IMPRISONMENT AS A RESULT OF WOMEN SUBORDINATION REFLECTED IN MAYA ANGELOU’S POEMS

Fatikha Amalina, Mohamad Ikhwan Rosyidi
Universitas Negeri Semarang
Semarang, Indonesia
fatikhaamalina@gmail.com, mirosyidi@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract
This research is aimed to describe the imprisonment of African American people, especially women, in the case of patriarchy and women subordination through Maya Angelou’s selected poems entitled “Caged Bird”, “Still I Rise” and “Woman Work”. This research discusses the meaning behind the poems that reflected Maya Angelou’s life experience relating to women subordination and freedom. Feminism approach is applied to analyze the concept of freedom in women subordination and patriarchy in this research. The paper points to how the concept of gender intertwines with labor, ethnics, kinship and gender domination. Without aiming to paint a detailed picture of feminism, the paper explores how ideas developed in these inquiries question the taken-for-granted assumption about the universality of women’s subordination and challenge the emancipation prerequisite of feminist agenda.

Keywords: women subordination, patriarchy, freedom, Maya Angelou

Introduction
Patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development. It is necessary to understand the system, which keeps women dominated and subordinate, and to unravel its workings in order to work for women’s development in a systematic way. In this way, feminists use the term ‘patriarchy’ to describe the power relationship between men and women as well as to find out the root cause of women’s subordination. This article, hence, is an attempt to analyse the concept of patriarchy and women’s subordination in Angelou’s poems in a theoretical perspective.

Methodology
Modern civilization is the result of joint action of men and women. Nowadays women are seen in positions of power such as queens and prime ministers with constitutional control or virtual, and women in general have wrested benefits in greater or smaller measures. Yet it does not change the fact that the system is male dominated and women are merely accommodated in it in a variety of ways. The subject of this research are Angelou’s selected poems entitled “Caged Bird”, “Still I Rise”, and “Woman Work” which describe perfectly how patriarchal culture dominate women. This research uses qualitative methods. Concluding remarks are included in this section. This article is written entirely on the basis of secondary sources that include review of books, journals and other secondary materials.

Finding and Discussion
Culture plays a pivotal role in the subordination of women, as there are requisite implication of power and control mechanisms embedded in culture, which allow for the exploration of gender inequality and inequity. Culture is a broad term that refers to the ‘customs, institutions and achievements of a particular nation, people or group’. Radical feminists argue that culture imprisons women leading to their subordination because of the patriarchal nature of society and hence culture plays a major role in the subordination of women in the society.
One of the elements of culture which is a chief culprit in the subordination of women is patriarchy. The word ‘patriarchy’ literally means the rule of the father or the ‘patriarch’, and originally it was used to describe a specific type of ‘male-dominated family’. Now it is used more generally “to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways” (Bhasin 2006:3).

Patriarchy describes the institutionalized system of male dominance. They do this “through institutions such as the academy, the church, and the family, each of which justifies and reinforces women’s subordination to men” (Millett 1977:35). The patriarchal system is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. Patriarchy, which pre-supposes the natural superiority of male over female, shamelessly upholds women’s dependence on, and subordination to, man in all spheres of life. Consequently, all the power and authority within the family, the society and the state remain entirely in the hands of men. So, due to patriarchy, women were deprived of their legal rights and opportunities. Patriarchal values restrict women’s mobility, reject their freedom over themselves as well as their property.

Born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou is known for her 1969 memoir, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, which made literary history as the first nonfiction best-seller by an African-American woman. Angelou’s works, mostly autobiographical in nature, focus on issues of race, sexuality and violence. Being a writer with a very keen insight, she not only makes use of her social observations but also brings in her past experiences and autobiographical details to validate her claims regarding marginalization faced by African females in America. Angelou uses various poetic devices in her poetry and one of them is figurative language as seen in “Woman Work”. The rhyme scheme throughout ‘Woman Work’ is not constant. The first stanza consists of seven pairs of rhymed lines in the pattern AABB and so on. Since these lines are short and quick in nature, they create an impression of breathlessness in the reader’s mind, as if the author has no time to pause between her various household chores if she is to complete them within the required space of a single day. The next more stanzas are written in free verse, and create a more calming effect.

“Sun, rain, curving sky,  
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow,  
You’re all that I can call my own.”

In the third stanza, the author endows the elements of nature and consider them as having human qualities in attempt to feel less lonely. It is the sun, the rain, curving sky, and moon glow that are her friends.

“Woman Work” implies what Angelou feels toward women. The endless chores, children to take care of, and tons of jobs to do to provide her family. Women has been replacing men as workers in factories and in any other work space since the World War II. As men went to war, it was women who operated heavy machine, became engineer, and controled the economy in America. Women labored themselves to feed their children, they took both responsibility as the head of the family – for the husband had died during the times of war, and also being a mother. The society took women as slaves of the family, the second party, the subordinated one.
Subordination means, “something else is less important than the other thing” (Cobuild 2010:1559). The term ‘women’s subordination’ refers to the inferior position of women, their lack of access to resources and decision making etc. and to the patriarchal domination that women are subjected to in most societies. Thus, women’s subordination is a situation, where a power relationship exists and men dominate women. The subordination of women is a central feature of all structures of interpersonal domination, but feminists choose different locations and causes of subordination. Contemporary feminist theory begins with Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that because men view women as fundamentally different from themselves, women are reduced to the status of the second sex and hence subordinate.

