



THE SELF & THE OTHER: GENERIC, GENERATIONAL AND SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN THE MEMOIRS OF MAYA ANGELOU.

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As Angelou once opined: "Listen carefully to what country people call mother wit. In these homely sayings are couched the collective wisdom of generations." The ties that bind together women of all generations across all cultures and nations are mediated through common experiences of pain and pleasure; hope and despair; rise and fall, all of which surround the idea and concept of Motherhood. As a concept and phenomenon, in transit from the African communities to the African American familial and societal structures of contemporary times, Motherhood has remained as a potent symbol of empowerment among women who resisted the onslaught of male dominance within every sphere of individual and societal existence. Cultural and critical dialectics reveal that considerations of motherhood whether out of choice or under force or threat had remained steadfastly matrilineal. The figure of the Black Mother was subjected to a complex multi-dimensional study, and she came to be accepted as a 'Superhuman' – a figure denied the 'luxuries of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences....' This image was further strengthened by the visual representations of the mother-figure in traditional African documented history and art as is represented in African American literature. Even before the Atlantic Slave trade, the Africans had extensive relations with other parts of the world. Their exodus to the other parts whether voluntary or enforced was one of the constitutive elements of African literary and cultural history. The symbol and concept of the strong black mother, the fender of her family within the community "The Matriarch" gradually evolved as a phenomenal idea. It identified the coalescence of the masculine and feminine role-playing traits in the black woman. She fulfilled both roles of the breadwinner and homemaker within her family. The convergence of opposing forces – termed as phallic fecundity can be well related to the figure of the trickster God Esu-Elegbara. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. recounts, Esu of the Yoruba myth in the indigenous black metaphor who travelled to the New World – The Western Hemisphere, as an integral part of the culture and civilization brought forward by the survivors of the dreaded Middle Passage. As an emblem of unity of opposed forces, Esu embodied the contrary qualities of disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rapture. Each set of binaries define the evolution of the African woman and her journey from enslavement to emancipation.

Subjected to the most extreme conditions of survival, these women were not just child-bearers but also nurturers who ensured and stabilized the continuity of life. The prevalence of the gynocentric system across generations can be studied as a necessary method of self-preservation.

As an integral part of cultural and identity studies, literary criticism on race and ethnicity demarcate a methodological shift from a general to a generational perspective. African American studies categorically returned to the history of slavery and the ensuing cultural challenges following emancipation and the immensely creative output that flowed from the Harlem Renaissance at the start of the twentieth century, to reconceive notions of race and resistance to the dominant white culture. Amidst these literary forays into the

domain of race and identity, the involvement of gender also becomes crucially important. The primary agenda being to break free from the Eurocentric mind-set and tradition.

The body of the Black woman came to be studied as a focal point of strength, embodying the aggression of her race. The pride and prominence enjoyed by the mother within the inner fold of her family and the greater fold of her community is replicated through literature, art and a plethora of creative output in the African American literary scenario. The image of the Black mother working in the ante-bellum South, her breasts full of milk, nursing her child over her shoulder, exhibits a picture of resolute strength. The transition from breeders, mammies, matriarchs to the contemporary proactive mother involved centuries of resistance to the andro-centric system. For the Black woman subjected to the dual bind, it was a curious position indeed, which made them equal in gender but divided in race and class from their white counterparts.

With regard to motherhood, several ideologies like Blood Motherhood, Other Motherhood, Single Motherhood have been the locus of critical studies. As a versatile author of contemporary African American literary interface, Maya Angelou communicates the idea of Resistance through her prolific writings on the women's cause. Angelou's autobiographical narratives, showcase the problematics of motherhood as a signifier for Black Womanhood. Her memoirs prioritize the diverse roles of a mother and how the very concept of Motherhood stands problematized as the woman and the mother comes vis-à-vis one another.

