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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

***Maya Angelou's Selected Poems: A Reflection on Racism and Segregation***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the issues of racism and segregation in Maya Angelou's selected poems. As an African American, Maya Angelou in her poems and autobiographical novels demonstrates the historical, social and economic condition of her community, especially till the 1970's. To argue on these grounds, power structure between the white and the black, or African American is also important to discuss. In this paper, six poems of Maya Angelou which are "Still I Rise", "Caged Bird", "Alone", "Harlem Hopscotch", "Phenomenal Woman" and "My Guilt" will be discussed and analyzed to discover and rediscover the themes of racism and segregation. So, this paper examines the historical reality of Maya Angelou's community, important features, facts and information found in her poetry, along with the way of segregation in a racist society. Simultaneously, this paper explores the socio-economic context of the blacks as a base for racism and segregation and the apparent mentions of racism and segregation in Maya Angelou's poems.

**KEYWORDS**

Racism, Resistance, Segregation, Marginalization, Cultural-identity

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**1. Introduction**

It was the medieval era, to be precise, the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the trading of the Africans as slaves was started. According to the New York Times Magazine, "Some 12.5 million men, women and children of African descent were forced into the trans-Atlantic slave trade" (Elliott and Hughes). When this people were started bringing to North American colony, that was the starting period of racism, discrimination, segregation and marginalization of towards the black people. Thus, "freedom was limited to maintain the enterprise of slavery and ensure power" (Elliott and Hughes). Significantly, that racism survived for hundreds of years and led to the brutal time of 1970's, the decade which Maya Angelou's poems regarding racism and segregation are about.

Maya Angelou addresses racism within society with the intention of promoting social reform. As she states, "I speak to the black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and still survive." Through her work, she aims to represent her own race while also reaching out to all people, regardless of their background. Her writing seeks to eradicate racism and foster social equality for everyone.

For a long period of time, the African American communities in America were marginalized because of their race and ethnicity, which started from the slavery period in America and continued throughout the 1970's, when Maya Angelou was in her peak regarding her writing. However, a significant part of her works demonstrates the sufferings of the ancestors of the current African American community. Besides, the economic condition of the community, their social values, marginalization etc. are also common themes of her poetry. Through her poetry, she also shed light to the white people's perspective towards the blacks and the discrimination in different sectors. This paper intends to analyze the texts to find out these dimensions of racism and segregation.

## 2. Literature Review

Maya Angelou's poems are widely discussed, deciphered, and analyzed from a plethora of dimensions like historical, socio-economic, and political perspectives. Among them Snoor Ismael Mahmood's socio-racial study titled *Overt and Institutional Racism in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems* explores Maya's poems from her first collection of poems name *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie* (1971) from "sociological criticism" with the background and social conditions. In this study, Mahmood depicts the naked racist attitudes and the incorporated social and state-bases institutions to strengthen the racist prejudices exposed in the literature of a Black or African poet, Maya Angelou. He concludes saying that her poems expose "their lives in contrast to the white people in her poems to denote the effect of racism and racial prejudice on black community. She shows them as a victim of a race that is not their fault but rather a condition imposed on them due to unfair assumption of racial attitude." (Mahmood 622)

On the same note, Zahra Mustavi and et al wrote a research article title *Racial Discrimination as the Representation of American Social Life in 1970s in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems* describes "how social discrimination is manifested" throughout Maya Angelou's poems "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", "Alone", and "Still I Rise". He shows how her poems become the portrait of American social life in 1970s and how racial discrimination is described in those poems. This qualitative study concludes that Maya Angelou tries to describe "American society experience the social anxiety as the impact of people's discomfort toward their position." (Mustavi and et el, 2)

Hanaa Khalifa Mohamed Eid in his study *Manifestations of Racial Discrimination as Shown in selected Poems by Maya Angelou* illustrates her poems as a resistance of Black to the White's racist society. Along with the contextual moments and her political spirit this study explores racism from color, economic class, and gender's perspectives. How Maya tackled the concept of otherization or marginalization, especially inequality based on color and gender, is the core part of its discussion. The paper concludes that "Her poetry shows her sense of racist oppression that African American have been subjected to." (Eid 87)

Considering these existing literatures, this study explores the themes of racism and the scenes of segregation caused by racist system reflected in Maya Angelou's six poems, which are "Still I Rise", "Caged Bird", "Alone", "Harlem Hopscotch", "Phenomenal Woman" and "My Guilt". The poems are analyzed in the lens socio-historic timeline to contextualize them. While the abovementioned studies explore the racist attitudes, along with these this study includes portraying the state of segregation in a white dominated society.

