

The Social Segregation in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

Dwi Husna¹

¹Universitas Airlangga

Email: dwi.husna-2022@fisip.unair.ac.id

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji segregasi sosial dalam novel "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" karya Maya Angelou melalui lensa sosiologi dengan menggunakan kerangka sosiologi sastra. Tinjauan literatur mengeksplorasi tiga perspektif dalam kerangka ini: sosiologi penulis, sosiologi masyarakat, dan sosiologi pembaca. Dengan menggunakan novel Angelou sebagai studi kasus, penelitian ini berfokus pada diskriminasi dan segregasi rasial yang dihadapi oleh warga Amerika keturunan Afrika pada tahun 1930-an dan 1940-an, serta menekankan dampak jangka panjang dari ketidakadilan dalam sejarah.

Kata kunci: Denotasi, Rasisme, Segregasi, Sosiologi Sastra

ABSTRACT

This study examines social segregation in Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" through a sociological lens, employing the framework of the sociology of literature. The literature review explores three perspectives within this framework: sociology of the author, sociology of the society, and sociology of the reader. Using Angelou's novel as a case study, the research focuses on the racial discrimination and segregation faced by African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, emphasizing the lasting impact of historical injustices.

Keywords: Denotation, Racism, Segregation, Sociology of Literature

A. INTRODUCTION

The intricate web of interactions that unfolds on Earth encompasses a spectrum of dynamics, ranging from social and cultural to political, economic, and deeply personal. Each interaction weaves a unique story, open to interpretation through the varied lenses of individuals. Hudson's assertion that literature serves as a vital record of human experiences resonates with the idea that literature captures the essence of life, reflecting thoughts, feelings, and the immediacy of enduring interests (Hudson, 1913: p. 10-13).

Literature, spanning various forms such as drama, poetry, novels, and biographies, emerges as a creative expression rooted in societal phenomena. This study delves into the realm of novels, considering them as replicas of real-life occurrences, shaped by the imagination of authors and reflections of surrounding social phenomena rich in cultural, social, and moral values. As Swingewood contends, novels, as a major literary genre, faithfully attempt to recreate the social world, depicting human relations with family, politics, and the state (Swingewood, 1972: 12).

Literary works serve as mirrors reflecting the intricate tapestry of real-life social structures, relationships, and conflicts. They offer insights into social conditions, beliefs, ideologies, and public expectations, embodying the spirit of their time. In this research, the focus is on the autobiographical novel "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," which vividly portrays the life of an African literary figure, offering a lens into the experiences of African Americans in America.

Despite extensive studies on racial segregation and discrimination, there is a notable gap in the analysis of autobiographical novels that depict the lived experiences of African American

women. Existing research largely focuses on broader sociological and historical contexts, often neglecting personal narratives that offer a profound understanding of individual struggles. Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" provides an intimate portrayal of social segregation, highlighting the unique challenges faced by African American women. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the novel's depiction of racial discrimination and its impact on the protagonist's life, thereby enhancing our comprehension of the African American experience during the early to mid-20th century.

This research on racial segregation primarily encompasses historical and sociological perspectives, with recent studies incorporating intersectional analyses of race, gender, and class. This research adopts the sociology of literature framework proposed by Swingewood to examine Angelou's work, bridging the gap between literary studies and sociological discourse. By analyzing the novel's vivid portrayal of segregation, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the personal and societal impacts of racial discrimination, offering new insights into the complexities of the African American experience.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Sociology of Literature

Sociology, stemming from the Latin "socius" (comrade) and Greek "logos" (words or speech), delves into the scientific examination of human social life. It focuses on group dynamics, encompassing products, customs, traditions, and values, scrutinizing their impact on lives (Swingewood, 1972:11). Literature, widely acknowledged as a reflection of society, mirrors human actions and societal issues, presenting a snapshot of the social world. Swingewood contends that literature, like sociology, is concerned with human adaptation, desires for social change, and the portrayal of relationships in family, politics, and society (1972:12).

