

ANALOGOUS AND DISPARATE READINGS OF MAYA ANGELOU'S "I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS" AND IMTIAZ DHARKAR'S "PURDAH."

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ABSTRACT

The comparison of Maya Angelou's Caged Bird and Imtiaz Dharkar's Purdah reveals the parallels and differences in how they address racism and discrimination. People of different races and cultures face a variety of forms of prejudice and discrimination. Imtiaz Dharkar has distinguished herself as one of the important female poets who have challenged the conventions of patriarchy vehemently as part of their strategies to grab the male space. Born and raised abroad, she was confident enough to oppose her community's orthodox nature in unequivocal terms. The title of the poem "Purdah" is very significant, literally. It denotes veil or cover but carries a deeper connotation; in fact, Purdah is a typical patriarchal machination that confines the women within the false sense of security and propriety. By using the Purdah as a metaphor, Dharkar suggests how certain norms' social and cultural structures are purposefully employed as tools of regimentation to serve a particular group of people's self-interest. Maya Angelou demonstrates something similar by utilizing the metaphor of a caged bird. She explains how racism and discrimination she experienced while living as an African-American influenced her. A comparative study of these two poems will help understand in more detail how discrimination and neglect brought on by a society affects a person.

Keywords: Purdah, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Imtiaz Dharkar, Maya Angelou, Patriarchy, Racism

Introduction

—I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings|| by Maya Angelou and —Purdah|| by Imtiaz Dharkar, which focus on the experiences of native people on the same platform and where they have had to fight racism and discrimination constantly, are compared to Survival in a Multicultural Society: A Comparative Study. —I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings|| (1970) by Maya Angelou and "Purdah" (1988) by Imtiaz Dharkar are two autobiographical writings that bridge two communities and cultures. Both Pakistan and America pride themselves on having multicultural societies where people of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds are treated equally and with respect. However, the reality in these nations refutes the notion that there

should be an equal place for all cultures. People of different races and cultures face a variety of forms of prejudice and discrimination. The American novelist and Black feminist Bell hooks describe the misery of being a member of the disadvantaged sector of a broader American community in the foreword of her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. "To be at the periphery is to be a part of the whole while being outside the main body," she asserts. In the next sentence, she elaborates on the plight of black Americans: —The train tracks in a small Kentucky hamlet served as a constant reminder of black people's marginalization. Paved streets, establishments we were unable to enter, eateries we were unable to use, and people we were unable to confront were all located across those tracks. We could work as prostitutes, janitors, or maids in the world across those tracks. We were able to travel there, but we were unable to live there. We had to constantly go back to the edge, to beyond the rails, to the shacks and abandoned homes on the outskirts of the city. Black women, who were at the bottom of the social scale, were among those marginalized.¶

These three marginalized women, who have long been forced to live on the periphery of the so-called 'Multicultural Society', are given voice by both Angelou and Dharkar. A comparison of Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* and Imtiaz Dharkar's *Purdah* reveals the parallels and differences in how they address racism and discrimination. Through Angelou, we learn a little bit about her mother Vivian and her grandmother, whom she refers to as Momma Henderson, in *Caged Bird*. Whereas *purdah* is only linked with Muslim women, it is nonetheless practiced and upheld in some segments of Indian culture today in the same spirit of social and cultural prescription. *Purdah*, however, has stronger sociocultural and socio-religious connotations for Muslim women, regardless of their level of education, social standing, or level of wealth or poverty. While growing up, Maya witnessed her family members being treated with contempt and humiliation on a regular basis, while also bearing the burden of racism and segregation herself. Imtiaz Dharkar has demonstrated her nuanced talent in exposing the *Purdah* System in her title poems and other related poems, in all its complexity of theme and style, thanks to her social and cultural development and lived experiences spanning three countries—Pakistan, England, and India. *Purdah*'s innate symbolism also finds its complexity and simplicity in an unfamiliar cultural context. Imtiaz and Maya have very different life stories. Imtiaz has courageously and honestly articulated her real experiences in her poetry. Her humanistic and feminist concerns, expressed via her suffering, sympathy, and protest, convey the message inaudibly, despite the fact that its thundering eruption is audible everywhere. This is the reason why her insurrection has made the orthodox religious guardians, cultural guardians, and pettifogging politicians flutter in their petticoats. Although Maya is black, she has been intensely aware of her marginalization as a black girl in a white world since she was a little child. She actually had a sincere childhood dream to turn into a white little girl. Little Maya is first seen at the church's Easter celebrations at the opening of *Caged Bird*. She invents a "cruel fairy stepmother" (Angelou 5) and a father who "must of been a Chinaman" (4) to explain to herself, more than anyone else, the true reason for her ugliness in an attempt to escape her ugly nature in the thin, lean, black body. By wearing the "lavender taffeta" dress on Easter, she will resemble "one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's fantasy of what was right with the world," (4) and she also predicts that the long-awaited transition will take place soon enough. She would like to be excused for her temporary ugliness, which she believes hasn't come to reside in her body permanently, until she is converted back to her real white self.

