

Received-Makale Geliş Tarihi 15.10.2024
Published-Yayınlanma Tarihi 30.11.2024
Volume-Cilt (Issue-Sayı), ss/pp 11(113), 2158-2167

Research Article /Araştırma Makalesi
10.5281/zenodo.14222038

Doç. Dr. Yavuz Çelik

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0439-3302>

Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Faculty of Letters, Ankara / TÜRKİYE

ROR Id: <https://ror.org/05mskc574>

Symbolism of Freedom in Maya Angelou's poem "The Caged Bird" from Text to Context

Maya Angelo'nun "Kafesteki Kuş" Şiirinde Metinden Bağlama Özgürlüğün Sembolizmi

ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou, an African-American woman with a long writing career as an author, poet and civil rights activist, rose to fame with her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* published in 1969 and died at the age of 86 in 2014, only to be honoured by President Barack Obama with the Presidential Medal of Freedom four years before her death. Inspired by her fondness for freedom, Angelou's poem "The Caged Bird" depicts the theme of freedom with multifaceted symbolism, while the images of the caged bird and the free bird successfully reflect the complex dynamics of oppression and liberation. Angelou uses the contrasting lives of the caged bird and the free bird to symbolize the struggle of individuals marginalized by their characteristics against systemic constraints and their enduring hope for liberation. In this poem, Angelou explores the theme of freedom through two contrasting images, the caged bird and the free bird, using the former to represent those who face socio-political and personal obstacles, and the latter to embody the ideal of unrestricted self-expression and autonomy. This symbolic duality or contrast not only underscores the resilience of the human spirit, but she also calls for a broader reflection on the social changes needed to achieve true freedom. This article aims to analyse the poem's striking and remarkable metaphors, symbols, and thematic elements, regarding the poet's struggle for equality and civil rights. By placing Angelou's poetry in historical and contemporary contexts, this article underscores its enduring significance as a powerful critique of inequality and a poignant affirmation of the quest for freedom.

Keywords: Angelou, freedom, caged bird, free bird, symbolism

ÖZET

Yazar, şair ve sivil haklar aktivisti olarak uzun bir yazarlık kariyerine sahip Afro-Amerikalı bir kadın olan Maya Angelou, 1969 yılında yayımlanan *Bilirim Neden Şarkı Söyler Kafesteki Kuş* adlı otobiyografisiyle ün kazanmış ve 2014 yılında 86 yaşında hayatını kaybetmiş, ancak ölümünden dört yıl önce Başkan Barack Obama tarafından Başkanlık Özgürlük Madalyası ile onurlandırılmıştır. Angelou'nun özgürlüğe düşkünlüğünden esinlenerek yazdığı "The Caged Bird" (Kafesteki Kuş) şiiri özgürlük temasını çok yönlü bir sembolizm ile resmederken, kafesteki kuş ile özgür kuş imgeleri baskı ve özgürleşmenin karmaşık dinamiklerini başarıyla yansıtmaktadır. Angelou, kafesteki kuş ile özgür kuşun zıt yaşamlarını, bireysel özellikleri nedeniyle marjinalleştirilmiş bireylerin sistemik kısıtlamalara karşı mücadelelerini ve kurtuluşa yönelik kalıcı umutlarını sembolize etmek için kullanmaktadır. Angelou bu şiirinde özgürlük konusunu kafesteki kuş ve özgür şeklinde iki zıt imgeyle ele almakta; kafesteki kuşu sosyo-politik ve kişisel engellerle karşılaşanları temsil etmek, özgür kuşu da sınırsız kendini ifade etme ve özerklik idealini somutlaştırmak üzere kullanmaktadır. Bu sembolik ikilik ya da zıtlık, sadece insan ruhunun direncinin altını çizmekle kalmıyor, aynı zamanda gerçek özgürlüğe ulaşmak için gereken toplumsal değişimler üzerine daha geniş bir düşünme çağrısında bulunuyor. Bu makale, şiirin çarpıcı ve dikkat çekici metaforlarını, sembollerini ve tematik unsurlarını, şairin verdiği eşitlik ve sivil haklar mücadelesine de değinerek incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Angelou'nun şiirini tarihsel ve çağdaş bağlamlara yerleştiren bu makale, şiirin güçlü bir eşitsizlik eleştirisi ve özgürlük arayışının dokunaklı bir olumlaması olarak kalıcı öneminin altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Angelou, özgürlük, kafesteki kuş, özgür kuş, sembolizm.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and mid-19th century is accepted as the eventual outcome of the age of reason, privileging the mind, education and knowledge, beginning in the Continent with the rise of the Renaissance from the mid-15th to the early 17th century. Accumulation of scientific findings, human interpretations, geographical discoveries, migrations, and power struggles are usually accepted to have accelerated the progress into this seminal event. It can also be taken as signifying the onset of numerous changes in human societies, lives, discourses, tendencies, preferences, etc., especially with the increased colonial, imperial and material aspirations of the European states. Concomitant with the rise of such power-oriented movements in the West in particular, the growing inclination of ordinary people towards power, almost accepted as tantamount to possessing money and wealth, is, simply speaking, responsible for making people more interested in their physical world, appearances, houses, clothes, and so on, all of which are taken as manifestations of their economic power. This concise story of the development from the Renaissance as the rebirth of man to the Victorian Period as the turn of man to himself proves to be the reason for the increased gap between social classes and for the class distinction, overwhelmingly humiliating to the spirit of democracy and to human nature as created on an equal basis. “We talk about class like it’s always been a natural part of human life, but in fact we constructed it ourselves, based largely on what you do for work. Industrialization had a tremendous effect on work, and on class,” says Purintan (<https://www.oerproject.com>) to point to the relationship between the industrialized societies and class system in them. The growing need for human labour at factories and mines is another stimulus for another inhuman practice, which is slavery from the mid-18th to the late 19th century in particular. Slavery also means racial discrimination between the whites and blacks, based on the colour of their skins, since it is almost always the black-skinned Africans who are forced to work in the facilities owned by the white-skinned Europeans known as the colonizers of those lands. This creates a huge and unbridgeable gap and distance between civilization and colonization, says Aytan Er (2019, p. 59) in her study on Olympe de Gouges, a French playwright and political activist of the 19th century who is known her for support of women’s rights and abolitionism.

