

CAGED BIRD : A SYMBOLIC POEM BY MAYA ANGELOU

Dr. Kirandeep Kaur

Assistant Professor T.S.G.G.S., Khalsa College,
Affiliated to GNDU, Amritsar (Pb) E-mail: jashanchd@gmail.com

Abstract

Caged Bird is a symbolic poem where Maya Angelou, an Afro-American poet, Civil rights activist, describes the social injustice & maltreatment meted out to her community by the White Americans. The word Cage itself means confinement and segregation while Bird represents freedom to fly and touch the skies. But the Caged Bird can't fly as his wings have been clipped and feet have been tied. The Caged Bird raises his voice against oppression in the form of a song which is sung with fear of the unknown. Song again is a symbol of protest against limitations and marginalization and also hope, that someday dream of freedom will come true. It is a cry of pain and anger also against the perpetrators. It also highlights the fact that desire for freedom can't be quelled. By using metaphors of a free and caged bird, the poet tries to present the difference between the civil liberties enjoyed by the oppressor that are denied to the oppressed. The wide social divide has been laid bare by the free bird claiming the skies his own. Maya Angelou uses several literary devices in this poem written in free verse: alliteration, repetition, imagery, symbolism and metaphors. This six-stanzas and 38-lined poem is a wrap up of several themes: oppression, captivity, sorrow and freedom.

Keywords: Caged Bird; Song; Oppressor; Freedom, Captivity, Symbolism; Metaphors; Imagery.

"She raises her pen and lets words – her words make music, the sentences dive and dance; her life story surges and soars."

- *Bethany Hegedus* - At the end of 20th century, many black women writers became successful and popular in the field of Afro-American literature (Af-Am is the short form). Maya Angelou (1928-2014) shot to fame with the publication of her first autobiography book : *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It was celebrated as a non-fictional bestseller which was nominated for a *National Book Award* in 1970. The book lays bare the trauma of her early childhood and adolescence period when she was racially abused, sexually exploited and raped. She became a poet and writer after working as waitress, prostitute, cook and dancer during her stay in San Francisco (1940). After that, she moved to the New York city in 1950, where she joined Harlem Writers' Guild. She mingled with literary persons, read books and listened to their talks. They encouraged her to write. *About the same time she landed a featured role in State Department Production of George Gershwin's folk opera Porgy and Bess: with the troupe she toured 22 countries in Europe and Africa. She also studied dance with Martha Graham and Pearl Primus. (Britannica.com)*

In 1961, after marriage she moved to Cairo – and worked for *Arab Observer*. She later moved to Ghana and worked for the *African Review*. Here, she closely observed the political and social milieu of the country. After returning to California in 1966, she wrote – *Black, Blues, Black-* "a ten part television series about the role of African culture in American life". It was aired in 1968 (encyclopedia.org).

In 1969, she published her first book and after that, there was no looking back for her. *In the course of Caged Bird Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice (wikipedia.org)*

Maya Angelou herself admits in this book: *that the need for change bull-dozed a road down the center of my mind. She wrote more than 30 books and received more than 50 honorary degrees (drexel.edu)*. Her literary work was highly acclaimed and greatly impacted the social fibre of the United States of America. She was awarded *Langston Hughes Medal* in 1991; *National Medal of Arts* in 2002; *Presidential Medal of Freedom* in 2010. Her book of poetry *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water,fore I Diiiie* was nominated for Pulitzer Prize. Michael Berkowitz is of the view that *her constant energy produced the creative acts which allowed her to weave the strands of violence, pain, loss, discovery, friendship and passion into a uniquely American experience, popular and accessible (huffingtonpost.com)*.

Maya Angelou used her pen as her weapon to throw light on the social injustice, sexual exploitation, lack of civil liberties and the pain, anguish, hurt and shame it caused to her people known as Blacks by the White Americans. She expresses all this in her poem *Caged Bird* which is included in fourth volume of her poetry : *Shaker: Why Don't You Sing?* (1983). *Shaker* contains 28 poems and *Caged Bird* is the 9th poem in this volume published by Random House (pp189-90).

