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Layers of Meaning in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird"

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Abstract

Maya Angelou was a renowned American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist who had the talent of capturing the essence of the human spirit through her powerful words. Her poetry touched people's minds and hearts offering a voice to those who had been silenced and shedding light on the realities of racism, injustice, and the struggles faced by marginalized communities. Social segregation, identity exploring, and the image of the body are some of the main themes portrayed in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and many other poems. Maya Angelou's impact as a poet is undeniable, as she used her words to inspire and empower individuals to overcome adversity and fight for equality.

Maya Angelou's metaphorical expressions allowed readers to perceive the world differently, encouraging introspection and fostering a deeper understanding of human experience. The aim of this study is to show how Angelou's metaphorical language in her poems helped to create vivid imagery and convey complex emotions through analyzing layers of meaning and metaphors which serve as a bridge between abstract concepts and

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tangible experiences, to allow readers to connect with her poetry on a deeply personal level.

Keywords:: Social segregation, Identity exploring, Racism, Injustice

طبقات المعنى في قصيدة مايا انجيلو "العصفور المحبوس"

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المستخلص

مايا انجيلو شاعرة معروفة وكاتبة مذكرات وناشطة في الحقوق المدنية تتميز بمهارة اسر جوهر الروح البشرية من خلال كلماتها المؤثرة. فشعرها يلمس عقول وقلوب الناس بتقديمه صوتا لكل من تم اخراسه وبألقائه الضوء على حقائق العنصرية والظلم والمعاناة التي عانت منها المجتمعات المهمشة. يعتبر العزل العرقي وتحري الهوية وصورة الجسد من المواضيع المهمة في قصيدة "انا اعرف لماذا يغني العصفور المحبوس" وغيرها من القصائد لمايا انجيلو.

لا يمكن انكار تأثير دور مايا انجيلو كشاعرة فهي استخدمت كلماتها لكي تلهم وتمنح الافراد القدرة على تخطي المحن والصراع من اجل المساواة. ان التعابير المجازية لمايا انجيلو قد سمحت للقراء بأن يدركوا العالم بطريقة مختلفة وذلك من خلال تشجيعهم على اختبار وتبني فهما اعمق للتجربة البشرية. وعليه فان هدف هذه الدراسة هو لبيان وضيقة اللغة المجازية في قصائد مايا انجيلو لخلق مجاز مشرق ونقل مشاعر معقدة من خلال تحليل طبقات المعاني والاستعارات والتي تعمل كجسر ما بين المفاهيم المجردة والتجارب الواقعية مما يسمح للقراء بالارتباط بشعرها بعمق على المستوى الشخصي.

الكلمات الدالة: العزل العرقي، تحري الهوية، العنصرية، الظلم .

1. Background on Maya Angelou:

The well-known American poet, writer, and autobiographer Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928. Her autobiographical series, each focusing on a different time period, is her most well-known work. She received fame and praise on a global scale for her work "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (Abdel Salam, 2021, p. 71). This autobiographical work tackles themes of racism, identity, and resistance—all of which are prevalent among African American writers—and combines autobiography with literary fiction. In the book, Angelou describes events and memories from her early years from both a child's and an adult's point of view. The story takes place between the 1930s and the 1950s. After her parents' divorce, Angelou and her brother Bailey Jr. were taken to live with Mrs. Annie Henderson, their paternal grandmother. Around this time, Angelou encounters racism's trials and goes through a number of tragic events that affect her childhood. Her sense of belonging to a specific home is severely impacted by her frequent relocation and shifting environments. Between the ages of three and sixteen, Angelou actually resided in sixteen separate households.

2. Summary of "Caged Bird":

In 1983, Maya Angelou published the poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" in her poetry collection "Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?" The poem describes two birds' opposing experiences. The freedom of living in nature is enjoyed by one bird, while the other suffers in confinement. As an extended metaphor, the imprisoned bird signifies oppression.

Angelou offers a critical portrayal of oppression by emphasizing the un-oppressed's privilege and entitlement while portraying the parallel experience of agony and emotional strength. The poem's extended metaphor might be interpreted as a description of the African American experience in America, highlighting the difficulties that Black people confront.

The poem can be summarized as follows:

A free bird flies in the sky, seemingly floating downstream, until the wind current shifts and the bird seems as if it is dipping its wings in the orange sunlight, feeling proud of calling the sky his own. On the other hand, there is a bird that moves angrily and silently in a small cage which can barely see through the cage bars or his own rage. His wings are trimmed, preventing him from flying, and his feet are tied together to further limit his movement, and all he can do is to open his throat and sing. The caged bird sings with fear about the things he does not know or experienced, yet he longs to have them. Despite his imprisonment, his songs could go beyond his bars and be heard in the far away hills.

