

The Defensive Blacks: A Study on Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise' and 'Caged Bird'

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Abstract

Maya Angelou is an African American writer who is famous for her memoirs and collections of poetry. Her life exemplifies how each Black American must fight against the odds and come out of life's miseries and insults. The present study is an attempt focusing on how the Black Americans defended themselves against the racial, superior and White Americans. Being black, they have to go through different struggles in order to survive. Their survival on earth is actually established on insults and attacks and their life is almost like a caged bird. But they fight back like dust and air. They voice against the evils of the American society.

Key words: Black Americans, freedom, oppression, survival.

Every human being likes to live a life that is free from alienation, oppression and marginalization. Freedom is a state of mind even a child likes to possess. But in a world that is filled with ego, ambition, pride and jealousy, people try to suppress others in terms of colour, race and gender. So some people find some means to identify themselves with others. When there is such a process going on, either the victims gain liberty or they face suppression more.

Maya Angelou is an African American writer who is known for her autobiography and several collections of poetry. Through her works, she voices against the White's torture of the Blacks or the Male's suppression of the Female. The researcher through the present study aims at analyzing how the Black Americans defend themselves against the dominating Whites as seen in Maya Angelou's poems "Still I Rise" and "Caged Bird". The title of the paper is The Defensive Blacks: A Study on Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" and "Caged Bird".

In the book entitled *Writing for the Media*, Sunny Thomas says, "In real life, we seldom know a character in totality and the unexpected realms of his/her personality remain invisible like a submerged iceberg"(119). Such is the life of the Blacks. They are invisible to

the world. So, great authors like Maya Angelou raise their questions to the oppressors and show their resistance in a very open and rude manner.

“Still I Raise” is a poem that was directed towards the oppressors who would love to tie the speaker (i.e) Maya Angelou herself to a bitter past. There are various situations in which the lives of the Black Americans are under estimated and misinterpreted. But she says that she will rise above history, hate and bigotry. So, this poem exposes the poet’s strength.

“Caged Bird” is a poem that was written shortly after the death of Angelou’s friend Martin Luther King. In this poem, she compares two birds; one that is free and another one caged forever. The latter bird is denied freedom and cannot enjoy any blessing that nature has bestowed. The only way of relief a caged bird finds is through singing. It sings of freedom. Therefore the caged bird cannot be silenced anymore. The muted stance has changed even though it is caged.

In both the poems, history has a great impact on the poet’s life. She remains the representative of the whole Black women community. She is tormented by history’s lies. The White people, as in “Still I Rise”, used to write her down in history; “You may write me down in history/with your bitter, twisted lies,/ You may trod me in the ;very dirt”(Lines1-3).

In “Caged Bird”, it is like a life in fetters. Their life has been under the clutches of white people:

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. (Lines 8-13)

A Black’s life lacks freedom. They cannot express whatever they want. Maya Angelou herself remained a mute for six long years after she was raped at the age of seven. She thought and believed that when she spoke, somebody was killed. This belief she acquired when Mr. Freeman was killed. But after those six years, she began to speak. Such is the past of Maya Angelou.

In toto, Black Americans especially the women face bitter experiences living in America. The Whites are not happy when they see the Blacks emerging out of their destiny or their cages. It is clear from Angelou’s lines in “Still I Rise”: “Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?” (Lines 5-6). She also examines the psyche of the Whites as she asks:

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like tear drops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard
 'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
 Diggin' in my own backyard. (Lines 13-20)

where as in "Caged Bird", the bird outside enjoys the free wind , stream and sun. The free bird claims to own the world: "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" (Lines 23-26). But the bird inside the cage "stands on the grave of dreams" (27).

By recollecting the past and the present, Maya Angelou decides to be the representative of all Black people who love to come out of their cages or to rise against suppression. According to Claudia Maria Fernandes Correa, "The act of remembering, organizing and registering memories is a creative act, a means of self knowledge, and also a reformulation of an individual's responsibility towards his/her own self because this (re)ordering is also a path to personal growth" (79).

Maya Angelou wants her people to act defiantly. She doesn't want her fellow beings to be slaves to the brutish White people. She wants to fulfill the vision of her ancestors. She refuses to be the victim of slavery anymore. That's why she claims in "Still I Rise", "But still, like dust, I'll rise"(Line 4). When dust is been trampled upon, it will certainly rise. It is the same with the Blacks. She also states:

Just like moons and like suns,
 With the certainty of tides,
 Just like hopes springing high,
 Still I'll rise. (Lines 9-12)

She uses various images like dust, air etc.

The caged bird doesn't remain mute forever. Bearing all humiliation and torture, the bird even though afraid, begins to sing. According to Angelou, she cannot be muted anymore:

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.(Lines 31-38)

Maya Angelou is not ashamed of anything happened in the past. Her only vision or dream is to free the Blacks from bondage. With that hope, she says in "Still I Rise", "Out of the huts of history's shame/ I rise/ Up from a past that's rooted in pain/ I rise" (Lines 29-32). She also promises:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
 I rise
 Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
 I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise. (Lines 35-43)

She stresses on the word 'rise'. The concluding lines of the poem give an optimistic note for everyone.

Through both the poems, she exposes how the Black Americans are denied of their freedom. Because of the humiliations and losses, the Blacks are forced to grow up and fight for their cause. They are no more mutes. Even when they feel detached from the mainstream, they have the courage to be defiant by rising or raise their voices against the cruelties of the world to achieve real freedom.

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