This change in social and individual life was quick to find an equivalent for itself in literary world. It was realism with its insistence on portraying anything as it really is without probing into its soul or inner world. Explicit realism of the 19th century, which rose also in reaction to the preceding Romanticism, sought to portray the visible realities in concrete and tangible words. Realism, understood as a faithful and non-distorted aesthetic reproduction of external phenomena as we perceive them, says Raffa, “can be considered a particular version of the old principle of mimesis.” (Villanueva, 1997, p. 5) Viewed from this perspective, it could be said that realism has always existed in literary artistic world as part of an attempt to portray the real life outside. What was called realism then as the new artistic and literary mode of the 1850s had indeed always existed and what was new with it was just its name accorded to it then. With this purpose in their minds, realist writers’ avoidance of expressing the deeper truths and emotions for the sake of pure realism and scientific objectivity and their turn to the social realities and events acquainted the readers with the victory of those who preferred the evil way over those who were away from devilish thoughts and actions. The states’ imperialist attitudes towards the underprivileged people of the colonised world, coupled with the writers’ works portraying the gap between the rich and the poor though accusatory of the means whereby the rich become richer at the expense of the poor getting poorer, could therefore be arguably blamed for the moral corruption and decadence towards the end of the 19th century in Europe in that they seemed to set the model for the evil-minded and/or inhumane winners in real life. Almost in the same way as the Roman Empire, which was troubled by “the agrarian dislocation, impoverishment of the peasant and political corruption” due to the “unequal distribution of property between the rich and poor” in the presence of its overseas expansion and acquisition of big wealth (Lintott, 1972, p. 626), found itself in a political turmoil and failure in the end, it could as well be said that the British Empire of the 19th century witnessed the creation of two different Englands, one the privileged rich and the other underprivileged poor, in the words of Disraeli who pronounced it in the sub-title of his thought-provoking thesis novel *Sybil* in the 1840s. Not surprisingly, this was quick to be followed by the era of corruption in almost every sense. Suffering from poor and wretched living conditions, the majority’s witness to the minority’s living conditions in wealth and health created both an atmosphere of pessimism from the 1870s on and an urge to get more and more of anything from money to pleasure whatever the means might be. This utilitarian instinct, coupled with the Machiavellian principles making the purpose or end sacred over the manner in which it is achieved, could be to blame for the diminished social bonds and integrity on one hand and increased selfishness and immorality on the other. Coloured or discoloured by all such social developments, it proved to be a new era marked by an air of appearance and physical glamour at the

expense of the soul and spiritual beauty. For example, Heffer entitles his book on the period from 1880 to 1914 *The Age of Decadence*, in which he says:

Swagger was the predominant style of the period... The pervasiveness of this mixture or opulence, arrogance and ornament and its ability to seduce explains why our conceptions of the age between 1880 and 1914 are rooted, still, so much more in myth than in reality. Swagger reflected the rise of imperial power, and the effects of that on the British psyche (Heffer, 2017, p. 3-4).

This book is also depicted by *The Times* as “a rich social history ... and a painfully relevant story about the dangerous decadence of traditionalism” (Heffer, 2017) in such a way as to imply that the last two decades of the 19th century bore witness to the collapse of traditional values normally held responsible for favouring the integrity, continuity and morality of the society and social life and regulating the individual roles, relations, styles and attitudes for this very purpose. Following the footsteps of the great cultural critic Jacques Barzun, says Douthat, decadence refers to “economic stagnation, institutional decay and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development” (2020). What Barzun (2001) means with the term ‘decadence’ is as follows:

The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable results. Boredom and fatigue are great historical forces. ... The decadent society is, by definition, a victim of its own success.

