Woman in Introspection: Maya Angelou, the Phenomenal Woman†

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Maya Angelou, the prolific African-American author, is best known for her serial autobiography and her several volumes of poetry, which have generated great interest and critical acclaim because they embody her tenacity in overcoming social obstacles and her struggle for self-acceptance. Maya Angelou’s life experience proved to be a repudiation of Euro-American cultural assumptions and an affirmation of African-American cultural norms. She explores the discrepancy between the idealization of marriage, femininity, family, and motherhood in the larger American culture and her actual experience as a black woman. Her serial autobiography, no doubt, recaptures that confrontation, but portrays, at the same time, the extraordinary life of a black woman who has survived and triumphed. This paper probes the nature of challenges that Maya Angelou faced and the quality of her response which made her an extraordinary woman.

Maya Angelou, one of the greatest voices of contemporary African-American literature, is best known for her serial autobiography and numerous volumes of poetry, which embody her tenacity in overcoming social obstacles and her struggle for self-acceptance. Certainly, the serial autobiography is Maya Angelou’s personal narrative, celebrating her psychological, spiritual, and political odyssey. The first volume of her serial autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970), portrays her life up to sixteen, providing a child’s perspective of the perplexing world of adults in Stamps, Arkansas. The second volume, Gather Together in My Name (1974), gives a trenchant account of a young woman’s struggle to have an existence that provides security and love. The third volume, Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas (1976), describes an unwed mother’s efforts at seeking a career in show business and her encounters with white people at an intimate personal level for the first time. The fourth volume, The Heart of a Woman (1980), vividly presents the complex race relations which Maya Angelou finds in

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European countries while travelling as a dancer and singer with “Porgy and Bess,” as well as her relationship with her son, Guy Johnson, who is slowly moving away from her towards independent selfhood. And the fifth volume, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), traces Maya Angelou’s quest for home, with post-colonial Africa enabling her to realize that she is distinctly American and in many ways isolated from traditional African society, though she has cultural ties to the land of her ancestors.\(^1\)

While the five volumes of her autobiography, no doubt, recapture Maya Angelou’s subjective experiences and her spiritual growth and awareness, they demonstrate, at the same time, that her personal experiences mirror the period of 1920-1965 in the history of African-American people—family is constituted as the essential moral center of society, of which woman is the silent, unpaid domestic guardian; woman’s social identity is obliterated, and the home acquires an illusive power and appeal, security, and comfort; and assumed risk and terror in the process of breaking through the walls of home help maintain the harmony of this patriarchal unit. To the socialist feminists, the marriage contract is a work contract in which a woman produces mainly for the family’s internal use.

Maya Angelou’s life experience proved to be a repudiation of Euro-American cultural assumptions and an affirmation of African-American cultural norms. She explores the discrepancy between the idealization of marriage, femininity, family, and motherhood in the larger American culture and her actual experience as a black woman. Maya Angelou, like other blacks, tried to grasp the ever-elusive American Dream, the glamorous dream life she saw in the movies. Her marriage failed to bring normality and stability to her life. The failure highlights the impossibility for black working-class mothers to be blissful housewives. Maya Angelou challenged the prevailing notions of maternity by questioning the feasibility of a domesticated motherhood for working-class black women and the supremacy of the nuclear family structure. By successfully raising her son, she proved that a man is not needed to make her and her son’s life complete. She showed that for a black woman, mothering and working are inseparable. While underscoring the intricate connection between maternal concerns and the racial and economic politics, Maya Angelou radicalizes autobiography and acknowledges its contribution to the struggle for racial equality. She resisted, though unconsciously, the patriarchal supremacy of the traditional culture and demonstrated how she had always striven towards a self-empowering identity, one which can be seen as an inspiration for all women, black or white.