## 3. Methodology

This research is sort of qualitative research since the analysis concerns on finding data primarily in the form of words instead of number. The primary data of this research are fact and information related to racial discrimination taken from the dictions of the selected poems of Maya Angelou while the secondary data are facts and information about racial discrimination in America in 1970s taken from African American history books, the biography of the author, journals, and articles.

## 4. Results and Discussion

It was the medieval era, to be precise, the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the trading of the Africans as slaves was started. According to the New York Times Magazine, "Some 12.5 million men, women and children of African descent were forced into the trans-Atlantic slave trade" (Elliott and Hughes). When this people were started bringing to North American colony, that was the starting period of racism, discrimination, segregation and marginalization of towards the black people. Thus, "freedom was limited to maintain the enterprise of slavery and ensure power" (Elliott and Hughes). Significantly, that racism survived for hundreds of years and led to the brutal time of 1970's, the decade which Maya Angelou's poems regarding racism and segregation are about.

The first poem of Maya Angelou that should be mentioned as a demonstration of racism and segregation is "Still I Rise". The poem starts with a notion talking about as a member of the black community or an Afro-American, how the so called white people may acknowledge her community. The narrator seems to be pretty sure that she will be mentioned with "bitter, twisted lies" (Angelou 163) and be trodden "in the very dirt" (Angelou 163). Now, here racism can be found as an action, of which, segregation comes as a reaction. The bitter and twisted lies are the tools to make her depict as a belonging of an inferior race. At the same time, she is talking about social segregation when she says that she will be thrown in that part of the history that includes nothing but dirty mentions. Basically, though these first two lines of the poem, the narrator simply talks about the period of slavery of the African-American people. "Does my sassiness upset you?/ Why are you beset in gloom?" (Angelou 163) is the line where the narrator tends to give a reply to the racist behavior. Through these lines she shows how her confidence makes the members of the so-called superior race tensed, because they do not expect someone from such an inferior race to be this much confidence. However, in this second stanza, a last lines can be seen as a reply for the social segregation she has to face, where she mentions that the superior part of the society has a reason to segregate her, which is her confidence with which she walks without any hesitation. Hana Eid interprets these lines saying, "She affirms that she walks like someone who is very wealthy and rich. As most American-African poets, Angelou refused to be marginalized" (83). However, Angelou again mentions the period of slavery in the 4<sup>th</sup> stanza

of the poem. She assumes how the white people want to see the black people broken, with bowed head and lowered eyes. Here, she directly refers to the expectation of the whites of seeing the black people as inferior beings, who naturally behave like slaves, the behavior the expected from their ancestors. "Shoulders falling down like teardrops,/weakened by my soulful cries?" (Angelou 163), are the lines that basically emphasizes the sayings in the previous lines. Moving forward, the fifth stanza, where the narrator is seen striking back again, she basically "announces her refusal of slavery and inferiority" (Eid 84). But, possibly it is the sixth stanza, where the most naked depiction of racial segregation can be found. "You may shoot me with your words/ You may cut me with your eyes/You may kill me with your hatefulness," (Angelou 163). Here Angelou shows every possible negativity an African-American has to face because of her ethnicity. She here portrays, as a black person, how one is 'commanded', not talked to; how one is seen like a rival; how one is hated just because of her being black. The eighth and ninth stanza can be said to be the most intense stanzas of the poem, demonstrating aspects of racism and segregation through metaphors. Angelou says, "Out of the huts of history's shame/I rise/Up from a past that's rooted in pain/I rise" (Angelou 164). The huts of history's shame, and a past rooted in pain, both these phrases again refer to the shameful part of the history, which is the slavery of the black community, which is the dark part of Angelou's past that is nothing but a tale of painful memories and incidents. She mentions the nights of terror and fear, which actually refers to the brutal form of racism and segregation. The poem is ended with the notion of hope, where she expresses herself as "the dream and hope of the slave", which portrays her stand against racism and against segregation.

"Caged Bird" is another poem of Maya Angelou where mentions of racial segregation can be found. The title of the poem itself is a depiction of segregation. According to Khalil Ismail, the poem "is a metaphor for the African-American community's past and on-going experience of race-based oppression in America, or any other oppressed group around the world. The metaphor portrays the agony and cruelty of the oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of the caged bird" (Khalil Ismail 26). However, in the first stanza, there is actually no apparent sign of racism and segregation. The first stanza only talks about how a life free from racism and segregation actually looks. Despite of not mentioning racism and segregation, the first stanza actually leads to the path to create a platform to mention them. And the platform is created in the second stanza which has an opening couple of lines saying, "But a bird that stalks/down his narrow cage" (Angelou 194), basically refers to the segregation of the black community in America. Angelou here portrays the fact that the black community is so much oppressed through racism and segregation they "can seldom see through" the "bars of rage" (Angelou 194). This actually shows the uprising agitation of the black community because of the racial segregation caused by the white people. Then comes the part where Angelou describes the level of segregation, "his wings are clipped and/His feet are tied" (Angelou 194), demonstrating that how the African-Americans have lost their freedom to the white community. Moreover, the words 'clipped' and 'tied' can be also taken as references to the chains of slavery of the ancestors of Angelou. However, then the caged bird of the poem starts to sing. This action of singing can be said to be a reference to relate the caged bird to the African-American community, too, because it is one of the key characteristics of their ancestors to sing and dance time to time, not necessarily only in the moment of happiness, but also in their moment of sorrows. Khalil Ismail shows how the white community in America used this as a propaganda to defend their slavery and racist deeds, "Historically, many defenders of slavery and other forms oppression of African American argued that the song and dance that was a part of African American culture indicated that black people were in fact joyful and content with their situation" (26). Besides, Khalil Ismail also thinks that,

