

## Marxist Perspective In “Caged Bird” By Maya Angelou

I Made Satria Bayu Temaja<sup>1\*</sup>, Novita Mulyana<sup>2</sup>, I Nyoman Tri Ediwan<sup>3</sup>, Gek Wulan  
Novi Utami<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Faculty of Humanity, Udayana University

Alamat: Jl. Raya Kampus Unud, Jimbaran, Kec. Kuta Sel., Kabupaten Badung, Bali

Korespondensi penulis: [satriabayu49@gmail.com](mailto:satriabayu49@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Literature and social life have a close relationship. Many writers express ambiguous emotions when observing their surroundings. Society is a mixture of the upper and lower classes. Due to the imbalance of wealth, the lower classes often experience different fates in life, while the upper classes enjoy the benefits. Karl Marx has pointed out this social injustice in his theory. This research is an attempts to find elements of Marxism related to social inequalities in the poem "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou. This study uses the text analysis method through the lens of Karl Marx's propositions about the behavior of the lower or marginalized social class in facing the severity of life. This research is a qualitative research that uses descriptive text analysis methods to explore the social and economic dimensions hidden in the text. In this study, Using a Marxist approach, this research seeks to uncover the layers of meaning contained in each line of the poem, highlighting the sharp contrast between the upper class and the marginalized class. Thus, this view states that how economic forces create inequalities and make life difficult for the lower classes. The poem challenges readers to consider the impact of the social class system on individual lives and raises awareness of the desire for social justice.*

**Keywords:** Caged Bird, Marxist, Poem, Social Inequalities

### Abstrak

Sastra dan kehidupan sosial memiliki hubungan yang erat. Banyak penulis mengekspresikan emosi yang ambigu ketika mengamati lingkungan mereka. Masyarakat adalah campuran dari kelas atas dan kelas bawah. Karena ketidakseimbangan kekayaan, kelas bawah sering mengalami nasib yang berbeda dalam hidup, sementara kelas atas menikmati keuntungan. Karl Marx telah menunjukkan ketidakadilan sosial ini dalam teorinya. Penelitian ini merupakan upaya untuk menemukan elemen-elemen Marxisme yang berkaitan dengan ketidakadilan sosial dalam puisi "Caged Bird" karya Maya Angelou. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode analisis teks melalui lensa proposisi Karl Marx tentang perilaku kelas sosial bawah atau terpinggirkan dalam menghadapi kerasnya kehidupan. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif yang menggunakan metode analisis teks deskriptif untuk menggali dimensi sosial dan ekonomi yang tersembunyi di dalam teks. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan Marxis, penelitian ini berusaha mengungkap lapisan-lapisan makna yang terkandung dalam setiap baris puisi tersebut, dengan menyoroti kontras yang tajam antara kelas atas dan kelas yang terpinggirkan. Dengan demikian, pandangan ini menyatakan bahwa bagaimana kekuatan ekonomi menciptakan ketidaksetaraan dan mempersulit kehidupan kelas bawah. Puisi ini menantang pembaca untuk mempertimbangkan dampak dari sistem kelas sosial terhadap kehidupan individu dan meningkatkan kesadaran akan keinginan untuk mendapatkan keadilan sosial.

**Kata kunci:** Caged Bird, Marxist, Puisi, Kesenjangan Sosial

## **LATAR BELAKANG**

Literature and social life have a close relationship. Many writers express ambiguous emotions when observing their surroundings. As noted by Peck and Coyle (Peck & Coyle, 1993) in *Terminology and Literary Criticism*, "The sociology of literature emphasizes literature as an important tool to convey a message to society about the reality of those around them."

