

**Socio-Cultural Nuances in the Select Works of Maya Angelou**

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**R. Vinothini**

**14PEN017**

A thesis submitted to Avinashilingam Institute for Home  
Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore – 641043  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master's Degree in English

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*S. Kalanani*  
28.04.2016

Signature of the

Head of the Department

*ANJOM*

Signature of the

Supervisor

## **Acknowledgement**

Sweet is the breath of vernal shower, / The bee's collected treasure sweet,  
Sweet music's melting fall, but sweeter yet/ The still small voice of  
gratitude.

-Thomas Gray

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have in the moment of recollection. This strange form -- it may be called fleeting or eternal -- is in neither case the stuff that life is made of.

-Walter Benjamin

Autobiography is a record of a person's life. It informs us about the various incidents of a person's life. However, autobiography is not only 'Literature of knowledge' but also moves us. It portrays life in a very aesthetic manner. In order to understand the moving as well as informative function of autobiography one has to understand its nature and elements thoroughly.

Autobiography is derived from three Greek words meaning 'self,' 'life,' and 'write,' a style of writing that has been around nearly as long as history has been recorded. However, it was not classified as a genre within itself until the late eighteenth century. Robert Southey coined the term 'autobiography' in 1809 to describe the work of a Portuguese poet. Stuart Bates in his book *Inside Out: An Introduction to Autobiography* offers a functional definition of autobiography as "a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned" (2).

According to Collier's *Encyclopaedia*: "Autobiography, a form of biography in which the subject is also the author; it is generally written in the first person and covers most or an important phase of the author's life" (319). In his grand work, *English Biography* Mr. W. H. Donne remarks; "Autobiography, which is worth the name, is serious and truthful self study" (252).

Autobiographical form reveals four different aspects that vary according to the auto biographer's mode and mood. These aspects can be classified into Subjectivity, self-revelation, introspection and self concealment. The centre of any autobiographical work is the life. James Olney in his book *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical & Critical*, rightly observes: "The 'I' that comes away to its own being shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself that opened up the subject of autobiography specifically for literary discussions" (34).

Self written life-story: Autobiography, as the very term suggests is a life story written by the person himself. It includes all the events of a person's life right from his childhood. These events focus on the internal and external life of the person. The writer himself gives report of his own life. The basic necessity of writing about one's life arises from the sense of individuality. Janet Gunn in his book *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience*, observes: "Autobiography is the act of 'settling down' or of wedging one's feet downward. It represents an act both of discovery and creation that involves at the same time, the movement of the self in the world recognizing that 'the land makes man' and the movement of the self into the world, recognizing well that 'man elects his land'" (59).

Most autobiographies are written from the first person singular perspective. This is fitting because autobiography is usually a story one tells about oneself. It would not naturally follow that the writer would recount his or her past from a second or third person perspective. Jean Quigley in his book *The Grammar of Autobiography: A Developmental Account* confirms the point that “As soon as we are asked about ourselves, to tell our autobiography, we start to tell stories. We tell what happened, what we said, what we did” (144).

Although the intent of the majority of autobiographers is authenticity, they, unlike biographers, are not expected to reveal all about their subject. Autobiographers are free to shape their life story in whatever manner they choose. They are at liberty to select what they want to include or omit. They can simplify or amplify an event. Or they can leave out the skeletons in the closet if they desire. As Stuart Bates in his book *Inside Out: An Introduction to Autobiography* views that, “he (the autobiographer) will often be enlarging on special aspects of his life, such as the influences that moulded him...or the services that he rendered to what he most cared about;...a vindication for this world;...he may...turn his book into...a laundry for the dirty linen of his dirty soul” (3). The way he or she organises and arranges the events of the story shows what the author considers important.

African American autobiographies constitute a very important part of the autobiographical literature. African Americans began to write in the late eighteenth century. They often produced slave narratives and other autobiographical prose. They were encouraged by abolitionists who used these writings to support their cause. Additionally, for people who had been denied recognition, autobiography allowed African Americans to define themselves and assert their selfhood as people rather

than as property. The work of claiming and defining the self continued in the writings of Maya Angelou, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and other writers.

African American subjects historically denied access to public modes of self-representation. Writing is not just about telling a good story. From the slave narratives published during the nineteenth century to the contemporary novel, African American authors have been cutting through the culturally imposed layers that naturalise dominant white hierarchies of racialised difference. Authors such as Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, employed the testimonial to call attention to ideological systems that justified slavery by coding the African American subject as invisible, impure, cultureless and in need of taming at a white master's hands.

While many African American writers have chosen to speak out against the history of silence by making visible a Black essence, the pan- African movement of the 60s have sidestepped essentialist categories altogether, seeking rational models that avoid the white vs. Black duality. As one can imagine, many writers who deliberately confuse racial binaries have fallen between the cracks, rejected by the white mainstream because of the “Blackness and by African Americans for not spouting the Black- pride line.

Recent books on African American literature, Crispin Sartwell's *Act Like You Know: African American Autobiography and White Identity* and Jon Woodson's *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance*, trace how the mimetic impulse in African American's letters grew out of this struggle against white fictions and how often these radical writings affected the writers' careers. Sartwell's *Act Like You Know: African American Autobiography and White Identity* provides

analysis that is culturally and textually sensitive, allowing those erstwhile silenced voices to give voice to the contrapuntal tones that shape white and Black identity.

Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Malcolm X and even rap artist Sister Souljah create truth-telling testimonies that debunk white mythologies of race in their articulation of the particular experiences of the African American self. Rather than appealing to universals that dissolve the self reliance of Emerson, these authors seek to emplace themselves in the particular through the act of detailing their lived experience. Frederick Luis Aldama in his journal “Re-visioning African American Autobiography” insights the move to emphasise the particular over the universal reveals how whiteness works to survey and objectify Black bodies as “the specular negative images itself abstracts the white person into an abstract knower” (4).

Jeff Loeb in his article “MIA: African American autobiography of the Vietnam War” quotes the words of Herman Beavers argue that, books seeking out more accurately drawn representations by African American authors, are scarce and instead have come to depend on white narrators, who mistakenly feel that, “against all odds, they understand the Black grunt” (7) and are thereby able to “decode the Black presence in the war” (7). Luckett rejoins that “these accusations of neglect and negative treatment are clearly exaggerated ... for positively depicted Black soldiers are ubiquitous in Vietnam narratives” (7). Though Luckett’s major criterion, “sympathetic treatment, seems finally to miss the point of Beavers’s contention, his argument that white Vietnam authors have gladly granted Black characters, their proportionate share of the page nevertheless rings true, especially in works written in the past fifteen years” (7).

Eleanor Taylor Bland says that the popularity of the nineteenth-century fugitive slave narrative as a genre was based on a number of circumstances. These included the complex inter-relationship between the increasing influence of abolitionist activity, the increasing political debate about slavery, the public desire to read about the experiences of slaves and an increasing interest in the first person accounts or the effects of slavery on individuals. There are no easy ways to draw connections between slave narrative writing and the social, political and cultural elements that contributed to the development of the genre. A great deal has been made of the twenty Africans who were brought by the European settlers who arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619.

However, scholars like Leo Wiener in his pioneering study *Africa and the Discovery of America* and Ivan Van Sertima in his book *They Came Before Columbus* compile evidence from archaeology, linguistics, sculpture, weaving styles for cloth, burial conventions, evidence of similar customs and ship-building practices to make a strong case for the presence of Africans in America before the arrival of European explorers.

Eleanor Taylor Bland also tells that the twenty Africans who landed in Jamestown in 1619 were considered indentured servants rather than slaves. Indentureship meant that the slaves were free to actively pursue a livelihood, purchase land and generally live as free citizens after fulfilling their contract, for seven years. The system of indentured servitude was gradually eliminated for African Americans as well as whites. Instead, by the mid-seventeenth century, most procedures were changed to specify that all Africans would live as slaves for their entire lives, rather than for the duration of a contractually specified amount of time.

A number of factors contributed to the expansion of the African slave trade in America, including the quickly expanding rice, tobacco, cotton and indigo economy in the southern colonies. The rise of the planter class; the institution of laws allowing Africans to be considered property; intellectual arguments endorsing ideas of African inferiority and a complicity in the Atlantic slave trade that involved, among others, the British colonies, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal and the Dutch also included. Even an area like New England, which did not make extensive use of slave labour, economically benefited from the slave trade because of its involvement in the shipping industry.

The slave narrative represents the ways former slave writers were willing to adapt prevailing narrative forms to their needs. Simultaneously, they undercut the very notion of a “traditional” form by co-opting the forms for distinctly non-traditional uses. The eighteenth-century slave narrative form was strongly shaped by the literary conventions from which it drew. These stylistic techniques, while certainly popular throughout the eighteenth and early third of the nineteenth centuries, were endowed with a certain amount of urgency as political differences began to escalate and the role of the slave narrator became co-opted by the growth of the New England abolitionist movement. These changes initiated shifts in the ways slave narrators were encouraged to present their work as well as the ways their audiences received their work.

As a result of the publication of popular slave narratives that went through multiple printings and were translated into several languages, the slave narrative became fairly well established as a genre of narrative writing that had the potential to attract a large audience. But as political pressures in the North intensified to persuade

the South to bring about the end of slavery, the objectives of the slave narratives sought more directly to address the antislavery impulse.

Ex-slaves were increasingly encouraged to tell their stories both as public orations and as written narratives. The oral, performative component of the narrative is especially significant. It is probable that by initially presenting their experiences as an oral presentation, slave narrators were able to gauge and revise the effectiveness of various combination of experience before composing the written version of the narrative.

African American narratives play off the expectations initiated by white autobiographies African American because narratives are not able to present the kind of details the white autobiographer was able to draw upon to identify himself. African American autobiography became distinct from white autobiography in the fundamental inability of the ex-slave to write his or her autobiography using the features common to white autobiography. Parentage is unclear or sketchy in African American autobiography.

The legacy of the narratives is as much a function of social and political condition as the narratives themselves. Hence the narratives of former slaves suggested, racial awareness was inexorably fused with the desire for freedom and autonomy. For a slave writer, these elements were rendered in physical and, to a somewhat lesser extent, spiritual terms. Subsequent African American writers rendered these desires in broader cultural and political terms. In the generation or following the end of the civil war, African American writers like Elizabeth Keckley in *Behind the scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868) and, probably most famously, Booker T. Washington in *Up from Slavery* (1901)

continued overly to use the slave narrative form. The realities of slavery and its effects were acknowledged, but, however the emphasis shifted away from description of past oppression and toward an awareness of the possibilities for the future.

The poet, essayist, activist and educator Nikki Giovanni was born on June 7, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee. Her poetry and essays are autobiographical in nature; her work regularly blurs the line between the personal and the political. In one of her autobiographies, *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-five Years of Being a Black Poet*, is no exception. Rather than providing a chronological or detailed account of her life up until that point, Giovanni endeavours, in *Gemini*, to explain how and why she became a writer and an activist. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook*, quotes the words of Giovanni that, “I was always just a little secreted away with the thought that one day I would be understood. This is probably a main reason any artist emerges” (152). Giovanni situates her process of creative development within the larger framework of African American culture. Rather than seeing herself as an individual artist who has benefited from and been influenced by the generations of African American writers before her.

Most reviewers found Giovanni’s prose are difficult and faulted her for the lack of autobiographical revelations. Fox- Genovese, an African critic, emphasises the connections Giovanni makes between the personal and political, noting that Giovanni “has, with special force, made the case of the relations of Black women’s autobiographies to changing political conditions” (154). She compares Giovanni’s autobiographies to those of her contemporaries Maya Angelou and Gwendolyn Brooks, claiming that all three use their personal stories as a way of bearing witness to the collective experience of African American women.

Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas. Her two autobiographies namely, *Report from Part One* and *Report from Part Two* offer glimpses into her personal life, her artistic credo, and her politics. In her first autobiography, she begins with two prefatory statements: one by Don Lee, himself a poet of considerable talent; the other by George Kent, a distinguished African American scholar. The fascinating part is her statement on her political transformation. After attending a raucous literary political conference on the campus of Fisk University, Brooks says that she began to align herself with the new Black Consciousness movement. That conference, she points out, marked her transformation from ‘negro’ to ‘Black.’

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* quotes that Toni Cade Bambara says that, Brooks’s first autobiography “is not a sustained dramatic narrative for the nosy, being neither the confessions of a private woman or poet or the usual sort of mahogany desk memoir public personages inflict upon the populace at the first sign of a cardiac” (152). Brooks’s second autobiography, a less substantial text than the first one, was largely unnoticed. There are no major reviews of it.

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4, 1908, on the Rucker’s plantation in Adams County, Mississippi, about twenty two miles from the city of Natchez. *Black Boy* is the only purely autobiographical written by Wright. *American Hunger* was the title Wright had envisaged for the entire work; the section dealing with his years in the south was to be called “Southern Night,” while that of the Chicago years was to be called “The Horror and the Glory.” Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* quotes the words of Wright that, “The environment of the South creates is too small to nourish human beings,

especially Negro human beings” (397). But Wright also shows that if life for a child in an African American southern family could be oppressive, African American survival for families like his home, which were always on the brink of penury, would be impossible without the mutual assistance that family members provide.

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* quotes the words of Richard Wright’s over confidence in rationalism, for example, is patent in the advice he gives to Kwame Nkrumah at the end of *Black Power*: to militarise African life to “free minds from mumbo-jumbo” (398). Theorists of African American literature accorded a pre-eminent place to African American autobiography, and for them, *Black Boy* was a seminal text. Keneth Kinnamon compares *Black Boy* with Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Charles Nichols compares *Black Boy* with several other African American autobiographies and shows their relationship to the picaresque in Spanish literature.

Malcolm Little, who later rechristened himself first as Malcolm X and then as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, was born on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is the product of a collaborative effort. His autobiography also presents a self in quest of wholeness. This in detail offers an intriguing glimpse into Malcolm X’s psychology. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is, in fact one of the most significant documents in the political history of United States. He was able to see how the educational, legal, political and religious systems are part of a larger apparatus that the dominant culture had established.

Malcolm X’s recognition of Black America as an internal colony within the United States prompted him to call for a separate homeland for African Americans. His alliances with many leaders and intellectuals of newly independent African

nations allowed him to locate the predicament of African Americans in an international context and analyse the issues from a broad historical and global prospective. When his autobiography was published in 1965, most reviewers recognised in it the makings of a modern classic. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* quotes the words of Trueman Nelson's statement in *Nation* sums up the general enthusiasm:

Viewed in its complete historical context, this is indeed a great book. Its dead-level honesty, its passion, its exalted purpose, even its manifold unresolved ambiguities will make it stand as a monument to the most painful of truths; that this country, this people, this Western world had practiced unspeakable cruelty against a race, an individual, who might have made its fraudulent humanism a reality. (252)

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* enumerates that Frederick Douglass, the renowned freedom fighter and civil rights champion of the nineteenth century, was born into slavery in February 1818 on a farm in Tuckahoe, Maryland. He devoted his life and writings to the cause of African American emancipation, enfranchisement and equal rights through his autobiographies. Douglass fought against slavery and racism, oppression and exploitation. In *Life and Times* (1892), Douglass sets forth the purpose of his writings: "My part has been to tell the story of the slave. The story of the master never wanted for the narrators" (101).

