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MOTHERHOOD AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* AND *THE HEART OF A WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of most Black literature is the issue of race. Therefore, the denigrations, subjugations and oppressions that African-Americans undergo occupy the writings of Black writers. Maya Angelou's autobiography chronicles her life under such an environment that places premium on colour well above any other quality the individual or community may possess. It is imperative to underscore that the individual remains the essential base from which an autobiographer builds relationship to both community and family. Throughout her autobiography Angelou is engaged in determining the place of the individual, especially a black woman in a racist environment. Through her personal stories, readers are able to appreciate better those conditions and situations that not only malign and hold Blacks down, but she offers quite succinctly diverse ways and means available to Blacks in their quest to raise their heads up in the society, overcome difficulties and find self-worth. Although these difficulties may be demoralizing and painful, they can at the same time give a regenerative effect on the sensitive, intelligent, and to anybody that is morally aware. The struggle to upturn the "status-quo" and reclaim the self that is being obliterated dominates her works. Motherhood becomes a veritable avenue she employs in cushioning the negative effects of racism and its accompanying denigrations.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is an important theme that is central to Black women writing, and this is quite dominant in the autobiographical novels of Maya Angelou. Jacqueline de Weever in *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction* points out that:

> More than any other, motherhood is the female function most associated with Black women. In African societies, where the extended families lived in compounds of their own, the functions of a wife were shared by a man's many wives. The rearing of children was their biological mother's chief responsibility, shared with her co-wives and her extended family of aunts and uncles (134).

But, this was not the case in the plantations of the American South as the closely-knit family structure was missing. As Deborah Gray White contends, the "practice of marrying slaves from one plantation to slaves in another effectively divided the family, and female slaves found that they had to rear children alone without the assistance of co-wives and the extended family" (65). She explains further, however, that when slave holders now focused on childbearing female slaves, that only rekindled and reinforced a cultural attitude that could be seen in both Africa and America. And, the situation of becoming a mother has well been embraced by the Black community since then. Joyce Ladner (1971) captures this whole essence appropriately, stating that the "ultimate test of womanhood ... is one's ability to bring forth life" (215). Thus, for any black woman, this singular experience not only produces, but equally enhances maturity that no other experience has been found capable of.

MOTHERHOOD

It is important to recognise the emasculating effects of slavery on the head of the black home, the man. Even after emancipation, the denigration, psychological emasculation and dependence simply deepened in the sense that the economic system further denied him employment and as a consequence, the leadership of his family. Daryl Dance (1979) discusses this development in her study, "Black Eve or Madonna?" She argues that "because the Black man has historically been stripped by society of his authority, pride, and manhood, the Black woman has naturally been forced to assume a dominant role" (127).

The White society is responsible for the emasculation of the black man, and in the event it throws onto the laps of the black woman, the responsibility of seeing to the survival and even growth of the entire household. This responsibility could not have been more enormous, considering what survival for Blacks in the American society meant. William Grier and Price Cobbs (1968) acknowledge in their psychological study of the Black psyche that:

> This is every mother's task. But the Black mother has a more ominous message for her child and feels more urgently the need to get the message across. The child must know that the White world is

> dangerous and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him (61).

Therefore, as the child struggles through growth, the black mother is there to guide his steps so he may be aware of the ominous presence of the slave master, the lynch mob and the present-day legal system. She had to teach her child to mask and repress his normal masculinity and aggressiveness, lest these put his life in danger (Dance, 128). Thus, she carefully and effectively initiates and prepares him to face a world that places him in a subordinate position.