Lyrical, emotional and melancholy ... full of shining hurt as, like curving scimitars, they skillfully pierce the hearts of readers - opines J.T. Keefe about poems included in this volume (World Literature Today). Mary S.

Grove considers the poems in the *Shaker* as *lyrical outpouring*. She finds Maya's poetry *Musical, rhythmical and enchanting.*" (*Horn Book Magazine*). This volume came out in the most productive periods in Angelou's career. (wikipedia.org)

Caged Bird is a symbolic poem where metaphorically depicting a *caged* and a *free bird* Maya expresses unhibitedly her fierce love for freedom and stresses that freedom should be valued as a *necessary step for human expression*. There is also a *call to listen* (sergiocarldda.eu)

Caged Bird is infact a symbol of Maya and her community's captivity and oppression they are facing at the hands of White Americans. Song of *Bird* symbolizes their call for freedom and social justice. Here is the full text of the poem:

Caged Bird

*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.*

*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.*

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still and his rune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.
The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and he names
the sky his own.*

*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.*

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still and his rune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

Although poem's title is *Caged Bird*, it starts with the description of a *free bird* and his flight in the sky indicating Maya's desire to be *free* like a flying *bird* who '*leaps on the back of the wind*' feeling '*orange sunrays*' on his body and '*dips his wings sideways*' to feel the air-currents.

Here Maya is referring to the natural surroundings of the *free bird*: wind, trees, sunlight and sky making his flight memorable. He is in a happy mood and poem's tone in the first stanza conveys it. The word choice and rich imagery is superb in describing the *bird's* flight of freedom. The free bird has no qualms about considering the sky his own.

But the mood changes from happy to sad in the II stanza as the environment of *Caged Bird* contrasts deeply with that of the *free bird*. He is confined to a *cage* which is narrow and has bars and is locked too so that he may not try to come out and fly away. But how can he as '*his wings are clipped And his feet are tied.*' *Caged Bird* is living a nightmarish life and he expresses his desire of freedom through a song.

III stanza too focuses on the *Caged Bird* and his song. He sings fearfully but loudly putting all his anger, hurt, pain of *caged* life into his voice. His voice is loud enough to be heard across the hills so that owners of the *cage* may hear him. Maya herself used to dance and sing like her community to express her emotions. It was their way of registering their protest against social injustice, sexual exploitation, racial abuse and violence.

IV stanza again focuses on the *free bird* who is dreaming of another breeze which will carry him to another place where '*fat worms*' crawling in the grass will serve as his food. He has everything he dreams for so he enjoys life to the hilt.

The V stanza again focuses on the *Caged Bird* who sings for all those who saw dreams of freedom but died and are lying in graves now. He sings for those also who are alive and are living a painful, nightmarish life, holding dreams of freedom in their hearts. Although he is fearful of the coming events yet he raises his voice with full vocal energy to be heard across the hills.

The concluding VI stanza is a repetition of the third stanza. Repetition is intentional by Angelou to convey the message of freedom from social injustice and Black community's relentless fight against it.

Angelou has positioned the stanzas in such a manner that it lends *musicality to the poem and a rhythm*: stanzas 1 & 2 have 7 lines each; stanzas 3 & 6 are made up of 8 lines; and stanzas 4 & 5 have 4 lines each. It is written in *free verse* and does not follow a regular rhyme scheme : *cage*-rage; trill-still-hill; down-lawn (internal

rhyiming). Alliteration can also be seen in lines 8 and 10:
But a bird ... (8)
Can seldom see (10)

She lends persona to wind & trees: *Back of wind; the sighing trees.*

Freedom and slavery is the main theme of the poem but other themes like fear and courage, despair and hope are woven into it. The song of the *bird* conveys it all. The song symbolizes Afro-American community's grit and resolve to achieve the goal of freedom by protesting through singing and dancing.