Discussion

Maya Angelou in her poem —I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings¹ states,

*“A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream
till the current ends and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky” (stanza 1)*

Here, she refers to nature. A free bird "leaps on the back of the wind," as she puts it. She talks about the bird flying against the fiery orange sky. The freedom to "claim the sky" belongs to the free bird. The reader is given a greater understanding of the natural beauty of the sky by the way she describes the "orange sun beams," and by the way she explains how the bird "dips his wing," the reader is given a greater understanding of the bird in his natural habitat, enjoying his freedom. However in the poem —Purdah² the writer states-

*“One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame.
She found it came quite naturally.
Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide...” (stanza 1)*

According to the lines above, a girl must wear a veil or purdah because once she reaches puberty; the world begins to view her as an object. For women, the veil turns into a haven where they feel protected from harm and rejection. As a girl is forced to act in accordance with social expectations rather than her own feelings, it is also a sign of oppression and alienation from oneself.

A girl wants her freedom much like the bird does. The ability to freely voice her ideas. Freedom to live in a society where others will support her in leading a self-sufficient life. Not a life that is dictated by social customs and beliefs. A girl yearns for her freedom since that is where she will find happiness, much like the bird who is thrilled to see its freedom.

In another stanza Maya Angelou says-

*“But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.” (stanza 2)*

The mood shifts abruptly and dramatically from one of contentment, satisfaction, and delight to one of gloom, unease, and even frustration. She says that this imprisoned leader "rarely sees through his chains of wrath." The imprisoned bird hardly ever even gets a peek of the sky, whereas the free bird may take in the entire sky. She asserts that "his feet are bound and his wings are cut." It is clear from text in her autobiography that Angelou experienced this

feeling frequently. She felt deprived of the freedom that ought to have been her birthright as a human. The speaker goes on to say that the bird "opens his throat to sing" for precisely these reasons. This was how the author herself felt. She expressed her desire for independence via writing, singing, and dancing. The same is felt from the lines in —Purdah—

“Purdah is a kind of safety. The body finds a place to hide.

The cloth fans out against the skin much like the earth that falls

on coffins after they put the dead men in.” (stanza 2)

It is true that veils were required in the early stages of various cultures because they protected women from harm during periods of upheaval and social unrest. We also can't fully ignore the reality that men also utilized the veil as a tactic to subjugate women. Religion has been utilized by the "Men of God" to justify their use of oppression, subordination, and alienation against women. The veil imprisons a woman's spirit, mind, and personal agency in addition to her physical body. When Dharkar writes the sentences above, she skillfully captures the oppression that is articulated deep within the woman's psyche.

Under a veil, a girl experiences oppression and confinement similar to how a bird does in its cage. The girl and the caged bird both receive very little opportunity to see the sky. She expresses her oppression, inferiority, and estrangement while feeling unhappy and even frustrated. A woman's spirit, body, and mind are imprisoned by a veil in a manner similar to how a bird is imprisoned by a cage.

