

The Role of Literary Responses To Racism: An Examination of The Works of Maya Angelou's

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Abstract: *Research paper provides emerges as a powerful artistic expression that encapsulates the multifaceted challenges faced by African Americans in the face of racial segregation. The paper successfully navigates through the historical and societal dimensions of the poem, employing New Historicism as a lens to elucidate the profound connections between literature and the socio-political landscape. Maya Angelou's work stands as a testament to the enduring impact of history on artistic creation, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding race, identity, and societal struggle..*

Keywords: Social segregation; Racism; Historicism; Caged bird

1. Introduction

Poetry, as one of the earliest literary forms, has served as a profound mirror reflecting the prevailing issues and human experiences in society. From the days of Socrates, Plato, and Homer, poetry has encapsulated powerful emotions in condensed words. Ramsay (2009) aptly compares a poem to a butterfly, suggesting that it captures moments, experiences, and memories in a uniquely expressive way. Maya Angelou, a prominent African American poet, utilizes the distinctive features of poetry to delve into the complex issues of racial discrimination and the search for identity in her renowned work, "Caged Bird."

The essence of poetry lies in the adept manipulation of words, employing numerous figures of speech to convey emotions in a condensed and impactful manner. According to Ramsay (2009), there is a poet in everyone, awaiting the right conditions to manifest. Poetry becomes a means to express deep feelings and emotions with a unique linguistic artistry.

The African American experience, marked by racial prejudice, has significantly influenced literary expressions. While prose narrative and autobiography often took center stage in articulating their stories, poetry emerged as a powerful avenue for subjective expression. Eugene (1937) notes the scarcity of African American poetry, highlighting the notable voices of Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, Owen Dodson, and Frank Davis.

Wormser and Cappella (2000) emphasize poetry's concise registration of the spectrum of human emotions. Poetry

engages with fleeting moments, making them articulate and shaping time itself. In the case of African American literature, the unique emotional command of poetry becomes a potent tool for conveying the depth of their experiences.

Historically, racial prejudice subjected African American literature to scrutiny. Kant (1997) exemplifies this bias, asserting that blacks lacked talents and intellectual capacities. However, the literary landscape, particularly in present-day America, contradicts such views. Figures like Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Booker T Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Maya Angelou have not only disproven these stereotypes but have become literary giants.

2. Problem Statement

Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" intricately compares and contrasts the experiences of a free bird with that of a bird held in captivity. The central problem lies in deciphering the implicit layers of this comparison and contrast, aiming to highlight the injustice imposed upon the captive bird while arguing that freedom is an inherent and natural state for all living beings. This exploration further delves into the extended metaphor that serves as a commentary on the historical oppression faced by African Americans in the United States. The assertion that freedom is a fundamental human right amplifies the cruelty and injustice inherent in race-based oppression, introducing



analytical controversies that demand a comprehensive interpretation of the entire poem. The caged bird's yearning for freedom becomes a poignant symbol of the black community's resilience against oppression and social segregation, necessitating a thorough examination within its historical context for a holistic understanding of the poem.

3. Objectives

The primary objectives of this research paper are:

Exploration of Oppression and Social Segregation:

- To elucidate the facets of oppression and social segregation prevalent among the black community in the United States, as portrayed in "The Caged Bird."

Understanding Maya Angelou's Influences:

- To investigate the impact of Maya Angelou's personal life and the historical backdrop on her writing style, using "The Caged Bird" as an exemplar of her literary expression.

Analysis of Extended Metaphor and New Historicism:

- To explicate the role of the extended metaphor employed by Angelou in comparing and contrasting the lives of the black and caged bird, with a specific focus on its implications within the framework of new historicism. This involves examining how historical and societal contexts shape the interpretation of the metaphor, enriching the overall understanding of the poem's socio-cultural commentary.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this paper is New Historicism, chosen for its aptness in dissecting the intricate relationship between literature and history, particularly within the context of Maya Angelou's works. New Historicists argue that art and history are inextricably linked, forming an enduring symbiosis. Montrose (1989) underscores the interconnectedness of possibilities, patterns of action, and historical context, emphasizing that these elements are socially and historically situated. In contrast to theories that attempt to detach texts from cultural, historical, and societal influences, New Historicism, as utilized in this paper, embraces the idea that literature and history are ongoing conversations. Bressler (2003) posits that history and literature, as narrative discourses, interact dynamically with their historical situations, authors, readers, and contemporary cultures. This theoretical perspective rejects the notion of a complete or objective understanding, recognizing the perpetual dialogue between literature and its socio-historical context.

