

Singing from the Cage: Race, Voice, and Resistance in Maya Angelou

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Received: 25 March 2026 / Accepted: 27 March 2026 Published: 31 March 2026
Journal homepage: <https://anubodhan.org>

Abstract

This paper explores the poem “Caged Bird” through the perspectives of gender studies, subaltern theory, intersectionality, and postcolonial criticism. The paper’s main **objective** is to analyze how the poem represents the condition of marginalized women, especially Black women, and to examine how gender and race together shape their experiences of oppression and resistance. The **methodology** used in this paper is qualitative and analytical which is based on close textual reading of the poem along with theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon. The paper provides an interpretation of symbols, themes and imagery in the poem to understand deeper meanings related to identity, power and inequality. Freedom, privilege and dominance is represented by the free bird, while the caged bird symbolizes women who are restricted by patriarchal and racial structures. From a subaltern view, the poem shows how marginalized voices are often silenced, yet the song of the caged bird becomes a way of resistance. The paper also highlights intersectionality, showing how Black women face double oppression due to both gender and race. Additionally, the poem presents the idea of the “Other,” where the oppressed are treated as inferior, weak and face loss of identity. Overall, the paper concludes that “*Caged Bird*” is a powerful expression of suffering, resistance, and hope especially of Black women where voice becomes a tool for survival and protest.

Keywords: Gender study, subaltern, intersectionality, postcolonial criticism

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Introduction

Maya Angelou (1928–2014) is recognized not only as an American civil rights activist but also as a significant postcolonial writer. She did not write from a formerly colonized nation in Africa or Asia but her work lies within postcolonial discourse by centering the experiences of marginalized Black women in a white-dominated society. Her works highlight themes of racism, resistance, identity and the subaltern. Her literary works function as a resistance to physical and emotional oppression. She provides deconstruction of the "othering" process used by colonial power structures in America. Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" is a prosaic narrative poem rich in powerful imagery, presenting a gender-based contrast between freedom and oppression. The poem was published in the collection "Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?" in the year 1983. The free bird symbolizes man, who enjoys unrestricted liberty, while the caged bird symbolizes woman, confined by social, cultural, and patriarchal restrictions.

In Caged Bird, Maya Angelou shows how oppressed people (the subaltern) suffer silently but still hope for freedom. The poem also shows the concept of intersectionality by highlighting how different forms of oppression, in the form of race and power, come together to make their struggle harder.

Gender based study of the poem

The image of a free bird is presented in the first stanza of the poem, who represents a man living in complete freedom. He leaps confidently *on the back of the wind* and moves wherever he wishes. The entire sky belongs to him, symbolizing unlimited opportunities and power. He not only flies freely but also dips *his wing in the orange sun rays*, enjoying nature until water current ends. He feels the warmth of his glory, suggesting privilege, comfort and joy. His movements reflect confidence and dominance, as he believes *and dares to claim the sky*. This man lives without fear or restriction, secure in his authority and independence.

In the second stanza, the caged bird, symbolizing a woman, suffers from severe limitations. Her *wings are clipped*, showing restricted mobility, lack of freedom, and controlled access to basic necessities like food and water. She cannot fly or move beyond the *bars of rage*. When she tries to sing, her voice comes out as a painful cry rather than a song. Her attempt to open her throat reflects desperation and helplessness. Unlike the free bird, her voice is suppressed, and her suffering goes unnoticed.

Subaltern view of the poem

Subaltern refers to people who are socially, politically, and culturally marginalized and whose voices are not heard. Subaltern people are marginalized groups whose voices are often silenced by dominant power structures.

The famous question of Gayatri Spivak is : “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” Subaltern people often cannot express themselves in dominant systems of power. Even if they try to speak, their voices are ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented by other intellectual people.

From a subaltern perspective , the poem reflects the condition of women as marginalized voices within a patriarchal structure. The woman in the poem represents the subaltern subject whose voice is suppressed by societal norms. Her sacrifices and adjustments highlight how patriarchy normalizes inequality, making her suffering invisible and unheard.