\(^1\) The titles of the volumes are hereinafter referred to as follows: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – CB; *Gather Together in my Name* – GT; *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* – SS; *The Heart of a Woman* – HW; and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* – GC.
Maya Angelou, true to the black autobiographical tradition, uses the literary mode to define her quest for human individuality, identifying her personal struggle with the general condition of black Americans and claiming a representative role, not only in relation to black Americans, but also in relation to the idea of America. She thus converts this autobiographical genre into a new mode, wherein the personal statement transcends the self in such a way that the self becomes the representation of the African-American people and the people find a voice in the self. While her serial autobiography continues to enrich the traditions of retrospective writing of black Americans, Maya Angelou departs from the primary focus of black American autobiography, which involves the confrontation of the black self with a society that threatens to destroy it. Her autobiography, no doubt, recaptures that confrontation, but portrays, at the same time, the extraordinary life of a black woman who has survived and triumphed.

Maya Angelou, as a working-class mother, 'demythifies' and thus challenges the socially accepted white notions of domesticated motherhood, the supremacy of the nuclear family structure, and the blissfulness inherent in the institution of marriage—the three factors that constitute “the cult of true womanhood,” a bourgeois Eurocentric perspective of family life in the United States.

Maya Angelou’s ideas about womanhood, as they are inscribed in her autobiography, bring into relief the ideologies that serve to mythologize women’s experiences as mothers and wives, as well as the hierarchical divisions that generate conflict and struggle within families. The feminist perspective of womanhood usually interrogates the politics of sexuality, child bearing, and child rearing practices, but Maya Angelou’s experiences go beyond these areas and attempt to reveal the multiple and dynamic interconnections between households and the larger political economy.

Maya Angelou’s world is shaped and nurtured by the Eurocultural norms. Her views concerning femininity, beauty, marriage, family, and motherhood revolve around her yearning to be absorbed into the larger American culture. She desires to be a white girl, not a black one. She betrays her longing thus: “Because I was really white,” she tries to think, “and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil” (CB, pp. 4-5). And because of her “shit color” and ugly appearance, she imagines, “no one either black or white seemed attracted to her” (SS, p. 6). She thinks: “The boys of my age and social group were captivated by the yellow- or light brown-skinned girls with hairy legs and smooth little lips, and whose hair hung down like horses’ manes” (CB, p. 273). Maya Angelou felt insecure about her approaching womanhood. In order to clarify to the world and to herself that she is a normal woman, not a lesbian,
she seeks a boyfriend's acceptance of her who would guide her into the strange and exotic lands of frills and femininity (CB, pp. 272-273). All these show how Maya Angelou’s views are shaped by her white fantasy of feminine beauty.

Maya Angelou’s intense desire to be a perfect housewife was born out of her romanticism, influenced by Hollywood films and lyrics from popular music, and her mother Vivian Baxter who was as glamorous and beautiful as a Hollywood actress. The Hollywood portrayals of lifestyle of ease and glamour and romanticized conception of marriage pushed Maya Angelou to yearn for “a man, any man to give me a June Allyson screen-role life with sunken living room, and cashmere sweater sets, and I, for one, obviously would have done anything to get that life” (GT, p. 189). She imagines: “We would live quietly in a pretty little house and I’d have another child, a girl, and the two would climb over his knees and I would make three layer caramel cakes in my electric kitchen until they went off to college” (SS, p. 13). In an interview with Jeffrey Elliot, Maya Angelou stated that she wished to be the weak person in the relationship between herself and her husband. She fancies: “I thought it would be magnificent if I could be the June Allyson-type—you know, have a big house, a station wagon, and lots of kids. I would stay home, of course, and do the cooking and the cleaning. My husband would have a good job and bring home the money. He would tell me what to think and how to act. I thought that would be heaven” (SS, p. 31). She hoped that “marriage would give her a world free from danger, disease, and want” (SS, p. 17), liberate her from the need to work, and provide her familial security. She thought that she needed a man to make her life and her son’s complete and that he would be a role model for her son to grow up in life. Ironically, the men in her life turned out to be the most destructive to her. The idealization of marriage in the large American culture, which is at the depth of Maya Angelou’s consciousness, comes into conflict with her real life experience of marriage.