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) is an American fugitive slave classic that merits an extended discussion. A subgenre of the African American autobiography, the fugitive slave narrative describes, from the

slave's own point of view, the trials and tribulations of a slave, as well as the slave's difficult journey from slavery to freedom. Its main objective is it shows the horrors of slavery and their impact upon the slave's life and personality, with the aim of ending slavery. Major themes of Douglass's *Narrative* include the horrors of slavery and the degrading influence of slavery not only on the slave but also on the slave holder as well.

Everett LeRoy Jones a poet, playwright, activist, novelist, musicologist, editor, journalist, director and teacher, founder of a distinctly ethnic aesthetic movement and a unique political form of resistance changed much more than his name on his way turned him into Amiri Baraka. In *The Autobiography of LeRoy Jones* Baraka described his move to Harlem as a flight. He immediately jumped into the Black Consciousness and the Black Power movements. Baraka became affiliated with the National African American Political Assembly and founded the congress of African People and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School. Although BART/S was the base from which Baraka became the father of the Black Arts Movement. Unlike the Harlem Renaissance the Black Arts Movement was strictly concerned with Black audiences.

The reader finds him as a "brown boy," preoccupied with colour and meaning, who struggles when his sense of Blackness is both challenged and defined by enrolment in a white high school. This splitting of his identity before he can rightly articulate it is thematic throughout the early years of his life. His desire to emulate the writers and poets of the Beat community and his realisation that he could not express himself in exactly the same way because of his realisation that he could not express himself in exactly the same way because of his differing reality, drove Baraka to seek forms of authentic African American expression.

Baraka's 1966 work *Home: Social Essays* also offers much insight into the ideology of this multifaceted man. The essays are a compilation of Baraka's struggle with the major issues of his life. His contribution to African American literature in general and particularly his place as founder of the Black Arts Movement situate him firmly as one of the most influential members in the canon of African American literature.

Langston Hughes's autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), which focuses on the period from his youth in Kansas and Mexico through the publications of his novel *Not Without Laughter* in 1930, is an engaging study of the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. The book's detailed, journalistic account of New Negro events and figures has long been the source of its favourable critical reception. Dennis Chester in his article "Modernism, African American autobiography, and Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea*", observes that scholars such as Arnold Rampersad have praised Hughes's autobiography as "the finest firsthand account of the Harlem Renaissance in existence" (37). R. Baxter Miller has written definitive interpretations of Hughes's autobiographical texts, and Joseph McLaren has contributed critical editions to the *Collected Works*. Autobiography has played an important role in the evolution of African American Literature and an overdue analysis of *The Big Sea*, as it fits in among other autobiographical works, reveals new dimensions of the author, his text and its genre.

*The Big Sea* by Hughes and other African American Americans not only attempts to interpret the developments of modernity but also to take advantage of its opportunities. As a confluence of technological, economic, political and social changes that bear at the end of the nineteenth century, modernity introduced and occasionally struck new tones of human expressions. As Hughes and his

contemporaries record their own personal stories, they extended the African American autobiographical form to fit their new circumstances and rhetorical needs. Dennis Chester, in his article “Modernism, African American autobiography, and Langston Hughes’s *The Big Sea*” enumerates that “Hughes’s autobiography exemplifies this dimension of modernist innovation in terms of the critical dialogue between African American cultural production and other interpretations of modern experience (37). It is characterised by techniques such as irony, and parody and by the exploration of themes of subjectivity, the nature of identity and the nature of society.

A combination of modernist technique with African American autobiographical practice reflects the significantly formal and thematic transformations that occurred within the genre. Nonfiction memoirs by Hughes and his peers bring a new self-conscious attention to the questions of identity. The themes of kin ship, race and nation from an emerging global perspective emphasising the fluid qualities of identity. African American modernism appears in the scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois, Augusta Savage, Bert Williams and other thinkers or artists of the era, Moreover, works that critique the assumptions, intentions, and contradictions of modernism stand as an important supplement to mainstream and hegemonic views.

In the literary effort to represent the self, the relationship between African American autobiography and modernism is a complicated one. Some of the most evocative intersections of modernism and African American autobiographical practice in *The Big Sea* occur in Hughes’s representations of the African continent and his travels there. His rendering of African experience overlaid with questions of racial identity, sexuality and colonial influence provides an intriguing and productive counterpoint to the depictions of Africa offered by other modern writers and artists. Through these African images, *The Big Sea* identifies and illuminates the

complications of modern African American understanding, exposing Modernist assumptions about race, class and capital.

The African American modernist perspective gave rise to both formal and thematic changes in African American autobiographies, especially with regard to new structures conducive to innovative prose. The conventional opening “I was born” a common opening in Jim Crow narratives during late 1915s give way to more iconoclastic beginnings such as those by James Weldon *Johnson Who Begins Along This Way* (1933) by depicting the life of his father in Haiti, and Claude McKay who begins *A Long Way From Home* (1937) while describing a first encounter with an influential editor.

James Arthur Baldwin is acclaimed today as one of the most important literary voices of the twentieth century. His *Notes of a Native Son* can only be considered an autobiographical collection of essays. His own voice alternates between personal self and the collective self throughout the book. *Notes of a Native Son* concludes with a major theme that is continued in *The Fire Next Time* that those who indulge in hatred destroy themselves. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* enumerates that justice will come only when Black and white people acknowledge their commonality and work together to improve the human condition. African American Americans, white Americans, Europeans and Africans are brought together for Baldwin’s reflections on the human dynamics of perceived racial differences.

*Black Voices: An Anthology of African American Literature*, published in 1968, contains “Many Thousands Gone,” one of the major essays from Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*. More recent anthologies continue to publish selected essays

from *Notes of a Native Son*. The explicit autobiographical essays are equally significant in that they bear out Baldwin's skill and discipline as a writer and provide a context for understanding his works. *Notes of a Native Son* is the powerful expression of a sensitive, discerning writer's reaction to his complicated world.

Hilton Als a cultural critic, literary critic, journalist and screenwriter grew up in Brooklyn in a predominantly West Indian and African American neighbourhood. His tenure at a white high school in Manhattan was his first prolonged association with whites. Much of Als's published work is an interesting mix of autobiography, literary criticism and cultural criticism. Visibility, silence and gaining voice are key themes in Als's work. His only published book is a collection of three essays entitled *The Women*.

The first essay explores Als's struggle to define himself in relation to his mother and the concept of the Negrées. He seeks to understand and reconcile his conflicting feelings toward his mother and his own self-image. Being a Negrées allowed Als to redefine himself, to resist the definitions of his body by others. It permits Als to be a rebel. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook*, refers to the words of Hilton Als who says that the Negrées in fiction is a symbol of both oppression and Blackness. He argues that the writer's ego distract them from sufficiently probing or representing the essence of the Negrées.

Als identifies the meaning of the Harlem Renaissance as "the moment when Negro social life devolved from Negro to Black" (8). He also belittles writers for a lack of talent and publishers for their lack of criticism. Interestingly, he neglects to mention the writers by name. *The Women* is indeed Als's story; his memoir is subtly

woven through the three essays, and one leaves the book wishing that he had used a mirror instead of a veil.

The study of experiences of Black women involved in comparatively similar resistance struggles to draw transnational comparisons of family influence and activist identity development. The social conditions of Apartheid and Jim Crow segregation, both in their institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms, have similar social structures created to emphasize white supremacy. A comparative work between the two movements presents an analysis of the nature of racism exploring the comparisons between these social structures and the creation and implementation of white supremacy. Although G. Fredericks in his book, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History*, suggested that the United States and South Africa influenced one another such that “black South Africans often cited the progress of blacks in the United States to show what black people were capable of accomplishing” (5), little work has explored the resistance movements of Black South Africans and African Americans in their respective systems of oppression. This scrutiny will provide a starting point for understanding similarities in the resistance strategies of the two movements.

The autobiography of Black South African and African American women suggests four types of familial influence on resistance identity and strategies. Black women consider and reflect on the strategies of familial modelling of resistance, familial generation of resistance, discursive construction of families and redefinition of conventional family forms. The representative nineteenth-century Black woman’s autobiography is much more than a personal narrative that merely remarks on her personal growth; it is a social discourse that applies a unique Black woman’s voice to the interpretation and recording of her life experiences. Harriet Ann Jacobs’s

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, are the black female slave narrative most often studied and anthologised, offers an excellent example of an African American woman's use of a reinstated autobiographical genre as social discourse.

Elizabeth Laura Adams is one of the first female African Americans to have been recognised within the body of writings in and around the Catholic Church and her autobiography *Dark Symphony* has remained an integral piece of the literature up to the present time. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* views that Adam's major autobiographical work is *Dark Symphony*, which was published in 1942, a year after her narrative first appeared in the serialised essay "There Must Be a God... Somewhere: A True Story of a Convert's Search for God" (3). Her work focused on the search for peace and purity through religion. *Dark Symphony* works as a spiritual Bildungsroman, taking the reader on a religious journey that transcends the realities of racism, death and physical frailty. While her autobiography discusses the importance of poetry and music in her life, religion and specifically Catholicism structures the text thematically. Adam's message is clear: Faith brings peace and salvation.

Adams maintains that her religious focus and particularly her commitment to certain ideals of forgiveness and acceptance have helped her find happiness. At times her narrative smacks with disappointment over her literary endeavours and her chronic career frustrations. Her autobiography was a popular text within Catholic community, selling approximately 15,000 copies and thereby earning Adams enough royalties to make her living after 1942. Within the Catholic community of her time, Adams's text was well known and her autobiography was still considered a seminal text on African Americans and Catholicism.

Booker Taliaferro Washington shortly after his Atlanta Cotton Exposition speech, which established him as the new leader of African American Americans, Washington began considering an autobiography. The project did not come about until four years later, but then Washington produced two works in two years. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* enumerates that both, according to Louis R. Harlan, were part of a larger plan to solidify Washington's place as "the possessor of the conventional wisdom in race relations" in turn of the century America (367).

Washington's first autobiography, *The Story of My Life and Work*, was published by J.L. Nicholas and Company in 1900. Like *Up from Slavery*, *The Story of My Life and Work*, Washington immediately began second autobiography. This time he involved himself much more in its writing, working closely with a new ghost writer, Max Bennett Thrasher, a white man. Other expert editorial advice was obtained and a Doubleday, Page and Company, a leading publisher, helped assure a quality product. All of his autobiographical writings show that Washington remained forever faithful to the ideas upon which he had founded Tuskegee Institute and which he prompted unceasingly during the twenty years he was the de facto, if not undisputed, leader of African Americans.

The flourishing of interest in African American literature and autobiographical studies in the 1970s and 1980s led to critical studies of *Up from Slavery* and Washington's other autobiographies that explore these works as autobiographical art and take an objective stand toward Washington's philosophies. He sought autobiographical strategies to "tame" Douglass and claims the spiritual and literary "father's" place as undisputed leader of African Americans.

One of the prominent autobiographers is Maya Angelou. She is an author, poet, historian, songwriter, dancer, stage and screen producer, director, performer, singer and civil rights activist. Her poetry collection are, “A Brave and Startling Truth” (1995); “The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou” (1994); “Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now” (1993); “Now Sheba Sings the Song” (1987); “I Shall Not Be Moved” (1990); “Shaker, why Don’t You Sing” (1983); “Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well”(1975) and “Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie” (1971), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In 1959, at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She has also written and produced several Prize winning documentaries, including “Afro Americans in the Arts” a PBS special for which she received the Golden Eagle Award.

Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Ann Johnson) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928, the second child of Bailey Johnson, a navy dietician and Vivian Johnson, a nurse and card dealer. Angelou’s older brother, Bailey Jr., nicknamed Marguerite “Maya”, shortened from “my-a-sister”. She was an American author and poet. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays and several books of poetry and is credited with a list of plays, movies and television shows spanning more than fifty years. She received dozens of awards and over thirty honorary doctoral degrees. Angelou is best known for her series of seven autobiographies, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her life up to the age of seventeen and brought her international recognition and acclaim.

Angelou’s long list of occupations has included pimp, prostitute, night-club dancer and performer, cast-member of the musical *Porgy and Bess*, coordinator for

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, author, journalist in Egypt and Ghana during the days of decolonisation and actor, writer, director, and producer of plays, movies, and public television programs. Since 1991, she has taught at Wake Forest University in Winston Salem, North Carolina, where she holds the first lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies. She was active in the Civil Rights Movement and worked with both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Since 1990s she has made around eighty appearances a year on the lecture circuit, something she continued into her eighties. In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration, the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961.

With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou was heralded as a new kind of memoirist, one of the first African American Women who was able to publicly discuss her personal life. She is highly respected as a spokesperson of African American people and women and her works have been considered a defense of African American culture. Although attempts have been made to ban her books from some US libraries, her works are widely used in schools and universities worldwide. Angelou's major works have been labelled as autobiographical fiction, but many critics have characterised them as autobiographies. She has made a deliberate attempt to challenge the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing and expanding the genre. Her books focus on themes such as racism, identity, family and travel.

The first 17 years of Angelou's life are documented in her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. When she was three and her brother four, their parents "disastrous marriage" ended. Their father sent them to Stamps, Arkansas

alone by train to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. In “an astonishing exception”(10) to the harsh economics of African Americans of the time, Angelou’s grandmother prospered financially during the Great Depression and World War II because the general store she owned basic commodities and because “she made wise and honest investments” (25). At the age of eight, while living with her mother, Angelou was sexually abused and raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman was found guilty, but was jailed for only one day.

Later Angelou and her brother were sent back to their grandmother once again. Angelou credits a teacher and friend of her family, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, helped her to speak again. Flowers introduced her to authors such as Dickens, Shakespeare, Poe, Douglas Johnson and James Weldon Johnson, authors that would affect her life and career, as well as African American female artists like Frances Harper, Anne Spencer and Jessie Fauset.

Angelou’s second autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name* recounts her life from the age 17 to 19 and “depicts a single mother’s slide down in the social ladder into poverty and crime” (11). Angelou worked as “the front Woman or business manager for prostitutes”, (19) restaurant cook, and prostitute. She moved through a series of relationships, occupations, and cities as she attempted to raise her son without job training or advanced education.

In her third autobiography, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou describes her three-year marriage to Greek electrician, former sailor, and aspiring musician in 1951, despite the condemnation of interracial relationships at the time and the disapproval of her mother. She took modern dance classes during this time and met dancers and choreographers Alvin Ailey and Ruth

Beckford. Angelou and Ailey formed a dance team, calling themselves “Al and Rita”, and performed Modern Dance at fraternal Black Organisations throughout San Francisco, but never became successful. Angelou, her new husband and son moved to New York City so that she could study African dance with Trinidadian dancer Pearl Primus, but they returned to San Francisco a year later.

As Angelou described in her fourth autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, she met novelist James O. Killens in 1959 and at his urging, moved to New York to concentrate on her writing career. She joined the Harlem writers Guild, where she met several major African American authors, including John Henrik Clarke, Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall and Julian Mayfield and was published for the first time. After meeting and hearing civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speech in 1960, she and Killens organised “the legendary” Cabaret for Freedom to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and she was named Northern Coordinator. Angelou also began her pro-Castro and anti-racial segregation activism during this time.

She relates her experiences as an African American residing in Ghana in her fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. She became an administrator at the University of Ghana and was active in the African American expatriate community. She was a feature editor for *The African Review*, a freelance writer for the Ghanaian Times, wrote and broadcast for Radio Ghana and worked and performed for Ghana's National Theatre. She performed in a revival of *The Blacks* in Geneva and Berlin.