Moreover, the denial of education and employment reflects a deeper mechanism of control—keeping women in a state of dependency so that they cannot challenge authority. This aligns with the subaltern idea that marginalized groups are often excluded from systems of knowledge and power. The woman’s unfulfilled dreams represent a longing for liberation that remains unacknowledged just like the caged bird that sings for never experienced freedom.

Why is that the women have to follow the orders of the male in order to claim her own rights? Isn't she also a citizen of her country who has right to freedom and speech laid down by the Constitution? And why should she only follow the rules created by the society? Doesn't she have the will of her own in this natural world governed by divine presence? God has created both men and women alike so why the discrimination? Only people have created the class, gender and racial differences.

Intersectionality in “Caged Bird”

The concept of **intersectionality** explains how different forms of oppression—such as **gender and race**—interact to create deeper and more complex marginalization. The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the paper “*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,*” to help explain the oppression of African-American women. It explains how gender overlaps with race, class, caste etc. It is a framework for analyzing how interlocking systems of power affect those who are most marginalized, particularly Black women, whose experiences are often overlooked by conventional anti-racist or feminist advocacy.

In “Caged Bird,” Maya Angelou presents intersectionality through the opposite states of the free and the caged bird, symbolizing not only men and women, but also **White and Black people**.

The **caged bird** represents **Black women** in the third stanza,, who suffer from both **patriarchy** and racial discrimination. She sings of things unknown and never experienced-- unknown people, distant lands, and unexplored possibilities. This shows how Black women are historically denied

opportunities, education, and freedom. Her longing for freedom, stability, and equality shows a double struggle—not only as a woman in a male-dominated society, but also as a Black person in a racially oppressive system.

Her song reaching “*distant hills*” symbolizes a silent protest against both sexism and racism. Although her voice travels far, it remains mostly unheard, reflecting how the voices of Black women are often ignored or suppressed. Her singing becomes a call for help, expressing hope that someone will recognize her suffering and liberate her from both racial and gender oppression.

In contrast, the free bird in the fourth stanza represents White men, who enjoy gender as well as racial privilege. He flies freely even against strong winds, showing power and confidence that come from dominance in both gender and race hierarchies. He is ever ready to test the new winds and water which suggests new challenges. His access to “fat worms” symbolizes abundant resources and opportunities, which are historically reserved for privileged (White male) groups.

The image of “*sighing trees*” represents oppressed women—especially Black women—who silently witness their dreams being taken away due to both patriarchy and racism. Meanwhile, the free bird “claims the sky,” asserting dominance over the world, which reflects how White men move freely through society with control and authority.

Postcolonial study of the poem

Postcolonial feminism highlights how women resist oppression and express identity through literature. It is a theory that studies the condition of women in colonized and postcolonial societies.

In the paper “*Afro-American Feminism in Maya Angelou’s Poems: A Study of “Caged Bird” and “Phenomenal Woman”*” Rabiya Ahmad and Prof. Aejaz Mohammed Sheikh says about Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" (1983). It serves as a powerful metaphor for **Black feminism** by illustrating the intersectional oppression of race and gender. The bird in the cage, with “*clipped wings and tied feet*,” represents Black women restrained by systemic racism and patriarchy, who “*sings of freedom*” to protest their confinement. The poem asserts resistance and agency through this song, transforming fear into a demand for equality.

Reclaim of the Past

Frantz Fanon in his book “*The Wretched of the Earth*” (1961) says that colonized people lose their voice and identity under colonial rule. According to Fanon, the first step to freedom is: to reclaim one’s own past. In the poem, the bird in the cage sings of “*things unknown but longed for still*”. It sings even though it is trapped. This reflects the idea of the subaltern trying to speak

despite oppression. The song is a way of reclaiming female identity and existence.