Interestingly, black women novelists and writers, according to De Weever (1991), continually depict the fatherless household with the advantages and disadvantages it entails for the women, emphasizing the maternal relationships and minimizing the paternal ones as a part of the reality of black life, where more households are headed by women than by men (135). It corroborates Dance's assertion that rather than being seen as a fallen Eve, who, as a matter of urgency, should be destroyed before she corrupts and violates others–a view held in Black literature - Black writers have instead paid glowing tribute to the black mother as a Madonna, bringing and ensuring salvation to her children (125). It is this perception of functioning as a succor and stabilizer that black women have come to represent, especially in Black writings. This development is echoed by Maggie Humm (1986) in *Feminist Criticism,* when she posits that:

> In literature, by citing allegiance to their mothers, Black American women move closer to African ancestry and away from the White dominated intellectual context of American academia. Mother myths have a great power and are a continuing part of many African cultures where motherhood is enshrined and traditionally venerated (112).

Ebele Eko (2005) shares in the above inviolable position, contending further that, "while exposing the deep sufferings as well as the endurance and resilience of black women, these writers celebrate their mothers and grandmothers" (42).

This pride of place for the black mother can be summed up by Maya Angelou's comment in *Jet:*

> There is a kind of strength that is most frightening in Black women. It's as if a steel rod runs right through her head down to the feet. And I believe that we have to thank Black women... for keeping the Black family alive... (48).

In *Caged Bird,* the theme of motherhood remains quite topical. This is viewed not only in respect of Angelou becoming a mother at the youthful age of sixteen, but most importantly in the three dominant women who perpetuated her life: her mother, Vivian Baxter; paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson and of course, the acclaimed Stamps' Black aristocrat, Mrs. Bertha Flowers.

These women all contributed in shaping Angelou in her march towards adulthood, and successful survival in a harsh environment.

It is pertinent to underscore here that whereas motherhood was usually associated with domesticity and reproductive labour for White women in America between the 1940's and 1960's, for Black women and women of other racially oppressed groups, motherhood was tied and is still being tied to work in both the productive and reproductive sense. Elaborating on this idea, Patricia Hill Collins (1994) in her study, "Shifting the Centre: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood" offers the term "mother-work" to actually connote the need for racially oppressed women to work for the day to come, especially for one's children, those of the community or possibly for those yet unborn (58). The focus here then is that Mother-work captures in essence the inseparability of work from motherhood in racially oppressed and segregated communities, and at the same time reduces the dichotomies in feminist theorizing which rigidly distinguish between private and public, family and work, as well as the individual and the collective.

Collins' study also depicts how the White feminists dichotomous split of the public sphere from the domain regrettably distinguishes one domain as "male" and the other as "female" in a manner that disregards black women's realities. Conversely, it is important to recognise that black mothers have always worked in both spheres, in that black motherhood had always encompassed work. Therefore, Angelou's autobiographies highlight how racist capitalism drives black women into poverty that is not only financial, but at times, equally moral. This is evidenced in *Gather Together in my Name,* the sequel to *Caged Bird,* where Angelou writes about the problems she faced as a working teenage mother, an unprofessional black girl to whom only the most menial jobs were available. As Siphokazi Koyana explains in "The Heart of the Matter...," "the long list of Angelou's menial jobs which include those on the fringes of society, shows how false is the assumption that working outside the home would liberate women from economic dependence on men" (2), an assumption that was the main thesis of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique.* Bell Hooks holds the same position and remarks that the bourgeois assumption that working outside the home would bring women self-fulfillment did not take into account the nature of the work and which often times is so demeaning (95).

Having appreciated the above, it would have been almost impossible for Angelou to work full time if she did not have her mother and community 'othermothers' to rely on, for assistance with childcare. This is so because the extended family in Black communities includes people outside of kinship lines who show loyalty owing to a sense of obligation. The presence of these "othermothers," according to Collins, could account for Angelou's ability to leave her son with different care providers or friends while she searched for a viable career in both *Gather Together* and *Singin' and Swingin..*

Similarly, it is acknowledged that the traditional family structure in the Black community in America has its origin in Africa. According to anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa, "in African communities, marital and family stability are not the same thing. Lineages, rather than married couples, are the core around which the typical African extended family is built" (xxi). Arguing further, Sudarkasa stresses that this form of family organization happens to be one of the traditional African retentions which have enabled the survival of the African-American people in the socially, economically, and politically oppressive climate of America. Therefore, by demonstrating to us the traditional centrality of "othermothers" in Black motherhood, Angelou challenges the Western notion of children as property and demonstrates the importance of sharing one's children with other women in the community. She also depicts quite clearly how African and African-American communities have long realized that vesting one person with the full responsibility of mothering may not be wise. Hence, the need and role of other mothers.

