

Constructing Freedom and Oppression in Maya Angelou's Caged Bird: A Semiotic and Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool that reflects and shapes social experience, identity, and power relations. In poetry, linguistic choices play an important role in constructing meaning and expressing social critique, as seen in Maya Angelou's Caged Bird. This study aims to analyze how linguistic signs in the poem construct meanings of freedom and oppression and reveal underlying ideological messages. The research adopts a qualitative approach, using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory integrated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The data consist of the full text of Caged Bird, analyzed by identifying linguistic features such as diction, metaphor, repetition, and contrast to uncover relational meanings and ideological structures. The findings indicate that meaning in the poem is formed through binary oppositions between the free bird and the caged bird, representing contrasts such as privilege versus marginalization, mobility versus confinement, and voice versus silence. The caged bird's song emerges as a symbolic form of resistance and hope within oppressive conditions. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that poetic language carries social and ideological significance and can both reflect and challenge power relations. The findings imply that combining semiotic analysis with CDA offers a comprehensive framework for understanding poetry as a medium of social critique and empowerment.

Keywords: *Semiotic, Discourse, Maya Angelou, Cage Bird*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it reflects and shapes human experiences, identities, and social relationships. Through language, people express ideas, reveal who they are, and negotiate social power, while the words, metaphors, and structures they choose reflect social norms and values. Meaning in language is always shaped by context and relationships, a process that can also be seen in computational models such as ChatGPT, which generate meaning based on the input they receive (Mulyadi et al., 2023). Poetry works in a similar way, as poets carefully select words, imagery, and metaphors to communicate emotions, ideas, and social experiences.

Poetry represents a powerful form of linguistic expression that combines artistic creativity with social commentary (Arcilla Jr., 2024). Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* (1983) is a clear example, portraying the experiences of African Americans and highlighting oppression, racial inequality, and the struggle for freedom. Through the contrasting images of the "free bird" and the "caged bird," Angelou illustrates differences in privilege, mobility, and voice, helping readers understand freedom in opposition to confinement and silence. These contrasts not only evoke emotional responses but also reflect broader social and political realities, turning the poem into both a personal and collective narrative of marginalization and resilience (Sugara et al., 2024). The poem also demonstrates that meaning in language is relational. The free bird's freedom, mobility, and song are understood fully only in opposition to the caged bird's confinement and longing. Binary oppositions such as liberty versus captivity, voice versus silence, and privilege versus oppression are central to interpreting the poem's message. These linguistic patterns reveal how Angelou constructs meaning through contrast, showing that language carries social and ideological significance. Recognizing these patterns is essential for understanding how poetic language represents complex social experiences and power dynamics.

Moreover, *Caged Bird* illustrates the power of language as a medium of resistance. The caged bird's song, emerging from confinement, symbolizes hope, resilience, and the assertion of identity despite oppressive circumstances. This shows that language can actively challenge domination and articulate visions of freedom. Studying such texts provides insight into how poetic language encodes social critique and ideological messages, reflecting collective experiences of inequality while offering a voice of empowerment.

In literary studies, poetry is often examined not only as an artistic form but also as a linguistic practice that reflects social realities and power relations. Poetic language functions as a medium through which social issues such as race, identity, and inequality are represented and questioned. By analyzing the linguistic choices within a poem, including imagery, metaphor, and contrast, readers can uncover deeper meanings that go beyond aesthetic expression. This perspective positions poetry as a meaningful site for understanding how language operates within social and ideological contexts, especially in texts that emerge from marginalized experiences.

Despite the richness of poetic language, many studies still focus primarily on thematic interpretation without closely examining how linguistic structures shape meaning. This gap highlights the need for an analysis that connects language use with social experience and power dynamics. Therefore, studying *Caged Bird* through a linguistic lens allows for a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed through contrast, symbolism, and relational language. Such an approach not only

enriches literary interpretation but also demonstrates how poetry functions as a form of social commentary and resistance, making it relevant to discussions of language, power, and identity in contemporary society.