Caged Bird as the “Other” with reference to Edward Said’s Orientalism

Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) argues that western culture created a way of thinking called Orientalism. Orientalism portrays the East (“Orient”) as inferior to the West, assumes Western superiority, and treats Eastern people as the “Other.”

Similarly, in the poem, the caged bird can be seen as the “Other,” while the free bird represents the dominant western group. The free bird enjoys power, freedom and control, whereas the caged bird faces restriction and oppression. This reflects how the dominant group assumes superiority and marginalizes the weaker group.

Said says the East exists in the Western imagination as a “*surrogate and underground self*.” This means that the West projects its hidden fears and negative qualities onto the East, such as cruelty, sensuality, laziness, and violence, while seeing itself as rational, civilized, and superior. In the same way, the caged bird (black women) is associated with fear, weakness and limitation (“*fearful trill*”) and also they seem to be less skilled, uneducated and uncivilized while the free bird (white men) is related with confidence and freedom, rationalism and intellectual thinking. The pain and suffering of the caged bird reflect how the dominant group (the white men) projects weakness and inferiority onto the “Other,” just as the West does to the East.

At the same time, Said explains that the East is shown as exotic, mystical, and seductive. It is seen as both dangerous and inferior, yet attractive and mysterious—this contradiction serves Western imagination. The song of the bird in the cage can be heard “*on the distant hill*,” making it both pitiful and powerful. The black women in those times were made slaves and cruelly treated by white men who considered themselves as more dominant and powerful. Like the East, the caged bird is both marginalized and symbolically important, creating a contradiction in how it is perceived.

Said states that the East is seen as homogeneous, anonymous masses with no individuality, controlled by emotions like lust, terror, and fury, and determined by race rather than personal identity. People are reduced to racial identity instead of being seen as individuals.

In the poem, the caged bird is not given any personal identity. It represents a whole oppressed group rather than an individual being. Its identity is shaped by confinement and suffering, not by its own choices. Like the “Orient,” it becomes a symbol of collective oppression rather than a unique individual.

A Cry for Help

The fifth stanza goes back to the tragic reality of the bird whose cage is described as the “*grave of dreams*,” meaning her hopes and ambitions are buried and can never be fulfilled. Even her shadow—representing her soul—screams for help, but the cries remain unheard, distant, and muffled. Like a person trapped in a nightmare, she struggles but cannot escape. Her wings are cut so deeply that even if the cage was opened, she would no longer remember how to fly. His wings are clipped—his dreams are shattered even before they are realized.

A woman has to face numerous challenges in life. She must rise above societal expectations and break free from the conventions, traditions, and stereotypes imposed by men and even by older women in society.

Still, she opens her throat to sing, believing that her voice might reach someone. Her song becomes an act of resistance—a final attempt to be seen, heard, and liberated.

In *Caged Bird*, repetition is effectively used through anaphora, especially the recurring use of “and” and the repetition of the third stanza as the last. This technique emphasizes the continuous and unending struggle of freedom, reflecting the persistent oppression of women and the broader experience of marginalized voices within a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

Through vivid imagery and symbolic contrast, “*Caged Bird*” exposes gender inequality. While the free bird (man) lives in confidence and control, the caged bird (woman) survives through pain, hope, and voice. The poem powerfully asserts that freedom is not equally distributed, and when physical movement is denied, voice becomes the only means of survival and protest.

The writings of Maya Angelou analyze the two-fold discrimination based on race and gender, showcasing how Black women were oppressed by both white society and patriarchal structures. The poem presents the woman as a subaltern figure whose voice, though suppressed by patriarchal power, finds expression through silent resistance. Like the caged bird, her song becomes a symbol of both suffering and the persistent desire to be heard and recognized.

The caged bird reflects Edward Said’s concept of the “Other.” It is marginalized, defined by limitation, deprived of individuality, and positioned against the dominant free bird. Through this, Maya Angelou highlights how power structures create and maintain the idea of the “Other,” especially in terms of race and inequality.

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