In Accra, she became close friend with Malcolm X during his visit in the early 1960s. Writing about their relationship in her sixth and final autobiography *A Song*

*Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), Angelou said she returned to the U.S. in 1956 to help him build a new civil rights organisation, the organisation of African American Unity; he was assassinated shortly afterward. In 1977 Angelou appeared in a supporting role in the television mini-series *Roots*. She was awarded with hundreds of awards and honorary degrees from colleges and universities from all over the world.

Over thirty years after Angelou began writing her life story, she completed the sixth and final autobiography in her series of six, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, in 2002. Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* states that when Clinton campaign ended, Angelou put her support behind Senator Barack Obama, who won the election and became the first African American president of the United States. She stated, “We are growing up beyond the idiocies of racism and sexism” (16). Maya Angelou, who preferred to be called “Dr. Angelou” by people outside of her family and close friends, was partially descended from the Mende people of West Africa.

Although Angelou considered herself a playwright and poet when her editor Robert Loomis challenged her to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she is best known for her autobiographies. According to Lupton, many of Angelou’s readers identify her as a poet first and an autobiographer second. Reviewer Elsie B. Washington has called her “the Black Woman’s Poet Laureate”, and has called Angelou’s poetry the anthems of African Americans. Maya Angelou has experienced similar success as a poet as she did as an autobiographer. She began, early in her writing career, of alternating the publication of an autobiography and a volume of poetry. Her first volume of poetry “Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘Fore I Diiie”, published in 1971 shortly after *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, became a best seller, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* views that Angelou's narratives have been criticised for using devices identified with writing fiction rather than autobiographies, resulting in a number of critics classifying "Angelou's five volumes as autobiographical fiction and not autobiographies" (17). Some of the major themes prevalent throughout the narratives are imprisonment, identity, displacement and motherhood. Like the caged bird who beats his breast bloody against the bars of his prison, the sentiment behind the poem is a prayer of hope for an imprisoned people to transcend their restrictions and to break free from the cages of racism, oppression and hatred.

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* enumerates that Sidonie Ann Smith writes about Angelou's autobiography that:

Maya Angelou's autobiography... opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self will seek escape. The Black girl child is trapped within the cage of her own diminished self-image around which interlock the bars of natural and social forces. (18)

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* enumerates that Kent acknowledges the uniqueness of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* within African American autobiographical tradition "by its special stance toward the self, community and the universe and by a form exploiting the full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity" (21).

Emmanuel Nelson in his book *African American Autobiographies: A Sourcebook* observes that finally, analysing all five volumes of the narrative in respect

to the autobiographical tradition, Lupton's essay "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical continuity" concludes:

The volumes are intricately related through a number of essential elements: the ambivalent autobiographical voice, the flexibility of structure to echo the life process, the intertextual commentary on character and theme and the use of certain recurring patterns to establish both continuity and continuation. (22)

Angelou's contribution to literature and social movements will remain as an inspiration to today's youth as well as future generations. Youth and students from successive generations were influenced by Maya Angelou's widely read book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The Civil Rights Movement from 1955-1968 had a profound effect on the rights and liberties of the African American population. Maya Angelou's literary work is a prime example of how one African American woman influenced the civil rights movement with her words.

Maya Angelou, an African American writer who is best known for her seven autobiographies was also prolific and successful poet. She has been called the African American woman's poet laureate and her poems have been called the anthems of African Americans. Angelou studied and began writing her poetry at a young age and used poetry and other great literature to cope with trauma.

Considering Maya Angelou as a poet and playwright, she wrote 'Caged Bird' in 1969 which brought her international recognition and acclaim. Many of her readers consider her a poet first an autobiographer second, but she is better known for her prose works. She has published several volumes of poetry and has experienced similar

success as a poet. Her poetry cannot easily be replaced in categories of themes or techniques.

Many of Angelou's poems are about love, relationships, or overcoming hardships, as expressed in poems of hers such as "Still I Rise", *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and "Million Man March Poem". The metaphors in her poetry serve as coding or litotes, for meanings understood by other African Americans, but her themes and topics apply to all races. She explores common themes like love, loss, music, identity, discrimination, racism, family and struggle in all her works.

Angelou uses everyday language, the African American vernacular, African American music and forms and rhetorical techniques such as shocking language, the occasional use of profanity and traditionally unacceptable subjects. As she does throughout her autobiographies, Angelou speaks not only herself, but for the struggles experienced by her entire gender and race. Her poems continue the themes of mild protest and survival also found in her autobiographies, and inject hope through humour. Her first volume of poetry, "Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie", published in 1971 shortly after "Caged Bird" became a best-seller and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

"Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now", published in 1993, is African-American writer and poet Maya Angelou's first book of essays. It was published shortly after she recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration. Hilton Als in his book *Songbird: Maya Angelou Takes Another Look at Herself* observes that "Journey" consists of a series of short essays, often autobiographical, along with two poems, and has been called one of Angelou's "wisdom books" (89). It is titled after a lyric in the song "Keep Your

Eyes on the Prize”. At the time of its publication, Angelou was already well respected and popular as a writer and poet. Like her previous works, “Journey” received generally positive reviews.

“Even the Stars Look Lonesome” is a collection 20 short personal essays, most of which are autobiographical. Genevieve Stuttaford and Simson Maria in the article “Forecasts: Nonfiction” enumerates that all but one essay, “Those Who Really Know, Teach”, previously appeared in other publications (54). The book is dedicated to “the children who will come to maturity in the twenty-first century” and lists more than 35 of them she knew, charging them to “make this a perfect world” (244).

Angelou discusses a wide range of topics in “Stars”, including Africa, aging and the young’s misconceptions of it, sex and sensuality, self-reflection, independence and violence. She explores her early career as a nightclub performer. She writes about African art and “the importance of understanding both the historical truth of the African American experience and the art that truth inspired” (44). She salutes African American women, calling them “precious jewels all” (44), and profiles her friend Oprah Winfrey, who she compares to “the desperate traveller who teaches us the most profound lesson and affords us the most exquisite skills” (44).

Angelou came up with “Letter to My Daughter”, which became a New York Times bestseller, while going through old boxes of notes and papers full of concepts for future books and poems, which she called “WIP” (Works in Progress). She found twenty years worth of notes written to her friend Oprah Winfrey, and realized that she should put the essays they inspired into a book so that others could read them. Gary Younge in his book *Maya Angelou: I’m fine as Wine in the Summer Time* portrays that, although she had no daughters, and gave birth to a son (Guy Johnson), which she

called “the best thing that ever happened to me in my life” (114), many women in Angelou’s career looked to her as a mother figure. She wrote *Letters* to speak to those women and to share with them the wisdom she has gained throughout her long life.

Maya Angelou was a very influential voice, when it came to issues such as gender and racial equality. She is urging women to respect themselves, to be active in taking the offense, if offended, rather than naturally accepting the inferiority and being submissive if mistreated. Maya Angelou was a feminist and a fighter for women’s rights, therefore a closer look of feminism, and the significant message of the writer’s work was unarguably compulsory.

In 1960s the second wave feminism was born in The United States of America, later spreading throughout the Western World. Unlike the first-wave feminism, this mainly focused on legal problems, such as gender equality in property and voting rights, the second-wave feminism unravelled issues, such as the workplace and different sexual topics among others. Subjects previously unspoken, like abortion, birth control, education on contraception, sexually transmitted infections and reproductive rights, thus sexuality in general and family life got now publicly discussed. Maya Angelou’s poems “Momma Welfare Roll”, “Men” and “Woman Work” just to name a few, all directly touch the latter subjects. The second-wave feminism is considered to be delayed reaction to the post World War II exceptionally high economic growth and thus the creation of the suburban-family life ideal, vastly idealised by the media of the time.

The rise of the second-wave feminism was widely influenced by the French philosopher, intellectual, writer and feminist Simon de Beauvoir. Beauvoir is considered to have laid the grounds for the contemporary feminism. Her book *The*

*Second Sex* released 1949 is a detailed analysis of women's oppression and their perception as the 'other part' in the patriarchal society. She's argued, that simply due to the physical differences, such as women's ability to get pregnant, give birth, lactate and menstruate, they cannot be perceived as the 'second sex' in the society and thus claimed, that one becomes a woman and is not born to be one arguing gender to be a social construction. Beauvoir is considered to be a major influence on both feminist theory and feminist existentialism. The example of Maya Angelou intensively denies the latter Freudian statement as well, hence automatically aligning with Freudian view, while her life illustrates the significance of search for one's self in order to achieve the ultimate intellectual development and life fulfilment.

African American feminists, including Maya Angelou emphasised the problems of certain marginalised society groups, more than the humanity as a whole. Problematic of disparities of gender, class or race got addressed, making these issues the corner stone themes in Angelou's work. Angelou's literary work in general and her poetry specifically might be considered an effort to show African American women seeking to survive against white masculine prejudice at social or psychological levels.

In general she advocates the urgent need for the creation of a truly humane society with greater respect for all its members. Generally, contemporary African American female authors in America both in poetry and fiction have commenced establishing their own voice through recreating and rewriting their identity. Thus the discourse created by African American has subverted the dominant monolithic discourse. And hence my thesis will throw a light on cultural consciousness in her autobiographies in the further chapters.

The objective of the present study is to explore the socio-cultural nuances in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*. Although, these two works are autobiographical and narrate the life of the author, no life history is devoid of socio-cultural context. Therefore, the aim is to separate the narrative from its context and study the background to decipher the socio-cultural nuances in these two autobiographical works.

Culture has been a definite theme in the works of African American writers. Maya Angelou's autobiographical works like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* are best examples. This study explores the culture in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* and its relevance in the social scenario.

The present study entitled, "Socio-Cultural Nuances in the Select Works of Maya Angelou" contains four chapters. The first chapter titled, "Introduction" presents forth the characteristics of an autobiography, review of African American autobiographical works and Maya Angelou as a writer. The chapter ends or culminates with objectives and the thesis statement of the study.

The second chapter titled, "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" explores the social and cultural elements in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The third chapter titled, "*Gather Together in My Name*" scrutinises the instances which reveal the socio-cultural aspects in Angelou's second autobiography *Gather Together in My Name*. The fourth chapter titled, "Summation" consolidates the socio-cultural analysis from the previous chapters and concludes with the importance of this study.

## Chapter 2

### *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

One of the significant features of post colonial writing is the exploration of cultural patterns and social behaviour. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhaba expresses his view, “post colonial criticism witnesses the unequal and uneven forces of culture representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world” (34). There is shift in culture on account of political and social grounds. In *A Collection of Essays on Maya Angelou*, William H. Wiggins, says “African American writers always incorporated the colourful rituals and culturally centered themes of their people’s traditional annual and occasional festivals in their literature” (273).

In post colonial literature, the writers who represent marginalised social groups reconstruct the socio- cultural practices of their community through their writings. Gita Viswanath in *Writing the Community: Sindhi Literature as Minority Discourse*, while commenting on the role of literature in conserving the peculiar cultural patterns of a community writes that literature is “a right within which a community is not only reflected, but also constructed” (134).

Maya Angelou, the African American author, in her autobiographical narratives re-enacts the typical African American culture with its social and behavioural patterns. The term ‘culture’ evolves from the French word ‘cultura’ which means to cultivate. Thus, it is evident that recurring behavioural patterns, social actions and the interpersonal affairs of a particular community, a region becomes part of a particular culture. The African American in America, being subaltern social group, carry on their unique cultural practices and social patterns against a multi-

cultural American backdrop. Alain Locke in *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature* says, “The position of the Negro in American Culture is indeed a paradox. It almost passes understanding how and why a group of people can be socially despised, yet at the same time artistically esteemed and culturally influential, can be both an oppressed minority and a dominant cultural force” (523-524).

Despite the fact that the major concern of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical writings is to reconstruct her past, as well as the past of her racially oppressed clan, she candidly displays the individuality and liberty she had gained by swimming against the tides. Apart from the authorial intension in her autobiographical novels, she reconstructs the cultural and social patterns of the African American community. Her writings confirm the fact that literature is not a lonely island, but has a close proximity with areas of human experience like culture, philosophy and religion.

Similarly, the African Americans felt that writing brought forth the beauty that was lying hidden in their race. Being a marginalised social group, the African Americans in America adopt certain strategies to encounter the problems and agony which they are destined to suffer. These strategies in the course of time become the typical cultural patterns of the community. According to “The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison”, Morrison, in her conversation with Leclair enumerates that “... Peasants have a portrait of themselves from gossip, tales, music and some celebrations. The middle class needed a portrait of itself. The novel served this function ...” (2765).

The vulnerable situations of the African Americans force them to seek solace and asylum in religion as it provides a little hope and temporary ease. So invariably in all African American families, prayer is a regular feature. The minority cohesion of

the African Americans makes them lead a close knit life and they feel secure in that kind of existence. Moreover, the African Americans have their own unique dialect warped in their culture which they use in their day to day life.

Faith and religiosity are part of cultural behaviour which differs from society to society. Ronna Privett in “Crying from the Wilderness: Religious Margins and the Emerging Woman’s Voice in Early American Literature”, speaks about the religious faith of women in the captivity narratives of writers like Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Duston remarks that they use faith for “their survival and their treatment of their ‘wilderness conditions’...” (98). As in captivity narratives, in women’s writings too there are plenty of references to the faith of the African Americans. This is predominantly reflected in the pages of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical narratives.

Church and faith are the two major factors that are well interfused in the African American culture and life. Carole Boyce in her *Migratory Subjectivities. Literary Theory: An Anthology*, gives suggestion in reading the African American woman’s writings, “Black woman’s writings, I am proposing, should be read as a serious of boundary crossing and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (996). The opening of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* represents the above discussed ideas:

The Children’s section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was wiggling and giggling over my well-known forgetfulness.

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. It is an unnecessary insult. (4)

Maya Angelou depicts that she is different from other children in appearance and that she did not have a sense of belonging associated with anyone or anyplace. She deals with a story of girl's growing up and surviving as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and early 1940s. She underscores her diminished sense of self and ruthlessness of her early childhood years when she proclaims in the prologue: "What are you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay..." (1).

Angelou introduces *Caged Bird* with an anecdote. It is Easter Sunday at the colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Stamps. In celebration of the event, Momma had prepared a lavender taffeta dress for Angelou. Believing it to be the most beautiful dress she has ever seen, she attributes magical properties to it: when worn, the dress will transform Angelou into the lovely, blond and blue eyed sweet little white girl, she actually believes herself to be. But on Easter morning the dress reveals its depressing actuality: It is "a plain, ugly cut-down from a woman's once-was-purple thrown away" (8). Unlike Christ, whose resurrection from death the church is celebrating, Angelou cannot be reborn into another life.

The fairy tale imagery employed to depict her creation is characteristic of the imaginative and impressionable girl, but the meaning of her tale cannot be overlooked. According to her own representation Angelou's identity highlights on the whims of this fairy step mother. If benevolent, she will transform Angelou back into a pretty White girl; if she remains cruel, her spell over Angelou will rest unbroken. When her dress does not produce the longed for results, Angelou is forced to contend with her Blackness. But if she acknowledges this Blackness, Angelou must also acknowledge the existence of an arbitrary and malevolent force beyond her control which dictates her personal and racial identity. As if mourning the death of the lovely

White body beyond her possession, Angelou in *Caged Bird*, describes her dress as sounding, “like crepe paper on the back of hearses” (7).

