

CRITICIZING FEMINISM PORTRAYED IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SING* THROUGH MINORITY FEMINIST CRITICISM

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Abstrak

Karya sastra merupakan salah satu media tulis yang dapat menjadi wadah mengekspresikan ide, pemikiran, imajinasi, dan bahkan karya sastra dapat menjadi refleksi dari suatu sejarah, budaya, dan masyarakat tertentu pada suatu era. Tujuan dari penulisan artikel ini adalah untuk mengkritisi dan menganalisis bagaimana karya sastra dalam bentuk puisi menggambarkan dan merefleksikan sejarah diskriminasi terhadap kaum perempuan terutama kaum perempuan kulit hitam. Artikel ini juga mengkritisi tentang bagaimana diskriminasi terhadap kaum perempuan kulit hitam menstimulasi munculnya feminisme kesustraan African American. Puisi dari Maya Angelou yang dikritisi dalam artikel ini mencerminkan bagaimana fenomena diskriminasi terhadap kaum perempuan kulit hitam ditentang dalam bentuk feminisme oleh penulis puisi tersebut. Sejalan dengan isu feminisme yang menjadi tema dalam puisi, artikel ini mengkritisi fenomena tersebut melalui sudut pandang Minority Feminist Criticism. Minority Feminist Criticism adalah suatu kritik sastra yang menganalisis isu feminisme yang terjadi karena adanya diskriminasi terhadap kaum perempuan yang menjadi kaum minoritas dalam suatu masyarakat tertentu. Artikel ini diharapkan mampu memberi pengetahuan tentang sejarah munculnya era feminisme dalam kesusastraan, jenis-jenis feminisme itu sendiri, dan bagaimana kritik feminisme di aplikasikan dalam analisis karya sastra.

Kata kunci : *criticizing, Feminism, poem, minority feminist criticism*

I. Introduction

Literature has been produced by human even before the twentieth century. Literature in Britain preceded by Old English Period in the fifth century, followed by some other periods which were Middle English Period, Renaissance, Augustan Age, Romantic Period, Victorian Age, Modernism, and ended by Post Modernism in 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, the period for American literature started from Colonial or Puritan

Age in seventeen century until eighteen century, followed by some other periods; Romantic Period, Realism and Naturalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism in 1960s and 1970s. Literature has become such kind of tool for people to express their thoughts and feeling, imagination, and also as a media to reflect the authors' personal life experience. Furthermore, literature can also be the representation of the portrayal of how people in certain society live, interact, and communicate since literature can

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reflect the society and culture by the time the literary works written. Literature itself has some major genres.

Major genres of literature in the past divided into three main genres; *epic*, *drama*, and *poetry*. Following the development of literature the epic was significantly replaced by *novel*. Klarer (1999:9) states “among the various attempts to classify literature into genres, the triad *epic*, *drama*, and *poetry* has proved to be the common in modern literary criticism”. The recent classification refers to *fiction*, *drama*, and *poetry*”. The fiction genre having some parts such as novel, but previously people knew *epics* as the oldest text of literary history. Other than novel, the genre of fiction has *romance* as the trigger for the appearance of novel. The *short story* and *novella* or *novelette* then completed the genre of fiction. Relating to genre of literature, poetry as the second genre was the oldest among others. Klarer (1999:28) states, “poetry is one of the oldest genre in literary history”. Poetry divided into two major categories; *narrative poetry* and *lyric poetry*. Meanwhile, the last genre was drama and some categories of it were *mystery*, *miracle plays*, *tragedy*, *comedy*, *heroic drama* and *closet drama*. The three major genres in literature having some intrinsic elements such as; character, theme, plot, symbol, tone and setting. One of the intrinsic

elements which is character; can be in some categories and types.

Character is a depiction of one or some people in literary works. Character presents someone told in the literary works with certain personality, attitude, and habit. According to Jannidis (2010:7), character is fictive persons or fictional analoga to human beings. Character can reflect an author’s personal life but a character can also represents the common stereotype of people who live in one kind of society as the background of the story. Character signifies the plot of the story since the readers can have the ideas of the story’s theme based on how characters communicate to each other. Characters can be as protagonist and antagonist, main and minor character, static and round character. Character commonly found in novel, prose and short story. Meanwhile, character depicted in a poem commonly called as *speaker*. As stated previously, character in the novel, prose and short story can be the mirror of the authors themselves. In addition, *speaker* in a poem, can be the representation of the poet himself or herself. Some writers like to portray their own personal life and experience through their works.