This role was to come to the fore following the annulment of the cantankerous relationship of Angelou's parents, as she and Bailey were sent to Stamps (a little town in Arkansas) to live with their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson. This is a role Mary Burgher latches on, and speaks pedagogically about:

> Motherhood is a non-individualistic, cultural force that is not based solely on procreation, breeding, or providing numbers. It means a great deal more. It means ordering the universe - or whatever small part of it one can claim - in the image of one's personal concept of beauty, and transmitting this conception along with a respect for strength to one's heirs (115).

Momma Henderson, described as a strong character who lives by her fundamental religious beliefs, provides succor to the distressed children. Although a black woman in Stamps, she has incredible power and owns a successful business that guarantees her financial freedom. Mary Jane Lupton (1990), in her study "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity" is appreciative of this position and reveals that "as a self made woman Annie Henderson has the economic power to lend money to Whites. As a practical black woman however, she is convinced that Whites cannot be directly confronted" (260). Recognising the place of Blacks in such a charged environment, she teaches the children to act according to outdated racial codes of behaviour.

In a similar vein, Mary Burgher (1979) discusses how the "Black mother's knowledge and endurance of America's racial hostility and violence are envisioned as strengthening and motivating tools with which she prepares others of her race for self-sufficient and productive lives" (115). Thus, for the black mothers, the protection and safety of the Black community genuinely occupy them as found in Black literature. In John Oliver Killens *Youngblood,* such motherly protection for her son, Robby manifests quite clearly. Equally, this is apparent in Richard Wright's "The Ethics of

Living Jim Crow," in which he fought back when attacked by Whites who left a long gash in his neck. However, instead of receiving sympathy, his mother beat him and proceeded to lecture him on the "Jim Crow Wisdom", admonishing him "never, never, under any conditions to fight White folks again" (4).

The young Angelou remembers her grandmother in this role, agreeing that "a deep-brooding love hung over everything she touched" (47). Furthermore, as Lyman Hagen (1997) recalls, her love of Angelou is unconditional and maternal (69) and steadily impacts on her grandchildren's ways of living in a segregated environment, and also being realistic about their place as blacks in the society, knowing quite well that the White structure would not hesitate to express its displeasure if they moved out of line. Even though, the youthful Angelou had frowned at this submissiveness, especially at being taunted by "powhitetrash" girls, Lupton points out that throughout the *Caged Bird,* Momma Henderson, "represents to Angelou both strength and weakness, both generosity and punishment, both affection and denial of affection" (261). The same woman whose "gentle press of her rough hand conveyed her own concern and assurance to me (Maya)" (96), and in reply to Angelou's question if she loved her, that "God is Love. Just worry about whether you're being a good girl, then He will love you" (47).

She is a woman of substance, whose store in Stamps is regarded as "lay centre of activities in town" (5), especially by the Blacks, as they assemble to move and return from the plantations. It is equally seen as the moral centre of the family. As Eko points out, "the grandmother in African-American literature is the epitome of resilience, survival and endurance; she is the matriarch of the extended family, keeping them together by the power and dignity of her presence" (21). Black mothers as signified by Momma Henderson are therefore saddled with the responsibility of holding together, not only the black family, but also the larger community.

Elizabeth Fox Genovese is forth coming in her study, and sees particularly the time Maya "spent under Momma's care in Stamps as the core of her childhood and, implicitly, as the wellspring of her adult identity" (230). In the absence of her biological mother, Momma stepped in to guide her through that particular stage of her life, and even the town, after recognizing them as "harmless (children) responded to them by closing in around us as a real mother embraces a stranger's child; warmly but not too familiarly" (7). In that way they blended and became part of the community's life and activities.