The sociology of literature, encompassing education, marriage, politics, religion, and economy, is integral to societal ideologies. Swingewood notes its late emergence compared to other sociological disciplines (1972:13). Three types of literary sociology are identified: sociology of the author, examining the social context of the writer's production; sociology of society, studying societal influence on literature; and sociology of the reader, tracing how literature is received in specific historical moments (Swingewood, 1972:17, 21).

Literature, inseparable from human social conditions, reflects historical, socio-political themes, addressing issues like colonialism, racial identity, politics, and gender. The sociological analysis of literature provides insights into societal norms, attitudes, and values, reinforcing and illuminating sociological material (Swingewood, 1972:15).

This study explores social segregation, a prevalent theme in Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Illustrating racial discrimination in the 1930s American South and 1940s California, the novel portrays the struggles of the black community, highlighting unequal treatment, labor struggles, and subordination to white society. The exploration of social segregation in Angelou's work aligns with the broader objective of understanding the intersections of sociology and literature.

2. African Americans in the 19th Century

Maya Angelou's novel, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," serves as a crucial lens for the researcher to comprehend the conditions of African American life during the productive years of the poet in the 19th century. The historical backdrop of African Americans in the United

States provides essential context to address societal issues during that time. The first two decades of the 20th century marked a violent period for African Americans in both the North and the South. Emancipation brought bitterness, as racial prejudice and discrimination hindered their dignity and economic progress (Link & Link, 1983, p. 14).

The injustice faced by Africans predates World War I, with their involuntary arrival in Virginia in 1619 through the slave trade. Once free farmers, traders, hunters, musicians, and warriors in their homeland, Africans were physically and psychologically forced into slavery, proving profitable for their masters.

Milton Meltzer's "The Black Americans" (1984) underlines the national belief in white supremacy by the 1900s, perpetuating the myth of the darker races' natural inferiority. Newspapers and literary magazines, such as *The New York Times* and *Harper's*, played a role in portraying Africans as criminals, reinforcing stereotypes of the criminal Black. The superiority of whites further depicted Africans as dull, ignorant, vicious, lazy, and even as clowns, thieves, and liars (pp. 143-144). This historical context illuminates the challenges faced by African Americans, laying the foundation for understanding the themes of discrimination and racial prejudice in Angelou's novel.

3. Segregation

Segregation, a coercive action targeting specific groups based on ethnicity or race, often involves the use of force and violence. In the context of racial discrimination in South Africa from 1910 to 1948, segregation legally separated races, favoring those of European descent and disadvantaging those of African descent. This practice impacted Africans' rights to own land, choose their residence, travel freely, and maintain job security (Clark and Worger, 2011: 18).

Despite the formal prohibition of racial discrimination in the mid-twentieth century, racial politics persisted as a major phenomenon. Historical racism manifested in socio-economic inequality, evolving into modern, indirect expressions, with symbolic racism being predominant. Symbolic racism combines anti-Black sentiments with traditional U.S. values, such as self-reliance, individualism, and the Protestant work ethic. This form of racism was employed to explore White Americans' attitudes and behaviors across various political issues and public policy debates.

For African Americans, professional opportunities were scarce, leading to poor living conditions, poverty, and diseases. Rejected and dehumanized by white society, they faced violence, including hangings and rape. The 1955 murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi highlighted the extreme racial cruelty prevailing in the South, symbolizing the broader injustice faced by African Americans (Bynum 80).

The civil rights bill wasn't enacted until the late 1960s, preceding which Jim Crow laws of segregation dictated strict racial separation. African Americans endured inferior living conditions and reduced value, unable to mix with whites in various aspects of life. Racism, integral to the southern lifestyle in the 1930s, perpetuated segregation in buses, schools, parks, restaurants, hospitals, and schools, enforcing a divisive and discriminatory system.