After claiming the air and sky, the free bird sings happily about the worms waiting to be eaten on lawns everywhere he flies, whereas the only scene in front of the caged bird is a grave and his dark shadow on the wall behind him, and once again he prepares himself to sing. Although the caged bird is locked behind the bars of his cage, his wings are clipped and his feet are tied but he was able to sing because it is the only way to express his freedom, and shouts that he has a voice and no one can take that away from him. His voice will be heard and will reach far away, and nothing will silence this power, the power of making his voice be heard despite all his restrictions.

3. The Purpose of the Study

The goal of this research is to delve into the complexities of Maya Angelou's poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". By analyzing the poem's themes, symbolism, and Angelou's personal experiences, this study aims to uncover the profound messages conveyed through the poem's emotional verses." Through studying Angelou's writing style and the different literary strategies used in this poem, this research aims to shed light on the poem's investigation of identity, social division, and the image of the body. Angelou's profound remarks of the human condition call for appreciation and to be given a deeper understanding, especially of the context of the poem and the multiple layers of its meaning.

4. Personal experiences of Maya Angelou and the "Caged Bird"

Maya Angelou opens her autobiography by describing in detail her own experiences as a kid, when she and her brother Baily who was four-year-old, were relocated from

California to Arkansas. Maya's life became a succession of relocations throughout the years, traveling from Stamps to St. Louis, back to Stamps, and then to California. This constant physical mobility marked the early stages of Maya's journey.

Maya and Bailey were entrusted to their grandmother's care after their parents' marriage ended. At the tender ages of three and four respectively, they were treated like mere baggage, with tags attached bearing the words "To Whom It May Concern." Maya reflects on this period, stating, "I don't remember much of the trip" (Angelou, 6), but the abandonment they experienced undoubtedly left a profound impact. They couldn't help but question why they were sent away and what they had done so wrong. Maya wonders, "Why, at three and four, did we have tags put on our arms to be sent by train alone from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas?" (Angelou, 51).

Maya internalizes the belief that their parents' decision to send them away stems from some grave mistake they must have made, something unforgivable. However, she remains unable to pinpoint exactly what she did wrong or how she can rectify "her fault," causing Maya to persistently deny herself. She is tormented spiritually and constantly wonders what she should do. Sidonie Ann Smith shows how "such rejection a child internalizes and translates as a rejection of self: ultimately the loss of home occasions the loss of self-worth" (Smith, 1973: 6). As a result, at this point, Maya suffers from a tremendous loss of self-worth and is on the verge of losing her identity.

Upon their arrival in Stamps, a segregated Southern town, Maya and her brother are initially regarded with caution. The town observes them for a while, lacking curiosity, until it deems them harmless children, at which point it embraces them warmly but not overly familiarly, akin to how a real mother would embrace a stranger's child (Angelou, 7). As Stamps gradually accepts the newcomers, Maya, too, must adapt to this unfamiliar environment. While she looks to be assimilating into Southern life and has seemingly forgotten her terrible abandonment, she nevertheless suffers from the loneliness of an unloved kid. Maya gets consolation in her thoughts whenever she misses her mother. She imagines her mother lying in a coffin, unable to see her face, and resorts to writing "Mother" across the casket, enabling herself to grieve for her "dead" mother. Maya, a profoundly self-conscious youngster, suffers from a persistent sense of ugliness,

inadequacy, and a sensation that her inner nature is hidden. This is clearly seen at an Easter morning church service when she mentally recites a poem in her mind: "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay..." (Angelou, 1).

Maya, who lacks confidence and is driven with self-loathing, feels that everyone in the church is gazing at her due to her small legs and dark skin tone. She feels uncomfortable and disgusting as an unwanted kid, wishing to be someone else totally. She becomes conscious of her dual existence at times, which becomes the focus of her fantasies. She wonders, "One day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about 'my daddy must have been a Chinaman'..." (Angelou, 4-5).

Maya's racial self-hatred grows as she fantasizes of being "really white" with "light-blue eyes" and "long and blond" hair. To make sense of her feelings, she invents a story about a "cruel fairy stepmother" who, out of envy, changed her into a larger-than-life Negro girl. According to Pierre A. Walker, Maya's concept of self is utterly disconnected from her ethnic identity, which leads to her identity dilemma. She refuses to accept herself as she is and longs for an identity that conforms to conventional conceptions of white feminine beauty. (Walker, 1995: 97).