As earlier recognised, childhood autobiographies cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. This is so because the importance of the influences such a child faces in the quest for growth would definitely impact on the child. Hagen buttresses the point that the systematic segregation and racism that Angelou observed and endured as a child, and the traumatic rape she suffered cannot be dismissed lightly or even perhaps considered as inconsequential in her overall development (12). Richard Coe submits that these autobiographies emanate from families "with a strong element of emotional imbalance" (140). In this case therefore, the rape of the child Angelou, initiated a period of substantial emotional stress. It is important to discover, however, that Angelou's apparent emotional imbalance was equally met by the strength of Momma Henderson who unconditionally gave the young child tough love, and the stability to enable her rise from ashes. Speaking gloriously on Black motherhood, Hagen observes that "without formal psychological counselling, Momma found someone to break through the self-imposed silence resulting from the child's response to the rape event" (14).

The woman Momma ran to for help was Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the acclaimed "aristocrat of Black Stamps" who threw her a life line. This is the woman, Angelou reveals "was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known and has remained throughout my life the measure of what *a* human being can be" (78). This surrogate mother accepted young Angelou as an individual, not in relation to another person. Moreover, she ministers to Angelou's growing quest for individuality by giving her books of poetry, engaging her philosophically about books, and most importantly encouraging her to recite poems. This singular act of committing poems to memory, pondering and reading them when lonely, simply enthroned in Angelou, a sense of power within herself, and as such a transcendence over her immediate environment.

Fox-Genovese posits in her study that "Mrs. Flowers joined the world of Stamps to the world of literature, embodied in her person the dreams that shaped Marguerite's imagination. For Marguerite, under Mrs. Flower's tutelage, formal education became salvation" (232). She did proceed further, not just stopping at the delights, as it were, of literature, but most importantly in making her to recognize and appreciate the unending beauties and sense of black folk culture. She insisted that ignorance and illiteracy should not in any way be confused.

As Angelou recalls in the *Caged Bird* "she encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations" (83). Thus, Angelou's "Lessons in Living" with Mrs. Flowers did primarily awaken her consciousness, sharpen her perspective of her environment and also of the relationship between Blacks and the larger society, and teach her something about the beauty and power of language. Dolly McPherson discloses that she was "emotionally and intellectually strengthened by this friendship" (44), and the effect being that she "begins to compose poetic verses and sing songs, and to keep a scrapbook journal in which she records her reactions to and impressions of people, places and events, and new ideas that she is introduced to by books" (44). Angelou's recording of impressions of early life in Arkansas when she was barely nine years old attests to this.

Mrs. Bertha Flowers, therefore, imparted to Angelou language, the human form of communication which distinctively sets humans apart from lower animals. Thus, words acquire meaning by being spoken. Fox Genovese sums up by acknowledging that "Angelou represents Mrs. Flowers as bridging the gap between oral and literary culture, between the Black community of Stamps and *Jane Eyre"* (233). This is a remarkable achievement in the end for the woman who helped bring Angelou, who sopped around the house" "like an old biscuit", out of her cocoon and began to speak. Mrs. Flower's influence therefore cannot be underestimated. As Angelou captures, "she made me proud to be a Negro, just by being herself" (77), and as such returned her confidence.

Angelou's biological mother Vivian Baxter cut a different image to other mother substitutes, like Momma Henderson, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, and even grandmother Baxter. Vivian's role in the growth of her daughter in the text does not fully smack of motherhood but instead, of abandonment, a crime their father Bailey Snr., was culpable of too. Having been shipped off with her brother to Stamps at such a tender age, it was a shock and anguish to realize that their parents were alive, and couldn't know why they (parents) chose to send them away. As a matter of fact, this dominant issue of abandonment will turn out to be important in their young lives, as they are reclaimed and shipped off by their parents several times in the course of the book. It remains one of the feelings that really influenced their childhood, and also undermined their happiness in adulthood.