Hence, Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" refuses to bend to the convenient and racist interpretation of African American song by white oppressors, and instead asserts that the anguish forced on black communities by white oppression must be acknowledged and recognized as one of the darkest spots in the modern history of the United States of America. (Khalil Ismail 26)

However, the proof of Khalil Ismail's comment in this regard can be found in the lines of the poem, where it is said, "The caged bird sings/with a fearful trill/of things unknown" (Angelou 194). And this fearfulness of the bird can be related to the fear of the black community that came because of the racism and segregation they faced. Next, comes the appetite of caged bird for freedom, which it expresses through its song. And this is a metaphor for the concept of being free from these racial segregation. The forth stanza is actually the glimpse of that freedom from racism. According to Khalil Ismail, "In the fourth stanza of the poem, Maya goes back to the free bird that has got the lofty things of life "the fat worm waiting on the dawn" (line 25) and goes on to "name the sky his own." The heat of segregation is such that the caged bird longs for freedom, good breeze and space" (27). Then, Angelou portrays the fact that these racism and segregation have destroyed the dreams of the black people saying, "But a caged bird stand on the grave of dream/his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream" (Angelou 195). The latter line depicts the horrors of being racially marginalized and segregated. Lastly, the repetition of the lines second and third stanza again emphasizes the racism and segregation the black community faces, and their will to be free from all these.

"Harlem Hopscotch" is probably one of the most influential poems of Maya Angelou, regarding racism and segregation. Through the poem, Angelou has made a much bolder and braver portrayal of the oppression of the whites on the black people. The poem simply starts with the introduction of the rules of a simple children's game, hopscotch, which actually sets the stage for

demonstrating the racist behavior of the white community. "One foot down, then hop! It's hot/Good things for the ones that's got" (Angelou 51) are the first two lines of the poem, clearly saying that good things are for the superiors, in this case the white people. On the contrary, the last line of the stanza displays the scenario of the black people, "Everybody for hisself" (Angelou 51), which means, the black people themselves have to fight the oppression they receive, and nobody is going to help them. This racial discrimination gets denser in the next stanza, where a line says, "since you black, don't stick around" (Angelou 51). In this case, Mahmood comments, "It shows that in the oppressed community of white supremacy the black people do not have the chance for economic development and it is difficult for them to be successful because of their race and racial segregation as she says "since you are black" you will not have the same chance of employment" (621). On the same issue, Hardianti kind of agrees, saying, "The words deliver the meaning that since you are an African-American you cannot socialize as free as you want it. It is related to segregation, discrimination, stereotype and all those racism idea" (31). The very next lines, "Food is gone, the rent is due/Curse and cry and then jump two" (Angelou 51) emphasizes this discrimination in employment because of racial segregation. The third stanza shows the result of this unemployment. People of the black community get out of work, and if they "cross the line", or complains about the situation, they are counted out. Through this statement, Maya Angelou demonstrates the peak of racial discrimination. However, the last lines show the poet's fight against racism, where she says, "They think I lost, I think I won" (Angelou 51). Actually, this poem establishes the fact that the living issues of the black or African American people are nothing but child's play to the white community and the whites can ruin their life without any hesitation, as if their life is as simple as a hopscotch game.