C. METHOD

This research was done by using descriptive research. "Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organize, tabulates, depict, and describe data collection" (Glass & Hopkins, 1948). Descriptive research studies in which the researcher does

not interact with the participant include observational studies of people in an environment and studies involving data collection using existing records. The researcher concerned on the interpretation and analysis on the object with some helps of library research. Thus, the writer applied descriptive research, because it could describe the data that had been collected.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Social-Segregation of Negroes

This section will give an explanation of findings and discussion based on research questions regarding the illustration of social-segregation of Negroes on the novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. Segregation is social phenomena that limit the opportunity of a group of people with certain backgrounds both racially and so on. White people in America are landlords, that's how they claim themselves, thus people other than white people are just people hitch hike on their land. As explained earlier that blacks have long been accustomed to living amidst the pressures of discrimination and social inequality, they are like already accustomed to living like that, but in the 1930s it was their worst nightmare.

Social life which becomes separated between white people and black people then gives birth to social segregation. Black people who were segregated or exiled from white people lived in underdevelopment in all aspects of life. At that time the white people saw black people not like humans, therefore equality of human rights was not felt by black people. Arrogance of the white people make them really not want to socialize with blacks. This also made white people limit access for black people to get their daily needs. The separation carried out by whites and blacks occurred in several aspects. Such as health access, job discrimination, social status discrimination, etc.

a. Limited access to health of Momma as African

As one important aspect of human life, health should be easily accessible both in terms of facilities and services and infrastructure. This turned out not to be felt by blacks because they had to feel the restrictions imposed by whites because they did not want to intersect with blacks whom they considered to be slaves. Maya Angelou tells in her novel how the arrogance of whites was so bitter that blacks felt. It is told one day when Maya was in a toothache and Momma felt that Maya should be taken to the dentist for check themselves, they decided to go to the clinic owned by dr. Lincoln, a white doctor who is the only dentist at Stamps. When they arrived at the clinic, the assistant from Dr. Lincoln welcomed them politely and even Dr. Lincoln refused to serve them.

Excerpt 1

“Annie, you know I don’t treat Nigra, colored people

Annie, everybody has a policy. Now, my policy is I don’t treat colored people.

My policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s.”

(Angelou 2015 : 188-189)

It is clear that the white-skinned doctor rudely rejected Maya and Momma who are black or Negroes by saying that he prefers to put his hand in a dog's mouth than a Negro's. This rude attitude is a form of racism towards blacks which makes it difficult for them to get proper health services.

b. Job Discrimination toward African

Living in isolation, Maya Angelou clearly illustrates how the struggle that must be experienced by herself and her people to struggle to survive. Black people at that time were not allowed to work in offices such as government agencies, private agencies and so on. On the contrary, they were only considered slaves and worked as white errands. This of course makes blacks it is difficult to get money so they find it increasingly difficult to finance their lives, but they can only surrender because of the social conditions that make them helpless.

Excerpt 2

“They don’t want us to work along in the same office with them because we are just their slave.” (Angelou 2015 : 167)

The struggle of the blacks felt so heavy because they had to accept the fact that they were only allowed to work as slaves and messengers for the whites. This made blacks have to open small businesses to help the economic conditions of their lives. They manage everything around their living environment and sell it in their small kiosks.

Excerpt 3

Then Momma had the store built in the heart of the Negro area (Angelou 2015 : 6)

Momma's shop is visited every day by buyers who are also Negroes in their neighborhood. Here the authors argue that the difficulties experienced by black people are because they live in poverty which automatically makes them only able to buy goods and needs at low prices, to compensate for this of course those who open a business or sell must adjust their selling prices with the economic capacity of their own people therefore the benefits are only small, that is why they continue to live in suffering and poverty.

c. Social Status Discrimination between American and African

The social status of black people at that time was very low in the eyes of those who were white. Reproach and insults have become their daily food, in the eyes of whites, black people are rubbish, slaves and are considered evil.

