



Satire in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

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Abstract: This study is about the use of satire in the poetry of Maya Angelou who uses repetition, satire, and imagery to express her social views and to enhance humanity through constructive social criticism. She writes about political and social topics using satire. Maya Angelou's politically sophisticated and outspoken voice in her poems "Caged Bird" and "Still I Rise" emphasizes her fervent belief in equality and freedom for all, regardless of color or creed. Finally, the study concludes with how Angelou utilizes figurative language and employs ironic comments than literal ones as a matter of face-saving and to maintain the speaker-addressee relation from damage.

Keywords: Maya Angelou, satire, "Caged Bird", "Still I Rise".

السخرية في قصائد مختارة لمايا أنجيلو

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة استخدام السخرية في شعر مايا أنجيلو كشاعرة أمريكية استخدمت التكرار والهجاء والتصوير للتعبير عن آرائها الاجتماعية وتعزيز الإنسانية من خلال النقد الاجتماعي البناء.



فهي تكتب عن مواضيع سياسية واجتماعية باستخدام السخرية. يؤكد صوت مايا أنجيلو المتطور سياسيًا والصريح في قصائدها "الطائر الحبس" و "ما زلت اسمو" على إيمانها القوي بالمساواة والحرية للجميع ، بغض النظر عن اللون أو العقيدة. أخيرًا ، استنتجت الدراسة كيف تستخدم مايا أنجيلو اللغة التصويرية وتوظف التعليقات الساخرة أكثر من التعليقات الحرفية كمسألة لحفظ الكرامة وللحفاظ على علاقة صحيحة بين المتحدث - المرسل إليه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مايا أنجيلو ، هجاء ، "طائر محبوس" ، "ما زلت نهض".

in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

1. Introduction

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson. Her name was reduced to Angelou to avoid confusion with her brother, Bailey. She was born in St. Louis on April 4, 1928. (Gillespie et al., 2008, p.6). Angelou was well-educated. She was assigned to the California Labor School, where Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a brilliant teacher from her youth, mentored her. Mrs. Flower's impact on Angelou was so great that she regarded her as an "answer to the wealthiest white woman in town" and remained with her throughout her life. Indeed, she was close to her grandma Henderson. Additionally, Mrs. Flowers instilled in her a desire to study and understand more. She used to emphasize the importance of communication and language, attempting to inculcate in her a love of reading and writing: "It is language alone that distinguishes him [man] from the lower animals," she used to remark (Alsarhan, 2019, p.8).

After black people were liberated from slavery and granted citizenship, racial discrimination and individual racial attitudes persisted, particularly in the Southern States. These tensions between two distinct races culminated in the 1870s and 1880s in the birth of the Negro issue and racial segregation (Massy and Denton, 1993: 83-84). Angelou attempts to address racism within society with the goal of social reform, stating that "I speak to the black experience, but I am constantly speaking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream about, fail at, and still survive." She wishes to write for her race as well as for all people regardless of color; she wishes to write for the abolition of racism and the establishment of social equality (Cox, 2006, p.10).



Angelou is a global icon for her African-American poetry and prose, Civil Rights Movement work, and social activism. Two presidential ad hoc committees included her. 1994 Spingarn Medal. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. Universities worldwide have honored Angelou. She was awarded almost fifty honorary degrees in recognition of her contributions to literature. She was an incredible poet whose poetry touched people all over the world. Her poetry talks passionately about gender and racial empowerment (Gillespie et al., 2008, p.190).

Walker (2009, p.94) noted regarding Angelou's writing that she returned readers to the original argument sparked by Vicki Cox and Miles Shapiro's book, stating that both concerns, color, and race, were relevant to Maya Angelou. In the early 1960s, feminism was raging in the United States. Additionally, the Civil Rights Movement was continuing. Pierre Walker believed that these two developments had an effect on African-American literature during the period. As a result, both feminism and the Civil Rights Movement had a significant impact on Angelou's life and writings. Pierre Walker lauded her autobiographical works for their thematic coherence. Walker described "Caged Bird" as a collection of short stories, but its political significance is palpable throughout. Angelou's words and worldviews influenced are by movements and political events.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also lauded Angelou and another female author, Zora Neale Hurston, as emblems of the African-American struggle. Additionally, she notes that Angelou recognized that the tangled web of "gender, race, and condition" that encircled black women precluded their "self-representation." According to Fox Genovese, "any insight of the self-led back over desert roads to Southern cages." Vicki Cox claims that Angelou got an awareness of her own feminist tendencies as a result of her quick marriage to Tosh Angelos (Fox-Genovese, 1990, p. 223).