Maya Angelou is one of African American writers who often depicts her personal life in her works and argue her stance toward discrimination and racism

upon black people in America. She is also a poet, an editor, a dancer and human activist. She often criticizes racism through her works. Racism always becomes the issue which never being stopped to be discussed in America since this country has been inhabited by a lot of immigrants from African countries and other countries. A lot of racist Whites showing their rejection upon black community. Male, female, adults and children become the victims of this cruel action. Racism itself still exists and a lot of black people still complaining to the uncomfortable treatment they receive from racist Whites. Feagin (2014:167) states, "being black in U.S. society means always having to be prepared for antiblack actions by whites – in most places and at many times of the day, week, month, or year. Being black means living with various types of racial discrimination and their often severe impacts, from cradle to grave. This *lifetime* reality is also true for most other Americans of color". As an African American woman writer, Maya Angelou willing to inspire black people to be survive in their life. Generally, some of her works reflect how people live under racism and specifically in some of her poems she tells about the portrayal of black women who were being discriminated. Even, her own experience living in racist community depicted in some of her poems. Sickles (2010:19) states, "her writing depicts the

realities of racism and the ways the African-American community has resisted and overcome oppression". Furthermore, Sickles (2010:19) explains, "Angelou often focuses on the theme of motherhood and the relationship among African-American women. By depicting her personal history, and her many roles and identities, Angelou reconstructs the image of the black woman and depicts the multiple layers of oppression, survival, and freedom". Maya Angelou portrays how women in that era being survive in unfair condition because of racism and discrimination.

Some of Maya Angelou's works which reflect black women's life and how they struggle upon racism and oppression have claimed her as one of the feminist black writers. Sickles (2010:19) states, "her writing depicts the realities of racism and the ways the African-American community has resisted and overcome oppression. She issues feminism through her works by protesting to the unequal treatment toward black women, to the unequal chance for black women to have education, good living care, social services and other things in daily life. Maya Angelou struggles for black women in order not to be excluded from society. Sickles (2010:19) states, "as the autobiographies chart her development as a woman, a major theme that arises is the independence, strength, and survival of

African American women“. Feminism is sharply issued in some of her works. One of her popular works which made her won the critical and popular acclaim is a poem entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing*. This poem protesting racism upon Black women through feminism issue. Feminism is the effort to look for the equality for women in the attempt to avoid women to be exploited by dominant patriarchy ideology, to have rights to express ideas and thoughts, to be claimed as part of society and not being segregated in the society. According to Humm (1990:74) in Permatasari (2016:154), feminism incorporates both doctrines of equal rights of women (the organized movement to attain women’s right) and an ideology of social transformation which aims to create a world for women beyond simple social equality. In addition, Davies (1996:62) in Permatasari (2016:154) states, “feminism is women’s assertion of their equality with men and their demand for access to those roles and positions of public life traditionally regarded as the province of men”. From previous explanation comes the essence of feminism as the effort of finding the equality for women.

Relating to feminism issued by Maya Angelou in her poem, Feminism approach is suitable to criticize the content of the poem. Feminism approach is the approach in literature which analyzes some issues

related to gender equality, relationship among men and women, women and women, women’s position in society, violation toward women, oppression, repression and segregation toward women. Feminism depicted in a short story is analyzed through this approach by focusing on the characters, especially female character in the story. Meanwhile, feminism depicted in a poem is analyzed by focusing on the speaker of the poem. Speaker is the term in poetry who tells the story in the poem. The speaker in the poem can be in the form of first person narrator. This article will elaborates more on how Maya Angelou as the speaker in her poem reflects her personal life through feminism issue.

II. Discussion

1. Feminism

Feminism is the issue relates to the attempt to seek for women equality. Patriarchy ideology which put women in secondary position and become the victim of mentally and physically violation and exploitation becomes the main reason for feminism to be a breakthrough in 1960s. Along with the Civil Rights Movement which appeared in 1960s, feminism become a breakthrough in that era. Feagin (2014:144) states, “the 1960s Civil Rights Movement brought a renewed emphasis among black intellectuals and activists on

the institutional contexts of individual discrimination". Some activists and intellectuals showing their participation in the effort to fight against the discrimination of human rights, one form of it is racism toward black people. Meanwhile, as some intellectuals of black people supported themselves with knowledge, skill and networking, some of them transformed into some feminism activists.