Under these circumstances, what is called Symbolism originated in France with the rejection of explicit realism of the 19th century and with an attempt to portray the deeper truths and emotions of men by using symbols and metaphors. Aiming to evoke the moods and ideas indirectly and implicitly, symbolists can be said to have drawn inspiration from Romanticism’s weight on emotion, imagination and individual experience. Like the Romantic poets of the early 1800s who offered an insight into the personal and mystical experiences of man, the symbolists of the late 19th century turned to expression of man’s inside. In this process, Charles Baudelaire was one of the pioneering French poets whose work “The Flowers of Evil” in 1857 is often quoted as a precursor to Symbolism. As could be understood from the title, this poem deals with the darker aspects of human experience through rich and evocative imagery. Another pivotal figure in the development of Symbolism was Stéphane Mallarmé, whose work “The Afternoon of a Faun” in 1876 was popularized for its innovation in using the language and exploring the abstract and elusive themes. Paul Verlaine was also influential on Symbolism through the musical quality and emotional depth of his poems, proving integral to Symbolist aesthetics. His work entitled “Songs without Words” and dated 1874, for example, set an example for the two important qualities of the movement; suggestiveness and mood.

With such a developmental background, the Symbolist movement was literally born on September 18, 1886, when Jean Moreas, a Greek poet living in Paris, published his manifesto on Symbolism in the literary supplement to *Le Figaro*. He and those who were engaged in artistic debates on Symbolism after him aligned themselves against Naturalism, advocating the artistic suggestiveness of ideas rather than description of appearances. Mallarmé, for example, hints at the essence of Symbolism briefly: “To name an object is largely to destroy poetic enjoyment, which comes from gradual divination. The ideal is to suggest the object. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes symbol.” (1956, p. 21) In 1899, however, French symbolism appeared to exert a weighty influence on European and especially English writers of the early 20th century through Arthur Symon’s book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. In it, he depicted the movement as a “revolt against exteriority, rhetoric and a materialistic tradition.” (1908, p. 9) Symbolism is thus marked by its representational quality, conveying deeper meanings through the symbols that serve to represent the ideas, concepts or items beyond their literal sense. Symbols also help to embody abstract ideas or themes as part of Symbolism’s emphasis on the representation of the abstract. As such, any symbol can have more than one meaning according to the context, perspective and personal experience of the writer and/ or reader. Mallarmé, a pioneering figure of Symbolism, says for example that he exiled the words “as” and “like” from his vocabulary, tending increasingly “to omit or at least to play down the interpretation and to leave the symbol virtually unexplained.” (Chadwick, 2018, p. 3). This strategy of symbolism naturally creates a multivalence which in turn enhances the depth of the text.

Even though Symbolism tended to decline and be replaced by Modernism in the first quarter of the 20th century, it could be said to have been influential on many artists, poets and writers through its exploration of the inner life, emphasis on personal perception, and innovative use of symbols and metaphors. Among those who were influenced by it in their treatment of their subjects was Maya Angelou, an Afro-African

woman poet (1928-2014) who seemed to have more in her mind and soul to say than she said in her poems. As she was a black woman in the white American society, her difficulties and sufferings were doubled there, being a black on one hand and a woman on the other. The harsher one's living conditions are, the stronger and sharper his or her words tend to be. This was almost the case with Angelou, too, and it was for this very reason that she turned to symbols and symbolic language in many of her poems to mean more than what she said in them, leaving it to the reader to find out the intended meaning. "The Caged Bird" is one of such poems, and as such it deserves a symbolic analysis both in textual and contextual terms. This paper is therefore intended to view and examine this poem with a focus on its main theme of freedom through the lens of Symbolism.

2. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM BASED ON THE SYMBOLS

Human life is made up of contrasts and opposites as well as similarities. This contrast may be between hot and cold or night and day or man and woman. One may be full of love one day and hatred the next day. Sometimes he is alone, and sometimes he is surrounded by people. Yet one of the sharpest of these contrasts is between freedom and captivity. While almost all the beauties of life are experienced in times of freedom, captivity is like a nightmare that overshadows and darkens all beauties. Winston Churchill, for example, says that all good things are so simple that they can be expressed in a single word, which is "freedom", and he follows it with the words of "justice", "honour", "duty", "compassion" and "hope". (Johnson and Demetriou, 2016, p. 168) One is sometimes imprisoned behind iron bars and sometimes in their inner world; one leads an isolated and imprisoned life sometimes on a deserted island and sometimes in a huge city. However, one thing is certain: A free person is more advantageous, lucky and powerful in almost every respect than a captive. This must be why the famous romantic thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau compares freedom and captivity with the following words: "I prefer freedom with danger than peace with slavery." (Adolf, 2009, p. 124). Like many other subjects, freedom and captivity are among what has attracted writers' and poets' attention. Angelou is one of such poets, who dramatically depicts the contrast between a free bird and a caged bird in her poem under analysis in the study.