2. Satire

A satirist may direct his or her satire at an individual, a country, or even the entire planet. Generally, satire is a humorous piece of writing that mocks an individual or a society in order to reveal its folly and inadequacies. Additionally, he anticipates that everyone he criticizes will strengthen his



character by conquering his flaws. Writers frequently use satire to call attention to the dishonesty and foolishness of individuals and society and to condemn them through ridicule (Singh, 2012, p.71).

Satire mocks vices, follies, abuses, and infirmities to shame individuals and society. While satire is often humorous, its primary objective is often constructive social criticism, utilizing humor to draw attention to specific and bigger social issues. Parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, and, also, analogy, are used in satirical speech and writing. Satire uses humor, irony, exaggeration, or mocking to highlight an individual or society's stupidity and depravity. It exposes flaws to enhance humanity. A satirist uses a fictional character to criticize real-life corruption (Knight, 1992, p.22).

3. Themes in Maya Angelou's Poems

Most of Angelou's poems challenge racism. Racism still persists, and many black individuals complain about White racism. Angelou, an African-American writer, wants to inspire black people to survive. Some of Angelou's works present various themes, including racism, and detail how black women were discriminated against. Additionally, some of her poems describe life in a prejudiced community. Angelou shows how women survived prejudice and injustice at that age. Black women's lives and how they struggle against racism and oppression are significant issues in her poetry. She promotes feminism by protesting black women's uneven treatment, education, health care, social services, and other aspects of daily life. Angelou fights to include black women in society (Feagin, 2014, p.167).

Bartleby (2020) stated that the idea of equality is stressed in many of Angelou's works, "Equal rights, fair play, justice, are all like air: we all have it, or none of us has it" (p.1). Angelou employs a variety of linguistic figures of speech in her poems to convey a variety of messages and to evade directness. Angelou employs humor to deliver an essential message to her audience in her two poems *Caged Bird* and *Still I Rise*. The purpose of the textual voices in *Caged Bird* is to provide meaning and to emphasize the composer's ideas and beliefs. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou expresses her conviction



in human rights for equality and the freedom of every individual regardless of color or creed. In “Enter without so much knocking”, Bruce Dawe's caustic and judgmental voice delivers his critiques of society's superficial meaningless existence. Angelou’s *Caged Bird* forces the audience to ponder the true nature of the 'free bird' and the 'caged bird'. Through the contrast between the birds throughout the poem, she is able to address concerns of independence and isolation in the African American society. Angelou employs a variety of literary tropes and approaches to portray her views and beliefs on the beauty of liberty, including repetition, irony, imagery, and satire (Maity, 2018, p.1).

Her *Caged Bird* earned critical and popular recognition. This poem protests racism toward Black women through feminism. Feminism seeks equality for women so they won't be exploited by patriarchy, may express their ideas, and aren't excluded from society. Her experience as a black woman prompted her to write about injustice, repression, and segregation against black Americans, especially women. By describing her personal experiences and roles, Angelou reconstructs the image of the black woman and illustrates oppression, survival, and emancipation, "Caged Bird" was her most popular poem (Humm, 1990, p.74).

Sickels (2010) stated, “when I know why the Caged Bird Sing was published in 1970, the book won the popular and critical acclaim and was nominated for National Book Award” (p.18). Angelou is the poem's initial narrator and speaker. In certain stanzas, Angelou clearly describes being persecuted, repressed, and segregated by the white population. In the first stanza, Angelou uses free bird to signify Whites who become the majority in a Black-White society. She underlines the disparities between Blacks and Whites by saying “dips his wing” (ll.5-6) in the orange sun's rays to depict Whites who have more rights and chances in life and are not excluded from society. Angelou protests the inequity between Blacks and Whites in the opening verse by claiming the sky. This depicts White dominance over Blacks. Blacks as a minority group cannot claim anything because they are immigrants and have different skin and color.