An acclaimed poet, story teller, activist and autobiographer, Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. A prolific writer, editor, essayist, playwright and poet, over the decades, she remains as a cult figure of African American literary studies of contemporary times. Her name Maya connects her to the magical power by which the Universe becomes manifest. It is the illusion or appearance of the phenomenal world. In Latin the name means 'great' or 'larger'. Maya also means 'origin' and 'popularity' and is also a variation of the English name 'May'. In all its import the name Maya does refer to the illusion of magic that is created endlessly through the canonical writings of Maya Angelou. Through a series of autobiographical writings, she is able to transform an individual experience of pain to a universal realization and expression of the same. The first of her memoirs, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings showcases the early years of her life in Long Beach and Stamps in Arkansas, with her brother and paternal grandmother. In the course of the narration, Angelou quite subtly introduces the functional image and role of 'other mothers' within an African American family structure. As per this concept prevalent in African American community, 'other mothers' stand distinguished from blood or biological mothers but share mothering responsibilities with them. This hints at the gynocentric culture in practice within such familial set-ups, which help to maintain the centrality of women within the domestic space. Theorist, Patricia Hill Collins argues – "Organised, resilient, women-centred networks of blood mothers and other mothers are key in understanding this centrality. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts or cousins act as other mothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one mother's children."

In this respect, Collins refers to scholar Andrea Hunter's research on Black grandmothers stating how Black parents rely on grandmothers for parenting support.

Angelou's autobiographical account, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings begins with the acknowledgement of her grandmother's immeasurable contributions in bringing up her brother and her from when she was barely three years old. Grandmother Annie Henderson's influence therefore remained primary for Angelou and her brother Bailey in their formative years in Stamps. As the 'other mother' in her life, she was the only mother Angelou knew and loved. Ironically her own mother was not only remote from her growing consciousness, but also was the means of the sexual devastation she underwent when she was barely eight. The trauma of sexual violation that she experienced from a quarter where she should have received utmost protection, benumbs her into years of silence. The incident had such a debilitating effect upon her psyche that she returned to Stamps, to the grandmother, her 'Momma', her haven of comfort, numb and mute with pain. For the next five years, Angelou suffered in silence, till she was brought back to mainstream life by the patient and incessant efforts of her grandmother and her friend Mrs. Bertha Flowers. In this first volume of her memoirs Angelou records an explicit account of the first sixteen years of her life, when after her recovery, she found a meaning in life through her growing interest in literature and fine arts.

The agony of separation from her mother is quite explicit through the lines, "... I couldn't believe that our mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children." And at Christmas upon receiving gifts from her parents she recounts – "I sat down and cried and I looked up and Bailey was coming

from the outhouse, wiping his eyes. He had been crying too... the gifts opened the door to questions that neither of us wanted to ask – ‘Why did they send us away? and what did we do wrong? So wrong? Why, at three and four, did we have tags put on our arms to be sent by train alone from Long Beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas..?’ ”

Then again, stupefied by the aura her mother exuded, she concludes – “She was too beautiful to have children. I have never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called ‘Mother’.”

Since autobiography conventionally is a genre which is the medium for self-revelation, Angelou remains absorbed in personal, familial relationships with those who mattered most to her. The metaphoric comparison she makes between her ‘Momma’ and her mother is interesting. While her mother’s presence had always been like a shimmering shadow, casting a strange aura about her, an elusive reality, her Momma had been her real mother, nurturing and tending to her growing self.

Caught up in a whirlpool of academic and cultural activities, Maya begins to enjoy the first flush of youth, and becomes a mother at sixteen. It is her son and he parenting of him, in other words her experiences of mother hood which forms the central focus of her account in the subsequent volumes of her autobiographical narratives. The narrative moves forward with Angelou stepping into motherhood with great anxiety and trepidation. She records this transition in the next volume titled, Gather Together in My Name, she writes: “I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a son of two months...” With an extreme sense of righteousness which she terms as ‘textured guilt’, Angelou offers a rationale as to why she could not leave her son in the care of her mother while going out for work. Her reasoning is infused with a deep sense of integrity to her notion of motherhood. She writes – “I considered that although I was mother’s child, she had left me with others until I was thirteen and why should she feel more responsibility for my child than she had felt for her own. Those were the pieces that made up the spin of my refusal, but the core was more painful, more solid, truer.”

