

# Singing the Power of Black Motherhood in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou

Ruth Neyah V<sup>1</sup> & Vijayakumar M<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

Correspondence: Vijayakumar M, Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: vijayakumar.muthu@vit.ac.in

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## Abstract

In order to define Black motherhood, this research will explore mother-child interactions, alternative mother figures, altering marital balances, and women-men relationships. In addition to expressing her African American perspective, Angelou reflected it in the personalities, songs, and events she utilized in her autobiographies. Her autobiographies are extremely true to reality since she covers historical political happenings and well-known figures from actual life. The bonds that unite women of all eras, from all ethnicities, and from all countries are bridged by commonalities of joy and agony, adversity and despair, as well as ascent and descent, all of which revolve around the specification and design of motherhood. According to Maya Angelou, black mothers are wary, worried, and preoccupied with their kids in her concept of being a black mother, she adds that being single means that her lover has rejected her. Motherhood has endured as an idea and peculiarity that has moved from African communities to "modern" African American familial and societal formations, serving as a stark example of empowerment for women who have resisted the onrush of male supremacy in every aspect of their personal and societal reality. Traditional and intellectual discourse show that matrilineal conceptions of motherhood have persisted, whether by choice, by need, or by threat. She claims that white people who do not consider her hold all positions of authority in the outside world. This paper renders a perspective on the overall typical "motherhood format" of the blacks which serve as their strength altogether in the autobiographies of Maya Angelou.

**Keywords:** Black mother, autobiography, black history, African American, motherhood, diaspora, slavery

## 1. Introduction

After being born a granddaughter, Maya is now a parent. She begins the process of becoming a lady. She cares for the ladies in her community. She considers their lives to be finite. *The Caged Bird* depicts the parting of a parent and child who had become close through affection. It signifies the end of Maya's transition into womanhood. She is frightened and reliant. She exhibits indications that she can manage her life as a Black mother and a woman (Kamble, 1979). Near the close of the eighteenth century, the genre of autobiography emerged and quickly gained popularity in America. Women authors had a unique opportunity to portray their traumatic lives against white culture.

The cornerstones of self-examination, proclamation, and self-discovery seem to be the life tales. Marguerite Johnson, better known as Maya Angelou, was indeed a famous American poet, narrator, activist, and author. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Despite having a varied profession that includes work as a singer, dancer, actor, composer, and the first black woman to direct in Hollywood, Angelou is most known for her work as a writer, editor, novelist, dramatist, and poet. She is recognised with a long number of plays, cinema, and television programs extending more than five decades in addition to publishing seven autobiographies, three works of essays, and many poetry collections.

After undergoing a thorough multi-dimensional research, the Black Mother's figure was recognized as a "Superhuman" who was exempt from the "modern conveniences of loss, neurotic crises, and neutral feeling lifestyles." The mother-visual figure's depictions in traditional African history and art, as well as those in African American literature, enhanced this idea further and further. The Africans have close relations with other nations even prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Whether obligated or willingly, their migration to other regions constituted one of the fundamental aspects of African literary and cultural history. The idea of "The Queen bee," a powerful black mother who serves as the backbone of her household throughout the community, slowly took shape. It revealed how black women combined qualities from both male and female role-playing. She took care of her family's needs as both the earner and the housewife.

These women weren't just child bearers but also caretakers who guaranteed and stabilised the continuation of life while being constantly exposed to the worst times of hardship. It is possible to analyse the persistence of the deeply sexist culture through generations as a

required self-preservation strategy. She obtained more than forty honorary degrees in addition to other accolades. The seven autobiographies that comprise Angelou's series and which cover her whole harrowing and difficult life are her finest works. The fourth volume of Maya's autobiography is titled *The Heart of a Woman*. It covers the period between 1950 and 1960's in Angelou's life. As Maya works to raise her kid, motherhood is one of the book's most significant topics. Additionally, it discusses the mother-child dynamic in the black community. Maya shows her relationship with her kid in a nice way. It discusses parenting and the ties that bind mothers and children in African culture.

## 2. Maya Angelou as a Black Mother: A Young Mom's Story

Maya became pregnant at the tender age of sixteen, without understanding the true significance of the term "mother" or the obligations that came with being a mother. Even she was unable to properly embrace her baby. Maya developed as a mum together with her kid. Since she formerly had sentiments like to those of her son Guy, she would readily relate to his emotions. Guy and Maya both suffered from a fractured family relationship as children. Maya was Guy's sole parent, raising him. Maya formed a personal connection with Guy because she understood what it would be like to be a parentless youngster.