In *Caged Bird*, the reader meets two young children, aged three and four, who are wearing wrist tags that identify them as Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, Jr. A note addressed “To Whom it may Concern” (5) states that they are travelling alone from Long beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas, to the care of Mrs. Annie Henderson. The note posted on their bodies is not addressed to their paternal grandmother Annie Henderson, but rather “To Whom it may Concern” (5). Angelou explains that she and her brother Bailey were shipped to the home of their paternal grandmother when their parents decided to end their calamitous marriage. Early on, when the young Angelou fantasises that she is White, blond and beautiful; she does so because, in reality she sees herself as a child whom no one could possibly love certainly not her mother or father who has so totally rejected her. Her sense of displacement may stem in part from the fact that African American people were not considered full-fledged Americans, but primarily she feels abandoned by her family.

Angelou shows the deep bonding inherent within the African American social set up that protects its own people from the hostile environment. Angelou and Bailey reach their destination safely and gradually adjust to their new life in Stamps becoming integral parts of Grandmother’s store religion, of Uncle Willie’s life and of the community itself, a community that closes around the children “as real mother that embraces a stranger’s child. Warmly but not too familiarly” (6). Angelou was all alone during her early life in Stamps.

Maya Angelou also portrays about their method of washing clothes in two big iron pots. They boiled clothes in one and one was for rinsing, and there was a

clothesline from one tree to another tree. In *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, Joanne M. Braxton enumerates, "The road came right across here and so there was a drive" (21), she meant, for people who had cars or wagons. The toilet was between the pigs' stay and the chicken coop. And there was a door and over here there was a box, and in the box there were all sorts of interesting things like Sears and Roebuck catalogue pages used for toilet paper, but also nice magazines like *Liberty* and *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and one of those little Christian things that Momma thought should go out there and wouldn't be sacrilegious to put out in the toilet. They were never used—these Christian magazines—for paper, only the Sears Roebuck catalogue.

Broken families, separation of children from parents is another cultural aspect. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou's childhood is eclipsed with lack of parental care. For the five years that Marguerite and Bailey lived in Stamps, they did not hear anything from their parents except for getting Christmas gifts from them one year. Momma told them that their parents lived in "a heaven called California, where... they could have all the oranges they could eat. And the sun shone all the time" (52). Marguerite later wrote, "I was sure that wasn't so. I couldn't believe that our mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children" (52). In fact, Marguerite had convinced herself that her mother was dead: "I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother lying in her coffin" (52).

Angelou as a small girl feels hurt when she receives presents from her mother. It was proof that her parents were alive and that they hadn't bothered to contact her before. The gifts stand as a symbol of a White world beyond Angelou's reach or everyday experience; those gifts not only evidences her mother's exotic and alien life, but also intimate questions of guilt and banishment that none of the five- year- old

child could answer. Abandonment by a dead mother is forgivable, but abandonment by a living one evokes rage, which is so threatening that it must undergo massive suppression. Thus, Angelou becomes passive, inhibiting her deep anger and hostility. The fear of abandonment even when living with her mother in St. Louis never diminished.

There is violence, mistrust, ruptures at family level. Soon after their return to California, there is a bitter argument between Maya Angelou and Dolores (her father's current girlfriend), who wants Bailey's daughter out of her home and her life. Urging Maya Angelou to return to her mother, Dolores calls Vivian Baxter a whore. When Maya Angelou slaps her, Dolores cuts Maya Angelou severely. After taking her to one friend for emergency medical care, Bailey Sr., leaves her with a second friend. In *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, Joanne M. Braxton, explains about Maya Angelou's experience knowing that violence would ensue if she returned home and her mother learned that she had been cut, Maya Angelou leaves without telling her father or his friend and, after wandering about San Diego for some while, joins a junkyard commune of homeless children whom she describes as "the silt of war frenzy" (247).

After she has spent a month in the commune, Maya Angelou's thought processes have altered so significantly that she is hardly able to recognize her former self. In *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, Joanne M. Braxton, illustrates about Maya Angelou's peers' unquestioning acceptance dislodges her familiar feelings of insecurity; moreover, the unrestrained life that she experiences within the group expands her spiritual horizons and "initiates her into the brotherhood of man" (248). The gratitude Angelou owes those who befriended her on her

passage from childhood to adolescence to adulthood will forever include her junkyard family:

After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly out of the pale of the human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life.  
(255)

In *Caged Bird*, a light shade had been pulled down between the African American community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear admiration-contempt for the white “things”—white folks’ cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable.

Angelou’s childhood is moulded by her wise, hard-working grand- mother, Mrs. Annie Henderson, in a community where weekly church services, periodic revival meetings, and occasional confrontations with whites punctuate the young girl’s education. A tough-minded business- woman who purchased her store and first parcel of land in 1910 with \$1,000 in dimes earned from her sale of meat pies and lemonade, Grandmother Henderson is not demonstrative in her love for Maya. Yet she is uncompromising in that love. A model of righteous behaviour and a source of knowledge and pride, she sustains the young Maya Angelou during one of the most difficult periods of her life.

Mrs. Annie Handerson is a strong African American woman who strives harder to survive against the odds. Some people might have called her Momma a coward, Maya Angelou acknowledges, but she adds that Momma would have called herself a realist. Her Momma survived the odds stacked against her and became a successful businesswoman. She saved the Store in the Great Depression while many white businesses failed all over the country.

Moreover, she gives the child the kind of nurturing that will later fortify her to face her growing-up years and the outside- world. In *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, Joanne M. Braxton illustrates, from childhood still vivid in her mind, Angelou recalls that “a deep-brooding love hung over everything she touched” (21). Through this indomitable woman, Maya Angelou is introduced to the spiritual side of African American life. Portrayed as an individual whose world is ordered by work, duty, “her place,” and religion, Grandmother Henderson represents the religious tradition begun in secret praise meetings during slavery and further developed in the small frame churches that once dotted the countryside and small American towns.

In *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, Joanne M. Braxton views, much of the strength of the African American woman in general and of Grandmother Henderson in particular can be attributed to the African American church, from slavery to emancipation, African Americans found solace in the biblical injunction to “refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded” (21). A strongly devout woman, Grandmother Henderson begins each morning with a traditional prayer of thanks and supplication,

one often heard in African American churches through individual witness and testimony:

Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn't allow the bed I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen. (21)

Angelou captures her childlike observations about what makes white people different. Stamps, Arkansas, suffers so thoroughly from segregation and Maya Angelou's world is so completely enmeshed in the African American community that she often finds it hard to imagine what white people look like. They appear to her more like spectral ghosts with mysterious powers—and wonderful possessions—than as fellow human beings. At the same time, from a young age Maya Angelou knows that white people bear responsibility for the suffering of the cotton-pickers. She also learns from Momma that it is best not to address any white people directly, as it might lead to mortal danger. Momma goes so far as never to even speak about white people without using the title 'they'.

Angelou enumerates in her autobiography that Momma's philosophy regarding the safest way to deal with whites typifies the attitudes prevalent during the Jim Crow era—the period between 1877 and the mid-1960's during which a strict racial caste system relegated African Americans in the South to the position of second-class citizens. Lynch mobs represented only one danger faced by American blacks in the rural South. Segregation became more than a physical reality since it

influenced the culture and the mind-set of the African American population as well. Specific comments about particular people could prove dangerous if those comments reached the wrong ears.

Geography also constitutes cultural identity. In Stamps, there were two sides of the town – the African American side and the White side. Black and white people went to different schools, different stores, they even walked along different roads. Momma ran the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store, the only general store in the African American section of Stamps. This was the place where Marguerite lived and spent most of the time.

Stamps, Arkansas, were a difficult town for African-American people to live in. It was extremely segregated and African American people lived in a part of town that was much poorer than the area where white people lived. Marguerite and Bailey sometimes had to travel into the white part of town to buy fresh meat to eat. This always filled Marguerite with fear. She had heard stories about the Ku Klux Klan, a group of Whitemen who terrorised African Americans and sometimes killed them. In spite of this fear, Marguerite felt loved and protected by her grandmother while she lived in Stamps.

For Maya, Stamps and St. Louis stand in sharp contrast. In Stamps, there are Grandmother Henderson and the Store; there are also religious devotion and the acceptance of one's worldly and racial lot. In the closely knit rural community, Maya Angelou knows all the African American people in town, and they know her. For the young Maya Angelou, Stamps is a symbol of order; in fact, the orderliness of the Store—the carefully arranged shelves, the counters and the cutting boards—reflects the orderliness of her life in general. In St. Louis, however, Angelou is thrown into

her mother's world of taverns, pool halls, gambling, fast living and fast loving. This is a far looser environment than Maya Angelou has ever known and one that is devoid of the customary laws that Grandmother Henderson had taught her to respect.

The range of sanctioned behaviour is also broader; individuals are less stringently controlled by moral laws or social pressures; and relations among individuals are less stable. Donald B. Gibson, in his book *Individualism and Community in Black History and Fiction*, observes that although Maya Angelou lives comfortably in St. Louis and is excited by many aspects of urban life, she remains a stranger among strangers, mainly because the urban community treats the individual as individual rather than as part of a group, and so is powerless to provide her the emotional security she needs.

Moreover, having spent four years in the solitude of Stamps, Maya Angelou is dislocated by the strangeness of her new environment: the tremendous noise of the city, its "scurrying sounds" (68), its frightening claustrophobia. Grandmother Baxter's German accent and elegant manners are also unfamiliar. Her mother, aunts and uncles are equally unreal. St. Louis provides Angelou neither sense of place nor permanence. Indeed, after only a few weeks there, she understands that it is not her real home:

In my mind I only stayed in St. Louis a few weeks. As quickly as I understood that I had not reached my home, I sneaked away to Robin Hood's forest and the caves of Alley Oop where all reality was unreal and even that changed every day. I carried that same shield that I had used in Stamps: "I didn't come to stay". (70)

Further, the lifestyle of the African Americans varies from place to place and from state to state. Though, the variation is subtle, however, it prevails. In 1941, when

Maya Angelou is thirteen, she and Bailey move to Oakland and later San Francisco to live with their mother, whom they have not seen in six years. Joanne M. Braxton, in his book *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, enumerates about Maya Angelou's mother that by this time, Vivian Baxter has married Daddy Clidell, a gambler and respected businessman, who will soon become "the first father Maya would know" (58). For a while, Angelou re-experiences some of the personal dislocation already felt so acutely in Stamps and St. Louis. But in time "the air of collective displacement and the impermanence of life in wartime" (59) dissipate her sense of not belonging. Of this she writes: "In San Francisco, for the first time I perceived myself as part of something... The city became for me the idea of what I wanted to be as a grownup. Friendly but never gushing cool but not frigid or distant, distinguished without the awful stiffness" (60).

In San Francisco, the tender-hearted girl changes into another imagined self: a compound of her mother, Mrs. Flowers, and Miss Kirwin of Washington High School. Just as Stamps and St. Louis stood in sharp contrast, so do San Francisco and Stamps. From her prosperous stepfather, Maya receives a basic ghetto education:

He owned apartment buildings and, later, pool halls, and was famous for being the rarity "a man of honour." He didn't suffer, as many "honest men" do, from the detestable righteousness that diminishes their virtue. He knew cards and men's hearts. So during the age when Mother was exposing us to certain facts of life, like personal hygiene, proper posture, table manners, good restaurants and tipping practice, Daddy Clidell taught me to play poker, blackjack, tonk and high, low, Jick, Jack and the Game. He wore expensively tailored suits and a large yellow diamond stickpin. Except for the jewelry, he was a

conservative dresser and carried himself with the conscious pomp of a man of secure means. (221)

In San Francisco, Maya Angelou is also introduced to a colourful cast of urban street characters (i.e., Stonewall Jimmy, Just Black, Cool Clyde, Tight Coat, and Red Leg) who make their living through gambling and trickery. Here she learns a new morality: the Black American ghetto ethic by which “that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country's table . . . by ingenuity and courage, is able to take of himself a Lucullan feast” (219).

Inferiority and discrimination influence the lives of African Americans. One afternoon, a former sheriff named Mr. Steward visited Momma's store, he told the family that an African American man had bothered a white woman. He warned them that Uncle Willie might receive a visit from members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In *Caged Bird*, years later, Marguerite recalled the terror she felt. She mentions like “Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air and made my body light” (18).

In viewing the character of Uncle Willie, in the light of African American man, he was in danger for doing nothing wrong. If members of the KKK were looking to attack an African American man, it wouldn't matter which one they found. Anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time could be killed. Uncle Willie hid in a bin which is used to hold onions and potatoes. Throughout the long agonising night, the family listened to Uncle Willie's fearful moans from inside the bin. The KKK never came calling that night. Looking back, however, Marguerite still believes that if they had come to the store, “They would have surely found Uncle Willie and just as surely lynched him” (26).

The sense of guilt rattles Angelou's childhood as well. Angelou depicts that after the trivial incident, the family never speaks of the incident, and Angelou convinces herself that Mr. Freeman was killed because she lied in order to condemn him. Thinking that she has sold herself to the Devil, Maya Angelou resolves to protect others by not speaking to anyone except Bailey. At first the family accepts her silence as fallout from the rape, but after some time, they feel offended and become angry and violent with her. She also looks at herself as a bearer of death and violence, this is noticed when she claims that, "I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape" (87).

Angelou convinces herself to be the cursed instrument of violent death. This conviction is part of the pattern of self-rejection and inferiority, well established within Angelou's psyche. It lies but one small step beyond a personal sense of inherent gross repulsiveness. Intricating this repulsiveness which she believes everyone except Bailey feels towards her-Angelou generalises on her role in Freeman's death and perceive herself as death's tool.

The coloured people living in Arkansas feared racial exploitation because they belonged to a community consisting of economically disadvantaged citizens. The Negroes were forbidden even to have delicacies like ice cream very often. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou views, "People in Stamps used to say that the Whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth. Other days, he had to be satisfied with chocolate" (49). There is an instance when Angelou's classmate dares to sing the Afro American anthem by James Weldon Johnson as follows:

Later in the ceremony, Marguerite's classmate Henry Reed delivered his valedictorian speech. Then he did something unexpected. He began to sing the poem 'Lift ev'ry voice and Sing,  
Till earth and heaven ring  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty...'. (182)

Songs play a very significant role in the lives of the African Americans as they derive joy and peace from them and this reduces the intensity of their agony. Angelou's first autobiography begins with reference to church and joy derived from it. Songs, music, dance is integral part of culture. Maya Angelou is inspired when this song is sung openly in such a public gathering. Everyone is touched and sing in one voice, "We were on top again. As always, again. We survived" (184), she thought with a sense of pride.

Literature also plays a vital role in cultural reinforcement. The words of Dickens and Dunbar helped Marguerite survive her childhood heartbreak and reclaim her voice. The words of James Weldon Johnson helped the black community survive the ignorance and harshness of a racist society. Nevertheless, an ugly pattern was becoming clear to the young girl. Time after time white people would knock black people down. Time after time, black people would pick themselves up. Then, one year after her graduation, Marguerite's will to pick herself up again was sorely tested.

Literature then became Angelou's friend throughout her life and it also helped her understand both herself and the world around her. While reading, she momentarily escapes a difficult life, segregation, hatred of Whites towards African Americans, and vicariously experiences the colourful lives offered in books and the possibility of different, more promising and hopeful worlds. She shares a "Hot Cup of Tea and Milk

with *Oliver Twist*” making it “the best of times and the worst of times” (100).