From the start of this volume, Angelou problematizes the position of a single, working mother in the Black community. Feminist theorist Bell Hooks examines the concept of single motherhood and writes in Rock My Soul “... it has been wrongly assumed that single Black mothers repudiate patriarchal values.” However, Angelou tackles her single motherhood by flouting every conventional norm. Her grit and determination is explicit through her words: “I would quit the house, take a job and show the whole world... that I was equal to my pride and greater than my pretensions.”

The fact that she was a mother, and that was reason enough for her to live, operates as a bulwark, supporting her fragile self all through the maze of her life. Her motherhood teaches her to react, resist and reinvent herself in the face of all adversities and she emerges brimming with self-confidence and control on the verge of the third volume of her memoir. Singin’ and Swingin’ and getting’ Merry like Christmas. This volume opens with her preoccupation with music to ease away the pain of emptiness deep within her. Her emotional dependence upon her child is best expressed in the lines – “I picked up my son from the babysitter’s every evening. He was five years old and so beautiful his smile could break the back of a brute.”

As a daughter, Maya’s equation with her mother takes a fresh dimension in this volume. However, she did not want her son Guy to go through the childhood she had experienced herself. This anxiety helps Angelou move towards the consummation of herself as a mother.

The fourth volume of her autobiography, The Heart of a Woman, explores her journey towards this consummation. The more she moves towards self-reliance, the more progressive is her inward movement towards the core, the sense of her being a woman, her motherhood. The fourth volume is entirely devoted to Guy’s years of growing up. Their relationship goes through several complex sequences. Critic Mary Jane Lupton finds that in this volume, “Angelou has accumulated a multi-layered memory that affects not only what she remembers but what readers who have followed her previous books remember. As a serial autobiographer, she must continuously look backward unveiling the various layers hidden in earlier volumes, remembering what she has already written without being repetitious.” Lupton further records that autobiographer Lillian Hellman named this process “pentimento”, a term used in painting to indicate the reappearance of a design that has been covered over by layers of paint.”

There are several instances in this narrative which highlights this “layered point of view” technique adopted by Angelou. There are familiar echoes from the past in her defiant motherhood and mothering of her son. These echoes are the layers which help to connect each segment of her life together. In those traumatic times of bringing up her son single-handedly, of refusing to hold him guilty, for misconduct in school, till she heard him out, the rush of emotions that surge within her are put together in the lines: “How could the two women understand the black mother who had nothing to give her son except a contrived arrogance?... If he was headstrong, I had made him so....” This fourth segment of her memoirs is interspersed with her addressing the complications which problematize Black motherhood. She records:

“The Black mother perceives destruction at every door, ruination at each window, and even she herself is not beyond her own suspicion.”

The most potent deviation we come across in this volume is Angelou’s self-conflict with her motherhood. It charts her progress from a guilt-ridden mother to an assertive, intrepid individual who “affirms the achievement of a personal and public maturity.”

Despite her induction into the professional and personal spheres of hedonistic experiences, Angelou staunchly honoured the trust that Guy had in their mutual relationship. Their mother/son relationship was fraught with a greater friction and perplexity than is normally expected; heightened especially in the emotionally charged episode in which Maya tells her son about her decision of marriage. As she throws herself into the vortex of black activism in the next phase of her life, she lives to the full potential and stature of individual existence as a Black woman. Also as a daughter to her mother, she graciously acknowledges the role of the older woman in shaping her response to life. Angelou writes, “My mother raised me, then freed me.” This idea of emancipation as a release into her womanhood and full potential of motherhood is brilliantly recorded in this volume.