Beginning the poem with the imagery of the "free bird" in the bosom of the wind, the speaker describes the unlimited possibilities of movement that freedom gives a bird. The bird is floating, jumping, hopping and descending with the support of the wind, a symbol that represents the unrestrained forces of nature as it is the natural force of the wind that makes it easy and practical for the bird to float in the air, relying on its winds. The wind, viewed from this perspective, can be taken as reflecting the liberty and comfort or ease which the privileged in free world enjoy. The bird seems to be moving with the current of the wind in such a way as to imply that its journey or flight is hindered by no troubles or barriers. Depiction of the "*orange sun rays*"¹ (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>) in the first stanza points to the pleasure and sense of fulfilment enjoyed by the bird flying in the air freely and smoothly. It also symbolizes the sense of warmth and splendour of freedom. Since the orange rays of the sun indicate the end of the day, the speaker may also be aiming to express how beautiful and enviable it is that the free bird can fly at any time of the day, even in the evening. The last line of the stanza "*and dares to claim the sky*" underscores its courage and self-reliance in entitling itself to conquer and possess the sky. The free bird is confident enough to dare to dominate the sky where it enjoys its freedom. And so it is in reality; wherever it can fly and roam freely belongs to it. The sky is vast both vertically and horizontally. To the speaker, the bird's ability to move freely and unrestrictedly from top to bottom and from right to left stems from its sense of freedom and invites it to show this audacity. On the other hand, the conjunction "*and*", which the speaker uses in the three lines of this stanza, may be suggestive of her implication that freedom has no limits, because this conjunction is used to connect ongoing actions, situations or events and thus emphasize continuity.

The speaker assigns the second stanza, beginning with the conjunction "*but*", to another bird. This time it is a bird in a cage, which stands in sharp contrast to the free bird in the air. The conjunction "*but*" used by the speaker at the beginning of the second stanza leads the reader to expect something different after the first part. And it is what happens. The freedom of the bird in the first stanza that can rule the sky is contrasted with the imprisonment of the bird confined to a narrow cage in the second. While the free bird leaps and jumps in the vast sky, the caged bird hobbles along in a cramped cage. Unlike the free bird that frolics in the sunlight, the caged bird can hardly even see the outside world, as it is surrounded by bars. The cage in which it is bound to live is symbolic of the obstacles and restrictions that stifle its dreams. Its confined

¹ From now on, all the quotes from the poem will be given in italicized form for the sake of clarity from the text available on the website of 'Poetry Foundation'.

situation in it symbolizes the death of its aspirations, abilities and potential capacities. Again, while the free bird can dive from top to bottom, up to the end of either the wind or the air current, the caged bird has to move and wander only within a maximum of one square meter of its narrow cage; in other words, it cannot even clasp its wings comfortably, let alone fly. Unlike the free bird, which can spread its wings as widely as it wants and soar as high as it pleases, the caged bird can only spread its wings as widely as the width of its cage, because it has obstacles, and its feet are tied and wings are restricted. Its “*clipped*” wings and “*tied*” feet illustrate the physical and metaphorical limitations of the caged bird. It is, in a sense, a systemic and planned restriction of the caged bird’s potentialities. In fact, God has given both birds wings to fly and feet to walk and move forward, creating the sky and the Earth for both of these actions. But the bird, placed in a man-made cage, is unable to use the organs and spaces God has given it and unfortunately it falls into the grip of a man-made captivity. The choice of simple but powerful words creates a sense of depression and claustrophobia in the reader. The euphoria and sense of freedom observed in the first stanza is replaced by a sense of boredom and being trapped in the second stanza, at the end of which perhaps the only thing the caged bird can do appears to be singing, which is alluded to in the poem by the word “*throat*”. Singing thus serves as a challenge to the outside world. It dares to make itself remembered and its existence felt by singing. It is symbolic of its resilience and desire for freedom, a cry for liberation, and even an act of disobedience to the one who wants it to be as it is in the cage. The bird seems to be captured by the desire for its sound to go wherever it cannot bodily go. Considering that sound is invisible and bodyless, it may be taken as its soul, meaning that those bars can only confine its body, not its soul.

In the third stanza, which can be regarded as the refrain of the poem as it is also the sixth, the speaker describes the song that the caged bird sings. Its voice is trembling with fear and anxiety; perhaps it is the fear of its words being heard, or the trembling of its soul rebelling against its own captive body. The bird sings the song of things it does not know, but even if it does not know, it is singing the song of something it has been longing and waiting for. As a matter of fact, most of the songs and poems are written and sung for the lost lover, for the lost love, for the vanished hope and for whatever cannot be owned or obtained, because poems and songs are often the cry of absence and want, of longing and waiting or searching for whatever has been lost. Even the song sung by the caged bird carries the melody of desire and longing for freedom. Its sound goes to distant hills where it cannot go physically. Its voice reaches those places that it cannot reach by flapping its wings and that it cannot see with its eyes. Here, the bird’s song is a clear indication of its ability to overcome the limits and obstacles imposed on it. As stated at the end of the stanza, the bird sings the song of freedom. For freedom is what it cannot have, or rather what it is not given.