Furthermore, Maya Angelou says,

“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.” (stanza 3)

The stanza switches back to the free bird, reinforcing to the readers the distinction between the free bird and the caged bird. A "free bird thinks of another wind," according to the author, so that he can take in the "sighing trees" and be left alone to find his own food. These sentences depict the bird's life as being more tedious and burdensome since it is unhappy with how it is being kept in a cage. The same is seen through the lines in —Purdah—

“But they make different angles in the light, their eyes aslant, a little sly. ...carefully carrying what we do not own: between the thighs, a sense of sin.” (stanza 3)

These lines serve as a reminder of how society treats women as objects. The sole purpose of a woman's existence should be to satisfy her family because she is only considered as a child-bearing machine used to satisfy the sexual wants of men. Even her sexuality is not her own, giving her no sense of self. Her body is his to own since he is the master; it belongs to the man she marries. Furthermore, the last paragraph paints a picture of a conservative society that is perpetually watchful and aware and that must impart to women the manners, decorum, and dignity that a lady in Purdah must uphold.

Similar to how a bird is kept in a cage for someone's amusement, a woman is treated like an object and her entire life revolves around her family's needs, oblivious to her own. For the benefit of others, the woman and the bird are both denied their freedom and happiness. They are led to believe that they are not deserving of their freedom. Both feel extremely sad and lonely as they find no hope for their freedom.

Maya Angelou says-

“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.” (stanza 4)

This line illustrates the truth of the imprisoned bird's existence. The phrase "fat worms sitting on a dawn light lawn" also suggests a predator/prey contrast. It would be the worms that would be terrified for their life, losing freedom as the birds feed upon such prey. The worms, as opposed to the caged bird, are the ones who are free in the situation when the bird is entrapped by a cage. The writer states the same in —Purdah—

“We sit still, letting the cloth grow a little closer to our skin.

A light filters inward

through our bodies' walls. Voices speak inside us,

echoing in the places we have just left.” (stanza 4)

Men think that a woman's sole responsibility is to look after her family. She has no identity of her own. She is not allowed to express her thoughts or stand up for herself. The poet contends that this is the fault of our society. Everyone knows in their hearts that they should help her, yet they all choose not to. The identity of a woman is oppressed by these social conventions. The women are kept behind purdah while the men enjoy their freedom.

When a woman was younger, she was not as constrained by laws and norms as she is today. She used to be able to express herself and enjoy life, but she is now unable to do so, much like the caged bird. The bird who once had the ability to soar through the air and enjoy life's pleasures is now restrained from enjoyment and is kept captive in a cage. Both the woman and the bird are dejected because the people in their immediate environment are to blame for their predicament.

The poet more states that-

“But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.” (stanza 5)

"Stands on the grave of dreams," said the bird. This expresses the author's emotions on her personal dreams. Because she was never allowed the freedom to do everything that her white peers were able to accomplish. She has lost so many ambitions. Her cage was made out of racism and discrimination, and despite singing, she felt that only those who were closest to her cage could hear what she had to say. This stanza's second line is not simply ominous but also unsettling. The bird's cries are described as "shouts on a nightmare scream" by the

speaker. The imprisoned bird's screams at this point are so dejected from his life in captivity that they sound like someone experiencing a nightmare. The author then repeats these lines:

“His wings are clipped and his feet are tied

So he opens his throat to sing.” (stanza 5, lines 3-4)

Reiterating the notion that the bird opens its beak to sing because it is unable to control its urge for independence and to express itself. Imtiaz Dharkar too states-

“She stands outside herself, sometimes in all four corners of a room.