Ratna (2005:588) in Permatasari (2016:154) state that feminism is the concept of generalization of women. A critical of social theory which have the purpose to obtain human rights. Meanwhile, according to Humm (1990:74) in Permatasari (2016:154), feminism incorporates both doctrines of equal rights of women (the organized movements to attain women's rights) and an ideology of social transformation which aims to create a world for women beyond simple social equality. Feminism inspired by some phenomenons that women in the beginning of nineteenth century did not have equal rights to have education, to be paid as well as men as their salary, being the victim of physical violation and exploitation.

2. Literature Approach

2.1 Feminist approach

Feminist approach in literature is the approach which focuses on how women being valued in the society whether by

husband, men, and society. This approach sees women as people who deserve to be honored and appreciated because of their special values. Women having rights to have equality in some domains such as education, religion, family, and society. According to Guerin et.al (1999:196), in it diversity feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women : that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position. This reflects that women's voice is neglected. The secondary position emphasizes that women are forced to be silent in expressing their rights to talk, to learn, to decide something important in their life, to be treated well in family and society. According to Fakh (1997:99) in Sugihastuti and Saptiawan (2010:95), feminism appears in the attempt to be safe from men unfair domination. Exploitation upon women has inspired feminism to struggle for women's safety. Furthermore, Fakh (1997:99) in Sugihastuti and Saptiawan (2010:95) states, "feminism does not only struggle for gender equality but also humanity. Humanity related to women's rights to be treated well without being exposed to the hard jobs which commonly done by men, being exposed to the extreme patriarchal domination which forces women to keep their mind and feeling although they are not treated well in family and society.

Relating to equality and humanity for women in society, women are viewed as part of society who deserve to be literated, well-educated, and learn a lot of things formally or informally. Education can avoid women being exploited to the jobs which force them to work hard as men do, the jobs that bring risk for their safety because probably they are harassed around them, and also the jobs that do not fulfill them with enough salary. Meanwhile, as a member in a family women have rights to express their thoughts, ideas, and having chance to make important decision in the family. The main point is not having the unlimited space for expressing themselves, but women deserve to be safe from the dominant patriarchal ideology which oppresses them physically and mentally. Feminism in literature trying to see some phenomena related to how women treated in society, the relationship between men and women in family and society. Because of that reason there are some different categorizations of feminism seen from literature stance.

2.1.1. Gender Studies

Lately the emphasis of feminist critics was on gender differences, but recently some feminists argue that male differences have caused female oppression. In Gender Studies, female writers rely on realism. What phenomena happen upon

women will be the main theme to their feminist works. Meanwhile, Gender Studies criticizes that male writers rely on their objectivity. Guerin et.al (1999:201) state, "feminists debate whether the female preference for the novel is based on its realism or on its subjectivity, and whether there is a distinction to be made between these notions". Furthermore, Guerin et.al (1999:201) state, "in general, while male writers seem more interested in closure, female writers often respond with open ending. Feminine logic in writing is often associational, male logic sequential – that is, goal-oriented. Male objectivity is challenged by feminine subjectivity. There is different discrepancy between male's writer view and female's writer view. Female writers want to pick up reality happen in women's life by giving the real portrayal of women's condition through literary works.

Literary works as the media for the writers generally and female writers especially to look for women's rights to be safe, to be appreciated, and to be heard of their voice. Along with breakthrough of feminism in the past, Gender Studies appeared as the response for the unfairness toward gender difference (Sugihastuti dan Saptiawan, 2010:96). Furthermore, according to Fakhri (1997:12-13) in Sugihastuti dan Saptiawan (2010:96), the unfairness of gender is manifested in some

forms which are segregation in economy, the subordination toward women in some domains in the life, negative stereotypes toward women, physical and mental violence toward women, and also the working burden which is not suitable with women's strength and capability. Gender studies emphasizing that the significant value is not only on seeking for fairness for women, but safe the women from violence whether physically and mentally and all kinds of segregation toward women.

2.1.2 Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism focuses on how women relate to society and economy as well as with culture. This branch of feminism approach argues that women have rights to have the equality in economy and should not be exploited economically. Guerin et.al (1999:202) states, "marxist feminist attack the prevailing capitalistic system of the west which they view as sexually as well as economically exploitative". Marxist feminism trying to struggle for equality in women's salary payment compared with men, in which they do the same jobs. Furthermore, marxist feminism concerns with protecting women from being included in some unsafe jobs like prostitution and other jobs which bring hard risk for women's physical and mental safety.

Marxist feminism struggling to make the global society realize that women deserve to get more decent jobs rather than being labors, working with the long period working time with low salary, working by doing the harsh jobs with physical strength. By voicing this issues, marxist feminists hope every individuals and the society as a whole will realize that women should be protected from being the victims of economy and capitalist exploitation.

