, 61-92.

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