



Racism and Social Segregation in Maya Angelo’s “Caged Bird”

Khalil Bakheet Khalil Ismail

Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, KSA

University of Dalanj, Sudan

Email: khaleextra63@gmail.com

Article History

Received: January 5, 2021

Revised: February 10, 2021

Accepted: February 18, 2021

Published: February 22, 2021

Copyright © 2021 ARPG & Author

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International

CC BY: Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0

Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is to examine the issue of racial segregation in Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird” via exploring the poem in relation to the circumstances that typify life and existence in the African American context. An attempt is made to situate this poem within the heat of racism, oppression, and class discrimination as well as the search for black identity. The paper relies on New Historicism as the scope of exploration owing to the chunk of influence that history and society bears on African American writing. Then literary critical analysis is made to verify the different aspects of racism and social segregation as represented in the poem.

Keywords: Social segregation; Racism; Historicism; Caged bird.

1. Introduction

Poetry like all other genres and subgenres of literature has continued to mirror and respond to issues that overwhelmingly dominate life and human experiences in a given society. Being one of the earliest genres from the days of Socrates, Plato and Homer, and existing in earliest forms in most cultures of the world in form of songs, poetry has been recognized as one of the most veritable literary means through which powerful and strong emotions are expressed in condensed words. Ramsay (2009), holds that:

A poem is like a butterfly. A moment seeds itself inside us a memory. An experience when we saw, we felt, perhaps even, we knew. It touches deep in us, deeper than words. And something begins, in that inner space. Something that is uniquely ours to speak of ... There is a poet in all of us. However unknown or neglected that part of us may be, it is there often just waiting for the right conditions to present themselves.

The unique feature of poetry lies in the manipulation of words in a witty way through the use of numerous figures of speech that abounds.

The experience of blacks in the African American context bears great burden and influence on their writings. It is believed that the colour of the skin does not permit them to produce anything worthy of literature. This subjected their early writings to extra critical discourse to ascertain its literary value. Though prose narrative and autobiography assume more prominent stand in African American and even American writings as a whole because of the space it gave to elaborate their story and also give a room for subjective expression of experiences, few poets have ventured into poetry which also provides avenue to express deep feelings and emotion in a peculiar way. Eugene (1937), is of the view that “there has scarcely been any poetry- a few cries from Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and Richard Wright and with only one or two names like Owen Dodson and Frank Davis.” In response to the unique and powerful emotional command of poetry, Wormser and Cappella (2000) state that:

Poetry concisely registers on the nerves the whole skein of human emotions. It harrows, enthralls, awes, dazzles, confides ... The soul is the depth of our being and poetry is one means of sounding that depth ... A poem doesn’t wile away time; it engages our fleetingness and makes it articulate. It sizes and shapes time.

It is pertinent to note that African American experience within their given society became a fertile ground that good literature of many genres continues to spring forth. Their antecedent has been viewed under a racially prejudiced microscope. So much so that such critics like Kant (1997) once opine thus:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the

world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour... The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart with thrashings.

The above position by Kant will however not stand the test of time of what is obtainable in present African American society and all spheres of life in America has seen tremendous skills and talents springing forth from blacks. It should be noted that this assertion is made years after blacks in America like Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Booker T Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Maya Angelou have written literary works that still stand prominent till now. [Matlock and Andrew \(1997\)](#) open the preface with Lucius C. Matlock's 1845 review of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* declared that: *"The soil of slavery itself had turned out an ironically fertile ground for the creation of a new literature: a literature indicting oppression, a literature created by the oppressed..."*

It is on this background therefore that this paper shall rely on exploring issues that bother on racial discrimination and search for identity in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird"

1.1. Problem Statement

The poem "Caged Bird" compares and contrasts the experience of a free bird with that of a bird held in captivity. The main problem is how to understand the implicit comparison and contrast which are meant to convey the injustice forced upon the captive bird, and to argue that freedom is a natural state for living beings. Moreover, the extended metaphor for the historical oppression of African Americans in the United States, the idea that freedom is a human's natural state of existence further demonstrates the cruelty and injustice of race-based oppression in the United States add some analytical controversies to the overall interpretation of the entire poem. Thus, the caged bird's longing for freedom which demonstrates the black community's resilience against oppression and social segregation also needs to be elaborated and explained in its historical context so that the poem will be fully grasped.