In this context, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to understand how language reflects and shapes social power, ideology, and inequality. CDA views texts not just as neutral messages but as instruments that can reproduce or challenge social hierarchies. In the context of Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird*, CDA helps analyze how the poem's language expresses oppression, marginalization, and resistance, showing how freedom and captivity are communicated through social and ideological meanings (Avdagić et al., 2023; Ahmed & Mahmood, 2024).

Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory provides a complementary framework by explaining how meaning in language arises from relationships between signs. Saussure introduced key concepts such as signifier, which is the form or expression, and signified, which is the idea or concept, as well as distinctions like *langue*, the structured system of language, versus *parole*, individual speech, synchronic versus diachronic perspectives, and syntagmatic versus paradigmatic relations (Hamzah, 2020). A linguistic sign is an inseparable unit of signifier and signified, in which symbols, whether words, sounds, or text, interact with mental concepts to create meaning (Siregar, 2019; Talani et al., 2023). Applying this theory to *Caged Bird* shows how Angelou constructs meaning through contrasts between the free bird and the caged bird, revealing relational differences that reflect freedom and oppression.

Some previous studies have applied Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) across various media and contexts. Semiotic analysis has been used to interpret oral literature, such as the *Kabata Kora-Kora* narratives in Selamon Village, Banda (Lamusa, 2023), as well as films like *Selesai* (Halim & Yulius, 2023) and religious texts including the Qur'an (Fadhliyah, 2021) demonstrating how Saussurean concepts of signifier and signified help uncover meaning through relational structures. Semiotic approaches from other scholars, such as Roland Barthes, have also been applied to media texts, for example in comic strips on the Instagram account *Komik Grontol* (Saefudin et al., 2025), to deconstruct messages and identify connotations and mythologies within visual and textual signs. Meanwhile, CDA has been employed to examine social and ideological issues in films and media, including *Suteh-Delan* (Pahlavannezhad, 2022), gender stereotypes in the *Barbie Movie* (Mardhika et al., 2025), and racial constructions in cartoon films (Khadim & Abbas, 2023), highlighting how language and imagery reflect and reinforce power relations. Despite these insights, most previous research focuses on either semiotic analysis or CDA in isolation, with limited studies combining both approaches to analyze meaning, ideology, and social critique in a single cultural text or media form. This study addresses

this gap by integrating Saussurean semiotics with CDA to examine how linguistic and visual signs operate together to construct meaning and reveal ideological messages. The research problem is how signs and discourse in selected media reflect and shape social and ideological meanings.

This study aims to critically analyze Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* through the lens of Saussurean linguistic theory within a CDA framework. The objectives are to identify key linguistic signs, examine how these signs represent freedom and oppression, and reveal the ideological discourse embedded in the text. By combining Saussure's semiotic model with critical discourse perspectives, this research highlights how language and power intersect in poetry, demonstrating that Angelou's work is not only literary but also a symbolic expression of social resistance and emancipation.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which emphasizes understanding structures, patterns, and the nature of phenomena (Litosseliti, 2018 as cited in Saefudin et al., 2023). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the main analytical framework, combined with Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which examines the relationship between signifiers and signifieds in meaning-making. The research focuses on the full text of Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* (1983), chosen purposively for its symbolic richness and relevance to themes of race, gender, and freedom. The poem itself is treated as a cultural and ideological text, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument. Data collection involved identifying linguistic features such as diction, metaphor, repetition, and contrast, supplemented by secondary sources including previous studies on *Caged Bird* and Saussurean semiotics. The procedure included careful and repeated reading of the text to extract significant signs and patterns. Data analysis proceeded in three stages: textual analysis to identify key signs, interpretative analysis to connect these signs with their conceptual meanings and reveal underlying ideological and emotional dimensions, and critical interpretation to contextualize these meanings within broader socio-cultural and historical settings. The descriptive and interpretative technique integrates semiotics and CDA to explore how meaning and power interact. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of theoretical perspectives, enhancing the reliability of the interpretations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* reveals three main thematic patterns that structure the poem's linguistic and semiotic construction of freedom and oppression. The data source was the full text of the poem, analyzed by identifying recurring linguistic signs such as diction, metaphor, repetition, and contrast.