In the fifth volume of her autobiography, All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes, Angelou explores the connection between her African and African American identities. Along with it she continues to delve into the essence of her motherhood through her innate bonding with her son. The extreme emotional connect she shared with her son is recounted in the 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.” Gradually she grows aware that she would have to accept Guy’s choices, the decisions he would take as an adult. As Lupton defines, the mother/son equation goes through a series of active/counter-active rhythms. With a series of binaries, Angelou shows how imperative it becomes for the mother to extricate herself from her erstwhile absolute involvement with her son. The emotional complicacy between mother and son has been brilliantly depicted in episodes where Maya confronts her son realizing full well that he had moved far beyond the fear of her disapproval. When he seeks desperately his own independent space, Maya falters and thinks – “How could his life be separate from my life? I have been a mother of a child so long I had no preparation for life on any other level.... I looked up at the young golden brown giant towering above my head.... His existence had defined my own....”

The concept of motherhood remains her most consistent theme in tandem with her search for African identity. Racial and gender concerns pertaining to these themes find considerable space in her memoirs. As Maya and Guy draw apart, each creating a space of their own, the moment comes for Maya to bid both Africa and her son farewell. She records: “A sadness descended on me, simultaneously sombre and wonderful. I had not consciously come to Ghana to find the roots of my beginning, but I had continually and accidentally tripped over them or fallen over them in my everyday life. With each step she took away, she knew she was leaving a part of herself in Guy, in Africa.

Hence the issue of motherhood becomes integrally linked to the core of one’s own culture and identity. It is an intrinsic reflection of selfhood, assertion of one’s own identity within the larger map of human existence. There is an infinite sense of contentment with which she pens the last three volumes of her memoirs.

In A Song Flung Upto Heaven of her account opens with a celebration of selfhood which embraces considerations of race and gender quite candidly as she promotes her African identity in America. However the question of guilt as an inevitable part of parenting looms large when Guy is hospitalised after her accident. Angelou writes, “Suddenly I felt guilty.... When something goes wrong with offspring inevitably

the parent feels guilty. As if some stone that needed turning had been left unturned. In the case of a physical handicap, the mother feels that when her body was building the infant, it shirked its responsibility somewhere. I stood looking at my son, wondering where I had failed.” The account moves ahead with a flourish till she abruptly faces the reality that her son was capable of taking his own decisions and was no longer the child she had carried on her hip all over the world. The memoir closes with a potent reference to the first volume I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, which she relates to a childhood poem which said – “however low you perceive me now, I am headed for higher ground.” Considering the account with her characteristic dry humour, Angelou moves to pen the next volume of her life-story – Mom & Me & Mom. Study of this volume ought to begin with the dedication Angelou makes to her own mother. She writes – “I give particular thanks to Vivian Baxter, who generously taught me how to be a mother, allowing me to dedicate this book to one of the most courageous and generous men I know, my son, Guy Baily Johnson.” This tribute that she pays to her mother is time and again reiterated in this account. The potion she recommends is 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.” The memoir begins with an account of her mother and is largely a tribute to her womanhood. It’s interesting to note that in this last volume of her memoir, she is once again narrating from the perspective of a daughter, as she had in the first volume. The back story resumes once again with Maya going far back in time to re-capture her equation with her mother. This volume reads like that missing piece of a puzzle that Angelou finds later. It records incidents and experiences of her relation with her own mother and how she discovers her true self through the strong and determined presence of her mother in her life past adolescence. About the connect she shared with Vivian, she writes – “My mother said her friends told her that I had once been seen jumping on the street with my son and playing as if I were a child. She said, ‘No she was not playing. She was just being a good mother’.” Later in the narrative she puts together her blessings, which creates a deep sense of contentment within her and from that welled up the spirit to continue to be, Angelou recalls, “... whether my days are stormy or sunny and if my nights are glorious or lonely, I maintain an attitude of gratitude.... I remember there is always tomorrow. Today I am blessed.” Towards the close, she writes – “My mother’s gifts of courage to me were both large and small. The latter are woven so subtly into the fabric of my psyche that I can hardly distinguish where she stops and I begin.” Indeed it is their experience of motherhood that binds them together as one common entity, liberated and free.

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