As a young woman, Maya Angelou started thinking about the prospect of being a housewife. For instance, she describes how, at nineteen, her life was an assemblage of strivings, her energies were directed toward acquiring more than the basic needs (SS, p. 16). Maya Angelou fantasized that marriage would give her a world of security and happiness. She was nonetheless “as much a part of the security conscious fifties as the quiet young white girls who lived their pastel peter pan collared days in clear, middle-class neighborhoods” (SS, p. 17). But unlike their white counterparts, girls in the black communities found themselves “too often unmarried, bearing lonely pregnancies, and wishing for two and a half children each, who would gurgle happily behind that picket fence, while we drove our men to work in our friendly-looking station wagons” (SS, p. 17). Their dream of being “one man’s woman” never materialized.

Maya Angelou’s romanticism, influenced by Hollywood and lyrics from popular music, soon confronted the reality when, in 1949, she married her first husband.
Tosh Angelos, a Greek white. Maya Angelou was surprised by Angelos’ genuine appreciation of Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, and Dexter Gordon—black musicians and singers.

The marriage was initially satisfying, but eventually Maya Angelou began to resent Tosh’s demands that she stay at home and be the perfect housewife, the provider of suitable meals and fabulous jelly desserts (SS, p. 31). She was also bothered by what she sensed as the disapproval of the interracial marriage by her friends. As Tosh took greater control of her life, Maya Angelou, who had mistaken “prison for security,” did little to challenge his authority. Their home life was an Eden of constant spring, but Tosh was certain that the serpent lay coiled just beyond their gate.

The conflict between Maya Angelou and Tosh centered on two issues: gender roles and religion. When once Tosh told Guy that there was no God, Maya Angelou became furious. She reacted by secretly visiting black churches, searching for the faith she had left behind in Stamps with Momma Henderson. She was also looking for a way to get back at Tosh. She knew that she was an ardent believer, and that she was a child of a God who existed, and also the wife of a husband who was angered by her belief. Tosh expected her to give up her participation in the black church as well as her black friends. A very private person and an atheist, he underestimated the role of the black church in Maya Angelou’s life. As a member of an oppressed group, religious faith was her spiritual life-raft—something he apparently did not need as a white man who enjoyed racial and gender privileges. Tosh did not appear to understand the importance of Maya Angelou’s religious faith. So, Maya Angelou surrendered, in an acknowledgement of her husband’s outlook on god and religion, showing what a dutiful and accommodating wife she was.

Finally, Maya Angelou admits her failure and describes herself as a saner, healthier person than the young, greedy girl who had wanted a man to belong to—a fantasy, she admits, based on Hollywood films circa the 1940s (SS, p. 51). After the initial shock and grief, Maya Angelou firms up her mind and decides to show him that she is no helpless biddy to be beckoned, then belittled (SS, p. 45). She is not prepared to beg: “I thought women who accepted their husband’s inattention and sacrificed all their sovereignty for a humiliating marriage [were] more unsavory than the prostitutes who were drinking themselves awake in the noisy bar” (SS, p. 45). Maya Angelou effaces her own identity within the framework of the marriage. But the compromises she makes to secure a stronger marriage cannot be seen only in the context of the subjection of wife to husband or black female to white male. It can also be read as the subjection of the central values of the black world and, as a consequence, of the black woman to the dominant totality of white values.