2.1.3 Psychoanalytic Feminism

Psychoanalytic feminism concerns with women's issue related to mental side, motherhood, self and identity, women self esteem related to physical appearance and confidence. How women feel, think, and react toward repression upon them will bring negative impact for them if they often face in their life. Inferior women will be the victims if they are not ready of the action of repression which can make their self-esteem and self-confidence diminished.

According to Showalter in Guerin et.al (1999:203), English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. The mental repression toward women commonly happen to the minority group of women. These women feel that they are being

excluded from certain society because of their differences; can be their race, their skin, and their cultural background. This phenomenon can be seen from black women condition in America in the past. Repression and oppression toward them have made them to be inferior because they think that they did not deserve to be the part of society, especially living among Whites in America. This fact has brought the ideas for some African American writers to fight against it.

2.1.4 Minority Feminist Criticism

This criticism focuses on helping the women who are considered as the minority group to be well accepted in the society. Minority feminist criticism deals with the idea that women deserve to the part of society no matter what skin and the race they have. Minority feminist criticism showing the world that all women are equal and unique. Women are special with their own identities. Minority feminist criticism inspired some black writers to have the idea of being black feminist writers. Relating to their own personal lives living as black race women have made them realized to fight against racism they often receive. Guerin et.al (1999:209) states, "during the 1960s interest in black culture grew, as the inclusion of black writers in syllabi and anthologies attests. In the 1970s and 1980s this was followed by the emergence of

black feminist critics. Black feminist writers trying to give the real portrayal of how being discriminated by Whites. They depict the story vividly since some of them experience it. One of the famous black feminist writers is Maya Angelou. Guerin et.al (1999:210) states, "Maya Angelou is an excellent example of a black feminist writer who speaks for and in turn inspires many other women".

Minority feminist criticism struggles for equality for women to be involved and received in all parts of society without feeling inferiority on their mind. All women deserve to have it no matter the skin color, the race, the religion, and the culture background they share.

3. Analyzing The Poem Through Feminism Approach

3.1 Analyzing Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sing Through Minority Feminist Criticism*

During her childhood Maya Angelou was separated from her mother; her parents got divorce at that time, and she lived with her grandmother. The journey of her life has brought her experience of being editor, author, poet, dancer, stage and screen producer, director, and civil rights activist. Her own experience as black woman inspired her to produce some literary works as the portrayal of oppression, repression and segregation upon black people in

America especially toward women. Sickels (2010:19) states, "by depicting her personal history and her many roles and identities, Angelou reconstructs the image of the black woman and depicts the multiple layers of oppression, survival and freedom. Her most popular and critically acclaimed work was a poem *I Know why The Caged Bird Sing*. This poem was nominated for National Book Award. Sickels (2010:18) states, "when *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sing* was published in 1970, the book won the popular and critical acclaim and was nominated for National Book Award". The poem can be read below.

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sing

*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*

*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*

*The caged bird sings with a fearfull 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 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

*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

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

(Maya Angelou)

Maya Angelou uses the first narrator as the point of view of this poem and the speakers' voice of the poem is she herself. This poem has three stanzas and in some stanzas Maya Angelou portrays vividly her life in which she is being oppressed, repressed and segregated by white community which represented through some poetic words. In the first stanza Maya Angelou mention *free bird* in the first line as the representation of Whites who become the majority group in the society where Blacks and Whites live. She

emphasizes the differences among Blacks and Whites sharply by saying *dips his wing in the orange suns rays* in line 3-4 in order to represent Whites who have more rights and chance in some domains of the life, who are free from being excluded from society. According to Feagin (2014:145), routinized discrimination in housing, employment, politics, and public accommodations is carried out by whites acting alone or in groups. Specifically, the phrase *dips his wing* in line 3 symbolizes Whites' strength. *Dips his wing* relates to spreading the wing, means that Whites are having power to control many things in society. Meanwhile, Blacks are powerless. Feagin (2014:145) states, "Whites have the power to discriminate as individuals, but much of their power to harm comes from their positions in traditionally white networks and white-controlled organizations ". Furthermore, in the last line of the first stanza Maya Angelou extremely protest to the unfairness among Blacks and Whites by saying *and dares to claim the sky*. This line symbolizes Whites' domination toward Blacks. *Claim the sky* connotatively explains that Whites declare their higher position in the society. Meanwhile, Blacks as minority group do not have rights to claim anything since they are immigrants, they have different race and skin.