1.2. Objectives

The main objectives of this research paper are:

1. To explain the aspects of oppression and social segregation amongst the black community in the United States as represented in *The Caged Bird*
2. To investigate how Maya Angelou's personal life and her historical surroundings have shaped and influenced her writing style as exemplified by "The Caged Bird"
3. To explicate the role of the extended metaphor in comparing and contrasting the life the black and the caged bird with reference to new historicism.

2. Theoretical Framework

The choice of New Historicism as the framework of this paper is necessitated by the huge influence that experiences from history and African American society bears on their Literature. To New Historicists, there is a long-lasting symbiosis between art and History, this marriage appears not divorceable. According to [Montrose \(1989\)](#) who is one of the pioneers propounded "...the possibilities and pattern for actions are always socially and historically situated..."

Recognizing that other theories and schools of criticisms could be applied to deduce meaning and interpretation from these poems, New Historicism will suffice for the sake of this paper owing to the fact that the underlining situations that run through the poems are expression of deep thoughts on the life and experience of an American within the American context. Justifying the relationship between literature and history, [Bressler \(2003\)](#) asserts thus:

History and literature are nearly synonymous terms, both being narrative discourses that interact with their historical situations, their authors, their readers and their present-day cultures. Neither can claim a complete or an objective understanding of its content or historical situation, for, in fact, both are ongoing conversations with their creators, readers, and cultures.

The main assumption of the theory therefore lies in an attempt to deviate from old historicism and all forms of theories-including formalism and structuralism that attempt to detach a text from all cultural, historical and societal influences. In arguing for the bond between literature and history, [Garvin \(1977\)](#) opines thus:

It seems to me that we need to establish more concrete relationship between literature and history by examining them as efforts to arrange cultural signs systems-diachronically and synchronically-in order to take possession of some aspect of the present and its relation to the past.

It is on this assumption that this paper shall rely on in an attempt to dig into issues of racial segregation in Maya Angelou's poem under review.

2.1. Maya Angelou's Personality

Born in St. Luis in 1928 with the name Marguerite Johnson, she suffered abandonment by both parents who divorced. This is coupled with her being raped at the age of eight by her mother's boyfriend. This early ugly experience assumes more traumatic turn in the hands of white instituted order of racism that puts African American at a disadvantage, socially, economically politically and otherwise. Maya lived with her paternal grandmother until her teen years in Arkansas. The trauma she underwent made her lost her voice only returned much later as teenage. All of these experiences provided Maya with lots of issues to explore when she started writing. At various points in her life, she has been a streetcar conductor, Creole cook, madam, prostitute, junkie, singer, actress, and civil-rights activist. She wrote for the theatre, the movies, television, and achieved celebrity with the first volume of her

autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 1970, *Gather Together in My Name*, 1974 *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* 1976, *The Heart of a Woman* 1981, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 1986 and a few more. Though Maya is considered to be more popular with her autobiographies, she has written quite a number of published poems like *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die* 1971, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* 1971, *And Still I Rise* 1978, *I Shall Not Be Moved* 1990, *On the Pulse of Morning* 1993, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* 1994 and lots more. She has also published a number of plays, children poetry, essays and delivered series of speeches. Maya has lots of musical scores, written television programs, and lectured on literature. She achieved great national prominence in 1993 when she read "On the Pulse of the Morning," a poem she had written, at his request, for Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration. Married and divorced on several occasion, Maya has lived and worked in Ghana and in Egypt, where she was associate editor of the English language. Maya died May 28th 2014. Her life and experiences as reflected above exposes us to the issues that were raised in her writings.

