



Justice, Equality, and Moral resistance: A philosophical study of racism in Maya Angelou's literature

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Abstract

The themes of justice, equality, and moral resistance in Maya Angelou's works are examined in this essay from a philosophical standpoint. It contends that in addition to being autobiographical, Angelou's writings are profoundly moral and provide a potent critique of racism as a system that deprives people of equality and human dignity. The study demonstrates how racism functions in daily life through discrimination, segregation, and internalized oppression by extensively analysing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The study emphasizes how justice in Angelou's writing is linked to lived experiences, emotional challenges, and the pursuit of identity and self-worth in addition to legal fairness. The study also looks at how equality is portrayed as a moral requirement that calls for respect, acknowledgment, and the growth of human potential. The connection of race and gender is revealed in Angelou's depiction of Black femininity, demonstrating how various types of oppression impact people's lives. Her transition from quiet to voice is examined as a potent example of moral resistance at the same time. By taking back her voice and sharing her narrative, Angelou confronts injustice, upholds her dignity, and turns personal suffering into societal consciousness. The study links Angelou's literary works with more general discussions of justice and human rights by drawing on ideas from influential philosophers. It comes to the conclusion that her writing offers a significant foundation for comprehending racism as a moral and social issue. In the end, the article makes the case that Angelou's works advocate for a more compassionate and inclusive conception of justice that honours equality, dignity, and voice in everyday human life.

Keywords: Justice, Equality, Moral Resistance, Racism, Maya Angelou, Human Dignity, Voice, Identity

Introduction

Philosophical and literary discussions on racism have always revolved on the issue of justice and equality, especially when considering African American experiences. Maya Angelou's writings provide a rich literary environment where moral struggle, societal injustice, and personal remembrance converge. In addition to recounting personal experiences, her autobiographical and poetic works reveal the pervasive systems of racial injustice that undermine the fundamental principles of justice. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat," writes Angelou in her reflection on the psychological and social cruelty of racism in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1969, p. 4) [1]. This striking picture demonstrates how racial injustice shape's identity and self-worth both internally and outside. Fairness and equality are emphasized as fundamental tenets of a just society in the philosophical discourse on justice, especially in the writings of John Rawls. According to Rawls, "justice is the first virtue of social institutions" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3) [1], any system that upholds inequality is by definition unfair. The racial injustice and segregation portrayed in Angelou's works are clearly at odds with these philosophical values when read in conjunction with her stories. Angelou's observation that "the segregation was so complete that most Black children did not really know what whites looked like" (Angelou, 1969, p. 25) [1] illustrates how systematic racism undermines equality at its

most fundamental level by denying even the possibility of mutual recognition.

Furthermore, Angelou's writings might be interpreted via the prism of moral resistance, a notion intimately linked to intellectuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., who maintains that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King, 1963, p. 1) [9]. Through the affirmation of dignity, identity, and voice rather than overt political argument, Angelou's literature exemplifies this resistance. The existential aspect of racial oppression, where a loss of agency becomes a primary moral concern, is shown in her statement, "It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life" (Angelou, 1969, p. 180) [1]. In this way, personal sorrow is transformed into a universal ethical critique of injustice in her literature. The intersections of race, gender, and class in Angelou's writings further complicate the concept of equality. Bell Hooks contends that "racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination" (Hooks, 1981, p. 12) [6], a viewpoint that strikes a deep chord with Angelou's depiction of Black womanhood. Black women's daily experiences are shaped by the ongoing fear of violence and loss, as demonstrated by Angelou's observation that "the Black woman" had her heartstrings attached to a hanging noose" (Angelou, 1969, p. 114) [1]. By demonstrating that equality cannot be attained without concurrently addressing various types of oppression, this intersectional dimension broadens the philosophical concept of justice.