Looking also at the idea of marriage, where the women have to go into and be second class heads of the family, that is to say that women play second fiddle to men in marriage. In any marriage, issues around sex are very sacred and as such handled in a secretive manner that suits male dominance. Marriage also plays a significant role in the subordination of women, as marriage is only initiated by men, which means that the one who is seen as the creator of such an arrangement also has the power over the one who is asked to come into such an arrangement. This is what also makes it merely impossible for women to equally compete with men in public office like in politics as the woman is supposed to be busy with house chores and taking care of the children whilst the man is busy drafting policies and perpetuating the subordination of women.

Family as the first social institution, is a brewery for the subordination of women, as children are socialized from a tender age to behave in a manner deemed to be normal by the society, where children are taught to accept sexual differentiated roles which are unfortunately critical in the whole life of the child. From a young age what determines that boys grow up to be men and girls to be women is how they are taught through various methods like the toys, where boys are expected to get toys like cars, puzzle games and other such games that ensures the development of the physic whilst girls are kept busy with dolls that teach them to be caring but also good wives and mothers.

In the family, the male child is preferred to the female child. In fact, males rule females by right of birth and even if the male child is not the first born in a family, he is automatically considered the head of the household who should protect and look after his sisters. This shapes the way the society views women not only at family level but also in all other areas like in politics and at the work place. The cause of such differentiation and discrimination is, as some scholars note, the fact that society views women as sexual beings and not as human beings. Through the process of socialization, within the family, in educational institutions and other social spheres, where patriarchal conditioning plays a central role in the determination of men’s domination and women’s subordination and hence it is befitting to conclude that patriarchy is the chief cultural culprit in the subordination of women in the society. As long as issues around gender roles are not looked at, it will be a pipeline dream for us to expect women to equally compete with men in the society.

“Caged Bird” is one of Angelou’s poem that has a strong meaning. A caged bird symbolizes Angelou as a black woman which rights and voice had been shut down by the white supremacist. The poem is written with several metaphors. It also represents several thoughts, themes and ideas. It talks about two birds; one is trapped in a cage while the other flies freely in the sky. The caged bag is said to represent the African American individual
who is enslaved while the free bird represents the White American who is completely free. The poem tries to portray the racial segregation that existed between a true White or Caucasian individual and an African American individual in the past. Angelou paints a true picture of racial discrimination that used to be the order of the day in the American nation. She portrays how the Whites dominate the Black Americans. She showed herself as the trapped bird which was caged and barred from having her freedom.

“The free bird thinks of another breeze and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn and he names the sky his own”

Aside from the caged and free birds, there are other metaphors used in the poem. The breeze and fat worms in the poem represent hope and opportunity. Angelou portrays a great future and hope for the trapped bird irrespective of its present condition. The bird is expected to persevere in hope and never to quit since the future spells freedom and greatness for it.

Moving on to the last poem entitled “Still I Rise”. In the poem, Angelou advocates the potential that women possess, depicting black as beautiful and diverse, strengthening women and educating them to embody a strong spirit. In the poem under consideration, “Still I Rise” also, she explores the atrocities subjected at women of race, as well as women in general, as well as the process of painful anguish which results in women coming out ultimately as stronger individuals. She presents the idea of marginalization and subjugation leading to a regrowth and ultimately resulting in healthy survival, where women aren’t just equals, but superior to men.

Metaphor is also one of the most widely employed figures of speech in which one object is said to be another, keeping in view a common attribute between the two. Angelou uses metaphorical language when she calls herself a

“black ocean” in “Still I Rise”. “I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide, Welling and swelling I bear in the tide”.

Here it can be noticed that the only common trait among the two objects (Angelou herself and the ocean) is the vastness and diversity of the ocean. She thus literally calls herself an ocean implying that she is a mystery that not everyone can decode and she is a versatile being, containing within herself strength like the ocean has that of water; magnanimous and life giving, and immensely destructive all at once.

By addressing herself as an ocean, however, she is also referring to the collective female strength, both in the world and in terms of female writing. Angelou also claims her sexuality when she presents water images of an ocean “leaping and wide”, “welling and swelling”, bearing in the tide. Angelou also refers to herself as the ‘dream’ and ‘hope’ of the slave when she says: “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

Dream and hope are abstract nouns, aspirations, and cannot be literally a human being. Metaphorically, this verse suggests that Angelou is the fulfilled manifestation what slaves hoped and dreamt of becoming in the future. Yet women, especially African American women, couldn’t even have the chance to get a better education in order to get a better future for themselves.

The education sector also plays a role in the subordination of women as education is a key component of culture which shapes also the way people view themselves. The education
system ignores the fact that when children come to school, they come with inequalities from the family and it further perpetuates the view that boys are more intelligent and hard-working than girls who are shown as people who enjoy doing household chores.

Subordination of women also happens in politics and in economic activities. The participation of women in the economy, where in most developing countries the economies are agro-based and in most of the cases the women are the major players as labour and the unfortunate thing is that most of the decision making is left for men. The fact that fewer women go beyond secondary education because of son preference in most of the families, this limits the women from rising to leadership positions leaving them to be subordinate to their male counterparts. Even if the women get educated, it does not mean that they will get better paying positions at work, but they have to prove beyond any reasonable doubt their capability.

Conclusions
Culture is responsible for the subordination of women as it uses its various institutions for the subordination of women and it imprison them from their own rights as human being. Angelou tried to pour her thought out through poetry – in this research, poems entitled “Caged Bird”, “Woman Work” and “Still I Rise” – in which describe perfectly how women are subordinated because of the patriarchal culture that is rooted in the very beginning of humanity, and thus their right of freedom is being taken from them. Patriarchy which might be cited as the major culprit in the subordination of women as it is fueled by the various teachings right from the family and also further perpetuated by the education sector that portrays women as weak and having lower capacity than men. The many religions and various public institutions also fuel the subordination of women as women are shown as responsible for bringing evil to the world and their capacity is to hold public office is usually down-played by such institutions.

References