

Symbolic Portrayal of the Blacks in Maya Angelou's Poem Caged Bird

Mrs. P.Subaitha
Assistant Professor of English
Sivanthi Aditanar College
Pillayarapuram

Dr. G. Danish S. Georshia
Assistant Professor of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Nagercoil - 4

Maya Angelou's autobiographies have found an important place in the African American tradition of personal narrative. Even now they continue to garner praise for their honesty and moving sense of dignity. Though Angelou is an accomplished poet and dramatist, she has dedicated herself to the art of autobiography. Angelou herself explains in Maya Angelou from *Encyclopedia of World Biography* that she is

Not afraid of the ties [between past and present]. I cherish them, rather. It's the vulnerability . . . it's allowing oneself to be hypnotized. That's frightening because we have no defenses, nothing. We've slipped down the well and every side is slippery. And how on earth are you going to come out? That's scary. But I've chosen it, and I've chosen this mode as my mode.

Angelou's speeches and writings which stress the hopeful innocence of children have earned her world wide appreciation. Her devoted fans include Oprah Winfrey and President Clinton. Angelou with her blooming laughter and deep rhythmic voice has always been a symbol of strength and leadership for women and the underprivileged. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Angelou herself reveals that, "Image making is very important for every human being. It is especially important for black American women in that we are, by being black, a minority in the United States, and by being female, the less powerful of the genders"(146).

The poem *Caged Bird* explores freedom and lack of freedom for human race. The idea of imprisonment and restriction is found in "Caged Bird" and it also emphasises a feeling of yearning to escape from the cage. In "Caged Bird" there is a contrast between freedom and imprisonment, in the form of 'free bird' and the 'caged

bird'. The symbolism can be applied to many forms of injustices. The free bird in the poem has desire, wants more and also can search for more. But the caged bird has only dreams and all it can do is imagine and sing of freedom. The tone of the poem shifts between the caged bird and free bird stanzas, and there is a sense of anger and bitterness in her portrayal of the caged bird. The contrast seen in free bird and caged bird helps to understand how bad the situation of some people can be.

The structure of the poem is important and different. The poem is split in to two parts. Though it is divided in such a manner, the caged bird dominates the poem as there are four stanzas for the caged bird and two for the free bird. This is because Angelou wants to give importance to the caged bird. The main focus is on the title bird. Stanza three and six appears as a refrain. This helps to show, the pathetic situation of imprisoned birds and how it also affects their mind and body. The poem also suggests how the free take everything for granted, Angelou wants them to understand the position of caged also by listening to their troubles and sorrows.

The poem's diction is interesting to read. The words representing free bird is bright and upbeat like 'leaps', which shows the power of the bird and its easy going life. Angelou also takes up 'floats' to show that the bird is resting on water that's moving and his life is effortless as someone else is doing all the work for him. On the other hand, the caged bird is represented by gloomy and morbid walks. The word 'stalks' shows how it is marching stiffly and angrily in his cage and that he is angry about something. When reading the poem there is a strong sense of contrast between natural freedom and man made imprisonment. Angelou applies the opposite of freedom to convey imprisonment with words like 'bars' and 'tied' that express the idea of being locked up. The verb 'opens' again reminds of freedom and it refers to the free bird. Dreaming and singing is the caged bird's only freedom.

Rage is an abstract emotion that is made concrete in the poem with the help of the image "bars of rage" (11). Bars represent its emotional imprisonment in his anger, as well as in literal sense. Angelou says how a caged bird 'stands on the grave of dreams'. 'Grave' is an implication that his dreams are dead and has no future. The tone and emotional impact found here is bitter and despairing. In "Caged Bird" Angelou uses metaphors to contrast both their characteristics. The caged bird is more of a person who is timid and afraid to do things. He

lacks the confidence or courage to try something new. Instead of seeking the dreams, a caged bird would only wish to do something but there is no effort on its part to accomplish the goals. The free bird is just the opposite. It is ready to take risks, is adventurous and also has the courage to try new things. Angelou portrays the free bird as more of a daredevil. The writer says how the free bird floats downstream “and dips his wing / in the orange sun rays / and dares to claim the sky” (5-7). The free bird does what it wants and is willing to challenge even the sun. It has more of a positive attitude as it finds no hindrance on the way and no bars to stop his progress. The two birds are two different worlds.