We are the victims of the world’s most comprehensive robbery. Life demands balance. It is alright if we do a little robbing now. (Angelou 2015: 225)

Maya bluntly raised the issue of discrimination in her novel by mentioning that if blacks were already despised as criminals by whites then it shouldn't be a big problem if they robbed. According to Maya it should have become natural for blacks to commit crimes such as robbing and so on because in the eyes of the whites, they were seen as such, so committing crimes or not, they are still bad people in the eyes of those who are white, so it is better for them to do evil at all if it can help them survive. According to Maya, this should be commonplace because they are not in the service of getting a good job to defend their lives, therefore crime and crime are alternative ways for them to get money because there is also a compulsion due to the frustration they experience. The difficulties of life and the pressure of segregation for them are very pressing on their lives

d. Limited Appearance Access's African

In terms of appearance, blacks also felt the effects of social segregation. Living in a slum environment would have made it difficult for them to get the beautiful clothes they dreamed of seeing white people dressed. Let alone for beautiful clothes, decent clothes though difficult to get because their lives are isolated from city life inhabited by whites. If they force themselves to look for clothes in the city and enter the area inhabited by whites, then only insults and insults will get them. Surely they will get rejection from white people because only they can dress beautifully and properly.

They had so much clothes they were able to give perfectly good dresses worn just under the arms. (Angelou 2015 : 8)

Of course there is jealousy, especially for children of the same age as the Maya who lived at that time if they saw white people who could appear in such beautiful clothes, but not so with those who were only shabby in clothes and even tattered. But that is what the blacks have to deal with and with a heavy heart they must accept the reality of alienated life in social life.

e. Discrimination in Terms of Food toward African

Maya Angelou also illustrates how bitter social segregation must be experienced by blacks by giving a simple picture.

A negro could not buy a vanilla ice cream just because it's color is white. They had to be satisfied with only chocolate ice cream. (Angelou 2015 : 49)

This simple description, according to the author, is sufficient to explain how cruel the social segregation that occurred at that time. If in a matter as simple as the taste of an ice cream alone there must be a discriminatory action just because it is white then it can be imagined for sure in big things, there is a discriminatory act that occurs which increasingly corners the blacks in the social segregation they experience.

The white people restrict blacks in terms of food and being discriminatory because they do not want if there is government assistance in the form of food and then distributed equally to all people. They want those who get a part many are therefore discriminatory and stingy to blacks and let them eat only poor quality food and even the rest of the whites themselves.

2. The Portrait of African American in 19th Century

The history of the United States is inseparable from centuries of slavery. The slavery system in the United States cannot be forgotten especially by black African descendants, because slaves came from Africa. They were arrested and traded for slavery in European and American countries. They work in plantations and fields. Slaves were regarded as property so they were assets of whites as slave owners. They have no right to themselves and no freedom of life, and employers are free to treat them. It can be showed below;

“Entrenched racist attitudes on the part of white employers and coworkers in the nation's war-production centers hindered black women's ability to gain employment in these unionized blue-collar jobs. When black people did get hired, they often were forced to use separate restrooms and to perform

the lowest paid, most difficult work. Sometimes their employment triggered hate strikes, which erupted periodically over the war, when white workers walked off the job over promotion or hiring of African Americans into previously restricted departments and occupation categories. In 1943, for example, a Baltimore Western Electric plant was forced to build separate toilet facilities for white and black workers when white women demanded them.” (www.gilderlehrman.org/ African-American in World War II by Maureen Honey)