2.2. Oppression and the African-American Experience in "Caged Bird"

Maya Angelo's "caged bird" describes a bird that is trapped in a "narrow cage" with limited mobility, only able to sing about the freedom it has never had and cannot attain. It is a metaphor for the African American community's past and on-going experience of race-based oppression in America, or any other oppressed group around the world. This metaphor portrays the agony and cruelty of the oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of this caged bird. For instance, in lines 10-11 the poem states that the caged bird "can seldom see through his bars," which seems at first as if the poem is going to explain how being in the cage limits the bird's line of sight. But instead, the poem further describes the bars as being "bars of rage"—the bird is imprisoned and certainly the physical bars of the cage limit its line of sight, but the bird can "seldom see" because these conditions make the bird blind with rage. The oppression of the cage doesn't just keep the bird captive; the captivity changes the bird, and in so doing robs the bird of its very self, freedom and liberty.

By using New Historicism approach we realize that the metaphor is also used to convey the pain of the oppression experienced by the African American community throughout the history of the United States, aspects of the poem can be read as directly related to that particular African American historical experiences. For instance, the caged bird's song can be seen as an allusion to African American spiritual quest for freedom and justice.

Thus, the poem's point about the bird's song springing from sadness is critically important, because, historically, many defenders of slavery and other forms oppression of African Americans argued that the song and dance that was a part of African American culture indicated that black people were in fact joyful and content with their situation.

Hence, Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" refuses to bend to the convenient and racist interpretation of African-American song by white oppressors, and instead asserts that the anguish forced on black communities by white oppression must be acknowledged and recognized as one of the darkest spots in the modern history of the United States of America.

2.3. Racial Segregation in "Caged Bird"

According to Kozol (2005) Racial Segregation in the United States has increased since the civil rights movement. The Supreme Court ruled in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) that de facto racial segregation was acceptable, as long as schools were not actively making policies for racial exclusion; since then, schools have been segregated due to myriad indirect factors.

Over the next twenty years, a succession of further court decisions and federal laws, including the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act and measure to end mortgage discrimination in 1975, would completely invalidate de jure racial segregation and discrimination in the U.S., although de facto segregation and discrimination have proven more resilient. According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, the actual de facto desegregation of U.S. public schools peaked in the late 1980s; since that time, the schools have, in fact, become more segregated mainly due to the ethnic segregation of the nation with whites dominating the suburbs and minorities the urban centers. According to Rajiv Sethi, an economist at Columbia University, black-white segregation in housing is slowly declining for most metropolitan areas in the US Racial segregation or separation can lead to social, economic and political tensions. Thirty years (the year 2000) after the civil rights era, the United States remained in many areas a residentially segregated society, in which blacks, whites and Hispanics inhabit different neighborhoods of vastly different quality. It is this segregation that has been portrayed by Maya Angelou in most of her literary works including this poem under investigation, 'caged bird'.

First published in the collection *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* 1983, the poem "Caged Bird" explores the life of African Americans in America, linking it to that of a caged bird. We are powerfully employed into a mental picture that labels blacks in the then American society as prisoners. In the first stanza of the poem, Maya presents us with a picture of free bird that "leap in the sky and claiming ownership of the airspace. She puts it thus:

*A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky*

In the above lines, Maya raises the issue of freedom which is paramount inhuman existence as man needs to be free to be able to go about mundane activities. Freedom here transcends just being outside the walls of prison. It goes on to connote psychological freedom, economic freedom, social and even political freedom. “the sky” within the context of this discourse would refer to America of the 1980s. Poetry in itself has been argued by some critics as a genre that gives poets inner freedom of expression of deep thought. Maya here therefore buys into such ideas of [Bachelard in Green \(1958\)](#) who posit thus: “contemporary poetry has introduced freedom in the very body of the language. As result, poetry appears as a phenomenon of freedom.”