Angelou discussed women's anxieties and challenges in raising their offspring for a brighter future. As a result, she states "How could he know what a young Negro boy needed in a racist world" (*The Heart of a Woman*, 29). Although Maya's kid is fourteen years old and in the adolescent years, she could not consider him to be mature. She had always thought of him as a child. She was so concerned about the general public that posed a threat to all African society. This is not just Maya's thoughts; it's also the mentality of a devoted mother who connects to the black community. Maya writes in her memoirs, "Of course we can meet, of course, I want to see you, baby".

According to Maya Angelou, black moms are wary, worried, and preoccupied with their kids. In her concept of being a black mother, she emphasizes that being single means that her lover has forsaken her. She claims that white people who do not consider her hold all positions of power in the outside world. There are white people upon each job site. According to Angelou, a black mother is constantly on edge at residence because she never knows when the police may call to tell her that her child has been lynched or come on her door to tell her that her daughter has been killed (Meena & Karthigaiselvan, 2019).

Through these remarks, Angelou cautions black moms about the potential destruction of their tranquil households at the hands of white power. She not only shares her personal thoughts concerning being a black mother, but she also takes on the role of speaking for other black women. An author observes in his article that "the structures of a patriarchal culture are designed to keep women in subordinate positions and disregard their desires. Patriarchal societies also tend to be more violent... The duties of a woman have been reduced to those of a sexual and maternal nature" (Vinoth, 2023). There was issue with Guy once more when Maya was out from town. She arrived in New York right away to find out what had occurred. She ran into her buddies on the plane, and they shared drinks and conversation. Six feet tall, with a fourteen-year-old son, and I was still called baby" (*The Heart of a Woman*, 23). Even though she has a grown-up son, Maya's mother Vivian still views her as a child.

## 3. The Impact of Black Mothers on Their Children

The idea of super powerful Black moms is one of the most prominent ones in American culture and Black American ideology. It is considered that Black women possess the characteristics we connect with the classic mother more so than White women. They are committed, selfless, perceptive, and wise. They have a lasting, unwavering, and faultless love for one another. God might have forgotten us when he gave out long locks, large limbs, and fortune, but he absolutely did favor us since he gave out mom-love and wit. This is the theme of church hymns, the topic of preaching, and the topic of proverbs carried handed down from one generation of Black women to the next. It is hardly unexpected that empirical work on Black families places a strong emphasis on the accomplishments of Black moms. One sociologist said that motherhood is the "sole honorable inventive position wherein the Black women may properly aspire to engage." They define themselves as "historic beings in American notion than other women and undoubtedly powerful than Black males" mostly because of their function. It is astonishing, however, that sociological studies of Black motherhood don't reveal much about the bond that Black moms have with their daughters, who are the clear successors to motherhood because they are daughters rather than boys.

They perform classification on motherhood ambitions, parenting methods, hereditary poverty, single parenthood, and other issues that make us aware of the distinctiveness of Black motherhood, but they seldom ever look at the nuanced dynamics between mothers and daughters. In sociological studies of mother-child interactions, the child is often the man-child. Mr. Robert Staples claims, no connection is likely to be as some might explain interest in Black mother-son relationships as an understandable by-product of the high percentage of Black female led homes in the United States, but the actual cause lies somewhere. Few relationships are as uplifting or baffling as that of Black moms and sons (Wade-Gayles, 1984). Many television channels before the 1980s that included Black moms as prominent characters—despite their conventional portrayal—centered on this duo. Lately, Black dads and moms have been methodically "shed aside" on media. They have been replaced by fictitious parent-child connections that degrade our brains and violate our racial conscience. It seems sense to look for delicate accounts of mother-daughter interactions in Black women's autobiographies, yet even here we frequently find disappointment. With some exemptions, the memoirs place a greater emphasis on the racial victory than on the teenage years of Black women.

## 4. Maya Angelou's Take on Black Motherhood in Her Memoirs

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's autobiographical book, opens with a recognition of her grandmother's tremendous efforts to

raise Angelou and her brother when Angelou was just three years old. Consequently, during their growing years in Stamps, Angelou and her brother Bailey continued to be heavily influenced by their grandmother Annie Henderson. She was the only mother Angelou knew and loved, the "other mother" in her life. Strangely, her own mother not only ignored her developing understanding but also had a role in the physical harassment she endured at the age of hardly eight years old. She spends years in silence as a result of the sexual assault she suffered from a person in a position wherein she ought to have enjoyed highest safety. She returned to Stamps, to the grandma, her "Momma," her safe zone of solace, hopeless and solitary with anguish since the experience had such a crippling impact on her mental state. Angelou endured in silence for the subsequent five years until her grandmother and her friend Mrs. Bertha Flowers patiently and persistently worked to reintegrate her into society. In this first book of her memoirs, Angelou provides a detailed description of the first sixteen years of her life, during which time, following her healing, she discovered a sense of purpose in life via her expanding passion for literature and the creative arts. While memoir is often a genre that serves as a vehicle for self-revelation, Angelou continues to be preoccupied with her familial and personal strong ties to the people who counted so much to her. It's intriguing how she metaphorically compares her "Mother" to her own mother. Her Mom had been her true mother, nourishing and caring for her developing self, whereas her mother's presence had always been like a shimmering shadow, throwing a peculiar atmosphere about her.