5. Social Segregation in the "Caged Bird"

Maya Angelou's novel, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," and from the first time of its publication has received an extensive scholarship, appreciation, and criticism from various critical platforms. Different critics have expressed their opinions in different ways such as Bader, who argues that Angelou's mind is dominated by obsession, guilt, and overwhelming passion that are threaded together with various devices to convey her message. Angelou skillfully uses figurative language to help readers better comprehend the points she is trying to make. Her adept use of onomatopoeia is particularly powerful, such as the moment when the narrator winces, which vividly highlights the determination and pain endured by African Americans to achieve success (Bader, 2004:12). Bader

highlights Maya's innovative choices in style, diction, and figurative language, which deeply immerse the reader in the suffering experienced by the characters.

On the other hand, Barnwell expresses some reservations. While acknowledging the well-written nature of the piece and the author's evident talent, Barnwell suggests that the author might have been more effective in writing about characters of his own age, thereby possibly providing more effective characterizations. Additionally, Barnwell feels that one of the themes could have fit equally well in an earlier setting, while viewing the other as a relatively insignificant subplot that could have been omitted in the context (Barnwell, 2005: 54).

According to Kozol (2005), racial segregation in the United States has actually worsened since the civil rights era. Racial segregation was permissible as long as schools did not overtly promote racial exclusion practices. As a result of a variety of indirect circumstances, schools have been segregated. While later court rulings and federal regulations invalidated de jure racial segregation and discrimination, segregation and discrimination have proved to be more persistent. Even thirty years after the civil rights movement, many sections of the United States remain residentially segregated, with blacks, whites, and Hispanics living in dramatically distinct communities of various quality. Maya Angelou has depicted this segregation in many of her literary works, including the poem "Caged Bird." Published in the collection "Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?" in 1983, the poem explores the lives of African Americans in America by likening them to caged birds. The poem vividly portrays blacks in the American society of that time as prisoners.

In the opening stanza, Maya presents an image of a free bird that soars in the sky, claiming that the sky and air are his own. This imagery emphasizes the importance of freedom in human existence, extending beyond physical confinement. The importance of enjoying freedom psychologically, economically, socially, and even politically. The reference to "the sky" within the context of the poem signifies America in the 1980s.

6. Image of Body in the "Caged Bird"

In his essay "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility," Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines "body-image" as a holistic representation of our bodily experiences that provides commentary and meaning to our internal impressions and sense of embodiment at any given moment (Merleau-Ponty, 106). Merleau-Ponty goes on to define body-image as a continuous translation of the kinesthetic and articular impressions of the present moment, a dynamic phenomenon, and a way of asserting that our bodies exist in relation to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 106-108).

In her autobiography, Maya Angelou employs an eidetic account of her life, beginning with a childhood day on Easter morning, which she separates from the subsequent chapters to emphasize its significance in reflecting on herself, family, and community. This event is significant because it demonstrates Maya's memory's ability to recall and interpret her experiences. Marguerite has two awkward incidents on Easter morning, one involving forgetting the Easter prayer and the other involving the mixed reaction to her lavender taffeta dress. According to Yolanda M. Manora in this scene, in which the young Maya forgets her lines during the church service, evokes a nostalgic vision of the little Southern Black community to which she belonged and about which she subsequently writes in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (Manora, 2005: 359).

The frustration of a failed magic trick, juxtaposed with the act of forgetting, becomes a prominent aspect of this event. The magic trick entails a radical transformation, turning a young Black girl into a movie star, and it begins with the creation of the lavender taffeta dress that captures the onlooker's attention with its ruffles and tucks, diverting their focus to its fashion and craftsmanship (Angelou, 7). Similar to the movement of a sewing machine that captivates viewers, the dress becomes a symbol of transformation. Maya believes that wearing the dress will make her look like a movie star, investing it with a magical quality (Angelou, 7). However, the dress fails to manifest any enchantment, shattering the illusion and leading to an unappealing realization. Maya envisions herself as a "too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil" (Angelou, 8). This connection between forgetting and hallucination is rooted in conviction or faith. Maya's loss of faith emerges from the

tension between her mind and body, the intelligible and the sensible world (Manora, 2005: 360).

Maya's process of subject-formation occurs within the interplay between her body-image and the external forces that attempt to define her possibilities. The lavender taffeta dress serves not only as an external garment but also as an integral component of her body-consciousness. She describes how the rustling sound of the dress, synchronized with her breath, creates a hallucinatory internal impression, evoking the physical world (Angelou, 7). However, the failure of the dress to transcend the superficial realm of fashion and culture disrupts Maya's body-image, leading to a rupture in her connection with the objective reality it represents.

