



MAYA ANGELOU- A VOICE OF OPPRESSED WITH REFERENCE TO HER POEM 'CAGED BIRD'

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ABSTRACT

Marguerite Annie Johnson well-known as Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry and was credited with a list of plays, movies and television shows spanning over 50 years. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. She is the best known for her series of seven autobiographies which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, "I know why the caged bird sings" which was published in 1969, it brought her international recognition and acclaim is about her life up to her the age of seventeen. She was respected as a spokes person for black people and women and her works have been considered a defense of black culture. 'Caged bird' is a poem which considers the conditions of the free bird and the caged bird. Actually this contrast between the birds enables her to express her own emotions about freedom and isolation. The reader can extend this feeling of being caged into the human condition as well.

INTRODUCTION

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The poet describes a bird with clipped wings. Its feet have been tied and it has been placed in a cage that prevents it from flying away. Despite its fear the caged bird continues to sing of freedom. In this poem she describes the joy that a free bird takes in soaring through the sky. She describes a bird that has been caged. Its feet tied and wings clipped. It sings against its imprisonment, in spite of its fear, it sings of freedom. The free bird is a symbol of freedom and the caged bird is a symbol of isolation. Maya being a civil rights activist has written the poem to reflect the social disparity, ideals of freedom and justice and the voice of oppressed. The poet has effectively used the metaphor of two birds.

The poem begins with the imagery of a bird leaping on the backwind experiences to move freely through the air.

*“The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange Sunrays
And dares to claim the sky”*

The free bird leaps on the wind and floats over a stream till the end of the current. The environment is calm and amicable for the bird to move freely wherever it wishes. It dips its wings in the orange sunrays. The bird is quiet happy and contented in its privileged kingdom. It has no restrictions hence ‘it dares to claim the sky’, no limitations for its desires and achievements.

*“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”*

Here is the contrasting picture of caged bird. The poet uses it to explain isolation, discrimination and oppression. The bird is restricted and frustrated with its pathetic situation. It desires to break from its bondage in a narrow cage. It’s not even allowed to see beyond the bars of rage. Here the bars of the cage are used as metaphor for oppression. Its wings are



clipped and feet are tied and it is not free to do as it wishes. It is isolated but it opens its mouth to sing. It can do nothing but raising its voice against its oppressors.

*“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”*

The caged bird sings with fearful trill with the voice of sorrow and fear. It sings about dreams of freedom though it does not know and experienced the freedom but longs for it. His voice can be heard from faraway places as hills. Its situation is now known to all in the world by its sad songs. It is very ironic that the caged bird can sing but no 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.”*

At the same time the free bird is enjoying its freedom and waiting for another breeze to enjoy. It is free to choose and try again the trade winds through the sighing trees. Trees are sighing because they too are bound to earth. The free bird now can enjoy fatty worms which come out early in the morning. It explores new territories of its choice even it claims the sky as 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 poet again describes the conflicting situation of the caged bird, it is tied inside the cage but it is singing its unfulfilled dreams. It has no hopes of getting freedom so its dreams are becoming nightmare screams of oppression. Its helpless condition makes it open its throat to sing. The shadow of the bird is still fighting against the oppressors for freedom because it has still hopes.



The last stanza is purposefully repeated by the poet to stress the bird's determination to get freedom. It is singing continuously because it is only the way for it to express its feelings. Though it lost freedom it does not lose its dreams and hopes. Here the poet indirectly gives a message that she knows 'why caged bird sings' thus the poet is sending a message to all oppressed that they should not lose hope but raise their voice for the freedom by singing, though they are imprisoned or caged.

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