4.1. Maya Angelou's Personality

Maya Angelou's life experiences play a pivotal role in shaping her perspectives and thematic choices in her literary works. Born Marguerite Johnson in 1928, Angelou faced early challenges, including parental abandonment and sexual assault. Her encounters with racial discrimination and institutionalized racism further molded her worldview. Raised by her paternal grandmother in Arkansas, Angelou grappled with trauma, losing her voice temporarily. Her diverse roles, from streetcar conductor to actress, reflect the myriad experiences that fueled her creative expressions.

Angelou's autobiographical works, such as "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," offer profound insights into her journey. Despite multiple marriages and varied occupations, Angelou's impact extends beyond literature, encompassing activism, theater, television, and music. Her prominence surged with the recitation of "On the Pulse of Morning" at Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993. Angelou's death in 2014 marked the end of a life rich in experiences that form the foundation of her literary legacy.

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

Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" employs a powerful metaphor to convey the anguish of African Americans subjected to historical oppression. The caged bird symbolizes the marginalized community's struggles, evoking emotions of pain and cruelty. The metaphor extends beyond physical confinement, delving into the psychological and emotional impact of oppression. Angelou confronts the misinterpretation of African American song as mere contentment with oppression, rejecting such notions and asserting the validity of their suffering. Utilizing the New Historicism approach, the poem becomes a lens through which the African American spiritual quest for freedom and justice is examined. The caged bird's song serves as a poignant response to a history of slavery and discrimination, challenging the superficial interpretations imposed by white oppressors. Angelou's work refuses to romanticize the resilience of the oppressed, instead acknowledging the dark chapters in American history.

4.3. Racial Segregation in "Caged Bird"

Maya Angelou vividly explores racial segregation in the United States through her poem "Caged Bird." Published in the 1980s, the poem captures the essence of the discriminatory practices prevalent in American society. The juxtaposition of a free bird and a caged bird symbolizes the stark contrast between liberty and confinement, echoing the societal divide.

The poem underscores the racial disparities embedded in housing, education, and opportunities. By revisiting the metaphor of the caged bird standing on the grave of dreams, Angelou emphasizes the resilience and hope embedded in the African American community. The longing for freedom, depicted as a dream deferred yet not abandoned, becomes a rallying cry against racial segregation. The poem serves as a testament to the enduring spirit that persisted through societal challenges.

4.4 Analysis of "Caged Bird"

Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" offers a poignant critique of racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. Through the metaphor of caged and free birds, Angelou unveils the harsh realities faced by the African American community. The free bird symbolizes liberty, soaring in the sky and claiming ownership of the airspace, representing the privileges enjoyed by the dominant racial group. In contrast, the caged bird's constrained existence reflects the systemic oppression endured by African Americans. The use of the caged bird metaphor extends beyond physical confinement to encapsulate the psychological and emotional toll of racism. The bars of the cage are not merely physical; they embody the rage and indignation of a community subjected to discrimination. Angelou skillfully employs the New Historicism approach to weave historical and societal contexts into the fabric of the poem, emphasizing the inseparable connection between literature and the prevailing socio-cultural milieu. The repetition of the stanza describing the caged bird's song underscores the resilience and determination of the African American community. Despite the clipped wings and tied feet, the caged bird opens its throat to sing, symbolizing a defiant voice against oppression. The poem serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit that persisted through segregation, echoing the sentiments of key figures in the civil rights movement.

In the broader context of racial segregation, Angelou's "Caged Bird" aligns with the historical narrative of African Americans in the United States. The dream of freedom, depicted as standing on the grave of dreams, becomes a rallying point for the oppressed. The poem echoes the sentiments of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, envisioning a future where the shackles of segregation are broken, and equality prevails. Maya Angelou's poetic prowess transcends the boundaries of time, offering a timeless commentary on the enduring impact of racial segregation. Through vivid imagery, emotional resonance, and historical depth, "Caged Bird" remains a powerful articulation of the African American experience, an anthem of hope and resistance against systemic oppression.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, literature, in its various forms and genres, serves as a profound reflection of the human experience within a specific societal context. Writers, as integral members of their societies, craft their narratives not in isolation but rather draw inspiration from the abundant tapestry of human conditions, circumstances, and societal dynamics prevailing in a given time and place. Maya Angelou, an African American woman who bore witness to the scorching realities of racial discrimination, oppression, and segregation in her contemporary African American society, responded to these challenges through diverse literary genres. This paper has navigated through the intricate layers of racism and social segregation in Maya Angelou's poetry, employing the lens of New Historicism as a literary framework. The exploration has illuminated the profound impact of historical and social circumstances on Maya's distinctive writing style. The analysis revealed Angelou's adept use of the extended metaphor as a literary technique, skillfully comparing and contrasting the life of the African American community with the plight of caged birds yearning for freedom and liberty. In essence, Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" stands as a testament to the enduring power of literature to capture, critique, and transcend the complexities of the human experience. It invites readers to contemplate the indomitable spirit that persists in the face of adversity and serves as a call to action against the cages of discrimination and oppression.

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