This absence and abandonment was to come to the fore when Bailey Snr. came and uprooted them once again to St. Louis to see and be with their mother, whose exquisite beauty the youthful Angelou couldn't fathom. Angelou writes of her astonishment, "to describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colours of a rainbow... she was too beautiful to have children" (49 - 50).

To her understanding, therefore, a woman as beautiful as her mother doesn't really have need for children: the reason for sending them away in the first place. This is the realization that McPherson captures when she observes that Angelou's mother, like "Bailey Snr. represents some distant world unknown to Maya, Vivian Baxter's world is equally foreign" (38), expressing that "Maya's lively beautiful mother is bold, self-reliant, and unconventional"(39).

Even though she trained as a nurse, she fends for herself and her children through liaisons with an avalanche of live-in-boyfriends who provided the veritable necessities for existence. Disturbingly, it is this absence and abdication of motherly responsibility that created the leeway for an eight year old girl's exploitation. Writing in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism,* Stephen Demetrakopoulus (1980) argues that for Mr. Freeman, who is always in the house waiting for his woman who is not there, Angelou became a stop-gap, which he uses as an extension of the mother to assuage his denied sexual urge (198), an action that was to mark the beginning of a crisis in a young girl's life.

As the text develops, however, Vivian Baxter was to provide support for her young daughter on discovering that she was pregnant; and churns out hosts of aphorisms as Angelou struggles with life. In the *Reproduction of Mothering,* Nancy Chodorow (1978), argues that "Women identifiers develop in identification with their mothers and continue in relationship with them, real or imagined, that is interdependent and empathic" (44). This was reflective of Angelou's relationship with her mother, in that despite the earlier abdications, as it were, she came back to assuage, as she rightly puts it, Angelou's worries that she would crush her new baby if they slept together, "You don't have to think about the right thing. If you're for the right thing then you do it without thinking" (246).

As Angelou returns from the European tour with the opera group, *Porgy and Bess,* in *Singin' and Swingin',* she is confronted with the stark reality of looking after a growing young man, Guy, who equally was developing his own personality. Angelou inevitably returns to motherhood and its attendant responsibility. Smarting from the feeling of guilt for having abandoned her son in pursuit of career evidenced in *Singin' and Swingin'* Angelou resolved to be as close as possible to her son. This is equally reinforced as she remembers that she had suffered the same parental absence in childhood.

It is important to recognise that despite her desire to always stay close to her son, the demands of career would always be there, a point Lupton discloses too when she opines that, "in *The Heart of a Woman* the tension between mothering and working continues, but to a lesser extent" (270), as compared to in *Singin' and Swingin'.* This situation that gives rise to Angelou occasionally leaving her son, and on one of such engagements in Chicago, she was called with the message that, "there's been some trouble" (75), which clearly set her heart racing with fear that something terrible could have happened to Guy.

This incident which brings to the fore the issue of the protection and safety that motherhood involves, demonstrates that Angelou was a good observer of Momma Henderson in *Caged Bird.* Importantly also, is the fact that Angelou's concern for her son before now had largely been an internal struggle as could be seen when Guy was stolen in *Gather Together.* The one in *The Heart of a Woman* smacks of Momma Henderson's confrontation with the White dentist, Dr. Lincoln. While Angelou was away in Chicago, performing, Guy had a face-off with a Brooklyn street gang whose leader had accused Guy of beating his girlfriend, Susie, and threatened to murder Guy. Upon her return, she confronted the gang leader Jerry, swearing:

> I understand that you are the head of the Savages and you have an arrangement with my son. I also understand that the police are afraid of you. Well, I came round to make you aware of something. If my son comes home with a Black eye or a torn shirt, I won't call the police.

His attention followed my hand to my purse:

As the text develops, however, Vivian Baxter was to provide support for her young daughter on discovering that she was pregnant; and churns out hosts of aphorisms as Angelou struggles with life. In the *Reproduction of Mothering,* Nancy Chodorow (1978), argues that "Women identifiers develop in identification with their mothers and continue in relationship with them, real or imagined, that is interdependent and empathic" (44). This was reflective of Angelou's relationship with her mother, in that despite the earlier abdications, as it were, she came back to assuage, as she rightly puts it, Angelou's worries that she would crush her new baby if they slept together, "You don't have to think about the right thing. If you're for the right thing then you do it without thinking" (246).