Following this refrain, the speaker returns to the free bird. It dances with the winds; it chases the breezes, which bring peace and happiness and seem to be a portrayal of enjoyment, and it waits for the trade ships’ friend, the trade wind. The wind itself is a natural phenomenon that represents freedom. The wind knows no obstacles, and as such it is in a sense the fun of the outside world, because, as seen in the poem, it is largely the wind that gives the free bird that power in the air. The free bird, which sees itself as different and superior, is able to do this thanks to the wind and, of course, its unshackled wings. The free bird which is playing with the wind in the first stanza like two devoted lovers is in dream and search of “*fat worms*” here, symbolizing the abundance of resources and opportunities both for food and pleasure. The speaker evokes the continuity of this process with the word “*another*” in the phrase “*another breeze*”. The free bird openly declares that the sky, which it has already dared to dominate in the first stanza, is now its own. It is more than a bird now; it is a conqueror, a ruler, and an owner.

The speaker begins the fifth stanza with the conjunction “*but*” again and gives the hint that he will draw a world different from that of the free bird. While the free bird dreams of the winds and waits for them, the caged bird is crushed under its own dreams. While the caged bird says that its shadow is screaming a nightmare, the speaker claims that all that remains of its dreams is a scream, a nightmare. From another point of view, its shadow is able to get out of the cage thanks to the sunlight, and the fact that its shadow is outside while its body is inside hurts the caged bird, perhaps frightens it even if it does not, or cannot, express itself. The phrases “*nightmare scream*” and “*on the grave of dreams*” in the second stanza represent the haunting effects of oppression as well as the emotional and psychological trauma caused by the bird’s confinement in it. With these expressions, the speaker seems to consider every unrealized dream dead and draws a grave in his mind. Just as every dream is a hope and a cry for those whose freedom is taken away, the unfulfillment of these dreams is destruction and death. This may be because any hope, which revitalizes or rejuvenates its owner as long as it exists, digs a deeper grave of disappointment and torture for the owner if it fails to find a chance for realization.

The rest of the poem consists of the stanza presented above as a refrain. Again, the caged bird's feet are bound, and again its wings are clipped, but it still uses its throat to sing. Its song is again for the unknown but long-awaited and longed-for freedom; it is the song of freedom. Its sound and melody go far where it cannot go itself. The sound of the song, which expresses the fluttering of its soul, though not with the sound of wings as it flaps its wings, moves forward in the sky left without it and continues to live and keep hope alive. As a Chinese proverb that can be attributed to the poem analysed here says, "a bird sings not because it has an answer, but because it has a song." (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 261).

3. CONTEXTUAL SYMBOLISM OF THE POEM

Angelou's poem is based on two important symbols; one is the free bird as the symbol of freedom and opportunity, and the other is the caged bird as the symbol of confinement and restriction. Another important symbol in the poem is the song of the caged bird, serving as the representation of hope and struggle or resistance. Considering these three symbols as a whole, the poem proves to be a striking commentary on the social inequalities and injustices between those who have the privilege of freedom and ample opportunities and those who are deprived of them. Instead of saying this inhuman state explicitly and directly, the poet prefers to express herself and her views of this inhuman situation through a contrasting analogy between these two birds. In line with Mallarmé's above quote that poetic enjoyment is immensely destroyed when an object is named in a poem and it can be ideally secured with its suggestion, Angelou suggests the huge gap between freedom and captivity instead of saying directly that freedom is much better than captivity or imprisonment.

The strength of a symbol depends on its ability to arouse in the reader's or listener's mind the picture of whatever is described. This, in turn, depends on the reference to as many of their senses as possible through a work. This is usually accepted as the secret of the power of symbolic narrative. Viewed from this perspective, Angelou seems to appeal to her readers' sense of seeing by enabling them to visualize the state of both birds, one in the air and the other in the cage. There are several physical and visible references to the place where they are; for example, the phrases and/or words "*orange sun rays, sky, sighing trees, fat worms*" refer to the free bird's unrestricted domain, each inviting the readers to create a positive picture of the scene in their minds, while on the other hand the phrases and/or words "*cage, shadow, clipped wings, tied feet*" refer to the caged bird's restricted domain, each pushing the readers into the negative picture of the situation suffered by the caged bird. In addition, the poet Angelou manages to appeal to the readers' sense of hearing through the song of the caged bird. The depiction of the caged bird's singing "*with a fearful trill*" but "*heard on the distant hill*" creates the impression that the bird is captured by a sort of fear, thus singing its song in a hesitant and timid tone. On the other side of the symbolic comparison is the free bird, which thinks of nothing but another breeze and soft winds among the trees that give a sigh and which does not need to sing any song, but just declares itself to be the owner of the sky. Another sense appealed to by the poet is that of feeling, especially through the arousal of a depressive and claustrophobic feeling by means of the phrases such as "*grave of dreams, nightmare scream, bars of rage, clipped wings, tied feet*." Every time the caged bird flaps its wings to fly, it hits the bars of the cage and realizes again and again that it is in prison.