The same thing is also written in Maya Angelou's biography novel entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Excerpt 2 and excerpt 3 give the descriptions to the reader that It was very difficult for people in the lifetime of Maya Angelou to find work. They were deemed not to have the ability to even have the right to do the work carried out by white people. In various aspects of work, black people cannot compete with the abilities of white people. This makes them have to stay afloat and struggle with the abilities they have. Besides, based on data from African American Policy Forum (AAPF), blacks and whites were not granted equal treatment. Blacks were denied jobs, access to good schools, and were forced to sit behind whites in public transport facilities. In addition to legal separation, racial segregation included a set of beliefs that whites were superior to blacks in terms of intelligence and morality. Violence was often used to keep blacks beneath whites in the racial hierarchy. To give a few examples of Jim Crow etiquette: blacks and whites were not supposed to eat together, but if they did, whites were to be served first; a black male was not supposed to offer his hand to a white male, because that implied social equality; blacks were always supposed to be introduced to whites, and not vice versa. Racial segregation did not only exist in the South, but was a national phenomenon. For example, the United States Armed Forces remained segregated until the 1950s—white and black units were kept separate, and black units were led by white officers. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation in education was inherently unequal, thus overturning the longstanding *Plessy* doctrine. Civil rights legislation in the 1960s outlawed discrimination in employment, education and housing. Despite these laws, de facto segregation remains a powerful force in American life. For example, in 2005, there was estimated to be a smaller proportion of black students currently enrolled at majority white public schools than at any time since 1968. While racial segregation is no longer legally acceptable, its adverse effects continue to be felt—and further perpetuate racial inequality— in the United States Today. Besides, segregation is also very visible in public places. One of the important parts that show excessive racism in Stamps is the dentist scene. There was no Black doctor in Stamps, which made black people like Momma try to manage their pain and aches by themselves. In excerpt 1, the doctor said clearly that he'd rather put his hand in a dog's mouth rather than having to take care the blacks. This statement also is supported by Thomas L Bynum. In his book with the title *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom*, he said that most of them lived in bad conditions, poverty, and diseases. They were rejected by the white people and treated as animals and even worse. Many black men were hanged for simply looking into the eyes of a white woman or flirting with her, and many black women were raped by the privileged white men. The Murder of Emmett Till on August 24, 1955, was one of the most terrible crimes committed by the white Americans and which symbolized the injustice and the extreme racial cruelty of the South. He was a 14 years old Black American boy who whistled at a white woman in Mississippi,

and days later he was lynched. This brutal and terrifying crime was a big tragedy that affected the American society (Bynum 2013:80).

Based on explanation above, can be concluded that the term “ literature is the mirror of life” is true, after examining and comparing stories in literary works and life history in the times mentioned in the literary works there are indeed many similarities, even almost the same. all the stories set forth in the book bring the reader back to reminiscing about the past. this is evidenced by the printed news that can be accounted for the truth. As swingewood said the conception of the mirror, the, must be treated with great care in the sociological analysis of literature. Literature clearly reflects norms, attitudes to sex by the working class and the middle class, for example; it reflects, too, values in the sense of the writer’s own intention, and it might be suggested that it is on the level of values where literature is seen to reinforce and illuminate purely sociological material. Literature cannot be free from human social condition where the novel reflects the situation of social condition that appears in literary work. Such as; historical and socio-political themes as colonialism, post-colonialism, racial identity, politic, gender issues, and etc.

D. CONCLUSION

This study examines the intersection of sociology and literature, centering on Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" to explore the theme of social segregation. The research delves into the historical context of African Americans in the 19th century and the impact of segregation, utilizing a descriptive research method. The findings and discussions address various facets of social segregation, including limited access to healthcare, job discrimination, social status discrimination, appearance-based discrimination, and food discrimination.

The depiction of African Americans in the 19th century is detailed, highlighting the challenges faced, such as entrenched racism and discriminatory practices in workplaces. The discussion extends to segregation in public places and the unequal treatment of African Americans, underscoring historical injustices, violence, and the perpetuation of racial inequality. The conclusion connects literature and life, reinforcing the notion that literature serves as a mirror reflecting societal norms, values, and historical conditions.

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