Angelou continues to depict the "caged bird" using words such as "bars of fury", "grave", "fearful", and "shadow". These foreboding words refer to



seclusion and are unsettling in comparison to freedom. This strategy of contrast that she used throughout the poem is effective in emphasizing the comfort of liberty and the poet's ability to grasp the ease of liberty by contrasting it with something worse. Angelou use humor to convey her emotions in a more creative and effective, but less direct manner. "With a terrified trill, the confined bird sings" (l.16). This line is satirical, as the caged bird, not the free bird, sings. However, the adjectives "fearful" and "trill" indicate that this is not a cheerful tune but a frantic plea for liberty. This relief helps us to dig deeper and enjoy liberty (Arensbery, 1976, p.272).

*"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." (ll.8-14)*

In the above second stanza, the poet shows the contrasts between Blacks and Whites. Angelou compares herself to a "bird" who stalks through his cage as a victim of prejudice. A narrow cage means the restrictions and how she cannot express her thoughts and feelings. She does not have Whites status. Black women are second. Black women do not have enough schooling, living care, and other amenities compared to Whites. In the third stanza, Angelou sings a phrase with a terrified trill to represent her struggle for freedom. This is her worst period because the majority does not support her rights. Angelou illustrates her frailty by having her sing with a terrified trill when protesting prejudice. She believes she must be strong to endure her hard life (Feagin, 2014, p.27)



In "For the caged bird / sings of freedom" (ll. 21-22), Angelou conveys an essential message to the readers: the trapped bird wishes to be free. This leads the reader to conclude that every individual should be conscious, and appreciative of the freedom in their society. Although Angelou is less straightforward in presenting her ideas and ideals, she effectively uses satire to help us enjoy freedom even more. Angelou's *Caged Bird* examines the conditions of the "free bird" and the "caged bird". Indeed, the difference between birds enables her to communicate her own feelings about freedom and solitude. Because the poem is highly humorous, there are numerous hidden signals about her sentiments that she attempts to convey indirectly. Angelou gives vitality to her depiction of the "free bird" in the opening verse by employing verbs such as "leaps", "floats", and "dips". The "free bird" is a symbol of liberty, and these well-chosen verbs are particularly poignant because they include the word "joy" (Zaini & Hasan, 2021, p. 79). In the last stanza:

*"The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom"* (ll.31-38)

Angelou says a "Caged Bird" stands on the cemetery of dreams to protest racism's harmful influence on her. Her inadequacy is symbolized by Grave of Dreams. How can she have a better life if her dreams are dead? It shows her struggle to improve her life. In the final stanza, Angelou assures readers that she and other black women will always struggle to live despite their faults. They keep fighting, albeit it's not easy. Like a bird that sings softly yet always does. The trapped bird sings of liberation (ll.3-4). His tune echoes her struggle



to survive as a black woman. The line "sing for freedom, caged bird" informs readers that the awful story in the poem does not make her desperate; she preserves her spirit to find equality for her and black women. Angelou is pleased to be black and a role model, like her family. Angelou learns early on that black women must resist and rebel to survive (Sickles, 2010, p.27).

While she wishes to rise above the suffering in the second poem, "Still I Rise", (1978) Angelou represents experience with rising above society's torment. "Shoot me with your words," (l.21) "Cut me with your eyes," (l. 22) and "Kill me with your hatefulness" (l.23) are all phrases that express the anguish society attempts to inflict on Angelou. "Still I Rise" is about Angelou's experiences as a woman and her treatment by society. The poem demonstrates her conflict with how women are treated in society. Angelou describes what society demands that she responds to their cruelty in the fourth stanza: "Bowed head and lowered eyes," (l.14) "Shoulders sliding down like teardrops," (l.15), and "Weakened by my deep cries." (l.16) Despite her mistreatment, she emanated confidence, "sassiness," (l.5) and "sexiness."(l.25) Angelou asks questions throughout the poem, such as "Did you want to see me broken?" (l.13) (Ford, 2021, p. 3).