With the above textual interpretation of the poem through symbols and metaphors in mind, the contextual analysis could be made with reference to the cultural and social environment in which the poem was produced, the biography of the poet by whom it was written, the historical context of the poem and its critical reception. Given that the poet is a black Afro-American who spent a troubled, humiliated and outcast childhood in the presence of white American children at school and outside of her house, it would not be hard to imagine how wretched her life was then: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl," she says in her autobiography, "being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an insult." (Angelou, 2009, p. 6). She was only seven when she was even raped by the man that her mother loved within the confines of her house, for which she succumbed to the social pressure around and felt imprisoned in the society she lived in. She also felt marginalized after being pushed around. Therefore, the cage in the poem could as well be, on the one hand, the past in which she was subconsciously imprisoned by what others had done to her, but on the other hand it could also be a voluntary prison in which she entered to seek refuge in order not to be exposed to such brutal things again. Under the nightmarish effect of her memories, the poet seems to have put herself in the place of the caged bird. While she feels obliged to stay within her cage, or prison, her peers of white skin, which makes them – supposedly – superior to her and the members of her black colour in that society, are represented by the free bird that assumes itself to be owner of the whole sky, which is also the symbol of America as a

country where the white people live in better conditions than the blacks on the segregationist assumption and belief that the country is only the whites' while the blacks are just guests and/or foreigners.

This sense of racial exclusion is what Angelou witnessed and experienced in American society from her early age on. Considering the poet's African identity and the discriminatory and racist treatment of Africans in America, it could be argued that this cage is symbolically the part of American society where black people are required to keep themselves in isolation or captivity. The bars are the laws and rules, prohibitions and sanctions that restrict, stop and suppress coloured people, namely the blacks. Indeed, while the positive image painted in the first stanza, which appeals to the senses, represents the white race and the unlimited freedom granted to it, the pessimistic picture painted in the second stanza reflects the black race and the captivity it is deemed worthy of. The poet, instead of just portraying the living conditions of the caged bird, portrays it in contrast to those of the free bird, and invites the reader to compare and contrast the states of the two birds, thus aiming to create and even provoke an awareness among her readers. The poet also seems to be in an implied attempt to incite the readers to take action against the inequality and injustice between the two birds, not just feel pity for the caged bird. This is because freedom, if not given in natural and humane ways, should be obtained in defiance of those who prevent it from being given to others in accordance with the natural human rights.

Considering that the poet herself sang at clubs for a while and that the oppression of the white race on blacks was strongly felt at the time she did so, the poem seems autobiographical as far as the singing of the caged bird is concerned. "I talk about the black experience, but I always talk about the human condition - what we can endure, what we can dream about, what we can fail at and still survive." (Shapiro, 2009, p. 10) she says in one of her interviews against the common accusation on her that she writes just about the problems and sufferings of black people in American society. Although the whole poem here is a metaphor, this part in particular presents a slice of the poet's life. However, like any other modernist poet, Angelou, despite presenting a slice of her own life, reveals a general and universal situation that has been experienced for long years. In this case, the captive bird in the poem can be said to represent Angelou and African-Americans of her race who have been subjected to a similar treatment. Here the song represents the caged bird's hope for freedom and rights in the poem, which could be translated contextually into the poet's cry for freedom and equality on one hand and into her resilience and determination against the injustices and inequalities done to her and her natives on the other. As the blacks were deprived and denuded of almost all the chances and rights available to the whites in her social circles, they had no chance but to talk and/or sing of equality and freedom in the same way as the whites had. "Writing is an act of affirmation of female identity, a 'defence mechanism' to overcome suffering, and a giant step towards liberation," says Er (2022, p. 4) to point out the purpose of writing for women in particular. This is also what Angelou does all her life: She writes, rewrites and recreates the stories, experiences and emotions of women, black women in particular and all those who are made to feel humiliated and imprisoned. The word "*throat*" in the poem seems to have been deliberately chosen by the poet for this purpose, because the throat, or larynx, is known to be a very prominent organ in black-skinned artists. Especially in music, the expression 'black throat' refers to the powerful and impressive sounds attributed to black people. Jazz music, in particular, is a genre of music developed by blacks as a continuation of their own culture in defiance of whites and sung with powerful laryngeal movements. The songs that come out of this larynx signify the hope of the caged bird, because the song shows that the excitement in the soul is not over and that there is still something to say.

However, in such a metaphorical poem, the wind should undoubtedly have a function. At this point, the wind can be thought to be the institutions, traditions, rules, and all social and official regulations created and maintained by the white race to make their lives easier and more comfortable at the expense of dehumanizing the others, or the blacks. While the bars symbolize a closed place of confinement for the blacks, the wind represents a total freedom for the whites. On the other hand, the "*fat worms*" can be said to be evocative of the fattened people of capitalist society and the opportunities that make them fatter and fatter. In other words, commerce and profit, comfort and entertainment, food and fattening are described in this stanza as the three basic realities of the American dream.

Looking at the shadow as the speaker's subconscious, it could also be said to be the expression of her repressed identity. With this expression, the speaker, who pushes the boundaries with her mind and soul, reflects the repression of being a prisoner of the boundaries drawn for her with her body. She seems to be stuck between destruction and extinction. On the other hand, shadows only lengthen or shorten, depending on where the sun is, but their colours do not change. Although there is an apparent difference in whether people have a white or black skin, their visible shadows have no colour; moreover, the shadow of

everything and everyone is of the same colour. Despite this sameness, the troubles that the bird in the cage experiences or is forced to experience drag it into nightmares and screams. Because the free bird with a shadow of the same colour and size does not face such problems, this should be treated as an injustice, inequality and unfairness caused by human beings themselves.