In contrast to the free bird above, Maya presents us with the second stanza of the poem where she captures a caged bird with its “wings” being “clipped thus:

*But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing*

In the lines above Maya sets the stage for racial segregation, class discrimination and colour prejudice that typify the American society that she writes from. The “rage” that stares in the face of the oppressed and dominated African Americans is brought to fore the fourth line of this stanza. The third stanza of the poem reads like the chorus of the poem. In the face of the oppression and marginalization that African Americans suffered, they still sing from the cage. The struggle of the likes of [Wed Du Boise](#), [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), [Malcolm X](#), [Booker T. Washington](#) and many other pro blacks in the American context under review is re echoed in the chorus as resilience kept them through hoping for freedom in the social, economic, political, and even cultural sense of the word. For Maya in this poem, poetry assumes a significant platform through which African American discriminated life is exposed. This justifies the argument of [Arendt \(1974\)](#) who opines that “poetry removes the insulation between me and my experiences to reveal what is ‘true’ for me.”

In the fourth stanza of the poem, Maya goes back to the free bird that has got the lofty things of life “the fat worm waiting on the dawn” (line 25) and goes on to “name the sky his own.” The heat of segregation is such that the caged bird longs for freedom, good breeze and space. The contrast goes on in the fifth stanza of the poem as Maya returns to the contrast thus:

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing*

Evident from this stanza therefore is the hope for a better tomorrow that kept African Americans through the challenges of the American society. This builds on dream that [Martin Luther king Jr.](#) rely on in his famous speech “I Have a Dream”. Though the “wings” of the caged bird “are clipped and his feet are tied” “He opens his throat to sing” There is therefore no giving up on the dreams. This dream found realization in the former president of the United States of America [Barak Obama](#). It does not just in [Obama](#) politically but in the crop of quality artists and writers in African American Society. In this light, [Weldon \(1976\)](#) argues in these words:

A person may become great through many means but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of greatness of all people is the amount of and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people are great until that people produce great literature and art. No person that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as inferior.

It is not disputable that the current outlook of the study of American Literature will be that of dream come true. The bird is personified and even referred to as “he” to give it human undertone to the poem. Maya repeats the third stanza in stanza six of the poem for emphasis sake and to re-echo the resilience and the fighting spirit of the African American society.

3. Conclusion

Conclusively, every genre and subgenre of literature responds to human experiences in a definite society owing to the fact that the writer is a member of the society. He therefore writes not in a vacuum but from the abundance of human conditions, circumstance and situation in a given place and time. [Maya Angelou](#) who is an African American and experiences the scorch of racial discrimination, oppression, and segregation in the African America of her time responded through various genres of literature to this development. This paper has explained different aspects of racism and social segregation in [Angelou’s](#) poem by using new historicism as a literary framework. It has shown the influence of historical and social circumstances in [Maya’s](#) writing style. After the analysis of the text, it is observed that, [Maya Angelou](#) has used extended metaphor as a technique to compare and contrast the black community life with that of the caged birds which was looking for freedom and liberty. This paper has shed light on how she depicts this in “Caged Bird”.

References

[Arendt, H. \(1974\). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.](#)

- Bachelard in Green (1958). *La poetique de l'espace*. France: Presses Universitaires de, In (1988). *The dialectics of Freedom*. M. Green. Teachers College Press: New York.
- Bressler, C. (2003). *Literary criticism: An introduction to theory and practice*. Pearson Educational Limited: London.
- Eugene, H. (1937). *A writer's social obligation*" In "writer of the challenging world. Equinox Cooperative Press: Henry, H Ed. New York.
- Garvin, H. (1977). *Literature and history*. Bucknell University Press: London.
- Kant, I. (1997). *From physical geography, race and the enlightenment*. Blackwell: Eze, E. Ed, Oxford.
- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the Nation*. Random House.
- Matlock, L. and Andrew, W. (1997). *The Oxford companion to American literature*. Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford.
- Montrose, A. (1989). *Professing the renaissance: The poetics and politics of culture*. In *the new historicism*. A. H. Ed Veseer. Routledge: London.
- Ramsay, J. (2009). *The poet in you*. O Books: Winchester.
- Weldon, J. (1976). *Preface to the first edition.*" *the book of American Negro poetry. Voices from the harlem renaissance*. N. Ed Haggins. Oxford: New York.
- Wormser, B. and Cappella, D. (2000). *Feeling the art of poetry: The moves*. Erlbaum: London.