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His attention followed my hand to my purse:

> I will come over here and shoot Susie's grandmother first, then her mother, then I'll blow away that sweet' little baby. You understand what I'm saying? If the "Savages" so much as touch my son I will then find your house and kill everything that moves, including the rats and cockroaches (83-84).

Lupton acknowledges this fear in the Brooklyn incident in her study, but argues that, "unlike the internal complicates of *Gather Together* this one operates outside of the narrator, showing Angelou as a strong aggressive black mother rather than a mother torn by self-doubt" (270). What Lupton contends here is that rather than sit and continue to play blame game and allow her imagination to run wild, Angelou instead confronts squarely the problem and subdues the evil. This underscores the fact that in *The Heart of a Woman* there is a depiction of a more stable and mature woman determined to paddle her own canoe. These concerns, therefore, were a constant reminder of the question of motherhood for the Black American. And as Angelou observes "the Black mother perceives destruction at every door, ruination at each window and even she herself is beyond her own suspicion" (36-37).

Jerry's response ironically captures the very theme of motherhood that is dominant in her autobiographies, "O.K.: I understand. But for a mother, I must say you're a mean motherfucker" (84). Even at such strong protection from danger that the child is able to get from the mother, the reality though is that it is not absolute. This realization played out near the end of *The Heart of a Woman,* when Guy was seriously injured in a car accident. As she walks up to his hospital bed, she lets out this tormented feeling:

> I looked at my son, my real life. He was born to me when he was two months old, and except for a year I spent in Europe without him, and a month when he was stolen by a deranged woman, we had spent our lives together. My grown life stretched before me, stiff as a pine board, in a strange country, blood caked on his face and clotted on his clothes (263).

Remarkably, the above scene not only goes to confirm the vulnerability of the child but most importantly the mother's inability to constantly shield the child from all danger. As events continue to unfold, and with Guy on the path to recovery, it also marks a turning point, for Guy begins to move to his own independence, separate from his mother. Similarly, Angelou starts to chart a new life for herself.

Laying credence to the whole concept of motherhood in Angelou's autobiographies, Stephen Butterfield (1974), in *Black Autobiography in America* argues that "continuity is achieved by the contact of mother and child, the sense of life begetting life that happens automatically in spite of all confusion - perhaps also because of it" (213). Therefore, the issue of motherhood enjoys high profile attention in the study of Black literature, a point that Margaret Walker underscores in her study, "The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature", elaborating on her belief that "African-American literature is a reservoir of Black humanism. It is the standard bearer of the values of freedom, peace, and human dignity. It is what America, Black and White needs" (853 - 54).

It is pertinent to state, therefore, that the significance of motherhood is a unifying element in Angelou's autobiographies, and that the interplay between mother and child creates thematic continuity. For instance, while the end of *Caged Bird* marks the beginning of Angelou's life as a mother, *Gather Together* relates her struggles as a teenage mother. In *Singin' and Swingin'* she traces the tension between her pursuit of success as an entertainer and the guilt she feels as a mother who must leave her child to ensure a better future for both. In delineating her growth in *The Heart of a Woman,* she becomes a wiser, more mature woman and mother, while in *Travelling Shoes,* both Angelou and son are adults, and have established a healthy balance between dependence and independence as she leaves him at the University in Ghana while she returns to the United States.

CONCLUSION

As earlier underscored, racism remains the dominant theme in most Black literature. For Angelou, there are certain social barriers that she must negotiate in her growth from childhood to adulthood. These are obstacles she must confront and overcome in order to maintain a dignified sense of self and relative freedom in the society. Unfortunately, White dominance intrudes on this march, and so Angelou manifests necessary skills and learns vital lessons in courage and survival. She also opens her eyes to the fact that she belongs to the oppressed class.

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