Society is a mixture of the upper class and the lower class. Due to the imbalance of wealth, the lower class often experiences different fates in life, while the upper class enjoys advantages. This difference in fate makes the lower class oppressed and limited in realizing its desires. Research has shown that social class can influence individuals' perceptions of their own abilities and opportunities, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies of limited potential (Sewell & Shah, 1968). Class distinctions and injustices create inequalities that lead to class struggle, with negative impacts especially on the survival of the lower classes. It gives license for the dominant upper class to oppress and exploit their subordinates as they see fit. Karl Marx, as an opponent of this inhumane act, put forward the idea of a fair distribution of wealth in society, hoping to create justice and transform society into heaven on earth. Marxism is a social and economic theory that argues that the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is the driving force behind historical change (Marx & Engels, 1976).

Art, as articulated by (Marx & Engels, 1976), serves not only as an inspirational tool but also as a practical means to awaken collective consciousness in revolution. It provides an expressive outlet that can mobilize masses to act collectively in pursuit of substantial social change. These ideas form a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how art and literature can be mobilizing forces in revolutionary movements. Furthermore, the theory of intersectionality introduced by (Crenshaw, 1991) highlights the complexity of marginalization. Individuals experience oppression due to the interaction of various forms like class, race, and gender. This concept illustrates how intersections of different identities can shape unique experiences of structural oppression.

(Bourdieu, 1998) highlights that symbolic violence from social class domination can influence an individual's cultural capital and social mobility subtly. This underscores that despite being invisible to the naked eye, class power structures can shape and limit an individual's potential in society. Exploring the intersection of poetry and Marxism, as exemplified by (Hall, 1992), provides a profound insight into the complex relationships between culture, history, and power. Through this lens, we can examine how art, in this case

poetry, not only reflects socio-political realities but also actively contributes to shaping narratives of change and resistance.

Many writers reflect social class inequality through their works. Among them, a female literary author, Maya Angelou, is an American memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist. The poem discussed here is Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird," which is part of the autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," published in 1969. It is one of Maya Angelou's most famous and influential works. The basic motive behind this poem is to highlight social inequality and also celebrate the strength and courage to express their aspirations and desire to seek freedom. Terry Eagleton states that "Maya Angelou's 'Caged Bird' is a poignant illustration of how Marxism can be used to analyze the social and economic conditions that shape human existence. The poem highlights the struggle for freedom and the constraints imposed by societal norms and expectations, which are reminiscent of the Marxist concept of false consciousness" (Eagleton, 1983). Slavoj Žižek also argues that "the 'Caged Bird' by Maya Angelou is a striking representation of the Marxist notion of the 'false promise of freedom.' The bird's desire to fly and its inability to do so due to the cage it is trapped in mirrors the way in which capitalism promises freedom but ultimately confines individuals within its structures" (Žižek, 2008). This study aims to look at society through a literary lens by considering a Marxist perspective, especially regarding class conflict and inequality reflected in Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" (Angelou, 2023).

## **METODE PENELITIAN**

The sample taken for analysis and discussion comes from the poem "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou. As one of the first female American literary figures of the contemporary American literature period, her major works include themes of social class inequality, oppression, and racism. Therefore, it is necessary to explore these themes further. This poem was accessed at url: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird> on December 22, 2023

In this study, the researcher adopts a qualitative approach to explore the meaning and deeper understanding of the Marxist perspective that appears in the stanzas in the poem "Caged Bird" written by Maya Angelou. (Creswell, 2017) defines qualitative approach as a research method that focuses on understanding the meaning and experiences of individuals or groups through the collection of rich and in-depth data. The data is collected and analyzed in

the form of texts, the discussion section and conclusions are drawn from the researcher's background knowledge and personal views on the issues that arise in the research context.

## **HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN**

The researcher focuses on analyzing the poem "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou. The poem consists of six profound and meaningful stanzas, and the research was conducted using a Marxist perspective to explore the social and economic dimensions hidden in the text. In this study, the data recovered from each stanza provides a strong foundation for understanding the meaning of the poem. Using a Marxist approach, this research attempts to uncover the layers of meaning in each line of the poem, highlight the sharp contrast between the upper class and the marginalized.