Literature was Maya Angelou’s first love and it comes to be her eternal companion.

The lessons Maya Angelou receives from Mrs. Flowers were given through books of poetry and philosophical conversations. These lessons reinforce the values, beliefs and wisdom transmitted from generation to generation. Remembering the poems, repeating them aloud, and reflecting upon their meanings gives Angelou a certain sense of power and makes her transcend her immediate environment (100). On a second level, these lessons offer young Maya Angelou a closer observation of the relations of Blacks and Whites. Mrs. Flowers serves as a metaphor of young Maya Angelou’s blossoming into adulthood, and she provides the necessary force to break the cocoon into which Maya Angelou had crept. She also encouraged to listen to the country people because they represent the “mother wit” and “in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations” (100). By observing that Mrs. Flowers updates and validates Momma’s country knowledge makes respect her even more and learn how to listen.

Clothes characterise a culture. Angelou’s memory of Big Bailey, her father reveals that he stands completely out of place in the rural South. She remarks that he wears tight clothes made of wool and that he pronounces English even better than the school principal. His behaviour indicates that he tried hard to make a big impression. His brashness upset the quiet balance of routine in Momma’s family. His car, his accent, and his clothing were all marks of middle-class status, but he worked as a porter in a California hotel. Angelou never says whether Big Bailey acquired his possessions by saving his wages or by other, perhaps illegal means. Indeed, intelligent black men with goals and aspirations in Big Bailey’s generation had few legal

avenues to use to achieve success. In what is known as the Great Migration, between one and two million black farmers left the South from 1914 to 1930 in search of work in northern cities, where factory owners promised but never provided high-wage jobs. The African Americans migration from the rural countryside to the cities divided African Americans from their heritage and their roots, stranding them in a world where, it seemed, one had to look, talk and act white in order to succeed.

Despite her re-location to the loud, exotic, chaotic and alien city of St. Louis, to a certain extent Angelou shows her ability to engage with her new environment. She does not find true happiness in her relationship with her mother, but she meets a host of strong-willed and distinctive relatives who begin to improve her attitude about herself. Angelou's maternal Grandmother Baxter was nearly white and was raised by a German family. She married an African American man but chose not to pass as white and she achieved financial success and security by connecting with the criminal underworld. Angelou's grandfather and uncles are rough city folk who have cultivated a necessary toughness that wards off abuse and exploitation, and her mother's exotic life style seems to fit right in with Angelou's unusual family. Despite the lack of familiarity, Maya Angelou has landed in a more familial world where, she says; she feels a need to appreciate her benefactors and fears being returned to Stamps. She soon learns that she has not adjusted well and that the family she meets in St. Louis practices criminal behaviour, which affects her personally, "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the Black fat slugs that only pretended" (87).

Maya Angelou remains in the state of dullness, recognising neither colours nor people. Things were meaningless until she meets the woman who would break

through this state. Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the “aristocrat of Black Stamps” (93) is perfection in disguise for Angelou. She was the opposite of Momma; she spoke correctly, wore gloves, had rich Black skin and for the rest of Angelou’s life she “remained ... the measure of what a human being can be” (94). The words which trapped Angelou into isolation and in a state of being “dead” to the world will now be the bridge that will lead her away to life again. The encounters she had with Mrs. Flowers will be a kind of a workshop in living, and little by little, Angelou starts speaking again because as Mrs. Flowers told her:

Now no one is going to make you talk---- possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals. ... Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.

(98)

However, Marguerite was empowered in that small town because of a close knit family structure at her home. She enjoyed the respect, love and recognition provided to her by the whole community who were the customers of Mrs. Henderson. When she was raped and assaulted in California, it was in Arkansas where she recovered from emotional and psychological trauma. She also had the chance of coming into company with and learning it from Mrs. Flowers, who inculcated in her the love of books.

The point of commonality between the African American part of the town and White part of the town is the familial love and ties which characterise the coloured people. However, the representations of various kinship relations vary significantly

across borders. Mrs. Henderson, a symbol of motherhood, believes that her grandchildren could be empowered if they stay away from White folks and follow the austere values of African American family system. In African American families, mothers are usually the leaders and decision makers because for hundreds of years, fathers were separated from their families on the auction stall and the children usually stayed with their mothers. Consequently, mothers were the symbol of endurance, hope and nurturing in the society. Mrs. Henderson, Marguerite's grandmother, is an ideal example in this regard.

Another woman who has an equally important role in Angelou's life, through a negative situation which Maya Angelou changes into something positive, was Mrs. Viola Cullinan. She was a white woman for whom Maya Angelou worked as a maid. Mrs. Cullinan decided that Maya Angelou's name, Margaret, was too long and she decided to call her "Mary" and told her friends to do the same, not bothering to remember her real name. This cruel act showed Maya Angelou another way in which whites despised blacks. Race did matter: a basic right of all human beings is to be called by their proper names, and, as history demonstrates and, as Maya Angelou affirms, naming is a sensitive issue because African Americans have often been deprived of this right:

Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being called out of his name. It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks. (109)

Confining the bodies of women to certain physical spaces, clothing them in certain ways can alternately result in the empowerment or disempowerment of the women of colour. Marguerite had to dress up modestly, wash her feet every night for the fear of getting switches by her grandmother and apply Vaseline on her legs. Furthermore, growing up in a racist community was a trauma for every girl like Marguerite because the standard of beauty was 'White skin' and the sense of belonging to her race could be affirmed by Black skin only.

Consequently, Marguerite had developed a split personality where she desired to be White but loved the African American people. Furthermore, her confinement is reinforced by certain norms devised for speaking, addressing the elders, eating and drinking. In the opening lines, Marguerite is seen reciting Easter song, which she has forgotten. Her desire to look White and suppression of this desire makes her feel that she would die of a 'busted head' (4). Her Black skin consequently becomes a symbol of her confinement by a specific set of laws, which results in a lesser self-esteem:

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching,  
yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed  
and raped... This might be the end of the world. If Joe lost we were  
back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations  
that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the  
apes. (135)

Maya Angelou illustrates, how people crowd around the Store's radio with the rest of the community to listen to Joe Louis defend his world heavyweight boxing title. As Maya Angelou conveys, the entire African American community has its hopes and psychological salvation bound up in the fists of Louis, 'the Brown

Bomber<sup>7</sup>. It describes the precarious nature of African American pride in the face of hostile oppression, highlighting the staggering and wrenching significance this boxing match held for the community as the community teeters between salvation and despair. The rarity of African American people achieving public acclaim in both the black and white communities meant that the few who managed to do so had to bear the expectations of the African American community.

Language is cultural by nature and it is inevitable in the socio-cultural studies. Maya Angelou and her African American schoolmates learned to use Standard English and dialled in their appropriate settings. This short paragraph certainly belongs to the commentary running throughout the book on appreciating the significance and power of words: “We were alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial” (225). It also serves to emphasise the superior ability of African Americans to adapt to and get the best of circumstances and situations: “My education and that of my Black associates were quite different from the education of our white schoolmates. In the classroom we all learned past participles, but in the streets and in our homes the Blacks learned to drop s’s from plurals and suffixes from past-tense verbs” (226).

Angelou shows here the superior adaptability of her African American schoolmates (and that Maya Angelou has come a long way from her scorn of her grandmother's use of dialect): the African Americans learn all the whites do and more. She has used appropriate example to the con artist, since the stories about pulling scams demonstrate the African American version of heroism, which is to make the most of what little one has—in other words, adaptability: “In the Black American ghettos the hero is that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country’s table but by ingenuity and courage is able to take for himself a Lucullan feast” (225).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou informs about a revival meeting held in a make shift church. Unlike other communities, the African American culture “teen-agers enjoyed revivals as much as adults” (123). They also wear clothes permitted by their culture. The youngsters as well as the old people enjoy the revival meeting and the get together as well. Maya Angelou wonders whether God would come to the temporary church and bless the poor people gathered there. Soon she is comforted by the thought that the spirit of God visits the Church every Sunday:

Would the gentle Jesus care to enter into that transitory setting? The altar wobbled and threatened to overturn and the collection table sat at a rakish angle. One leg had yielded itself to the loose dirt. Would God the Father allow His only Son to mix with this crowd of cotton pickers and maids, washerwomen and handymen? I knew He sent His spirit on Sundays to the church, but after all that was a church and the people had had all day Saturday to shuffle off the cloak of work and the skin of despair. (123)

While intrusion from the outside world provides experiences that increase the child’s awareness of her social displacement, the Store, where African Americans congregate before and after work, teach Maya Angelou the meaning of economic discrimination. By keenly observing the cotton workers who visit the Store, she gains insight into their inner lives. In the early dawn hours, Maya Angelou observes the cotton workers, gay and full of morning vigour, as they wait for the wagons to come and take them to the fields. Optimistic that the harvest will be good and not choosing to recall the disappointments of the recent past, the workers josh each other and flaunt their readiness to pick two or three hundred pounds of cotton this day. Even the children promise “to bring home fo’ bits and six bits... The later afternoons, however,

reveal the actual harshness of African American Southern life. In the dying sunlight the people dragged, rather than their empty cotton sacks” (8). Angelou writes:

Brought back to the Store, the pickers would step out of the backs of trucks and told down, dirt-disappointed, to the ground. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn't enough. Their wages wouldn't even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown. (8)

The Arkansas River Valley were originally valued for its cotton land, by the time of the Civil War, the region had the state's most diverse agriculture. Maya Angelou gives minute details about cotton pickers, that she knew exactly how long it would be before the big wagons would pull into the front yard and load on the cotton pickers at daybreak to carry them to the remains of slavery's plantations. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn't enough. Their wages wouldn't even get them out of debt to Maya Angelou's grandmother, who doesn't knew about the astonishing bill that awaited on them at the White commissary downtown. In cotton-picking time, the late afternoons reveal the harshness of African American Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by nature's blessing of grouchiness, forgetfulness and the soft lamplight. In *Caged Bird* Maya writes:

The sounds of the new morning had been replaced with grumbling about cheating houses, skimpy cotton and dusty rows. In later years I was to confront the stereotyped picture of gay song-singing cotton pickers with such inordinate rage that I was told even by fellow Blacks that my paranoia was embarrassing. But I had seen the fingers cut by

the mean little cotton bolls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demand. (8, 9)

While *Caged Bird*, vividly portrays the negative social and economic texture of Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou, like many other African American autobiographers, describes the Southern African American community as one that nurtures its members and helps them to survive in such an antagonistic environment. There are numerous examples that demonstrate the communal character of life in Stamps. People help each other. During the Depression when no one has money, Grandmother Henderson employs a system of barter to help her neighbours and thus to save her store. When the wife of an old friend dies and the widower is unable to accept his loss, Grandmother Henderson and Uncle Willie, without a moment's hesitation, invite him to share their home, although space is limited and the guest will have to sleep on a pallet in Uncle Willie's small bedroom. When Bailey does not return from a movie at his usual time, the African American men and women share Grandmother Henderson's concern. One member's concern becomes the community's concern because members, in their practice of the rituals of extended family relationships, are related not only through the community but through the church as well.

Innumerable passages in *Caged Bird* provide a sense of the African American community, a sense of oneness, and a sense of fused strength. The changing seasons, for example, provide opportunities for fellowship and festivity. In winter, after the first frost, hog killings are spirited events that demonstrate community linkages and strength. Everyone is an important participant in this annual rite. As Angelou describes it:

The missionary ladies of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church helped Momma prepare the pork for sausage. They squeezed their fat arms elbow deep in the ground meat, mixed it with gray nose-opening sage, pepper and salt, and made tasty little samples for all obedient children who brought wood for the slick black stove. Then men chopped off the larger pieces of meat and laid them in the smoke-house to begin the curing process. They opened the knuckle of the hams with their deadly-looking knives, took out a certain round harmless bone (“it could make the meat go bad”) and rubbed salt, coarse brown salt that looked like fine gravel, into the flesh and the blood popped to the surface. (114)

In *Caged Bird*, Angelou’s generalised description of a summer picnic fish fry conveys the vigorous solidarity of the entire African American community. Everyone is there: church groups, social groups (Elks, Eastern Stars, Masons, Knights of Columbus, Daughters of Pythias), teachers, farmers, field-workers. Free from their daily chores, excited children run about in wild play and “the sounds of tag beat through the trees” (138). Musicians perform, displaying their artistry with “cigar-box guitars, harmonicas, juke harps, combs wrapped in tissue papers and even bathtub basses” (138). The harmony of a gospel group “floats over the music of the country singers and melts into the songs of small children’s ring games” (7). The amount and variety of food further underscore the importance of the event. As Maya Angelou recalls:

Pans of fried chicken, covered with dishtowels, sat under benches next to a mountain of potato salad crammed with hard-boiled eggs. . . .

Home- made pickles and chow-chow, and baked country hams, aromatic with cloves and pineapples, vied for prominence... On the barbecue pit, chickens and spareribs sputtered... Orange sponge cakes and dark brown mounds dripping Hershey's chocolate stood layer to layer with ice- white coconuts and light brown caramels. Pound cakes sagged with their buttery weight... And busy women in starched aprons salted and rolled... fish in corn meal, then dropped them in Dutch ovens trembling with boiling fat. (138)

In *Caged Bird*, each community or race has its own food habits and these food habits are well intermingled with the culture of a race/community. Childhood experiences are green in the memory of Maya Angelou who recollects one Sunday morning breakfast:

On Sunday mornings Momma served a breakfast that was geared to hold us quiet from 9.30 A.M to 3 P.M. She fried thick pink slabs of home-cured ham and poured the grease over sliced red tomatoes. Eggs over easy, fried potatoes and onions, yellow hominy and crisp perch fried so hard we could pop them in our mouths and chew bones, fins and all. Her cathead biscuits were at least three inches in diameter and two inches thick. The trick to eating catheads was to get the butter on them before they get cold- then they were delicious. (36)

Pineapple is a rarity for the African Americans because they could not afford to buy it. In Maya Angelou's family, only during Christmas they buy 'canned pineapple' and Maya Angelou would get only one slice that she would eat with great delicacy. Perhaps this would be the experience of each African American family in

America. “My obsession with pineapples nearly drove me mad, I dreamt of the days when I would be grown and able to buy a whole carton for myself alone. Although the syrupy golden rings sat in their exotic cans on our shelves year around, we only tasted them during Christmas” (15).

In *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, Joanne M. Braxton, views in a very direct way, the church-related activity and also speaks to the particularly American value of self-reliance, a value that is necessary for survival in a hostile social world. Unlike the white American, in order for the individual African American to be self-reliant, he or she must rely on the community.