Additionally, Angelou's writing addresses the idea of recognition, as Axel Honneth discusses, emphasizing that justice necessitates respect for one another and an appreciation of human dignity. In racially divided communities, the lack of such acknowledgment results in what Angelou describes as a deep sense of estrangement. However, her writing also provides a means of resistance by reclaiming identity and affirming humanity via language, memory, and storytelling. She suggests that resistance is both profoundly personal and political, as evidenced by the moments of pride and fortitude that arise even in the face of oppression. In order to investigate how justice, equality, and moral resistance are lived realities influenced by historical and social circumstances rather than abstract ideals, this study places Angelou's writings within a larger philosophical framework. The study aims to show that Angelou's writing offers a critical lens through which the moral failings of racist societies can be comprehended and contested by fusing literary analysis with philosophical viewpoints. In the end, her essays urge a reconsideration of justice that is compassionate, inclusive, and based on the real-life experiences of historically marginalized people.

Racism and the denial of justice: a philosophical reading

In Maya Angelou's literary universe, racism is shown as a deep philosophical rejection of justice as well as a social injustice. In her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou portrays racism as a structural system that denies people equality, respect, and dignity. Her story demonstrates that justice encompasses both the lived experience of being recognized as a complete human being and legal fairness. Racial prejudice thus turns into a moral failing of society, when cultural norms and institutions actively promote inequality rather than eradicate it. Through the creation of a divided moral system, racism undermines the basic basis of justice, as Angelou's literature demonstrates. "In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most Black children did not really know what white people looked like," she adds (Angelou, 1969, p. 25) [1]. This claim demonstrates how segregation eliminates the potential for mutual recognition, which is a crucial component of philosophical views of justice. According to John Rawls, who claims that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions," justice necessitates equity and equal participation in social institutions (Rawls, 1971, p. 3) [11]. It is clear from reading about Angelou's experience that racism breaches this ideal by constructing society in a way that denies Black people respect and equal opportunity.

Furthermore, racism functions through both internalized oppression and external discrimination. Racial injustice permeates people's inner lives, as demonstrated by Angelou's poignant comment, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat" (Angelou, 1969, p. 4) [1]. According to this metaphor, racism shapes identity, self-perception, and psychological health in both obvious and invisible ways. In this way, the denial of justice encompasses both the denial of selfhood and uneven rights. This has

important philosophical ramifications because scholars like Axel Honneth contend that respect and acknowledgment in interpersonal relationships are necessary for fairness. Lack of such acknowledgment leads to moral harm and isolation. The combination of gender and race exacerbates racism's denial of justice. "The Black woman in the south had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose," Angelou writes, highlighting the vulnerability of Black women in a racially stratified society (Angelou, 1969, p. 114) [1]. This striking graphic depicts a state of perpetual fear and instability in which justice is routinely denied. By claiming that "racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination," Bell Hooks supports this viewpoint (Hooks, 1981, p. 12) [6]. By demonstrating that equality cannot be attained without addressing several, overlapping kinds of oppression, this intersectional perspective broadens the philosophical framework of justice.

Furthermore, Angelou's story illustrates how racism limits people's possibilities and choices, undermining their moral agency. Systemic inequality impacts goals and destinies, as demonstrated by her observation that Black children were restricted to athletic success while white children may aim to become "Galileos and Madame Curies" (Angelou, 1969, p. 179) [1]. The ethical perspective of scholars like Amartya Sen, who emphasize that justice entails the increase of human powers and freedoms, is directly at odds with this denial of equal potential. These skills are not equally dispersed in a racist culture, which results in structural injustice. Fundamentally, racism is a moral paradox in countries that profess to support equality and fairness. By exposing real-life experiences that contradict impersonal intellectual ideas, Angelou's writing reveals this discrepancy. Her writings demonstrate that justice must be based on the acceptance of human dignity and the eradication of structural injustice; it cannot exist apart from social reality. Angelou weaves personal experience into a potent critique of injustice by recounting the everyday realities of racism, demonstrating that the denial of justice is not coincidental but rather profoundly ingrained in social systems. Therefore, it is evident from a philosophical reading of Angelou's works that racism is a basic ethical difficulty rather than just a social issue. It violates the fundamental tenets of justice and equality by depriving people of their humanity, rights, and acknowledgment. In the end, Angelou's writings urge a reconsideration of justice that incorporates lived realities, moral acknowledgment, and the proactive destruction of oppressive structures in addition to formal equality.