Maya, who is enmeshed in a vortex of scholastic and extracurricular pursuits, has her first rush of adolescence and gives birth to a child at the young age of sixteen. As the story progresses, Angelou enters parenthood with a tremendous deal of fear and apprehension. In the subsequent book, *Gather Together in My Name*, where she describes this transformation, she writes: "I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a boy of two months. Angelou provides an explanation for why she was unable to leave her kid in the supervision of her mother whilst leaving for work, justifying it as a result of an intense feeling of justice that she refers to as "patterned anguish." Her logic is permeated with a strong feeling of motherhood-related honesty.

Her motherhood served as a shield, maintaining her frail self throughout the complexity of her existence since it was justifiable explanation for her to live. Her motherhood enables her to respond, endure, and rediscover herself in the wake of all obstacles, and she rises on the cusp of finishing the third book of her memoir full of self-assurance and regulate in Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry like Christmas. This part begins with her obsession with music as a means of concealing the vacuum that she feels deep inside. In this book, Maya's relationship with her mother assumes a fresh perspective as a daughter. She, nevertheless, did never want her son Guy to endure the same childhood she underwent. Angelou is able to advance towards her completion as a mother because to her concern.

The fourth volume of her autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman* discusses how she arrived at this combination. She makes internal development towards her motherhood, feeling of being a woman, and self-reliance as she becomes more independent. The whole fourth volume is committed to Guy's formative years. Their connection experiences a number of intricate events. This story has a number of examples that show Angelou's use of "faceted viewpoint." In her stubborn parenthood and parenthood of her kid, there are recognizable reverberations from the earlier days. These remnants serve as the sections that link each chapter of her life altogether. She addresses the difficulties that Black parenting poses in this fourth section of her autobiography. One of most significant deviance we see in this volume is Angelou's internal fight about parenthood. Her transformation from a guilty mother to a confident, daring person who "asserts the accomplishment of a both personal and public maturity" is traced throughout the book. Angelou steadfastly upheld Guy's faith in their family despite her initiation into the extravagant encounters in both the work and personal realms (Koyana, 2009). Their mother-son connection was more contentious and confused than would often be expected; this was certainly relevant during the intense event where Maya informed her son of her desire to be married. In the next section of her life, she will plunge headfirst into the world of black activism, living up to her full potential and stature as a Black woman. In the fifth volume of her autobiography, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, is where Angelou examines the relationship between her African and African American personas.

Despite her intrinsic link with her kid, she also continues to explore the soul of motherhood. She recalls the intense strong connection she had with her son in her words: "... Save for one year when I was touring, we had been each other's home and centre for seventeen years. He could die if he wanted to and go off to wherever dead folks go, but I, would be left without a home." She eventually realizes that she will have to respect Guy's decision-making as an adult and tolerate his personal decisions. Angelou illustrates the need for the mother to break off from her previous total engagement with her kid via a sequence of pairings. Moments when Maya confronts her son while fully aware that he has progressed well past the dread of her condemnation masterfully show the moral resonance betwixt mother and son. Along with her quest for African identity, parenthood continues to be her most recurrent topic. In her memoirs, she devotes a lot of attention to racial and gender issues related to these subjects. While talking about the condition of women in the patriarchal society, an author writes that "a woman, as a victim, is severely attacked by her husband and relatives in the domestic environment... they are used as sexual objects" and observes this as an international crisis (Vijay & Vijayakumar, 2022). The time comes for Maya to send both Africa and her kid goodbye as Guy and Maya grow apart, carving out spaces for themselves. Thus, the topic of parenting becomes inextricably related to one's basic heritage and culture. It is fundamentally a mirror of oneself, a statement of one's individuality within the broader framework of human life. The latter three editions of her memoirs were written with an unending spirit of satisfaction.

In *A Song Flung upto Heaven* she advocates her African identity in America, her tale begins with a glorification of individualism that incorporates discussions of gender and racial issues rather freely. Nevertheless, when Guy is transported to the hospital following her accident, the issue of regret as a necessary component of parenting becomes big. The narrative picks up steam until she unexpectedly acknowledges that her kid was an adult who could make his own judgments and was no more the infant she had nursed across the globe

on her hip. Taking into consideration the situation with her trademark ironic humor, Angelou is working on the second book of her autobiography *Mom & Me & Mom*.