Maya Angelou describes about her brother Bailey, that he reels from having encountered a dead, rotting African American man and having witnessed a White man's light-hearted satisfaction at seeing the body. Maya Angelou emphasises that the traumatic experience forces him to try to confront a degree of hatred that he cannot comprehend. Maya Angelou does not say that he succeeds in comprehending the reasoning behind White hatred. Bailey asks Uncle Willie to explain how coloured people had offended whites originally, but both Uncle Willie and Momma try to hide the sickening, crippling truth from Bailey. This incident draws attention to the idea that Bailey's life depended upon him not understanding or attempting to understand how racism operates against African American men. Bailey's experience here triggers Momma's decision to remove the children from both the physical and psychological dangers associated with growing up in the South. While Angelou writes mostly about the experiences of African American girls and women living in the segregated South, she also empathises with the experiences of her male relatives. Maya Angelou writes:

Bailey was talking so fast he forgot to stutter, he forgot to scratch his head and clean his fingernails with his teeth. He was away in a mystery, locked in the enigma that young Southern Black boys start to unravel, start to try to unravel, from seven years old to death. The humourless puzzle of inequality and hate. (198)

The South that Maya Angelou lived in and that her kinsmen close and distant fled makes part of her past. But she has been eager to put as much distance between herself and its white bourgeois traditions in literature as in life. The only African American she speaks of with real scorn in this book is the father's priggish girlfriend who apes the ways of middle-class white women. Joanne M. Braxton in his book *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A CaseBook*, observes that Maya Angelou is a "small tight woman from the South" who "kept the house clean with the orderliness of a coffin"; who "was on close terms with her washing machine and her ironing board" (221). Who "had all the poses of the Black bourgeoisie without the material bases to support the postures" (221). With more pity but no closer identification, she recounts that the poor African American girls of Stamps were marked by the trivial traditions of Southern white women: "Ridiculous and even ludicrous. But Negro girls in small Southern towns, whether poverty-stricken or just munching along on a few of life's necessities, were given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood as rich white girls shown in magazines," the irrelevancies of "mid-Victorian values" (101). With money earned picking cotton and with fingers too coarse for the work, they yet bought tatting or embroidery thread and Maya Angelou herself had "a lifetime's supply of dainty doilies that would never be used in perfumed dresser drawers" (101).

Consequently, by the end of Maya Angelou's first autobiographical book, the fragmented self of the young girl has begun to be reconciled. The birth of her son is highly symbolic in the sense that it closes the circle of a search for self. The selves are aligned together by power, wisdom, religion, the lessons in living that Maya Angelou learns along the way; she is also reborn fully to life and accepts struggles and challenges not as obstacles but as possibilities of growth leading her to understand why caged birds sing: they sing not because they are trapped but because they know that deep inside, no one can stand against their will to be heard, and when they sing their voices are strong enough to surpass the bars of the cage. The sounds that come from the cage are the sorrow of a wounded bird that elevates the voice in a prayer for freedom. Maya Angelou sings her history with many voices, the voices of all her ancestors and especially the voices of the African American women who helped her find her own voice so that she could leave the cage and look back to it knowing why the caged birds sing: they sing because they know and hope that one day they will be truly free. Such a novel speaks powerfully to African-descended people throughout the America.

### Chapter 3

#### Gather Together in My Name

In *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory* Vincent Leitch remarks, “art derives from the community for the community” (86). Likewise, Florence Howe in *Myths of Coeducation: Selected Essays*, remarks, “art is neither anonymous nor universal, it springs from gender as well as class, race and cultural experience” (93). Art carries the insignia of the culture which has produced it. The popular Indian Writer C.R. Reddy in his foreword to the book *Indo-Anglian Literature* also focuses upon the close link between the author and his/her community. He writes that true literature is “the expression of one’s own individual or racial personality” (71).

Literature helps in preserving and demonstrating the subtle nuances of culture. In *English-Canadian Literary Canon: Emergence and Development*, Ansari expresses, a work of art carries “the evidence of the social and cultural practices of a community in its evolutionary history and play an obvious social role by serving as a selective memory of traditions and idea” (11). Therefore, there are many writers and readers who believe in the contribution of literature in recording and exploring Socio-cultural aspects of communities. Toni Morrison in her *Tar Baby* questions that “Culture bearing black women, whose culture are you bearing?” (269).

Maya Angelou’s debut autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been an acclaimed and widely read literary work of its type. It portrays the childhood life of Maya focussing on the African American woman’s adversity. This book also enchants the readers with its minute details on her experiences on marvellous evocations of childhood. The book ended with 16 year old Maya holding her newborn son.

In this volume of poignant autobiographical series, Angelou powerfully captures the struggles and triumph of her passionate life with dignity, wisdom, humour and humanity. Drifting through the late teenage years of her, she hardly seems to fit to be a conventional hero or role model in this tale. In fact, as a story of a young woman confused and without direction, the book might be more appropriately titled *Gather Together in My Name*.

Maya Angelou's second book *Gather Together in My Name* title has been taken from King James Version, Matthew 18:19-20: "Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". While Angelou has acknowledged the title's biblical origin, she also stated that the title counteracted the tendency of many adults to lie to their children about their pasts. Scholar Sondra O'Neale estimates from the King James Version, Matthew 18:19-20 that the title is "a New Testament injunction for the travelling soul to pray and commune while waiting patiently for deliverance" (105).

Critic Hilton Als believes that the title of this book may have an additional significance. A prevailing theme in *Gather Together in My Name* is how one African American female was able to survive in the wider context of post-war America, but it also signifies how all African American females survived in a white-dominated society. As critic Selwyn R. Cudjoe says, that the incidents in the book appear merely gathered together in the name of Maya Angelou.

The second volume, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), begins in the late 1940s; after the end of the Second World War and its negative effects on African

American lives. It concludes several years later, after Angelou won her own personal war against drugs, prostitution and dependency. Angelou's negative traits in this volume are intensified by a visit to Stamps, where she and Momma (Annie) Henderson confronted their differing attitudes towards race. These attitudes proved to be irreconcilable.

*Gather Together in My Name* charts her various work experiences as she moved from job to job, trying to provide for her son and survive in a hostile economic situation. She was a Creole cook, a dancer, a dishwasher and a barmaid. Frequently these jobs were entangled with her feelings for men who tried to take advantage of her naive. Angelou's confession that she had been a prostitute, that she had hidden stolen goods and that she had almost lost her son was difficult to put into world. On the brighter side, however, in the confusion and turmoil that surrounded her, Angelou had been learning how to perform professionally for live audiences. Her nightclub performances with R.L. Poole proved her to be a natural dancer; in 1952, at the age of twenty-four, she reportedly won a scholarship to study under Pearl Primus, the Trinidadian choreographer whose 1943 dance creation, 'Strange Fruit', was internationally acclaimed.

Maya Angelou walked into a meeting of civil rights leaders discussing affirmative action back in the 1990's looked around and put them all in their place with a single astute observation that it is time for the African American to voice out their rights. This novel depicts her travel experiences, and her life as a single mother, teen pregnancy etc. These experiences are closely knit with the cultural experiences of the African American community.

In viewing through the lens of culture there are some aspects that hold very high regard in this novel. Angelou has pointed out the relationship between working class African American men and tools. In the beginning of the novel, the book opens with the African American men hold no tools which are complicated. They are forced to learn to use lathes and borers and welding guns. They also learned to use war making machines.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, Maya differentiates the women in her culture from women belonging to the hegemonic culture. These African American women are doubly marginalised. However, they play their roles in the society, “Woman who had only known maid’s uniforms and mammy made dresses donned the awkward men’s pants and steel helmets and made the ship-fitting sheds hum some buddy” (1). Even the children had collected paper and at the advice of elders who remembered World War I. She also recollects her action of balling the tin foil from cigarettes and chewing gum. Angelou in *Gather Together in My Name* throws light on different aspects of culture like during the crisis; it was time for flourishing their lives as:

During the crisis, Black people had often made more money in a month than they had seen in their whole lives. Black men did not leave their wives, driven away by an inability to provide for their families. They rode in public transport on a first-come/first-seated basis. And more times than not were called Mister/Missus at their jobs or by sales clerks. (1)

There has been a cusp in the history of African Americans which is remarkable to study the socio-cultural condition. The mass migration of African American of the North and west during the early decades of the twentieth century not

only changed the racial composition of these regions but also helped to produce great tension within African American population. American progress and the realisation of the American dream forced Africa to look inward and engage in a cultural revitalisation. Their expanded understanding could never again be accorded into these narrow confines. They were free or at least nearer to freedom than ever before and they would not go back. The military men were considered heroes. Angelou refers to the war times as:

Those military heroes of few months earlier, who were discharged from the Army in the city which knows how, began to be seen hanging on the ghetto corners like forgotten laundry left on a backyard fence. Their once starched khaki uniforms were gradually bastardized. An ETO jacket, plus medals, minus stripes, was worn with out-of-fashion zoot pants. The trim army pants, creases trained in symmetry, were topped by loud, color-crazed Hawaiian shirts. The shoes remained. Only the shoes. The Army had made those shoes to last. And dammit, they did. (7)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most Southern Africans worked in either agriculture or domestic service. They were experiencing an economic depression due to the falling price of cotton which many Southern states continued to depend upon even after the civil war and emancipation. “In my memory, Stamps is a place of light, shadow, sounds and entrancing odors. The earth smell was pungent, spiced with the odor of cattle manure the yellowish acid of ponds and rivers, the deep pots of greens and beans cooking for hours with smoked or cured pork” (47).

Angelou in *Gather Together in My Name* enumerates the life of people living in the south reacted to the negative conditions, and hopeful prospects by leaving for

destinations such as Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis increasing the African American populations in these cities drastically and called it the promised land. “I bought a car which was a model of Detroitgenius” (41). Many residents supported the striker’s demands for union recognition and most were sympathetic to their desire for greater economic security.

Combined with racial prejudice, the enmity made for generally hostile public feelings towards growing African American population. The migrants who did not find themselves being used as pawns and labours dispute soon discovered that jobs their white counter parts did not want. Even those fortunate enough to have received an education which steered into menial jobs regardless of their qualifications.

Culture is fundamental for human and is necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function. Eating habits, rituals, dressings, the choice of dining and the reasons behind these behaviours are fundamental to fostering an understanding of human life in society. Recent psychoanalytic theory suggests that cultural practices are essential to self identity and are instrumental in defining family, class and even ethnic identity.

Although culture and related imagery have been part of literature, psychological theories have led to the examination of culture as a universal experience. Aspects related to culture are different among all types of writing and they are often used as a device for both visual and verbal impact. For example in *Gather Together in My Name* Maya writes, “The Creole cafe steamed with onion vapour, garlic mists, tomato fogs and green pepper sprays. I cooked and sweated among the cloying odors and loved being there” (12).

Food is significant in African context that the above lines employs and dramatises states of harmony and great effect as it reflects social order and

civilisation. It defines their socio-cultural identity. It also qualifies their domestic nature. The lines are the limitations imposed upon the African American. Angelou uses rituals of eating as a metaphor for the power struggle inherent to social dynamics as:

Chicken a la King

Irish Stew

Veal Cutlet

T – bone steak

Peach Cobbler – Sweet potato pie

Ham Hocks and Mustard Greens

(a sop which was always sold out an hour after opening). (118)

Hilton Als in his book *The Women* insisted that while Angelou's original goal, beginning with her first autobiography, was to "tell the truth about the lives of black women" (90), her goal evolved, in her later volumes, to document the ups and downs of her own life. Als also stated that Angelou's autobiographies had the same structure: they gave a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time, how she coped within the context of a larger white society, and the ways that her story played out within that context.

Critic Selwyn Cudjoe agreed, especially in regards to *Gather Together in My Name*. He stated that Angelou was still concerned with the questions of what it meant to be a African American female in the US, but focuses upon herself at a certain point in history, in the years immediately following World War II. *Gather Together in My Name* begins with a prologue describing the confusion and disillusionment of the African American community during that time, which matched the alienated and fragmented nature of the main character's life. McPherson, in his book *Order Out of*

*Chaos: Maya Angelou* insists that African Americans were promised “a new racial order” (222) that did not materialise.

Angelou’s autobiographies, including this volume, have been used in narrative and multicultural approaches in teacher education. Dr. Jocelyn A. Glazier, a professor at George Washington University, has used *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* to train teachers how to “talk about race” in their classrooms. Due to Angelou's use of understatement, self-mockery, humour and irony, readers of *Gather Together in My Name* and the rest of Angelou's autobiographies wonder what she ‘left out’ and are unsure about how to respond to the events Angelou describes. Angelou’s depictions of her experiences of racism force white readers to explore their feelings about race and their ‘privileged status.’ Stephen D. Glazier in his book *Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions (Religion and Society)* found that although critics have focused on where Angelou fits within the genre of African American autobiography and on her literary techniques, readers react to her storytelling with “surprise, particularly when enter the text with certain expectations about the genre of autobiography” (109).

Much of *Gather Together in My Name* treats the issue of mothering. When Angelou became a mother she was still a child, understandably lacking in wisdom and sophistication, without job training or advanced schooling of any sort. Nevertheless, she was able to survive through trial and error, while at the same time defining herself in terms of being an African American woman.

Angelou in *Gather Together in My Name* estuates the feeling of alienation which invades her when considering her newborn son. His beauty, “his perfection” (17) is at once a source of joy and maternal pride, and the umpteenth experience of

physical disownment. Just as she looks vain for any trace of resemblance in her parents and her brother's faces, Maya seems again unable to reconcile herself with the handsome face of her own flesh and blood. "His arms and legs were plump marvels and his torso as straight as a look between lovers. But it was his face with which I had to do" (17).

Angelou has just been assaulted by the praises which her son has elicited from two former classmates of hers. Their amazement at seeing a baby who "looks like he's white" (17) sets aflame the well-known feeling of estrangement, of flesh burning doubt. How can such a beautiful baby be truly, totally hers? How can "a crow give birth to a dove"? (17) As a mother, Angelou is reproducing the same process of physical comparison which had led her to a negative self-representation as a daughter. Angelou enumerates that belongingness is still to be found in a mirroring face and the fragile frame of her identity as an individual is again shaken by her physical positioning as other by stating:

Admittedly, the lips were thin and traced themselves sparsely under a small nose. But he was a baby, and as he grew, these abnormalities would flesh out, become real, imitate the regularities of my features. His eyes, even closed, slanted up towards his throbbing temples. He looked like a baby Buddha. And then I examined his hairline. It followed mine in every detail. And that would not grow away or change, and it proved that he was undeniably mine. (17-18)

There is an episode in Angelou's life which helps her in understanding the life and world better. When, in *Gather Together in My Name*, her son is abducted by a

baby-sitter, Angelou unwittingly faces a situation in which Guy understands himself as having been abandoned, not unlike her own abandonment at the age of three:

I stood holding him while he raged at being abandoned . . . Separate from my own boundaries, I had not known before that he had and would have a life beyond being my son, my pretty baby, my cute doll, my charge . . . I began to understand that uniqueness of the person. He was three and I was nineteen, and never again would I think of him as a beautiful appendage of myself. (192)

Motherhood is personal, however, it contributes considerably to the society. Guy reacts to abandonment in a way in which Angelou was never allowed to do with forceful emotion. This and several other incidents in Guy's life allow Angelou to experience again the emotions of her childhood, examining them from a more mature stance and subsequently coming to terms with them. The realisation of her own motherly misunderstanding leads Angelou to recognise how her own mother could have misunderstood the responsibility of motherhood when abandoning her two children.

While motherhood is a continuous thread in Angelou's autobiography, the embodiment of the theme varies. The closeness of Angelou's relationship with Guy lessens as they each mature. Her need to associate with her child is reduced as she comes to terms with the issues of insecurity she has held onto from her own childhood and the immediate association with his experiences decreases as she finds and accepts her own identity. Further, the strength of her relationship with Vivian increases with Angelou's own comprehension of her role as a mother.