Angelou, who uses as simple a language as possible in the poem, continues this simplicity in the contrast between ‘the free bird and the caged bird’ she places in the middle of the poem. Even for someone who does not know the poet, the poem describes the behaviour and lifestyle of those who are free and those who are oppressed. However, while the bird in the cage can be said to represent black people in America in a micro sense, since the poet is also black, in a macro sense, that is, from a more universal perspective, it can be said to reflect something about the lives of the repressed and restricted communities of the world all. For example, women in patriarchal societies who are confined to home by their fathers, brothers, lovers or husbands, and whose movements and living spaces are restricted; writers and artists in dictatorial societies who are denied the right to speak and express themselves through arbitrarily enacted laws and rules, penalties and sanctions, and even imprisoned for what they write and say; employees who are denied the chance to advance and prove themselves in their workplaces, and so on. In any corner of the world, it is possible to see a group that dreams of freedom and equality in the face of the owners of what they dream of. This list can be extended to small and large-scale environments. In fact, everyone who is exposed to similar situations is a bird in a cage. In this respect, the cage can be said to be the symbol of man-made laws and rules, institutions and organizations, traditions and ethical values, in short, every tool that can be used as an instrument of oppression. If the existence of these tools is applied to a certain group or segment of people rather than to everyone, as depicted in the poem, and another group enjoys freedom to the fullest, then at this stage, in addition to the violation of human rights and freedoms, human discrimination also comes into being.

“There is no greater pain than carrying an untold story inside you,” says Angelou (Mazhura, 2014, p. 32), in her first autobiography entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The fact that the bird has a story inside that it perhaps cannot tell others because it is not allowed to do so seems to force it to sing. This is her hope and in a sense her courage, because she knows that without courage, none of the beauties of life can be fully experienced. “Courage is the most important of all virtues; because without it you cannot fully fulfil the other virtues.” (Egan, 2009, p. 64) says Angelou about the place of valour in her life and indeed in human life. This courage of the caged bird, which in the poem represents black people in a narrow sense and the oppressed and restricted in a broader sense, also makes it hopeful. In this context, the poet indirectly says through his poem that surrendering to those who make conditions worse and impossible for you will mean that they have achieved their goal and this will make them happy, not you. Therefore, the importance of struggling without losing hope and courage, of being patient, of being able to say something in every situation and time is portrayed through the songs that this bird sings in a cramped cage that knows no distance or boundaries. When we look at Angelou’s life as a poet who says “You may face many defeats, but you must not be defeated” (Braxton, 1999, p. 154), it is possible to see in this poem a woman who fights hard to survive, who does not give up and who can do things that will be victorious after every defeat in the personification of the bird.

4. CONCLUSION

In her poem written with metaphorical fiction, Angelou makes the reader think about the injustices, destructive consequences and sufferings caused by the discrimination among people despite their sameness and similarities, and gives the following message: “We allow our own ignorance to rule over us and make us think that we can live alone as individuals, alone in groups, alone in parts, alone in races, and even alone in genders.” (Ross, 2010, p. 13). She emphasizes in this statement that this isolation is not true; if we want to live beautifully, peacefully and happily in the world, people of all groups and walks of life, races and genders must live in trust and solidarity. The only difference between a bird in flight and a bird in a cage is that one is outside and the other is inside. While God creates them on the same, equal and free basis, human beings imprison one of them and in a sense violate God’s justice and equality. The cage is man-made, whereby man aims to imprison a bird created with the same qualities and capabilities for his own pleasure, to use it for his own benefit, to close it for his own safety or to weaken it for his own power. Yet these two birds, which are alike in almost every sense, have their natural habitat in the sky and in nature. This is why both should be able to fly and flap their wings freely. As Jim Morrison, the American rock star who died young, put it, “The most important kind of freedom is to be what you really are.” (Hopkins, 2010, p. 177). A bird deserves to fly as a bird and be free in the infinity of the sky, not to be imprisoned in a cage for the pleasure of its owner’s eyes or ears or so that it does not cause problems for its owner. The sky is

enough for both of them, and for thousands of others like them. It is human beings who are not satisfied in this regard; human beings, who always want more and more, who grow darker the more they want, who have no pity or opportunity for anyone but themselves, who can deviate from equality, justice and honesty when it comes to their interests, gains, pleasures and tomorrows. In other words, even if the purpose of creation and the temperament of human beings are equal and the same, the stronger ones may resort to any means to protect, maintain and increase their power and prevent the weak from gaining power or sharing some of their power, when they are divided into two groups, such as strong and weak, in terms of their material means and physical environment.