The tribute Angelou offers to her mother should be the starting point for analysis of this book. In her statement, she repeatedly expresses her gratitude to her mother. She suggests taking a dose of love. She writes – “Love heals, Heals and liberates. I use the word love, not meaning sentimentality, but a condition so strong that it maybe that which holds the stars in their heavenly positions and that which causes the blood to flow orderly in our veins.” Her mother's story opens the autobiography, which is mostly a celebration of her womanhood. It's important to observe that she is once more writing from the viewpoint of a daughter in this final chapter of her autobiography, just like she did in the first. Yet again, the storyline picks up with Maya travelling deep into the past to recreate her relationship with her mother. This book reads like the last piece of the jigsaw that Angelou ultimately discovers. It details her bond with her mother and just how she comes to understand who she really is as a result of her mother's steadfast and resolute existence in her lifestyle beyond puberty (Lupton, 1990).

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, Maya's life experiences demonstrate that, rather than functioning well outside house, the underlying causes of despondency and drug misuse are a shortage of abilities and the discriminatory practice of banning black people from work opportunities. Maya is denied the opportunity to pass a straightforward assessment that would have qualified her to be a trainee operator by a white personnel supervisor, providing a glaring illustration of how black moms are excluded from productive economic involvement. She thus comes to an end herself working as a "dumb" bus girl and has to hang tight on the white girls who were formerly her classmates (*Gather Together*, 6-7). This is among the causes of Angelou's persistent outrage against racial oppression, which she chronicles in all of her books. Her personal life is a proof that when impoverished individuals are offered employment to achieve a good livelihood, the situations purportedly brought on by being a career woman quickly ameliorate. For example, Maya's life changes when she is offered the chance to perform in "Porgy and Bess." Her cash flow rises, which leads to a general improvement in the quality of her life. It has always been assumed that white middle-class feminists restricted their understanding of employment to well-paying professions. Because the labor they were doing (which is ongoing) was not freeing, the proportion of working white women and women of color did not connect with a campaign that didn't consider their wish to stop making progress. The dominant white attitude is well observed in an article: “it was because white Americans wanted Black to be ignorant and uncivilized, ... they denied Black people the opportunity to educate themselves” (Liyana, 2023).

Consequently, the historical feminist movement fell short of providing most women with defenses against dehumanization and social inequality. This is why Angelou's inclusion of the “mother work” of efficient and environmentally and racially disadvantaged women in her reworking of white middle-class maternal language is just as important as her redefining of the family. The cliché of domestic sphere is disproved in the first, and the primacy of the nuclear family is “unwound” in the second. If Maya had not been capable of relying on her mother as well as the other mothers in the neighborhood for assistance with babysitting, it would have been extremely difficult to enable her to work full-time. Maya may leave her son with various approaches or acquaintances while she looks for a job since extended families in black communities sometimes represent people who are not related but nonetheless demonstrate devotion and a feeling of commitment. If Maya hadn't been capable of relying on her mother as well as the other mothers in the community in the past with babysitting, it'd have been extremely difficult to enable her to work extra. Maya could abandon her son with various approaches or acquaintances while she looks for a job since relatives in black communities sometimes represent members who are not related but nonetheless demonstrate devotion and a feeling of commitment.

It's undeniable that Maya Angelou contributed more than anybody else to the autobiographical genre in America. Angelou stands out as a pioneer of the kind due to her singular digging of said feelings, her particular use of irony and personality, her literary sense, and her capability to reconcile the search for basic human dignity with the generalized predicament of black Americans. In addition to establishing a new precedent by drawing attention to incestuous behavior and rape in the black community, she also portrays an individual's struggle to develop and preserve a positive perception of themselves within a population that would be going through a societal shift. Sohaila Abdulali, writer, activist and rape survivor “questions gender roles and the patriarchal system. She describes how erroneous beliefs about rape, rapists, and rape victims affect society and leads to victim blaming, slut shaming, and questioning the behaviour of women (Asok, 2023). In 1986, when her final memoir was released, Angelou was almost fifty-eight years old. Her entire existence had already been filled to the brim with accomplishments on the interpersonal, social, and creative fronts by that point. The accolades of Angelou in several artistic mediums are included in this area, including poetry, nonfiction books, thoughts, composition for theatre, broadcast, and cinema, filmmaking, performing, and oral reports. This desideratum brings out the concept of Black motherhood and its significance in all of Maya Angelou's autobiographies.

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