Equality and the assertion of human dignity

In Maya Angelou's writing, the concept of equality is inextricably linked to the affirmation of human dignity, especially in light of a racially divided society that consistently rejects Black people. Angelou's autobiographical account in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* demonstrates that equality is a profoundly moral demand based on the recognition of one's humanity rather than just a political or legal idea. Her study shows that in an unequal environment, dignity is frequently established via human perseverance, self-awareness, and the regaining of voice rather than through institutional support.

Angelou's early experiences demonstrate how identity formation is the first step in the rejection of equality. "I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everyone's dream of what was right with the world," she remembers (Angelou, 1969, as stated in) ^[1]. Racism affects self-perception and degrades dignity at a formative stage, as seen by this internalized urge to fit in with white standards of beauty. From a philosophical standpoint, this is consistent with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's worry that social injustices distort inherent human equality, causing people to gauge their value by external, frequently harsh standards. Angelou's story demonstrates how rejecting these forced hierarchies is necessary to restore dignity.

However, despite oppression, there are other instances in Angelou's writing where dignity is upheld. Her analysis of Mrs. Flowers, "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be a Negro, just by being herself" (Angelou, 1969, p. 95) ^[1], demonstrates how cultural affirmation and acknowledgment can spread dignity. Because it aligns with Immanuel Kant's belief that all people have inherent value and should be viewed as ends in and of themselves, this moment has philosophical significance. According to Kant, "humanity is an end in itself" (Kant, 1785/1993, p. 36) ^[8]. Angelou's story illustrates how this realization reinstates the equality that racism seeks to destroy. Angelou's writing also highlights the intimate connection between equality and the capacity to tell one's own story. "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you," she famously says (Angelou, 1969, as referenced in) ^[1]. This statement emphasizes that having the freedom to express one's own experience is just as important to dignity as receiving recognition from others. From a philosophical standpoint, this supports Paulo Freire's contention that silence is a form of dehumanization and that the oppressed must regain their voice in order to achieve liberation. As a result, Angelou's tale becomes a potent declaration of equality that turns individual suffering into group resistance.

Angelou's depiction of Black womanhood serves to further emphasize the connection between equality and dignity. "The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character deserves respect," she notes (Angelou, 1969, p. 272) ^[1]. By portraying Black women's survival as evidence of their power and moral value, this remark challenges the prevailing narratives that deny them respect. Bell Hooks' claim that oppressive regimes aim to "dehumanize and objectify" oppressed groups (Hooks, 1981, p. 15) ^[6] becomes especially pertinent in this scenario. By upholding the dignity of people who suffer and oppose such structures, Angelou's writing rejects this dehumanization. Furthermore, equality is portrayed in Angelou's writings as a real struggle influenced by social and historical circumstances rather than as an abstract ideal. Black children are restricted to physical accomplishments, whereas white children are envisioned as scientists and thinkers (Angelou, 1969, p. 179) ^[1]. This illustrates how inequality limits human potential. This is in line with Amartya Sen's belief that in order to achieve true equality, people's capacities must be expanded so they can have fulfilling lives. Angelou's story demonstrates how denial of

these possibilities compromises dignity. In the end, equality is portrayed in Angelou's writings as a continuous process of defending human dignity against those who would undermine it. Her art demonstrates that dignity is earned via tenacity, cultural pride, and the guts to stand up rather than being bestowed by society. Angelou urges readers to reconsider equality as a moral obligation based on acknowledgment, respect, and fairness by turning her own experiences with racism into a more comprehensive ethical critique. By doing this, her literature not only highlights the shortcomings of racist systems but also presents a picture of humanity in which true equality is built on dignity.