Similarly, the only difference between blacks and whites is their skin colour and some physical characteristics. These two races, whose hearts, emotions, tears, pain, happiness and even death are all the same, should be able to live together like two different birds, because the world is so fertile, vast and large that not only these two races, but all races can live in peace and tranquillity, security and abundance. No one has the right to imprison, deprive or destroy another without just cause, so that he or she may have more space, wealth and freedom. As the American sociologist Du Bois put it, "Most people cannot conceive of a freedom that does not lead to the enslavement of another." (2004, p. 88), implying that one's unlimited and unconditional freedom is based on the idea of enslaving another. It is precisely at this point that one thinks that there must be a limit to freedom. Why? This is both because unlimited freedom tends to make someone else limited and restricted somewhere else and because in this process, when the adjective 'unlimited' is used to modify such nouns as 'power, money, pleasure, irresponsibility and selfishness', for example, in one's pursuit of them, he or she will have to prevent and/or limit the power, authority, position, etc. of another person or others. In other words, one person's limitlessness can mean violating and trampling on the limits of another one or others. It is for this reason that even freedom should be shared by all on equal and just terms.

In the poem, which is full of effective motifs and symbols, Angelou expresses the difficulties of racial segregation and isolation with all its nakedness through the use of repetitions, rhymes, symbolic expressions and figurative language. The poem, which is built on the contrast between the free bird and the caged bird, symbolically depicts the contrast between being free outside and being imprisoned inside through these two birds. The sharp contrast between the freedom and boundlessness of the world outside the cage and the limits and restrictions inside the cage determines both the atmosphere and the course of the poem. Despite the contrasting conditions in which these two birds find themselves, there is a unity in the poem. In terms of form, the first and fourth stanzas of the poem, which consists of six stanzas, describe the free bird; the second and fifth stanzas that immediately follow these stanzas begin with the conjunction 'but' and compare the caged bird with the free bird. The poet seems to have built his poem on this kind of balance in order to treat both birds equally and not to make them superior to each other. However, the third and sixth stanzas consist of the same lines repeated as a refrain possibly because of her intention of making the misery of the caged bird more apparent and visible to the readers.

All in all, in the presence of such discriminations and injustices between the caged bird and free bird, the only way for the former, symbolically standing for the black Americans of African descent, to gain respect and identity is pronounced as pursuing their rights and raise their voices, as Angelou did in her real life. The song sung by the caged bird represents exactly this sound that must be uttered. Staying silent in the face of injustice does not end injustice; on the contrary, it allows it to continue and even increase. That's why one must have a song to sing even in the most difficult situations. As black freedom fighter Martin Luther King said, "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The longing for freedom eventually reveals itself." (Jeffrey, 2006, p. 27).

REFERENCES

- Adolf, A. (2009). *Peace: A World History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Angelou, M. (2009). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House.
- Barzun, J. (2001). *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Braxton, J. M. (ed.). (1999). *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings; A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, C. (2018). *Symbolism*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Douthat, R. (2020). "The Age of Decadence", *The New York Times*, 7 February. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/opinion/sunday/western-society-decadence.html>)
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2004). *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Egan, J. (2009). *Maya Angelou: A Creative and Courageous Voice*. New York: Gareth Stevens.
- Er, A. (2019). "18. Yüzyılda Feminist ve İnsancı Olympe de Gouges'dan Kölelik Karşıtı Bir Oyun: *L'Esclavage Noirs, or L'Heureux Naufrage (Siyahların Köleliği ya da Uğurlu Gemi Kazası)*", In *Uluslararası 29 Ekim Bilimsel Araştırmalar Sempozyumu Tam Metin Kitabı*. Ed: M. Ü. Memiş & T. Nagiyeva. İzmir: İKSAD, 54-60.
- Er, A. (2022). "Başkaldırıdan Düş Kırıklığına; *Une Femme tout Simplement (Yalnızca Bir Kadın)*", In *Edebiyatta Kadın ve Başkaldırı*. Ed: A. Er & Y. Çelik. Ankara: Bilgin, 1-22.
- Heffer, S. (2017). *The Age of Decadence: Britain 1880 to 1914*. East Sussex: Gardners Books.
- Hopkins, J. (2010). *The Lizard King: The Essential Jim Morrison*. New Jersey: Plexus Publishing.
- Jeffrey, L. S. (2006). *Celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr., Day*. Berkeley: Enslow.
- Lintott, A. W. (1972). "Imperial Expansion and Moral Decline in the Roman Republic", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 21, H. 4 (4th Qtr), 626-638. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4435293>
- Mallarmé, S. (1956). *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*. Trans: B. Cook. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mazhura, M. (2014). *Navigating the Rapids and Waves of Life: 10 Lessons for Managing Emotions for Success*. Bloomington: Balboa Press.
- Oer project (n.d). *Class Structure*. <https://www.oerproject.com/-/media/WHP/PDF/Unit4/WHP-1750-4-1-3-Read---Class-Structure---610L.pdf>
- Poetry Foundation (n.d). *Caged Bird*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>
- Ross, K. (2010). *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Shapiro, M. & Cox, V. (2009). *Maya Angelou*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Symons, A. (1899). *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.
- Villanueva, D. (1997). *Theories of Literary Realism*. Trans. Ö. I. Sparisou & S. G. Castanon. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Wilkinson, J. M. (2010). *Poets on Teaching; A Sourcebook*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.