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Sreedevi.K.S.

Research Scholar,

St.Aloysius College

Calicut University

Thrissur, India

devisuraj0304@gmail.com

**Guide- Dr.Fr.Babu.K.T.

Principal

St.Aloysius College,

Calicut University

Thrissur, India

SUBVERTING FRONTIERS OF GENDER: EXPLORING THE SELF IN *ANGELA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

Abstract

Body poses hindrance for one's performance when an immobile gender is inscribed on it. Compartmentalizing human behaviours and actions into 'feminine' or 'masculine' curbs the freedom of self expression. Moving in line with the predestined order is easy and effortless. But it takes extra effort in transgressing the predetermined and conventional structures in society and culture. The word 'gender' itself is so controversial in current scenario. Woman moving beyond her 'feminine' roles often faces attacks in all means. Angela Davis is a Black American activist who succeeded to survive the attacks resulting from transgressed gender as well as racial roles. Her activism demands more consideration as she stood and fought for Black women's freedom in a white supremacist background. Her life narrative *An Autobiography*, published in 1974, reveals the subjectivity of Black women in 1960s American milieu and the obstacles they had to encounter being a woman as well as a Black. This study focuses on locating such margins of gender and downplaying them.

Keywords: Gender role, Intersectionality Theory, Black Feminism, Performativity, Angela Davis, Life narrative.

Gender is something that is ascribed on a body which has already been labeled with a particular sex: male or female. Social and cultural constructs assign certain codes of conduct

and modes of action to each sex. The typical gender conception always revolves round the dichotomous compartmentalization of everything connected with a human being into feminine or masculine. Traversing the hegemonic compartmentalization of gender roles always results in entitling the subject as rebel or outcast. Angela Yvonne Davis is a Black-American counterculture- figure who dared to fight against the predetermined conceptions of gender roles in American culture. Her subversion of the precincts of gender roles becomes relevant as she suffered subjection both being a Black and being a woman in white-male chauvinist society in American. She entered into the political arena of USA in 1960s. She is a striking person as an activist and as an author. Her activism sprouted with her involvement in Black Panther Party and Communist party in USA. Black Panther Party is the first notable Black organization to line up with the woman's liberation movement of the 1970s.

Angela Davis; An Autobiography points up the plight of black woman activists in America. The then American society, rooted in white patriarchal supremacy, treated the Black women revolutionaries like Black Panthers as underdogs. Black Panther Party's strong uproars for women's liberation shake the patriarchal supremacy. As a result, the dichotomous representations of gender began to change around the early 1970s. The gender hierarchy of American culture faced a shudder also with the emergence of the organizations such as SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee, with radical writings such as Mary Ann Weathers's 1969 manifesto "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force," and literary works like Toni Morrison's 1973 *Sula*. These works portrayed woman beyond the precincts of feminine gender roles.

The image of 'badness' conferred on Black female activists like Angela Davis doubled when they began to address the issues of sexism and black masculinity. That is, the society which had already put the black women in the shades couldn't bare they come out as strong persons. It is quite noted that women like Angela Davis succeeded to be strong base in molding Black Panther Party. It did a lot in attacking the male-centeredness in Black Power structure. This paper explores Black Power revisionism by focusing on the life writing of Angela Davis. How the life writing of this activist sheds new light on the politics of gender in the Black Power movement, an issue which was neglected in the life writing of Black Power male activists. A kind of new focus evolves in Davis's autobiography. Black as well as White patriarchal notions of Black women are challenged while exploring the self in line with self-presentation. Black women's struggles for representation in African American communities reached its new form in the misogynistic and male-dominated political culture in 1960s: Black Femnism.

In discussing the issue of predetermined gender role in connection with a Black American woman Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" theory is quite relevant. It eases the analysis of fluid and flexible boundaries between Davis's identity as being both black as well as woman. Although the concept of intersectionality emerged after the 1970s, it provides a useful theoretical framework to study Davis's autobiography. It is quite impossible to discuss the subverted gender performances of Black American women without the lens of race as Black American women faced gendered as well as racial oppressions. Though the Black Power movements and organizations stood to ease the transgression of gender roles, it is to be noted that the intersectional systems of oppression came even within them. But such challenges motivated the reconstruction of Black womanhood.