Moral resistance: from silence to voice

In Maya Angelou's writing, the transition from silence to voice is a potent example of moral fight against racism and oppression. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, silence is a state imposed by trauma, fear, and structural injustice rather than just the lack of voice. Angelou's early silence after being assaulted as a kid illustrates how oppressive systems may silence the voices of the weak. But in the end, she reclaims language, turning stillness into resistance and doing it in an ethical manner. This trip shows that moral resistance frequently starts within the individual as a fight to regain dignity and self-expression; it is not necessarily immediate or overtly political. Angelou's famous statement, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you," encapsulates the anguish of voice suppression (Angelou, 1969, p. 1) ^[1]. According to this argument, the inability to speak is a rejection of one's humanity, and silence itself is a type of pain. Philosophically speaking, this supports Paulo Freire's claim that oppression dehumanizes people by denying them the ability to express themselves and give their world a name. Freire highlights that "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 88) ^[3], implying that voice is intrinsically linked to freedom and agency. This principle is embodied in Angelou's story, as her moral and intellectual enlightenment begins with her move from silence to voice. This change is further demonstrated by the metaphor of the bird in a cage. "The caged bird sings for the caged bird sings of freedom," according to Angelou's poetic metaphor (Angelou, 1969, p. 38) ^[1]. Despite being imprisoned, singing represents resistance to persecution. The caged bird's voice is a cry for liberation and a refusal to accept quiet as fate, not a sign of contentment. This metaphor illustrates a more comprehensive philosophical view of resistance, according to which even constrained modes of speech can turn into acts of defiance. In this way, the voice turns into a moral force that confronts injustice and declares that change is possible.

Furthermore, Angelou's experience demonstrates the close relationship between education and recognition and voice rehabilitation. Her interaction with Mrs. Flowers is essential to her regaining self-expression and language confidence. She emphasizes that communication is not just functional but transformative, pointing out that words need the human voice to convey deeper meaning. This concept aligns with Hannah Arendt's theory, which contends that speech is crucial to

human freedom because it enables people to present themselves to others as distinct persons. Without a voice, people are not acknowledged or given agency in public life. A change from passive suffering to active moral resistance is also symbolized by the transition from quiet to voice. Because it gives voice to the experiences of a whole community, Angelou's story implies that speaking up is both a personal and a collective act. Black people were frequently "trained to sit quietly and listen" with no chance of counterattack, according to her perspective (Angelou, 1969, p. 180) ^[1], which emphasizes how silence is used as a technique of dominance. Therefore, it becomes morally required to break this quiet. By challenging the systems that aim to silence and marginalize Black voices, it turns personal expression into a kind of social criticism.

Furthermore, the assertion of identity and dignity is intimately linked to the emergence of voice in Angelou's writing. Speaking becomes a means of regaining one's position in society and fending off racism's dehumanizing consequences. Bell Hooks argues that in order for disadvantaged people to fight dominance, they must "name their reality" (Hooks, 1989, p. 28) ^[7]. By transforming personal memories into a potent story of resistance that challenges injustice and embraces humanity, Angelou's storytelling serves this purpose. In the end, Angelou's writing shows that moral opposition starts with having the guts to speak up. Her work demonstrates how oppressive structures frequently impose silence, but that voice may be recovered with perseverance, acknowledgment, and the power of language. In addition to opposing racism, Angelou redefines resistance itself by turning her own experiences into a more comprehensive moral story. Her experience demonstrates that speaking is an essential part of being alive, resisting, and claiming one's dignity in a society that tries to undermine it.

Toward a philosophy of justice in Angelou's literature

In order to develop a philosophy of justice in Maya Angelou's writing, one must go beyond theoretical notions of fairness and take into account justice as a lived, moral, and experiential reality influenced by resistance, race, and memory. Angelou's, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* presents a profoundly introspective moral perspective in which justice arises by the acknowledgment of human dignity, the uncovering of injustice, and the assertion of voice, rather than a formal philosophical framework. According to her research, justice must be based on the real-life experiences of people who are oppressed by oppressive systems rather than being solely understood through institutions or laws. According to Angelou's story, fairness is a question of moral awakening as injustice is ingrained in common societal behaviours. "In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most Black children did not really know what white people looked like," she adds (Angelou, 1969, p. 25) ^[1]. This finding demonstrates how racial segregation produces a moral distance that prevents mutual recognition in addition to physical isolation. Philosophically speaking, this is consistent with Iris Marion Young's critique of injustice, which contends that structural injustice is caused by accepted social processes

rather than singular acts. Justice must address these underlying institutions rather than just their outward manifestations, as Angelou's story illustrates.