The opposite condition among Blacks and Whites then described vividly in the second stanza. Maya Angelou describes she herself as inferior black woman who has ever been the victim of racism in line *a BIRD that stalks down his narrow cage*. *Narrow cage* means the narrow space for her to express her mind, her ideas, and feeling. She does not have equal position as well as Whites. She and other black women are in second position. Meanwhile, in other aspects of life such education, living care, and other services, black women do not have sufficient portion compared to Whites. This fact has made her grew as an inferior young girl in the past. Sickels (2010:19) states, "as a young black girl growing up in the racist South, Angelou felt insecure and inferior.

In the third stanza, Maya Angelou mention a phrase *sings with a fearful trill* which stands for her effort and struggle to seek for her freedom. This is the hardest time for her because struggling for her rights is not supported by the majority group. She tries to protest against racism toward her but she does not have much power, so Angelou symbolizes her weakness using the phrase *sing with a fearful trill*. Nevertheless, she still believes to her mind that she should be strong and survive in her harsh life. It is supported by the description of her life journey in Feagin's book. Feagin (2014:27) explains,

“even in the imprisonment of racism that Maya experiences, she still finds her voice and, like the bird, makes herself heard even in the midst of struggle “.

Related to the superiority of Whites, Maya Angelou depicts it again in the fourth stanza. She uses the line *the free bird thinks of another breeze* to emphasizing the contradictory condition on Whites. They are not excluded from the society. They are free to go to school, to have some facilities offered by the country, to have living care from social and public services. Therefore, in line 4 she says *and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright* to describe Whites who live in decent life because of support from the country. *Fat worms* indicates prosperity. Whites are not “hungry” of food, support, and attention.

In the fifth stanza Maya Angelou gives such a shocking line to the readers in order to extremely protest to the negative impact of racism toward her by saying *but a caged BIRD stands on the grave of dreams*. *Grave of dreams* is the symbol of her inferiority. How can she reach her dream to have more decent life if her dreams are burried on the grave. It reflects the hard time for her to struggle for her better life.

Finally, in the last stanza Maya Angelou reminds the readers again that she herself as well as other black women with all of their weaknessess will always try to

survive in their harsh life. Although it is not easy to do, but they keep their struggle to be going on. Just like a bird which always sing with a low tune, with soft voice, but it always sings. It is symbolized in line 3-4; *but longed for still and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom*. *His tune is heard on the distant hill* reflects her effort as black woman to survive. It is weak but it still exists. It exists for seeking the freedom. In her book *entittles African American Writers*, Amy Sickels describes that Maya Angelou has moved from her despair during racism time to a more optimistic life by learning a lot about some books, literature and many things. Angelou successfully transformes from an inferior woman to be strong, independent, and smart woman. This phenomenon then portrayed in her poem and she ends the poem by optimism that she keeps her struggle to find freedom for her and other black women. The line *for the caged bird sing for freedom* reminds the readers that the bad story in the poem does not make her desperate, but she keeps her spirit to find equality for her and for black women. It is supported by Amy Sickels' book. Maya feels proud to be a black woman and is herself a role model, like the women in her family. Maya learns early on that black women have many obstacles they must face and surmount, and if they are to

survive, they must develop forms of resistance and protest (Sickles, 2010:27).

Based on the analysis of the whole stanza, we get the idea that feminism issued in this poem related to minority feminism. The poem concerns to the portrayal of black women being discriminated and segregated in white society. Minority Feminist Criticism is suitable to analyze this poem. Minority Feminist Criticism is the criticism in which it tries to see the phenomenon in which women are trying to look for the equality. Women are trying to be free from exclusion of a society because of racism, oppression, repression, and segregation upon them. In some stanzas it is emphasized that Maya Angelou specifically and black women generally symbolized as bird living in narrow cage which feet are tied. Feet are tied reflects that Maya Angelou as well as other black women is the minority group who is inferior.

Nevertheless, they are trying to survive from the imprisonment of racism.

III. Conclusion

Minority Feminist Criticism has criticized the poem through the lense of someone who has personal life as the part of minority group which suffers violation from racism. Criticizing feminism issue on literary works should be related to the case discussed on it so that the suitable analysis will be produced. By looking carefully to the speaker's voice in the poem, some symbolisms and connotative meanings used in the poem, we can judge the feminism issue depicted in the poem. Feminism issue voiced by Maya Angelou through Minority Feminist Criticism giving us knowledge that women in the past faced harder life than women in this modern era. Their strength can inspire women throughout the world to be optimistic and strong in every conditions.

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