Satirically, the piece is punchy in reference to the civil rights struggle. "Did you want to see me broken?" (l.13) and "I am the dream and hope of the slave" (l.41) highlight the satire of the time. As if to say, it is an irony that one rises above what society asked of African-Americans in earlier generations, but now one stands free and equal with the power to be heard. The poem "Still I Rise" is uplifting and forceful. The way Angelou writes made it clear that she is addressing the reader. By doing so, Angelou gets readers emotionally invested in the poem, which helps them recognize that we are all guilty of discrimination. Angelou suffered from racism as a black woman, yet she had been tough and fearless. She was active in the civil rights movement, defending the rights of black women who were overlooked by society. "Still I Rise" was written by Angelou because she understood that things needed to change for the better. Black women were not socially and politically integrated into many ways. Angelou states in "Still I Rise" in the first stanza:

"You may write me down in history With



*your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt But
still, like dust, I'll rise" (ll.1-4)*

Angelou declares with great resolve and brave heart that no matter the circumstances and whatever the oppressors do, even if they stomped her in the mud or lied about her history, she will rise like the dust, and no one could defeat her or hold her down. "write me down in history" reflects racism. Due to her slavery past, Angelou is mistreated. People judge her according to her race.

Angelou enjoys writing about political and social issues. She writes in her poem "Still I Rise" about the history of African Americans and how she dealt with terrible treatment. Satirically, slavery is implied by the phrase "Out of the tents of history's guilt." (l.21) The speaker seems to speak to anybody who is reading the poem. Angelou is upset or angry throughout the poem, yet she is also aware of her bravery. The joke is that society desired Angelou's demise, but she grew stronger as a result and desired to demonstrate to everyone that they would not get the best of her, "I'll rise" (l.41) (Jeremiah, 2012, p.2).

The poet's confrontations with the people she addresses are frequently sardonic. One of them is satirical in that the oppressors, in attempting to oppress her, really provide her with the courage and resolve to survive. For instance, she informs them, "You may trample me to the ground/ But I, like dust, will rise." (ll.1-2) Trampling her into the soil is designed to immobilize her. However, it has the opposite effect, fortifying her resolve and propelling her higher than ever. The refrain "I rise" demonstrates her ongoing defiance (Hayani, 2016, p.135).

To summarize, Angelou writes her poems in a furious and triumphant tone to confront her oppressors and expose the shortcomings of political and social issues; for instance, she employs satire to characterize her encounters with society. She was continuously knocked down, yet the satire was that despite the heinousness, she shows constant courage. The poem expresses both how society desired her failure and how she proves her solidity and resistance. Maya is enraged but cognizant of her fortitude. Satirical poems depict



discrimination and segregation of black women in white culture. Racism, oppression, repression, and segregation exclude women from society (Jeremiah, 2012, p.3).

4. Conclusions

1. This study reveals how Angelou, in her *Caged Bird* and *Still I Rise*, uses satire to reflect the racism and reality of her age concerning black and white also, male and female. By using satire, Angelou exposes the truth's antithesis and softens the painful reality. She employs figurative language and uses words in unique ways to express her message by indicating something without saying it.

2. Angelou uses satire to express herself in a more creative, yet less direct way. A satirical statement, "The caged bird sings with a terrible trill," as stated in the poem by a frenzied prayer for liberation conveyed by "fearful" and "trill". Angelou uses repetition to emphasize freedom's significance and beauty. The third stanza is repeated at the end of the poem to underscore the two birds' differences. It is important to remember that the caged bird strives to be like the free bird. In her poems, Angelou shows us the disparities in her society, in which not everyone has the same opportunities. The second poem is "Still I Rise". A black person in misery is photographed. The illegal fist tormented and silenced them. In this piece, Angelou satirizes "gold mines" and "diamonds." In the end, the "black ocean" shows the speaker's power. Their grandeur rivals the oceans. Angelou uses satire to state that the caged bird is singing, not the free bird. Fearful and shrill make us realize it is not pleasant music but a desperate scream for freedom. This alleviation helps us appreciate freedom.

3. Her poems are satiric, proud, angry, and protesting. Thousands of African-Americans have had similar experiences to Angelou's. These poems exhibit Angelou's courage and black pride. They were written by a woman to women, because of her strong and wise lineage, which helped her to cultivate a healthy mind and body.

4. Angelou employs satire to be cleverer and more persuasive but less direct. In America, she faced racism, rape, and oppression. Fair skin, sharp features, and blue eyes define American beauty. But African-American women do not



conform. Angelou believes that inner beauty is true beauty. She loves her curvy, fit body. She satirically portrays that her strength is nurtured by her oppressors and her will is virtually cemented to show a continued resistance. In short, she employs satire to show how her power is born and reinforced from a womb of suffering itself.

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