7. The Search for Identity in the "Caged Bird"

As Maya Angelou recounts her journey from innocence to awareness, from infancy to adolescence, she finds several obstacles that she must confront and conquer in order to maintain her sense of self and achieve a measure of freedom. Before embarking on her literary and physical journeys, she must first find and reclaim her own identity. When she has her first interaction with a white person, it drives her into a clearer comprehension of societal realities and a developing consciousness of her own self-worth. This confrontation proves to be a watershed moment in Maya's life. At the age of eleven, Maya briefly works in the home of Mrs. Voila Cullinan, a wealthy woman from Virginia who now resides in the area. Mrs. Cullinan insults Maya by changing her maid's name from Marguerite to Mary, a name she considers too difficult for a maid. According to McPherson, "Mrs. Cullinan's attempts to change Maya's name for her own convenience echo the broader tradition of American racism that seeks to define the nature and limitations of a black person's identity.". By refusing to address Maya by her proper name, the symbol of her individuality and uniqueness, Mrs. Cullinan denies her humanity" (McPherson, 1990: 45). The young Maya, sensitive and introspective, coupled with her sharp intellect, comprehends the magnitude of this insult.

Maya vividly understands the significance of being "called out of her name" due to the collective fear that every person she knows shares. It is risky to address a Black person in

any way that may be regarded as offensive, given the history of derogatory names such as "niggers, jigs, dirges, blackbirds, crows, boots, and spooks" (Angelou, 106). In a vehement act of defiance, Maya retaliates by intentionally breaking several pieces of Mrs. Cullinan's precious china heirlooms. In doing so, she affirms her individuality and asserts her worth as a person. Through this experience, the young Maya learns that unless one takes a decisive step towards self-definition and refuses to compromise in the face of insults, they will remain confined within a cage. In short, individuals must resist society's attempts to stifle their aspirations and liberate themselves from the dehumanizing environment that surrounds them.

The identity forming process started with Momma's decision to take Bailey and Maya to California showcases her practical nature and quiet bravery. Unlike previous sacrifices where she would laugh, this time Momma shows a deep love for her grandchildren and chooses to separate from them to protect them from further encounters with racist Southern whites. Despite never having traveled far from her place of birth, Momma leaves her business and Willie behind to live in Los Angeles for six months while her grandchildren settle into their new life. Her calmness in making this abrupt change demonstrates her resourcefulness and determination.

Maya's feelings evolved from disdain to pride at her graduation ceremony. Donleavy's speech enrages her to the point where she imagines a recounting of history that is equally vicious toward white people as it is against blacks. Even Henry Reed's wonderful speech falls short of lifting her out of her gloom. However, as Henry sings the Negro National Anthem, he tells the crowd, including Maya, to be proud of themselves and their accomplishments. Maya understands that other black people worked hard to provide her with the opportunity to graduate, and she also discovers the rich tradition of black poetry and literature that celebrates black identity and accomplishment. She acknowledges the significance of black artists and poets for sustaining her hope and developing her black pride in the face of adversities. Maya's new home in San Francisco is a totally different from the rural South that she used to live in .She started to attend an integrated school, where classes of drama and dance were added to her curriculum. San Francisco had an active and diverse environment due to the effects of the war and the expansion of the

industry of defense, in addition to the flow of people from different backgrounds and the relocation of the Japanese in the detention camps. Ironically, finds a sense of connection and fresh bravery and self-awareness in this ever-changing landscape. She had never felt like she belonged anywhere before, but the dynamic nature of wartime San Francisco speaks to her, despite highlighting her previous feelings of alienation and isolation.

8. Conclusion

Maya Angelou's work stood in stark contrast to the prevailing ethos of the "Black is Beautiful" campaign during the 1970s, as she presented an unadorned, un-beautiful, and awkward protagonist (Arensberg, 1998: 31). Angelou deliberately projected the image of an ugly girl as a strategic move to expose the pervasive racism and common stereotypes that prevailed in 1960s America's collective consciousness. By portraying an unattractive African American girl, Angelou aimed to highlight the intersecting issues of sexism, social marginalization, the challenges faced by the African American community and the identity challenges that faces black women in that time. This portrayal served as a means for Angelou to convey her political motives and shed light on the complex interplay between identity, consciousness, segregation and the body-image within the context of her personal experiences in a racially divided society, ultimately, making "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" a work that reflects different layers of meanings that must be carefully understood.

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