She uses situational paradox to convey her message that it is the *Caged Bird* who sings and not the *free bird*; *Free Bird* does not know about a *cage* as he has never been held captive so he has no need to sing.

Neubauer opines that *Caged Bird brings Angelou's audience full circle with her autobiography, as the most powerful poem in the volume (wikipedia.org)* Keefe agrees and calls it Angelou's *central motif... and a Rhythmical and hypnotic Chant that cries to be sung (World Literature Today)*

Angelou's influences were not people or writers but leaders of her times like Malcolm and Martin Luther King Jr. with whom she worked aggressively as a Civil Rights Champion (*Edublog.com*)

King Junior's assassination shook her completely and it was then she picked up her pen to register her protest against racial violence by writing her first biography. Her writings are the writings of a witness who not only watched her community's captive existence but also experienced it personally. She wrote to lessen her own existential pain and also to awaken her community to be ready for a relentless struggle for racial justice, social liberties and freedom from slavery.

Her poetry shook the whites and pierced through their hearts. President Bill Clinton chose her to recite her poem at his inaugural ceremony (1993) - *On the Pulse of Morning* - left the listeners spellbound. When President was asked why he had Angelou give his inaugural poem - his reply was: *She understood the times we were living in.* (Michael Berkowitz) The poem was for *change, inclusion, responsibility and role of both the President and Citizenry...* (*encyclopedia.org*). Her poems compelled the audience to see Afro-Am community in new light.

Her another forceful poem : *Still I Rise* (1976) became a national anthem for Black women across the world. In this poem, she vehemently tells the black women that don't be ashamed of your physical attributes, have courage to assert yourself and what you stand for and raise your voice against injustice.

Many changes have occurred in American history since then and Blacks have been given more civil rights to pursue their dreams. Oprah Winfrey and Serena Williams are two well known names across the world who dared to break the *cage* and fly to achieve success in their fields. No wonder then that *Nelson Mandela read this poem at his inauguration in 1994, having spent 27 years in jail. (owlcation.com)* This poem holds universal appeal for the oppressed and the rebel across the world.

Chua Jun Yan, a young poet from Singapore has this to say about *Still I Rise: My personal rebel hero is Maya Angelou, a prominent advocate of racial and gender equality in United States. Despite generational gap between us, her words spoke to me as they would have to contemporaries ... Whenever I have felt alone in my little rebellions, Maya has been there. (ypn poetry society.org)*

The poem is about overcoming prejudice and injustice through empowerment of the self and moving ahead with hope of new dawn. No wonder then that every poem holds a special place in Black Community's hearts. There are myriad hues in her poems, her poetry is representative, symbolic and assertive in tone. Her literary works bear testimony to the fact that she lived and worked for the upliftment of her race and relentlessly fought for civil liberties and a dignified life.

Her contemporary Toni Morrison pays rich compliments to her: *She was important in many ways. She launched African-American women writing in the United States. She was generous to a fault. She had nineteen talents - used ten. And was a*

real original. There is no duplicate. (Maya Angleou - The Complete Poetry). A befitting tribute to the multifaceted personality loved and respected both by Blacks & Whites.

Michelle Obama speaking at the memorial service summed up her contribution to Af-Am community in these words: *In so many ways Maya Angelou knew us. She knew our hope, our pain, our ambition, our fear, our anger, our shame and she assured us that inspite of it all, we were good. An in doing so she paved way for me and Oprah and so many others just to be our good old black women selves (theguardian.com).* She truly ignited the souls of Af-Am women.

There is celebration of self and assertion of individuality in her works. When she breathed her last she was remembered by President Obama as *One of the brightest lights of our time - a brilliant writer, a fierce friend and a truly phenomenal woman (Wikipedia.org).*

Caged Bird has found freedom but not in full measures. He can fly but there are caveats as to how far and where he can go. The new morning has dawned but the fight still goes on for equal civil liberties for all the marginalized people not only in America but across the world.

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