The untitled prologue places the book in the immediate and then longer-term domestic aftermath of World War II. The rest of *Gather Together in My Name*, however, pays little attention to national and international events or context. (Angelou's attempt to enter the military is one exception. Foiled not by the child she has kept hidden but by having attended the California Labour School, considered by the army to be communist, Angelou here anticipates the McCarthyism and communist witch-hunts of the 1950s.) Unfortunately, Stamps was just as racist a town as Marguerite remembered, she could not stay for long in a town filled with so much prejudice. Her life seemed destined for failure as each job eventually failed or she fell in with unsavoury men and rescued herself by returning to her mother. Back in San Francisco and raising her three year old son, she took two part-time jobs.

The socio-cultural barriers which precluded African Americans' access to the space of visibility in politics, commerce and work are structurally different from those which relegated white middle-class women to domestic, family space. Furthermore, domestic space in Angelou's works is used to negotiate the individual's location within micro-social, as well as macro-social structures, thus considerably enlarging its functional configuration from the exclusive reign of family life to a site of socio-political agency.

This does not simply convey the idea that domestic space is a malleable reality to be rearranged according to the narrator's shifting experiences, but also that within domestic space individuals can construct their self-identity, a social community can assert their collective identity and political discussions and actions can take place in order to break into and deconstruct hegemonic institutions. Therefore, domestic space, on both a physical and symbolic level, contains and is identified with personal, communitarian and public space.

In *Gather Together in My Name* however the mother-daughter love does not stop with marriage of the daughter, mother exhibits a perpetual tenderness towards her daughter throughout life. Angelou, even after the birth of her son, stays with her mother and step father. “I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a son of two months, and I still lived with my mother and step father” (5).

The African Americans lead a quiet and peaceful life in their ghettos. They are self-contained and do not interfere with others. Angelou recalls her pleasant experiences whenever she visited her mother in Stamps. She reminiscence her past experiences and she writes, “We lived a good life. We had some food, some laughter and Momma’s quiet strength to lean against” (74).

Angelou’s experience with her mother may be the experience of any mother and daughter in the African American community. Another example throws light on the grandparent’s love for grandchildren as in *Gather Together in My Name*. “I had no idea that I had outgrown childhood’s protection until I arrived back in Stamps. Momma took my son in one arm and folded the other around me. In *Gather Together in My Name* Maya gives hints about her Momma that “she held us for one sweet crushing moment. ‘Praise God Almightyly you’re home safe’” (75). This reveals the love of the grandmother both of her and her son. Though Angelou has become a mother, her grandmother treats her like a small child.

The institution of family is very important in African American culture and all efforts are taken to keep the families together. While talking about the highly interwoven African American family structure, Martin Luther King observes that the African Americans have to strive hard to keep their families together. Alladi Uma in her book *Woman and Her Family: Indian and Afro-American: A Literary Perspective*

quotes the words of Martin Luther King that the African American family “had to fight against physical and psychological horrors to have a family life” (10).

Maya Angelou mentions in *Gather Together in My Name* with pride that even in an adverse situation the African Americans will not give up family ties. “During the crisis, Black people had often made more money in a month than they had seen in their whole lives. Black men did not leave their wives, driven away by an inability to provide for their families” (4). However, there is no denying that there are broken families.

In Angelou’s second autobiography *Gather Together in My Name* religion occupies a very small space. In a tone strikingly similar to Hurston’s she writes that “I loved the soul-stirring songs and heartily approved of the minister’s passions, but being penned shoulder to shoulder with a rocking crowd of strangers for three hours or more did nothing for my soul” (46). Just as in the case of Hurston, the narrator values the lively atmosphere of an African American mass more than its spiritual impact.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou recognises religion as a part of her cultural inheritance. She discovers, for instance, that a lot of her values, despite her life in the North, are the ones of her Southern religious upbringing. At one point she says: “My son had no father – so what did that make me? According to the Book, the bastards were not to be allowed into the congregation of the righteous” (6).

In addition, the practice of active church-going is clearly distinguished from an individual’s initiation and belonging to her culture and its religion. Talking about the churchgoers she meets in the streets on Sunday afternoons, Angelou points out: “I

was a part of that crowd. [...] I was for the rest of my life a member of that righteous band and would be whether or not I ever went to church again” (46).

The theme of motherhood controls the plot of *Gather Together in My Name*. Angelou makes decisions of forms relationships with the constant image of her son before her, as she tries to provide him with a stable environment or console herself when they are separated. Angelou’s motherhood is what keeps her connected to the world of responsibility. However, she often falls short in her duties as mother, due to complications in her work or the enticements of her male friends, who also want time with her. This situation highlights the duality that Angelou feels throughout the series between mothering and working.

With the theme of motherhood Angelou engages the reader in a mother/child configuration that is of vital concern for the remaining autobiographies. Mary Jane Lupton in her book *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self* refers to the words of Marianne Hirsch argues in another context, African American women writers during the past three decades are one of the few groups who tell the mother’s story and feature the mother in “complex and multiple ways” (91). In developing the theme of motherhood, Angelou applies the same quality of honesty to her role of mother as she does to her role of prostitute; in fact, the two tend to interconnect in their elements of pain, struggle, imperfection and loss.

One of the problems any working mother faces is finding child care. Maya needs an adequate sitter to care for Guy while she is working, which means, at least in the case of being a prostitute, all-night assistance. She finds an excellent sitter in Mother Cleo, a fat woman who likes babies and even takes in White infants, although she charges more for them. Another sitter, acquired after the interlude in Stamps, is

Big Mary arranges for Guy to live in her house, with Angelou taking her son on her day off. After she meets L.D. Tolbrook, though, Angelou occasionally forfeits her day off with Guy to be with her boyfriend.

Of the numerous references in *Gather Together in My Name* that address Angelou's feelings of inadequacy as a mother, the Big Mary episode is surely the most intense. Guy cries, pulls his mother's hair, and expresses his fury at being deserted for so long a time. Maya sheds bitter tears and acknowledges her "first guilt" (163). Earlier in the autobiography Angelou admits to having ignored her son to such an extent that Big Mary Dalton asked: "Ain't you got time for him?" (147).

Angelou also leaves him alone on the night that Troubadour Martin ushers her to the drug den near the San Francisco docks. These and other instances of maternal conflict or neglect give *Gather Together in My Name* a special tension. The tension does not vanish in the volume's affirmation of "innocence" but continues with lesser or greater gravity throughout the series.

Clothing is of great importance in the writings of African American women. Clothing is an indicator of class and character; African American women writers often use clothing symbolically, as a kind of second skin or mask. In Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow*, the heroine will be on a cruise ship. The six suitcases will be filled with linen dresses and evening gowns become, on both literal and symbolic levels, the excess baggage that keeps her trapped in the social middle class values.

Similarly, Jade, the light-skinned model in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, owns a sealskin coat, a rich, Black fur that covers her sleek body. The coat becomes a multileveled symbol in the novel- a barricade between her and her primitive lover; a sign of capitalism, with its slaughter of innocent seals for profit; a reference to the

famed tar baby of African American folklore that traps its victims and won't let go. Morrison uses similar images in her novel *God Help the Child*. Her central character, Bride, is a beautiful model with dark skin who wears nothing but white clothing in order to accentuate her features and her status.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, however, Angelou tends to use clothing as a form of deliberate costuming that either covers up or arguments her character's body, often conveying her bad taste and inexperience. Frequently, the way she dresses is determined by the men she is involved with. As in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the theme of clothing is introduced on the first page of *Gather Together in My Name*, where Angelou describes Southern African American women living in San Francisco during World War II. Although they knew only "Maid's uniforms and mammy-made dresses" (1), they changed these garments for men's work pants and took jobs in the shipyards. Prostitutes were so busy they didn't have time to take off their shoes, the narrator remarks in the prologue, foreshadowing Maya's work as a dancer, a prostitute and a madam.

Clothes become a tool of the trade when L.D. Tolbrook begs her to "dress her age" in short skirts, ankle socks, and hair ribbons. Teenage attire becomes her identifying features as a prostitute and her clothing an ironic statement about the theme of lost innocence that helps structure the book. Angelou buys too revealing a dance costume for her first Poole and Rita performance. Troubador Martin stashes stolen clothing in her rooms until Maya's closets are stuffed with sweaters and skirts.

Clothing takes on special significance when she returns to Stamps wearing her city clothing: white, off-the-shoulder peasant blouses and brightly colored skirts with

floral prints. Her high school friend, L.C. Smith, tells Angelou the truth. Everyone is laughing at her for wearing “the very clothes everyone here wants to get rid of” (69).

Angelou’s reason for going to the white section of Stamps is presumably to change her name of dress, since she orders a Simplicity sewing pattern for a design not available in Stamps. Reading the situation symbolically, ‘simplicity’ can be associated with innocence. The pattern, too complicated for the Stamps General Merchandise Store to stock, marks the end of Maya’s simple and innocent life in Arkansas. Because of her arrogant outburst over a piece of clothing that doesn’t yet exist, Angelou and Guy are finished in Stamps, ordered away for their own good by Annie Henderson.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, work is of supreme importance as the narrator persistently searches for a means of survival. Her greatest job disappointment occurs when, about to be inducted as an army recruit, Angelou is suddenly rejected because the army learns that she attended the Mission Labor School for two years, a school on the list of the House Un-American Activities committee (HUAC). HUAC, a committee created by the authority of the United States Senate, was headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957). Its business was to uncover communists among educators, entertainers, governmental employees, the army, the State Department and anyone else suspected of sheltering ‘Reds’ or ‘Commies.’ The army said ‘no’, even though they had no evidence that Maya was ever a communist sympathiser.

Angelou is more fortunate with other job applications in the service or entertainment businesses: cafeteria worker, cook, prostitute, dancer and so forth. Food service - short-order cook, waitress, restaurant manager- offers work that Angelou

feels fairly comfortable with, perhaps because of Annie Henderson's great success in selling lunches to mill workers in Arkansas during the Depression. Jazz was more than just music; at the height of its influence, jazz was a cultural movement, particularly influencing the young in dress, language, and attitude. It was, in this respect, a prototype for both rock and roll and hip hop because it was so viscerally hated by the bourgeoisie and the musical establishment of the day.

Jazz was associated with interracial sex (many jazz nightclubs were open to patrons of any race) and with illegal drugs, in the early days, marijuana, and during the 1950s, with heroin. Visual artists and writers were frequently inspired by jazz, many thinking its sense of spontaneity, its dissonance, its anti-bourgeois attitude embodied compelling aspects of modernism. Jazz deeply influenced artists such as Romare Bearden and Jackson Pollock. Many filmmakers, both in the United States and Europe - from the 1930s through the 1960s—used jazz in either nightclub scenes, as source music, or as part of the musical score in films and animated features.

Jazz was used extensively in film noir and crime movies, and occasionally in psychological dramas. Jazz inspired writers and visual artists but was hated by the bourgeoisie largely because of its association with sex and drugs. Angelou in *Gather Together in My Name* estuates the importance of dance as:

What did you study?

Ballet. Modern Ballet and the Theory of Dance. I made it sound like  
Advanced Thermonuclear Propulsion.

His face again fell again.

Any tap-dancing?

No

Jazz?

No

Acrobatics?

No. I was losing him, so I jumped in the gap. (70, 71)

Although Angelou's work in a San Francisco diner is dismal, she lifts her spirits by listening to jazz that "I let the music wash away the odors and moods of the restaurant" (80). Her restaurant jobs eventually become ways to meet male friends who, like her jobs, tend to be short term and unreliable.

A second category of work in *Gather Together in My Name* and one that has the greatest impact on her later years, involves the entertainment industry. As an individual or as part of a team, Angelou shows a promise as a dance nude for stag parties, telling R. L. Poole that she won't have a "bunch of white men to gape at me" (113). Maya learns her routines quickly and incorporates the steps into Poole and Rita performances until Poole's girlfriend returns to replace Angelou as his partner.

A third kind of work in *Gather Together in My Name* involves illicit sex. One night in a bar where Angelou works as a B-girl, pushing watered-down drinks at inflated prices, she meets two lesbians, Beatrice and Johnnie Mae. As usual, she is suspicious of gay women. Nevertheless, she accepts an invitation to visit them at their house, where she smokes marijuana for the first time and where, maybe because she's high, she concocts a plan to be their business manager or madam while Johnnie Mae and Beatrice turn tricks.

While the idea of being a prostitute disgusts Angelou first, she later succumbs to the wishes of L. D. Tolbrook, who begs her to prostitute herself for him so that he can pay off his debts. Angelou is least popular of the three whores at Clara's. As Clara

warns her, men don't want to get married; they just want to "trick" (141). Angelou dislikes the strong smell of disinfectant but enjoys the way the women talk to each other. The whorehouse scenes contain exactly the kind of material that Angelou was afraid to disclose to the public, fearing that her family would be offended if they knew she had been a prostitute. Nonetheless, the theme of sexuality in *Gather Together in My Name* reveals a great deal of honest and daring on the part of the narrator.

In *Gather Together in My Name* the two most important female figures in Angelou's life, Vivian Baxter and Momma Henderson, owned their own houses and businesses; they both ruled undisputed in their personal universe and were mistresses of their own fate. It is not surprising; therefore, that domestic space in Angelou's narrative does not only represent the narrator's grade of participation of a collective identity, but embodies, as well, the individual's strife to acquire a distinct personal space and, consequently, a personal identity. Soon after her unexpected son was born, Angelou decides that she would quit the house, take a job and show the whole world ... that I was equal to my pride and greater than my pretensions. Subsequently, a transfiguration of the symbolic significance of domestic space takes place and, for the first time, it becomes primarily a space of self-assurance in which individuality could be sought outside the family network:

I had rented a room (with cooking privileges) in a tall, imposing San Francisco Victorian and had bought my first furniture and a white chenille bedspread. God, but it looked like a field of tiny snow roses. I had a beautiful child, who laughed at seeing me, a job that I did well, a baby-sitter whom I trusted, and I was young and crazy as a road lizard. Surely this was making it. (38)

Just as Angelou moved toward accepting her African American identity in childhood by finding individual African American examples of the independence she so desired, Angelou likewise is eased in the acceptance of her American identity by the African-American examples she encounters and examines in Africa. In this case, however, it is the reminders of an abandoned Black America that tug at her heartstrings and lead her to recognise the importance of the ‘American’ in her label as an African American.

David DuBois, her companion in Egypt, and Julian Mayfield, fellow expatriate in Ghana, offer support to Angelou in the face of mounting difficulty in foreign surroundings. The aid from and reminiscence evoked by these Americans - even as African Americans - helps her realise that abandoning America for Africa does not accomplish her goal of self-knowledge. Rather, she must reconcile the two identifiers within her makeup, as they are perhaps those that most define her place within the society of men.

As Angelou’s world of books sheltered her from white racism and oppression as a child in Stamps and a young adult in San Francisco, it also buffers her from prejudicial treatment of another sort in Africa. This African versus American usage of the tale is ironic, given that the man opposing Brer Rabbit generally represents the white oppression of African Americans. Here, Angelou pinpoints the Africans of her promised land as nearly synonymous with the oppression she knew in America, though for different reasons. She recognises that the geographic place she had dreamed of is not without imperfections as a possible home.

The guiding tenets and rituals of fundamentalism — a twentieth-century religious movement which interprets scripture literally and applies it to daily life —

influence Angelou's themes, language, symbols, allusions and characterisations. A balm to despair and alienation since slave times, soulful worship, plaintive spirituals, and trust in a life in the hereafter bolstered African Americans who were cut off from African faiths by distance, time, and language. Buoyed by post-World War I revivals, which countered growing liberalism, the church found itself perpetually on the defensive and launched sensationalist journals, such as J. Frank Norris' *The Fundamentalist*, against illicit sex, pornography, saloons, divorce, and other embodiments of Satan.

