

Echoes of Fortitude in Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and "Caged Bird"

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Abstract

Centuries of slavery, oppression and racial segregation faced by the Africans left a profound mark on literature leading to genres like Slave narratives, Anti slavery literature and African Diasporic literature. In the later period of time the writers who emerged from Africa used poetry as a vehicle to express the pain of injustice. Maya Angelou is one among them she uses her verses to transform the experience of oppression into art that focuses on resilience and hope. Angelou illustrates strength and determination of the Africans in the face of adversity and embodies hope and resilience. Her works have created a significant impact, as both the poems emerge as works of empowerment. Her poems "Still I Rise" and "Caged Bird" talk about the struggles of African Americans by highlighting how they were resisting oppression. Both poems articulate the shared experiences of suppression and liberation. This research explores Angelou's poetry within the historical context of African American struggle, particularly during the civil rights movement making it a vital contribution to the field of African Diasporic literature.

Keywords: Hope, Resistance, Triumph, Determination, Segregation, Oppression.

The American Civil Rights Movement occurred from the mid 1950s to the late 1960s in the Jim Crow South. This era concentrated on dismantling the racial segregation and oppression faced by the African Americans. The Jim Crow law legally segregated the native Americans from the African Americans by providing separate public facilities, education, employment opportunities, etc...

“Separate but equal” was a principle introduced by the supreme court, primarily in the southern United States. After the enforcement of Jim Crow laws there was a large number of African migrating to Northern and Western cities.

Maya Angelou was an Afro American poet who published seven autobiographies. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is an autobiographical work by Maya Angelou, in which she writes about her childhood and early adulthood experiences. After the publication of this work, she was represented and respected as a spokesperson for the black people. In the poem, “The Caged Bird” the poet uses the words ‘cage’ and ‘bars’ as a symbol that reveals that the bird or the black Americans are not only discriminated against but the laws of segregation keep the black Americans in a state of subjugation. The ‘clipped wings’ and ‘tied feet’ imply that the freedom and the opportunities for the blacks are being restricted and snatched away. It is a time when these people couldn’t access basic education, employment and societal participation.

Angelou uses her autobiography to explore various subjects, including racism, oppression and discrimination. In the poem “Caged Bird” Angelou has compared the caged bird with the African Americans and the free bird to the native Americans. The caged bird is compared to the blacks who are the oppressed and marginalised community, the bird sings for its freedom, which it can never attain. The poet has used extended metaphor to convey the pain of the marginalized people in the USA by comparing it with a caged bird.

“he opens his throat to sing” (14). The caged bird of the central symbols where the bird sings for freedom from the bottom of its lungs. The bird is held captive, where it is restricted to see the world beyond the bars of the cage. The only thing the bird can do is to sing as its wings and feet are clipped and tied. The song of the bird symbolizes the cries of the oppressed people who find ways to voice out their longing for freedom, despite restrictions.

The emotional potential of the people is suppressed. Even though the bird sings in a pathetic tone, it still reflects a refusal to surrender to despair. The caged bird puts forward a counter narrative through song. It promotes hope as a counter-narrative to oppression. The oppressor caged the physical body of the bird but couldn’t silence its voice or the imagination. The bird imagines and sings for the freedom that one day the cage will open. The tone of the bird’s song insists that even within confinement, the longing for freedom lives on. Even in a such

condition, the caged bird never gives up; hence, this act transforms the cage into a platform of resistance.

The language used in the poem shapes the themes of oppression and resilience. Angelou's poetic style has a clarity, even though the lines carry layers of symbolic meaning. Her poem reaches a wider audience as it combines simplicity with a profound motif. The use of language, symbolism and imagery ensures that the message is not only read but felt by every reader. Angelou has transformed the sufferings and pain of the Africans into art through her verses. The language of the caged bird is apparently simple. The aspects used to compare the caged bird and the free bird are drawn from everyday life, making the poem accessible to every reader. The free bird is compared to the Native Americans, as it is the one that "The free bird thinks of another breeze" (23). it embodies the privilege and opportunities that the natives enjoy. This symbolizes the people who enjoy unearned freedom and rights, contrasting sharply with those who are oppressed. The conditions of the caged bird are described in physical terms. "His wings are clipped and/ his feet are tied" (12/13 his emotive diction allows readers to feel the restriction and pain of confinement. The 'bars' represented in the poem are not only literal cages but also metaphorical barriers of racism, sexism and systemic inequality. The song employs a descriptive language, where the poet showcases the juxtaposition of fear and longing which captures hope in confinement. The word "trill" suggests that even under constraint, the spirit created expression. Angelou uses language as a form of resistance in her verses. She paints two worlds, where one side of the people enjoys unchallenged privilege and the other side struggle in silence.