Angelou makes use of many grammatical features to make the “Caged Bird” poem appear powerful and extraordinary. In order to describe the free bird that is dynamic and energetic, there is the use of verbs like ‘leaps’, ‘floats’, ‘dips’, ‘dares’. The active construction is also available for free bird as it leaps and goes high above, moving on and on. But verbs to portray the caged bird that is less active “can seldom see” (10). Yet the passive construction like “his wings are clipped and / his feet are tied” (12-13), is sometimes used for its description. The active construction is applied to the free bird to emphasise its feelings of freedom, movement and happiness. Whereas the passive construction shows how the caged bird is unable to move, he is a victim of torture and has little or no control over his actions.

The conjunction ‘and’ is repeated in the poem, mainly to emphasise the great life that the free bird has and the countless quantity of things that he possesses. The reader feels as if the free bird can give some of this to the caged bird. The line “The free bird thinks of another breeze” (23), shows how the bird doesn’t appreciate what he possesses and instead he thinks of more. The poem also has the repetition of ‘but’ that recalls the darker side or something negative about the caged bird.

Sound has an important role to play in the poem, as it emphasises the theme of freedom and imprisonment. The assonance of ‘leaps’ and ‘downstream’ conveys a kind of flowing feeling to the free bird. Alliteration also seems important in order to find a contrast between the two different worlds. The free bird ‘dips’ and ‘dares’ in to the ‘sky’ and ‘sun’ but the caged bird ‘stalks’ and can ‘seldom see’. Freedom gives courage and confidence to take a daring step forward in to the world of opportunities represented by the ‘sun’

and 'sky'. But the caged bird can only 'seldom see', which shows that the world of opportunities is not even clearly visible to him and there is no 'sky' and 'sun' in the caged bird's world.

Though the poem does not follow a regular rhyme scheme, some lines do rhyme like 'narrow cage' and 'bars of rage'. This full rhyme focuses our attention on the bird's anger. In the chorus part, '-ill' words are repeated after every other line, as in 'trill', 'still', and 'hill'. When analysing it to the depths, it is the bird's plea for justice and it is hardly heard on the 'distant hill'. The poem reveals a truth that both free bird and the caged bird wishes for more. Even the free bird is not satisfied and 'thinks of another breeze'. Angelou tells how in the web article "Graaf Explore the Ways," "you should appreciate your liberty if you have it. You should consider other people's conditions and listen to the tune of those unheard in society" Freedom will come only when those who are free come forward and listen to the voiceless people.

The *Caged Bird* is also highly symbolic. It reveals how the poet herself feels about life. She is a caged bird and the cage represents racism and prejudice in America against blacks and females. Her religious upbringing gave her the courage to sing through poetry, in spite of being a black female trapped in an invisible cage of racial prejudice and economic poverty. Angelou literally and symbolically sings through her writings and poetry. The caged bird is symbolic of a black female learning to cope and fight against the racist attitudes and realities that exist in America. The belief in God set her free to express herself without fear of appraisal. Angelou's determination and drive to succeed as a poet, literally sets her free from the racist cage in which she is imprisoned as a child and as a young woman. The bird becomes free when it begins to sing, whether it is caged or not. Thus Angelou's act of singing and freely expressing herself through poetry, took her far above the bars, soaring in to the sky.

Works Cited:

Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994. Print.

Elliot, Jeffrey M., ed. "Maya Angelou with Claudia Tate". *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. USA: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. 146-156. *Google Book Search*. Web. 8 Feb 2010.

Graaf, Jacob de. "Explore the Ways in which Maya Angelou Uses Language and Other Poetic Devices to Present Her Ideas in 'Caged Bird'". *The International School of Toulouse*. n.d. Web. 16 Jan 2010.