"Alone" is another example of Maya Angelou's poems which gives the depiction of segregation. The poem starts with the quest of the poet for a home for her soul. And, to talk about home, she means such a place "Where water is not thirsty/and bread loaf is not stone" (Angelou 74). Her such criteria of home are nothing but those things which she does not have where she lives currently. Basically, it can be said that these lines refer to the hardship of the African American black community who are segregated by the white people there. As mentioned previously, the racial discrimination leads to a huge unemployment problem for African American people. However, in the third stanza, Angelou mentions some 'millionaires' who hold so much money that the money is of no use to them. Naturally, these millionaires are none but the so-called superior race, the whites. Angelou describes them saying, "Their wives run like banshees,/their children sing the blues,/they've got expensive doctors/to cure their heart of stone" (Angelou 74). This stanza is actually set as a contrast for the first stanza, showing the opposite lifestyle of the blacks and the whites. To Angelou, although the whites have expensive doctors for their treatment, still the doctors cannot transform their heart made of stone to one made of flesh and blood. In the fifth stanza, Angelou informs the readers that storm clouds are gathering and the wind is going to blow. These metaphors can be interpreted as the rage of the black people who are being racially approached and segregated by the whites. As per Zahra Mustavi, "However, the white rejects the reconciliation since the black's condition gets worse described in Alone. They even face another problem with the white-minded blacks. Maya Angelou warns the white to stop their racist actions because some blacks start to lose their patience and ready to 'blow the storm'" (3). Or in other sense, the metaphors can refer to the revenge of nature, the horrors that are going to break out just because one part of humans are oppressing and segregating another part of human just because of their skin color or ethnicity. And that is why the human race is suffering, and the only prevention to this destruction is to stop the racial segregation at once, because, as Angelou says for three times in the poem, "Nobody, but nobody/can make it out here alone" (Angelou 75).

Despite of holding more of a feminist's perspective, "Phenomenal Woman" can also be interpreted as a partial portrait of racism and segregation. Very first line of the poem is a portrayal of racial segregation, which is "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies" (Angelou 130). Here, pretty women can be taken simply as white women, because the shade of white as the standard of beauty can be said to be a colonial approach, thus a racial one. Angelou also mentions that neither her beauty fulfills the criteria of being cute from the white women's perspective, nor she is "built to suit a fashion model's size" (Angelou 130). This again shows the denial of people of a particular ethnicity or race, here, the black people, as cute or a fashion model by the whites. But they cannot understand the fact that, the physique of Angelou, ethnically and geographically is not oriented as per their standard of beauty. However, in reply, Angelou mentions her phenomena as the source of her beauty, which can be said to be a stance against the racism and segregation. Besides, in the third stanza, it can be found that, "Men themselves have wondered/What they see in me" (Angelou 131). Here, again the men can be taken as white men. It is surprising to a racist white man that a black woman somehow wonders him. Then, in the last stanza, Angelou says, "Now you understand/Just why my head's not bowed./I don't shout or jump about/Or have to talk real loud" (Angelou 131). The second line is a reference to the expectation of the white people that a black woman should always bow before them. And, as a reply to this racist, Angelou declines to do it. Moreover, she talks about the stereotypical qualities of the black people that are made by the whites. As mentioned previously, the whites tend to have a racist interpretation of the African Americans' way of singing and dancing, in which, they may take the songs and dances as shouts and jumps. This is why, Angelou seems to make the concept clear to the whites that, the blacks or the African Americans do not shout and jump, and despite of being from that community and having a black skin tone, she can wonder white people around her.

"My Guilt" directly addresses slavery as its topic. And the very first two lines of the poem determines its tone, "My guilt is "slavery's chains," too long/the clang of iron falls down the years" (Angelou 45). Through these lines, Angelou perhaps wants to say that, the brutal racism the blacks face at the present time is maybe the consequence of the long ago worn chain of slavery. And just because of this reason, families fell apart, different members of the family were sold to different places. After being slaves, the black people were "considered no longer as human but as property which there is no particular institution can protect them except the slave holder" (Hardianti 31). Angelou finishes this stanza saying "My guilt made music with the tears" (Angelou 45). This line describes their sorrows and hardships happened because of the racial approaches by the whites. In the second stanza, the poet tells that it is her crime that she and her community could not hold back their dead heroes. Here, she names some historically important figures for the blacks, like Vesey, Turner, Gabriel, Malcom, Marcus and Martin King, all of which were more or less related to the rebellions and revolutions for ending the slavery and ensuring the civil rights for the blacks. Angelou acknowledges that all of these heroes fought heart and soul against slavery and racism, and she thinks it to be her crime that all of them died, but she is still alive to see the brutal form of racism and segregation. The last stanza tells the story of the torture the black slaves faced, the way they were tortured to death. She tells that, none of those unlucky slaves screamed while dying to impress the people encountering the death. Angelou thinks this to be as dangerous as a sin, because as none of them screamed then, there was no protest against this crime at all. And that led to the racism and segregation the black community are facing today.

## 5. Conclusion

The six poems analyzed in this paper collectively reflect the profound impact of racism and segregation experienced by the poet throughout her childhood and adolescence. While other works such as "The Calling of Names," "Our Grandmothers," and "On the Pulse of Morning" also explore themes of racial discrimination, the poems discussed here serve as poignant representations of the life, history, and struggles of the African American community. These poems not only depict the hardships and sorrows endured due to racial segregation but also offer a vision of hope, suggesting the possibility of a brighter future and a new dawn of equality and understanding.

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