In addition, justice is portrayed in Angelou's writing as being inextricably linked to self-worth and dignity. Justice starts with acknowledgment and affirmation, as seen by her observation that Mrs. Flowers "made me proud to be a Negro, just by being herself" (Angelou, 1969, p. 95) ^[1]. This is in line with Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, which holds that all people have inherent value and should never be viewed as nothing more than a tool (Kant, 1785/1993, p. 36) ^[8]. However, in Angelou's reality, this kind of acknowledgment is not assured; instead, it needs to be fostered within communities that oppose racism's dehumanizing effects. As a result, justice becomes an ethical and relational practice based on respect for one another. Additionally, Angelou's writings redefine justice via the perspectives of survival and resiliency. "The adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character [and] deserves respect," she notes (Angelou, 1969, p. 272) ^[1]. This claim contradicts conventional philosophical frameworks that frequently ignore the perspectives of underrepresented communities. Angelou portrays justice as something that is created via struggle rather than as a set ideal. This viewpoint is consistent with Friedrich Nietzsche's theories, which highlight the importance of conflict in the development of strength and identity. However, Angelou reframes this battle as surviving with dignity rather than dominance.

Furthermore, the significance of voice and narrative is emphasized in Angelou's philosophical conception of justice. The transformational power of language is highlighted by her famous observation that "words mean more than what is set down on paper" (Angelou, 1969) ^[1]. In this way, justice necessitates giving marginalized people a voice and a chance to be heard. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, which holds that justice requires inclusive discourse and the equal involvement of all voices, lends support to this notion. By questioning prevailing narratives and making room for many viewpoints, Angelou's writing becomes a kind of such involvement. Furthermore, Angelou's writings imply that expanding human potential is a necessary component of justice. Injustice limits human potential, as demonstrated by her observation that Black children had limited aspirations while white children were urged to become "Galileos and Madame Curies" (Angelou, 1969, p. 179) ^[1]. This is consistent with Amartya Sen's contention that justice ought to be assessed in terms of people's actual freedoms to pursue fulfilling lives. Angelou's story demonstrates how racism consistently restricts these liberties, eroding justice at its foundation. In the end, a concept of justice in Angelou's writing incorporates voice, capability, dignity, and acknowledgment. It is a philosophy that emerges from lived experience rather than abstraction, forcing readers to face the ethical paradoxes of a society that practices exclusion while claiming equality. According to Angelou's writings, justice should be rethought as an inclusive, dynamic, and compassionate ideal that hears the voices of the downtrodden and works to change the systems that keep them silent. By doing this, her writing becomes a critique of injustice

as well as a picture of a world that is more compassionate and just.

Conclusion

In summary, this study has demonstrated that Maya Angelou's writings provide a potent philosophical analysis of equality, justice, and moral resistance in the face of racism. Her articles demonstrate that racism is a profound moral failure that deprives people of their humanity, voice, and dignity in addition to being a social and political issue. Through her personal stories, Angelou reveals the ways in which injustice shape's identity, restricts opportunity, and causes social and psychological harm. However, her work shows that equality is more than just legal rights; it also requires respect, acceptance, and the ability to express oneself authentically. Angelou's transition from quiet to voice serves as a key illustration of moral resistance. She confronts oppressive structures and turns individual sorrow into societal awareness by reclaiming language and sharing her narrative. Her writing demonstrates that resistance can arise through self-assertion, memory, and storytelling rather than constantly manifesting as overt protest. Her work thus links personal experience to more general philosophical concepts of justice and human dignity. In the end, Angelou's words urge us to reconsider justice as an inclusive, lived practice rather than an idealized concept. Justice, in her vision, must address historical inequalities and listen to marginalized voices. It must establish circumstances that allow everyone to live with respect and equal opportunity. As a result, in addition to criticizing racism, Angelou's writings present a positive picture of a society that is more just and compassionate and is based on moral bravery, empathy, and recognition.

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