Maya Angelou’s professional activities of having friendships within the Harlem Writers Guild and relationships with Godfrey Cambridge and Martin...
Luther King Jr., and her coordinatorship of Southern Christian Leadership Congress were interrupted after her meeting with a South African political activist, Vusumzi Make, in 1961. When she met Vusumzi Make, she was engaged to a divorced black American bail bondsman, Thomas Allen. Although she was a radical civil rights activist, Maya Angelou was so desperate to marry Allen that she even entertained the idea of straightening her hair and wearing pretty hats with flowers and gloves so that she could look like a nice, marriageable, potential homemaker, instead of the non-traditional career woman that she really was. Intelligent as she was, she was willing to live the rest of her life in a marriage where the conversation would be limited to her shouting in the bedroom and his grunting at the dining table.

Maya Angelou was willing to compromise herself to attain the much heralded state of marital bliss. Obviously, her desire for a stable companion, though natural, was still shrouded by her long-held fantasies. In real life, these fantasies, born of Maya Angelou’s loneliness and socially constructed ideals, did not come to fruition. Instead, she married Vusumzi Make and had another revealing encounter with the fantasies of marital bliss versus the real experience of marriage.

Maya Angelou had a chance to discuss the problems of blacks in Africa with Vusumzi Make and, later on, his intention to marry her, which he acknowledged as “the joining of Africa and Africa-America” (HW, p. 120). Maya Angelou was very careful in dealing with this marriage proposal. The idea of joining hands with an African leader was not only profound at a higher level, but also her son Guy’s acceptance of Make as his father was useful at a practical level.

Vusumzi Make also, like Tosh, expected Maya Angelou not to work outside the home. Unlike Tosh, however, he seemed to demand that a lot more of Maya Angelou’s energy be spent in housework. If in her marriage to Tosh, she was spiritually starved, in her marriage to Make, she was physically overworked. Make inspected and supervised her housecleaning to ensure that she had reached every nook and cranny under the bed and had removed dust from literally every surface. Maya Angelou confesses, “I wanted to be a wife and to create a beautiful home to make my man happy, but there was more to life than being a diligent maid with a permanent pussy” (HW, p. 143). Maya Angelou decried her position with Make thus: He “patronized me as if I were the little shepherd girl and he the old man of Kilimanjaro” (HW, p. 175). His expectation of Maya Angelou was that she should not only be the perfect African wife and the perfect cook, but also the perfect housekeeper.

Vusumzi Make was not only irresponsible in financial matters, but was also a womanizer. While he was very well-behaved in America, he was too friendly with other women and too irresponsible with money in Egypt. Maya Angelou was certainly prepared to make sacrifices if it ensured her family’s stability.
But Make's level of commitment was, at the very least, questionable. At a diplomatic party in New York, “he was dancing with the little sexy woman holding her too close, gazing too deeply in her eyes” (HW, p. 200). And there were times when Maya Angelou discovered the telltale signs of lipstick and perfume over Make’s coat. But Make had proclaimed, “My dear, there are no other women, you are the only love in the world” (HW, p. 201).

In her role as Make’s wife, she was confronted for the second time with the struggle between being a homemaker and being a professional, as she had struggled earlier between being a mother and being a professional. As an African who had been trained only to see women as subservient, Make was culturally insensitive to Maya Angelou’s needs as a working woman. The dispelling of this marriage fantasy that women should stay at home and serve their husbands highlights the impossibility for black working-class mothers to remain only as blissful housewives.

Maya Angelou’s disastrous relationship with Make evokes certain comparisons and contrasts with her marriage to Tosh Angelo in Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas. Further, retracing Maya Angelou’s steps, the first page of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings recalls the failed marriage between Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter, with its negative impact on Maya Angelou’s life as a child and a woman. Maya Angelou’s two failed marriages rid her of the notion that meeting the ‘right’ man will liberate her from the need to work. Indeed, it is her healthy work ethic and her enterprising spirit that enable her to free herself from her sexist husbands.