The feminine gender conception always connects woman with her family. Especially a Black woman expected to be served for her black man and white masters in 1960s American cultural milieu. But Angela Davis distances herself from her family to voice forth the rights of Black women. It could also be noted that her mother was college educated and active in anti-racists movements; she worked as a high school teacher conveys a constructive image of the assertion of the black woman's potential to thrive in a milieu of systematic racism and sexism. Davis briefly mentions that she "used to secretly resent my parent's for giving me light skin instead of dark, and wavy hair instead of kinky hair," (*An Autobiography* 98) in her childhood. But later she realizes the power in being a Black and became proud of her race as she could do something for the liberation of Black women.

Angela Davis represents a different facet of the Black Power movements, and arrested, imprisoned and tried for highly politicized charges. During 1960s and 1970s the U.S. federal law enforcement systems used as political tools to oppress black women activists. The black women activists including Angela Davis were jailed for their strong stand. More than that, they all were represented as kidnappers, murderers in the dominant culture and media. The black activists are always targeted by the law enforcement system only because of their activities with Black liberation movements. Angela Davis personified the intellectual turned political activist. By examining her treatment within the Black liberation movement and in contrast to that of her male comrades, we can see how the trials and treatment demonstrated the racist and sexist oppression of Black women political activists in American society. Davis faced so many trials and charge of kidnapping and murder as she chose to be politically active in a society which tried to silence the voice of woman. It also exposes the different biases of those involved directly in the cases, whether the police, lawyers and judges, jurors, or journalists in dealing with a black woman's activism.

Davis provides direct perspective on the motivations and experiences of the Black woman political activist in her autobiography. Angela Davis wrote her autobiography immediately after her trial ended. It explores her 'self' by being a person beyond the limits of her gender role, exposing her raw emotions and unresolved feelings surrounding the events leading up to and around her imprisonment and trial, along with the analytic examination of the academic intellectual. It creates a versatile image of the political and personal challenges facing Black women determined to participate in social change on their own strength. From the experiences one can see the direct effect of racism and sexism on their treatment as politically active Black women in the criminal justice system. A dual form of sexism is apparent, in that Black women are denied the protection of female stereotypes when it would help them and are the victims of stereotypes when it would hurt them. Essentially, Black women are ascribed masculine, aggressive qualities to dehumanize their image, while conversely the most negative female stereotypes of romantic weakness and subservience are applied, further alienating them from receiving any sympathetic treatment and empathetic feelings from the larger society. The woman continues in the vein of many Black women before her in their efforts to build their own image while simultaneously the greater society tries to silence them.

Gendered conception of self is portrayed well in Davis' autobiography. She explains the criticisms and verbal attacks she had to face being an activist. The criticisms sprouted even from the male members of Black Panther Party. Ron Karenga's Black Nationalist U.S. Organization criticized her for doing "a man's job" as he stated that "women should not play leadership roles" (*An Autobiography* 161). This is an apt example for compartmentalized performances of gender. Women are expected to be acquiescent, homely and enduring all hardships without any protest and man can be resistant, political and fight against whatever he dislikes. In her autobiography, Angela Davis discusses how she became acquainted very early with "the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists" who "saw Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. These men view Black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood, especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right" (*An Autobiography* 161).

In writing that "liberation is a dialectical movement – the Black man cannot free himself as a Black man unless the Black women can liberate herself," (*An Autobiography* 374), Davis strongly believes that only if solidarity between Black man and woman is created, the liberation of Black people will be possible. Davis's observations about the

oppression that limited the lives and choices of black women form a sort of gender analysis. In other words, the inclusion of Davis's letter to another activist Jackson in her narrative contributes to a "compelling gender dialogue" (Perkins 140) in which Davis strategically positions her statements on gender as the other half of the narrative of gender in the Black Power movement. Where Davis's dialogue with men such as Jackson offers some hope for improving gender equality. Having the public image as being the female leader of the BPP, Angela Davis had to deal with intense criticism of male members who considered her leadership position decides issues of aggression of chauvinism.

Davis's autobiography is a social apparatus which voices the often silenced experiences of black woman. At the same time it advocates the importance of collective consciousness. Through her personal narrative, the woman discovers a sense of agency which liberates her voice: private to public, and gives her agency to voice forth Black women experiences. Through her autobiography, Angela Davis converts her Black victim status to the empowered one. Her writings work as a tool of resistance, showing, that in spite of representational images which situate black women at the bottom of multiple hierarchies by enforcing oppressive, chauvinist structures upon them. Angela Davis smashes such representational images of Black women through a construction of strong identity subverting the gender boundaries.

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