Wherever she goes, she is always inching past herself,

as if she were a clod of earth and the roots as well, scratching for a hold

between the first and second rib.” (stanza 5)

The girl who uses purdah becomes accustomed to it. Purdah is decimated to a clod of earth, a dying tree whose roots desperately struggle to balance and withstand. Oppression is deep rooted in the psyche of women. She yearns for the good old days, when she was a child, unrestricted by purdah and able to live her life as she pleased. Despite this, she makes an attempt to restrain her emotions in the hopes that someday someone may be able to relate to them and help her.

Both the bird and the woman want to be heard. The bird yearns to be free and asks someone to set it free from its boring cage, which is preventing it from living. The bird feels as though its entire life will be spent in the cage, similar to how the lady feels while in purdah. Nobody can relate to the girl's situation. She, too, has given up on life and is still struggling to cope in this toxic environment.

In the last stanza, the poet states-

“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.” (stanza 6)

For the caged bird sings of freedom, the final sentence reads. With this, the speaker suggests that even though the confined bird might not have ever known freedom, he still sings about it since he was destined for it. This is comparable to the struggle experienced by African Americans in Maya Angelou's day. She believes that despite writing, singing, dancing, and crying out for the freedom, black Americans were only heard as a distant voice. However, they would continue to scream for freedom and equality despite this because they understood that they were meant for freedom. They would not give up until they were granted their human rights so that they might experience the freedom for which they were intended. The author of Purdah states-

“Passing constantly out of her own hands, into the corner of someone else's eyes . . . while the doors keep opening inward and again inward.” (stanza 6)

Women are unable to exercise their freedom due to purdah. The space of the woman is limited within her room. Purdah limits both her experience of life and her ability to see the world.

According to the poet, she sings for freedom. Even though she is currently concealed by Purdah, she is aware that she was destined for freedom. Although she is aware in her heart that this is not the life that is intended for her, she feels powerless to change it.

As much as the woman desires freedom, she feels helpless, much like the bird. They keep having dreams about a reality that is distinct from their own. Both of their broken hearts sing for liberation. They long for a life in which they are not confined and regarded as mere objects, held in service of others' desires. However, since they have no control, all they can do is cry out and live their current lives.

Conclusion

—I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a poem by Maya Angelou that relates to her life experiences. As an African-American in the 1900s, she experienced prejudice and discrimination. She describes herself as the trapped bird being held in a cage. This civilization has constructed a cage out of prejudice and discrimination. When she says that "the imprisoned bird sings for freedom," she is expressing how she feels. Maya Angelou seeks equality and freedom. She thinks that her cries are being heard, despite the fact that they are only a faint background noise. She believed that despite their struggle to get recognition African Americans were still heard as a distant voice. Despite the challenges in their way, they persisted in their battle for independence because they are aware that it is what they were supposed to have. The writer of —Purdah, Imtiaz Dharkar, mentions the similar struggle faced by a woman. Though she didn't mention facing racism, but she mentions discrimination faced by a woman in a male-dominant society. Imtiaz Dharkar penned the poem during a time when "male dominance" was prevalent in society. In other words, men were treated better than women in a culture. A girl is kept under a purdah or veil as soon as she reaches a particular age, according to the poet. The way they acted was rationalized by the society as "protection" for women against abuse and rejection. Women are treated as objects by society, who imposes rigid guidelines on how they should behave. The poem illustrates the oppression and alienation a woman experiences as a result of society's rules. Contrarily, a guy doesn't have to follow as many restrictions; this illustrates inequality and prejudice. Both poems, "Purdah" by Imtiaz Dharkar and "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou, discuss a similar problem that they encountered as children growing up in a society. They both experienced oppression, inequity, and discrimination. In other words, a person suffers from the effects of racism, prejudice, or oppression that is imposed by society. A person experiences feelings of despair, loneliness, and depression as a result. A person could experience a sense of loss and hopelessness as a result of this social rejection. It is challenging and tough to live in a society that is judgmental and repressive, and it has a detrimental effect on anyone's mind. When one rejects the rules and traditions of a culture, everyone in that society despises them because they are unwilling to accept any change. As a result, people experience discrimination and loneliness.

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