The free bird is represented through verbs such as leaps, floats, dips, and dares, which convey ease, autonomy, and dominance. Expressions such as on the back of the wind and till the current ends suggest effortless mobility and a naturalized sense of freedom. The lexical field surrounding the free bird includes light, warmth, and expansiveness, reflected in words like orange sun rays and sky (Suwarni et al., 2025). These signs consistently highlight freedom as a self-evident state supported by social structures and natural order.

In contrast, the caged bird is depicted through imagery of confinement including narrow cage, bars of rage, clipped wings, and tied feet. The repeated line his wings are clipped and his feet are tied emphasizes the cyclical and institutional nature of oppression (Temaja et al., 2024). Phrases such as bars of rage illustrate the internalization of anger and the influence of language in shaping perception (Suwarni et al., 2025). The caged bird's environment consistently contrasts with that of the free bird, creating a clear linguistic binary between freedom and captivity.

Despite physical constraint, the caged bird's singing, expressed in phrases such as he opens his throat to sing and fearful trill, represents a form of symbolic resistance (Ahmed & Mahmood, 2024). Singing functions as a polysemic sign conveying both suffering and hope, and becomes the only avenue for the caged bird to assert presence and identity (Saussure, 2011). The refrain The caged bird sings of freedom recurs throughout the poem, reinforcing the persistence of hope even under oppression (Temaja et al., 2024; Suwarni et al., 2025).

The poem consistently contrasts semantic fields. The free bird's world includes soft, bright, fat, and waiting, while the caged bird's environment is characterized by grave, rage, and nightmare. Repetition of key lines strengthens the ideological contrast and emphasizes endurance, highlighting the structural nature of oppression and resistance within the poem (Ahmed & Mahmood, 2024).

The findings show that Caged Bird constructs meaning through relational differences between signs, aligning with Saussure's semiotic theory (Saussure, 2011). The free bird functions as a signifier of autonomy and privilege, while the caged bird represents oppression and marginalization. These binary oppositions do not merely describe social conditions; they actively reproduce power hierarchies and social inequality, which CDA interprets as the structural operation of discourse (Avdagić et al., 2023).

The contrast between the free bird and the caged bird illustrates how language constructs ideological worlds. The free bird's effortless engagement with nature and ability to name the sky his own demonstrates discursive power, while the caged bird's song exemplifies resistance within constrained circumstances (Ahmed & Mahmood, 2024).

The act of singing serves as a semiotic site of defiance, showing that linguistic expression can reclaim agency when physical or social freedom is denied. Repetition reinforces both oppression and endurance, highlighting the dual role of language as a medium of domination and liberation (Temaja et al., 2024). By examining the lexical and thematic contrasts, the poem reveals how ideology is encoded and how marginalized voices can be symbolically empowered through discourse.

In synthesis, the poem demonstrates the interconnectedness of language, identity, and power. Angelou's strategic manipulation of signifiers exposes social hierarchies while offering a space for subversion. The analysis confirms that literature can simultaneously reflect and contest societal inequities, providing insight into the performative and political potential of poetic expression (Suwarni et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Maya Angelou's Caged Bird creates meaning through the contrast between freedom and confinement, revealing how language can both reflect and challenge social power. Using Saussure's semiotic approach, the free bird and the caged bird emerge as signifiers whose meanings exist in relation to one another, showing that ideas like privilege, oppression, and freedom gain significance through difference rather than in isolation. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the poem demonstrates how word choice, imagery, and repetition encode social hierarchies and provide a space for resistance, giving voice to those who are marginalized. The findings suggest that poetry is not just artistic expression but a powerful medium for exploring and questioning social inequalities, offering readers insight into the ways language shapes identity, perception, and agency. A limitation of this study is that it focuses on a single poem, which may limit the broader applicability of the results, and future research could expand to other literary works or cultural contexts to further explore how poetic language operates as both a social mirror and a tool for resistance.

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