1<sup>st</sup> Stanza:

“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.”

Analysis:

The first stanza of the poem provides an image of the freedom and beauty of life possessed by free birds. In analyzing the Marxist perspective, the researcher sees it as a representation of a higher social class or *privilegia* that enjoys greater economic freedom and power.

The image of the bird "leaping on the back of the wind" depicts the mobility and freedom of movement possessed by the higher classes. Researchers can interpret this as a symbol of economic freedom that allows them to pursue opportunities and gain advantages in society.

When the bird "floats downstream till the current ends," this can be interpreted as the ability to keep up with economic and social currents, reflecting flexibility and excellence in responding to environmental changes.

The depiction of the bird "dips his wing in the orange sun rays" shows the wealth and prosperity that the higher classes can enjoy. The orange color and the sun rays create an image of beauty and warmth, suggesting prosperity and a colorful life for them.

The words "dares to claim the sky" suggest that the bird has the dare to rule or claim everything. In the context of Marxist analysis, this can be interpreted as an act of claiming rights and powers that belong to a higher social class in the structure of society.

As such, the first stanza creates a strong image of inequality and class difference, showing how certain groups have greater access to economic freedom and power compared to others.

2<sup>nd</sup> Stanza:

“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.”

Analysis:

The second stanza of the poem provides a contrasting image to the first. In this stanza, we see a shift in focus from freedom to restriction, and it provides an opportunity to further analyze class dynamics and inequality.

The researcher sees the image of the bird "stalks down his narrow cage" as a symbol of a lower or marginalized social class. The words "narrow cage" highlights the restrictions and limited space experienced by the bird. In the context of Marxism, we relate this to the disadvantaged classes, who are trapped in social structures that limit their access to freedom and wealth.

When the researcher sees that the bird "can seldom see through his bars of rage," her interpretation highlights the discontent and anger that a marginalized class might feel. The "bars of rage" can be considered a symbol of social structures that constrain and limit the potential of individuals and groups.

The bird's physical condition that "his wings are clipped and his feet are tied" depicts a literal limitation and inhibition of movement. In the context of Marxist analysis, it reflects the inability of disadvantaged classes to reach their full potential due to economic and social restrictions imposed by higher classes.

However, the researcher found an interesting element at the end of the stanza, which is that despite the bird's restrictions, he still "opens his throat to sing." This can be interpreted as a form of resistance and self-expression from the marginalized class, who despite being

physically and economically limited, still have the ability to express their aspirations and desires.

As such, the second stanza continues the narrative of class inequality and economic restriction, but also includes elements of resistance and courage in the form of self-expression that remains available despite difficult conditions.

3<sup>rd</sup> Stanza:

“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.”

Analysis:

“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.”

The third stanza of the poem provides images that continue to reinforce the contrast between freedom and restriction, presenting the emotional and aspirational dimensions of a marginalized class.

In analyzing the Marxist perspective, the researcher sees that the image of the "caged bird" singing with a "fearful trill" reflects the uncertainty and fear faced by the marginalized class. The fearful trill can be interpreted as an expression of a difficult emotional state, due to the restrictions and inequalities experienced.

The words "of things unknown but longed for still" create an aspirational feel, highlighting the desire of the marginalized class for things unknown but longed for still. It creates a sense that despite being confined, there are hopes and dreams still alive in their hearts.

When the researcher notices that "his tune is heard on the distant hill," this suggests that the caged bird's voice reaches a great distance. In the context of Marxist analysis, this can be interpreted as the efforts of a marginalized class to make their voices heard and understood, even if it has to be from a distance.

It is important to note that "for the caged bird sings of freedom" is a prominent line in this stanza. It depicts that, despite being caged, the bird sings a song of freedom. This can be

interpreted as an attempt by the marginalized class to maintain their dignity and express their desire for social justice and freedom.