A key event in the history of Southern fundamentalism occurred in 1925, when high school biology teacher John T. Scopes, defended by the articulate Clarence Darrow, lost a battle against religious conservatives of Dayton, Tennessee, who, goaded to near-frenzy by populist William Jennings Bryan, sought to supplant Darwin's theory of evolution with biblical creationism in school curricula. Armed with Bibles and muttering amens, the faithful mobbed the courthouse and demanded that their simple interpretation of earth's beginnings was superior to scientific theory.

As a product of the fundamentalist South, Angelou, steeped in the uplifting rhythms of spirituals and schooled in scripture, learns early that wisdom is to be found in the Bible, strictly interpreted by Momma and Uncle Willie and dispatched through rigorous homilies, some of which (for example, 'Waste not, want not') actually derive from sayings by Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard*. In addition to personal prayers, mealtime blessings, and family worship, emotional funerals and flamboyant revivals color the day-to-day milieu of home, work, and school with added reminders of life's grimness and the rewards awaiting the faithful in heaven. Angelou internalises religious strictures, wisely avoiding concepts that strain her young mind and

disobeying when natural tendencies override her fear of Momma and her switch. Yet, with all her fundamentalist upbringing, she takes no comfort from the church during her most fearful challenge, the slow recovery from rape.

Maya Angelou's intended audience in the autobiographical works and many of her other works as well are women; in particular, women of color. In *Gather Together in My Name* she uses her experiences as a colored woman to make her writing more personal and relatable. She emphasises the importance of self-acceptance and feminine role. Angelou believes that women are too often underestimated and they need to show the world how capable they really are.

Reading this work is alarming with the character of Rita how much media outlets can affect our view of an entire gender. Pop culture and mainstream media show women as over-sexualised, purely physical beings. Angelou writes about how victimised women are, despite how they are commonly portrayed. For example, she writes as a woman, confident in her physicality, but undermines that there is more to her than her looks.

Later, when she moved to California to live with her mom, at the age of sixteen, Maya Angelou became pregnant with her son, Guy. From a rape victim, teenage mother and brothel madam to an actress, Angelou's past hardships and road to success inspired her writing. Embracing her heritage and femininity, Maya Angelou's writings help readers understand an African American woman's experience living in the 1960's and 1970's. In this work Maya Angelou writes that women are capable of surpassing preconceived expectations formed because of racism and sexism.

Africa comes to represent ‘home’ on a number of levels for Angelou-literally, as the native land of her ancestors; symbolically, as the mother who abandoned her long ago; but also hopefully, as embodying the distant possibility for complete acceptance which she strives for continually. Ekaterini Georgoudaki in her book *Race, Gender and Class Perspective in the works of Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde* estimates that Maya Angelou “adopts Africa as a place of peace, freedom, security and happiness” (19).

It is no doubt that because of Angelou’s efforts, the African American woman has gained wider respectability and greater reception. Her vividness and veracity have moved the impetus to the African Americans to struggle for equality. She has richly recorded the African American feminine experience from the early days of the Civil Rights Movement to the present day. In her lectures, Angelou brought to public attention the countless and important contributions that African Americans have made to American culture and literature. Angelou observes about African American woman in *Gather Together in My Name* that “One thing I don’t hold with is women messing ‘round with married mens. The other is messing ‘round with white men. First one the Bible don’t like, second one the law don’t like” (42).

According to Angelou, the African American Woman epitomises the strong-will to survive without losing empathy and compassion. She herself, promoted the archetypal African American female representative for African American female inclusiveness. Feminist scholar Maria Lauret in her book *Liberating Literature* states that “the formation of female cultural identity” is woven into Angelou’s narrative, setting her up as “a role model for Black women” (140).

Lauret agrees with other scholars that Angelou reconstructs the African American woman's image throughout her autobiographies and that Angelou uses her many roles, incarnations, and identities in her books to "signify multiple layers of oppression and personal history" (60). Angelou further portrays the plight of the African American women as follows:

Love is blind and hides a multitude of faults. I know what you're talking about, and prostitution is like beauty. It is in the eye of the beholder. There are married women who are more whorish than a street prostitute because they have sold their bodies for marriage licenses, and there are some women who sleep with men who have great integrity because they are doing it for a purpose. (95)

Angelou begins this technique in her first book, and continues it in *Gather Together in My Name*, especially her demonstration of the 'racist habit' of renaming African Americans. Lauret sees Angelou's themes of the individual's strength and ability to overcome throughout Angelou's autobiographies as well. As Selwyn Cudjoe in his book *New Orleans* states, Angelou is still concerned with what it means to be African American and female in America, but she now describes "a particular type of Black woman at a specific moment in history and subjected to certain social forces which assault the Black woman with unusual intensity" (99).

When Angelou was concerned about what her readers would think when she disclosed that she had been a prostitute, her husband Paul Du Feu encouraged her to "tell the truth as a writer" and to "be honest about it" (200). Cudjoe recognises Angelou's reluctance to disclose these events in the text, stating that Angelou does not

seem “particularly proud of her activity during those ‘few tense years’” she describes, but that they are important in Angelou’s social development (100).

*Gather Together in My Name* holds onto the freshness of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but has self-consciousness absent from the first volume. As author Hilton Als in his book *White Girls* states, Angelou “replaces the language of social history with the language of therapy” (67). The book exhibits the narcissism and self-involvement of young adults. It is Rita who is the focus, and all other characters are secondary. Als insists that these secondary characters, often presented “with the deft superficiality of a stage description” (89), often pay the price for Rita’s self-involvement.

Much of Angelou’s writing in this volume, as Hilton Als states, is “reactive, not reflective” (56). According to Mary Jane Lupton in her book *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, Angelou chooses to demonstrate Rita’s narcissism in *Gather Together in My Name* by dropping the conventional forms of autobiography, which has a beginning, middle, and end. For example, there is no central experience in her second volume, as there is in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with Angelou’s account of her rape at the age of eight. Lupton believes that this central experience is relocated “to some luminous place in a volume yet to be” (45).

McPherson agrees, insisting that *Gather Together in My Name* like much of African American literature, depicts Rita’s search for self-discovery, identity, and dignity in the difficult environment of racism, and how she, like other African Americans, were able to rise above it. According to McPherson, Rita’s search is expressed outwardly, through her material needs, and inwardly, through love and family relationships. Unlike in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* where in spite of

trauma and parental rejection, Rita's world is relatively secure, the adolescent young woman in this autobiography constantly experienced the dissolution of her relationships. The loneliness that ensues for her, as McPherson in his book *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical works of Maya Angelou* enumerates that, "a loneliness that becomes, at times, suicidal and contributes to her unanchored self" (160).

Rita was unsure of who she was or what she would become, so she tried on a variety of roles in a restless and frustrated way, as adolescents often do during this period of their lives. McPherson stated that Rita's experimentation was part of her self-education that would successfully bring her into maturity and adulthood. As the autobiographer, Angelou recognises that the mistakes she depicts were part of "the fumbblings of youth and to be forgiven as such" (161), but the young Rita insisted that she take responsibility for herself and her child.

The note of woman in society is of prime importance. Angelou recalls in *Gather Together in My Name* as:

That thought outsmarting a young girl living off the wages of women was honourable. Prostitution prevailed during the civil war and L.D. probably started in the south with white women thinking that by taking their bodies and their money; he was getting revenge on the white men, who were free to insult him, ignore him and keep him at the bottom of the heap. (140)

By the end of the book *Gather Together in My Name* readers can find Rita defeated by life that "For the first time I sat down defenceless to await life's next

assault” (206). The book ends with an encounter with a drug addict who cared enough for her to show her the effects of his drug habit, which galvanises her to reject drug addiction and make something of her life for her and her son.

A study of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical works reveals that Maya Angelou’s main objective is not only to narrate her story of triumph at the personal level but also to voice the trail and tribulations of African American women in the backdrop of racial and gender discrimination even in the advanced west. In her endeavour, she succeeded to document the social history of her fellow women and social economic conditions of the west.

In concluding with the view of a feminist scholar Mary Jane Lupton in her book *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* stated, ‘the tight structure’ of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* seems to ‘crumble’ in *Gather Together in My Name*. Angelou’s “childhood experiences were replaced by episodes that a number of critics consider disjointed or bizarre”; Lupton's explanation was that Angelou’s later works consisted of episodes, or ‘fragments’, that are “reflections of the kind of chaos found in actual living” (180). Selwyn Cudjoe in his book *Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement* thought this convention is what weakened the book’s structure, stating that the events described in it prevented it from achieving a “complex level of significance”(19).

## Chapter 4

### Summation

The needs of a society determine its ethics, and in the Black American ghettos the hero is that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country's table but by ingenuity and courage is able to take for himself a Lucullan feast.

-Maya Angelou

As social constructionists struggle to comprehend social movements from the perspective of their participants, autobiographies present a valuable vantage point from which to explore the movement experience. B. Glaser and A. Strauss in their book, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, emphasises the importance of the “links between historical events, personal constructions of those events, personal histories and (implicitly) also collective histories” (4). This stress on the relationship among identity, biography, and history reinforces the value of autobiographies and life stories.

Maya Angelou is considered one of the major contemporary authors and contributors to the African American autobiographical tradition. Her seven autobiographies include themes like racism, identity, family and journey. Angelou is best known for her debut autobiography, the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Her use of fiction-writing techniques such as dialogue, characterisation, and development of theme, setting, plot and language has often resulted in the placement of her books into the genre of autobiographical fiction. Angelou has made a conscious attempt in her books to challenge the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre. She

recognises that there are fictional aspects to her books; Mary Jane Lupton in her book, *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, agrees, stating that Angelou tended to “diverge from the conventional notion of autobiography as truth”, (34). Scholar Lyman B. Hagen places Angelou in the long tradition of African-American autobiography, but claims that Angelou created a unique interpretation of the autobiographical form.

Pierre A. Walker, in his 1993 article about *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, “Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form”, (19, 31) focuses on the book’s structure, and describes how it supports her presentation of racism. According to him, critics had neglected analysing its structure, choosing to focus instead on its themes, which he feels neglects the political nature of the book. He states, “One serves Angelou and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* better by emphasising how form and political content work together” (31).

Angelou’s humour in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and in all her autobiographies is drawn from black folklore and is used to demonstrate that in spite of severe racism and oppression, they thrive, as Joanne M. Braxton in her book *Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook* quotes the words of Hagen under the title ‘Death as Metaphor for Self’ states, “a community of song and laughter and courage” (50). Hagen states that Angelou is able to make an indictment of institutionalised racism as she laughs at her flaws and the flaws of her community and “balances stories of black endurance of oppression against white myths and misperceptions” (50). Hagen goes on to characterise *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a “blue genre autobiography” (60) because it uses elements of blues music. These elements include the act of testimony when speaking of one's life and struggles,

ironic understatement, and the use of natural metaphors, rhythms, and intonations. Hagan also sees elements of African American sermonizing in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou's use of African American oral traditions creates a sense of community in her readers, and identifies its African American segment.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a carefully conceived record of a young girl's slow and clumsy growth. It is also a record of her initiation into her world and her discovery of her interior identity. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou first confidently reaches back in memory to pull out the painful times: when she and her brother Bailey fail to understand the adult code and therefore, break laws they know nothing of; when they swing easily from hysterical laughter to desperate loneliness, from a hunger for heroes to the voluntary pleasure-pain game of wondering who their real parents are and how long it will be before they come to take them to their real home.

The second chapter deals with the socio-cultural patterns of African American community represented in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It extensively delineates the socio-cultural differences or the socio-cultural practices of African American shaped by the racial discrimination. The town, Stamps renders a microscopic portrayal of the African American Culture. More or less, the culture identity is created by the factors such as discrimination, inferiority, economic backwardness and emotional strain.

Vitality important aspect dealt is the religion. To Momma Henderson and the black community of Stamps, religion keeps them going in the face of tough times. Maya is raised with a strong sense of religion, which serves as her moral guide; however, she is enough of a realist to see how people use it to help themselves feel

better about adversity and doesn't believe this is a completely good thing. Faith gives them joy and leads them on in life.

Besides religion and racial discrimination, there are other socio-cultural idiosyncrasies presented in the chapter. The broken families, occupation, clothing, food and so on. Though, all the instances are related to Maya Angelou, there is emphasis on the entire community. Another important fact discussed is the community solidarity which enables every individual to live on. It holds everyone together and fasten individual to society.

In her sequel novel *Gather Together in My Name*, Critic Hilton Als believes that the title of this book may have an additional significance. A prevailing theme in *Gather Together in My Name* is how one Black female was able to survive in the wider context of post-war America, but it also speaks for all Black women and how they came to survive in a white-dominated society. Mari Evans in her book, *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* quotes the words of Selwyn R. Cudjoe under the title *Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement*, agrees that “The incidents in the book appear merely gathered together in the name of Maya Angelou” (20).

Beginning in *Gather Together in My Name*, motherhood and family issues are important themes throughout Angelou’s autobiographies. The book describes the change and the importance of Rita’s relationship with her own mother, the woman who had abandoned her and her brother as children, demonstrated by Rita’s return to her mother at the end of the book, as Mary Jane Lupton in his book *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* insights that, “after she realises how close to the edge she has come, as a woman and as a mother” (12).

Angelou's autobiographies have the same structure: they give a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time, how she coped within the context of a larger White society, and the ways that her story played out within that context. Critic Selwyn Cudjoe stated that in *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou is still concerned with the questions of what it means to be a Black female in the US, but focuses upon herself at a certain point in history, in the years immediately following World War II. The book begins with a prologue describing the confusion and disillusionment of the African-American community during that time, which matched the alienated and fragmented nature of the main character's life. According to McPherson, African Americans were promised a new racial order that did not materialise.

The third chapter brings out the socio-cultural aspects shaping the life of Maya Angelou in her second phase of life. It incorporates the status of African American women represented by the writer herself. The job opportunities which an African American woman can wish and have. The empowerment of adult women and their different roles in the society. Further, the relationship between the individual and society.

The chapter investigates into the entertainment aspect of culture and society. It explores the role of African Americans in show business. The glamour of this trade appears to be advantageous for the community. Dance and music are among the career options. Jazz music and dance clubs constitute a part of their society. They try to be on par with their White counter parts in all aspects. However, they only get the second best. Similar to the earlier chapter, this chapter also demonstrates the degree of racial discrimination the African Americans undergo. In viewing the book from

critical perspective, Dolly A. McPherson in her book, *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* observes, the loneliness that ensues for her is “a loneliness that becomes, at times, suicidal and contributes to her unanchored self” (61).

As Mary Jane Lupton in her book *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* enumerates, “In altering the narrative structure, Angelou shifts the emphasis from herself as an isolated consciousness to herself as a Black woman participating in diverse experiences among a diverse class of people” (115). There are similarities in the structure of both books, however. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name* consists of a series of interrelated episodes. Both books also start with a poetic ‘preface’.

Maya Angelou’s serial autobiography recaptured her own subjective experiences. Throughout her work, she described the personal, social, cultural influences which shaped her life and personality. She explored herself and individual identity and her relationship with the family, the community and the world. Of course, the divergent experiences which she confronted in her life represented the stages of her spiritual growth and awareness. Her study of autobiography was significant as it offered her deep insights into personal and group experience in America. Her work echoed her conception of herself as a human being and the survival strategies available to a Black woman in America.

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