In "Still I Rise" the poet directly speaks out against the oppressors and acknowledges for being underestimated and mistreated. The Americans wrote nothing but mere lies about the Africans in the history which oppressed the Africans both physically, psychologically and culturally. In spite of all the twisted lies, Maya Angelou refuses to accept victimhood. Both the poems capture the multifaceted struggles of African Americans. "Still I Rise" was written by Maya Angelou during her productive periods in her career, as she had already published two other volumes of poetry and written three autobiographies and a volume of poetry. This poem addresses the systemic oppression and discrimination faced by African Americans, especially women. Both the poems by Maya Angelou reflect her experiences as a black woman and the adversity faced by African Americans in USA. The poem reveals tenacity in

the face of adversity. From both poems, one can predict how Maya Angelou transformed herself from a victim of racism into a woman who is capable of responding to prejudice. Maya Angelou, a civil rights activist, made use of poetry to express the struggles, oppression faced by the black people in America. Maya Angelou has illustrated both the struggle and the pain of discrimination faced by the blacks and their resistance against oppression in the poem.

In “Still I Rise”, Maya Angelou uses a more defiant tone to confront the oppressor, acknowledging the distortion of Black history and identity. The repetition of the phrase ‘Still I Rise’ symbolises the perseverance against oppression. In both poems, Angelou reflects the struggle of African Americans but not their defeat; rather, their resilience in the face of oppression.

By using symbols, imagery and metaphor in her poems. She showcased how the marginalized community endured discrimination, still chose to rise with determination and strength. Angelou, as a poet, expresses the painful history and reality of the Black Americans through images, symbols and metaphors that resonates universally.

Unlike “Caged Bird” in “Still I Rise”, the counter-narrative was direct confrontation. The speaker mocks at her oppressor by flipping back onto them, revealing their insecurity. She puts forth an example that her rise is not only a matter of survival but also a victory. This shows that oppression cannot decrease dignity. All these elements exhibit the nature of Angelou’s poetry which is not passive but active, resistant and transformative. She turned suffering into song and humiliation into triumph.

Angelou affirms the possibility of freedom and empowerment by using hope as the core component in these poems. In “Still I Rise”, the speaker is not imagining a dream but rises against the oppressors in reality and declares that her spirit cannot be destroyed. Both the poems are empowering because they stand as a model for resilience. In “Still I Rise”, the speaker teaches that dignity and self-worth are impregnable. Hope, therefore, acts as a tool for survival and a pathway to transformation. Both poems are memorable for their underlying message, written in poetic language.

The language in "Still I Rise", employs a defiant diction that asserts power and refuses silence. There is a repetition of 'I rise' in the poem, which not only emphasizes resilience but

also creates a rhythmic refrain. This phrase conveys to the reader to feel the significance and inevitability of the speaker's triumph. There are also lines where the speaker questions the oppressors such as "does my sassiness upset you"?(5). These questions might seem sarcastic, but are confrontational, where the speaker controls the conversation. The speaker asserts her worth by comparing herself to rich sources. "Cause I walk like I've got oil wells/Pumping in my living room" (7/8).

The tone of the speaker is triumphant while confronting oppression. Angelou transforms all the insults into affirmations by embracing them. There is vivid imagery, rhythm and repetition seen in the poem. Since Angelou's imagery is rooted in nature such as the rising sun, tides, moon, which universalizes the struggle which once again reminds us that resilience is as inevitable as the laws of nature. Both the poems "Caged Bird" and "Still I Rise" stand as a timeless flame of the resilience and unyielding strength of the African Americans under structural inequality.

The African Americans was haunted by slavery and segregation over the years. The speaker highlights the suffering caused by systemic oppression and also showcases the determination of the people to overcome it. Resilience and traces of hope are the central themes to both the poem's impact. Angelou's language and imagery in the poem becomes a triumph that resists erasure. The study concludes that both poems will remain timeless due to their of its political and historical importance.

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