As such, the third stanza not only depicts the emotional state of the marginalized class, but also shows their desire and courage to remain hopeful and strive towards freedom.

4<sup>th</sup> Stanza:

“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.”

Analysis:

The fourth stanza of the poem provides a contrasting image between a free bird and a caged bird, highlighting social class differences from a Marxist perspective.

The repeated use of the word "and" forms a series of abundant images, creating an image of a comfortable and enjoyable life for the free bird. "The free bird thinks of another breeze" depicts the freedom of thought and mobility of the ruling class.

The descriptions of "trade winds soft through the sighing trees" and "the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn" emphasize the richness and luxury of nature accessible to freebirds. These words create an image of a comfortable and well-off life, depicting the rights and benefits that belong to a higher social class.

The statement "and he names the sky his own" highlights the higher class' dominance and ownership over nature, reinforcing social class inequality. As such, the stanza depicts a life of prosperity and freedom for the powerful bird, emphasizing class differences and inequalities in the structure of society.

5<sup>th</sup> Stanza:

“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.”

Analysis:

The fifth stanza of the poem provides images that continue to explore the themes of deprivation and resistance, deepening the understanding of the reality of the marginalized class.

In analyzing the Marxist perspective, we see that the image of the "caged bird" standing on the "grave of dreams" creates an image of sadness and loss. "Grave of dreams" can be interpreted as a symbol of buried and unfulfilled hopes and aspirations, referring to the restrictions and inequalities that hinder the marginalized class.

The words "his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream" create a tense atmosphere, suggesting the difficult emotional state experienced by caged birds. "Nightmare scream" can be interpreted as an expression of fear and despair experienced by the disadvantaged class.

In this section, we see the physical repetition of the bird's previous condition, with "his wings are clipped and his feet are tied." This reinforces the image of continued incapacity and restriction for the marginalized class.

Yet, despite its confinement, the bird "opens its throat to sing," emphasizing the theme of resilience and resistance. This action creates a strong contrast to the difficult physical and emotional circumstances, highlighting the desire for expression and maintaining dignity despite the difficult situation.

As such, the fifth stanza deepens the theme of resistance and courage of the marginalized class. The poem is not only explores class inequality, but also makes room for individual empowerment and strength in the face of limitations imposed by social and economic structures.

6th Stanza:

“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.”



#### Analysis:

The sixth stanza of the poem repeats the image of the caged bird and sings with a sense of fear, emphasizing inequality and the continuing class struggle. In the context of Marxist analysis, this repetition emphasizes persistent class inequality.

In "The caged bird sings with a fearful trill," the caged bird's voice is colored by constant fear. This repetition highlights an emotional state that remains unchanged, depicting the pressure and concern that the lower class continues to feel.

Despite the repetition of "for the caged bird sings of freedom," this phrase emphasizes that, despite the limitations, the voice of the caged bird continues to voice the aspirations of freedom. This repetition shows the persistent desire of the lower class to break free from social restrictions and inequalities.

As such, the sixth stanza provides a brief yet powerful overview of the persistent class divide, deepening the theme of the poem from a Marxist perspective.

#### **KESIMPULAN DAN SARAN**

Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" clearly shows the class divide in society through analysis from a Marxist perspective. The poem contrasts the life of a free bird with a caged bird, thus creating a contrast between the higher social classes and the lower ones. By describing the freedom, wealth, and power that free birds have in the first stanza, the author illustrates the dominance of the upper class in the social structure. The following sections create a contrast by depicting a marginalized class restricted by physical and economic limitations. Nevertheless, the caged bird still expresses freedom and longing in its chirping. This shows the resilience and courage of the underprivileged in facing difficult situations. Overall, "Caged Bird" is a powerful metaphor for class differences in society, showing how economic forces create inequalities and make life difficult for the lower classes. The poem challenges readers to consider the impact of the social class system on individual lives and raises awareness of the desire for social justice.

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