Maya Angelou experiences the trails of her double consciousness, her oscillation between her intrinsic African-American and her imposed Euro-American cultural identities, in literary terms, by contrasting reality with fantasy. For Maya Angelou, family is neither nuclear, nor restricted to household: “For middle-class white Americans, the ideal family is the archetypal middle class nuclear structure with a father who earns enough to exempt his spouse and dependent children from work” (Collins, 1987, p. 58). Being the sole income earner in his family, the husband exerts power over the women in the household as much as over those in the workforce, since owing to his race, gender, and class, he earns more than they do (Ibid.).

There are differences between her experience of marriage and its idealization in the larger American culture. Carol E Neubauer (1983) also identifies “[t]he discrepancy between Maya Angelou’s fantasy of marriage and the actual experience as one that shows how, despite the social propaganda, marriage fails to bring normality and stability to Maya Angelou’s life” (p. 127).

Motherhood is a unifying but, at the same time, disruptive theme. Maya Angelou engages the reader in a mother-child configuration that is of vital
concern for all the five books in her serial autobiography. In terms of character
development, the mother-child opposition is an essential aspect of Maya
Angelou’s growth. She said in an interview: “The absolutely greatest thing that
happened to me was my son, because I had to (grow) learn not to smother him”
(Lupton, p. 104). As Marianne Hirsch argues in another context, African-
American women writers, in the last three decades, are one of the few groups
who tell the mother’s story and feature the mother in complex and multiple
ways. In developing the ‘theme of motherhood,’ Maya 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.

When Maya Angelou became a mother, she was still a child, lacking in wisdom
and sophistication, without job-training or advanced schooling of any sort, and
without a man to provide for her and her baby. Nevertheless, she was to survive
through trial and error, while at the same time defining herself in terms of
being a black woman.

As opposed to the white concept of motherhood—productive work was seen
as incompatible with motherhood and a woman was to have her entire world
confined to her home—black motherhood always encompassed work. Maya
Angelou, in an interview with Judith Paterson, notes the contrast between the
conditions of white women and those of black women. The white women needed
only to stay in the bedroom, the nursery, and the kitchen. They were not needed
outside their homes. Motherhood was usually associated with domesticity and
reproductive labor for white women. But black women had to work outside home
in order to support their families as well as to nurse a nation of strangers and
look after white folks’ children. Black men remained jobless, but not black
women. As Collins observes, “For black women, motherhood was inseparable
from work, both productive and reproductive” (p. 116). So the term ‘mother work’
was coined by Patricia Hill to denote the need for racially oppressed women
‘to work for the day to come,’ whether for one’s children, for those of the
community, or for those yet unborn. Slavery and American capitalism had never
allowed domesticity among slave and black women who had to work in the
plantation house or the fields, or carry out menial jobs.

Given her racial and class background, it should come as no surprise that
Maya Angelou’s experience of motherhood was inseparably intertwined with
work. Maya Angelou was an unprofessional black girl lacking skills, and so only
the most menial jobs were available to her. In the post-World War II milieu, evil
abounded and poverty was everywhere. In such an environment, the need to
support herself and her son led Maya Angelou to some quick and easy choices.
She had to scratch for every penny, holding jobs such as short-order cook and
shake dancer in San Francisco, night club waitress and dancer in Los Angeles,
prostitute and madam in charge of her own house of prostitution near Bakersfield—work situations which highlight how racist capitalism could drive black women into a poverty that is not only financial but at times also moral. Being only a teenager, Maya Angelou was still very vulnerable, easily deceived. She became a prostitute with the hope of raising enough money to rescue her sugar daddy/pimp from debt, innocently thinking that he would marry her. This situation demonstrates how even black men are willing to abuse the black women's ability to work in that space in which the distinctions between the private and public spheres have been erased.

Maya Angelou's great love was for her son, Guy, but she also needed a chance for her career to grow. She left Guy with her mother, Vivian Baxter, and danced in Europe, Yugoslavia, and Egypt for Porgy and Bess. She was emotionally distraught when she found that her career was in conflict with her desire to be an excellent mother.

Maya Angelou challenges the western notion of treating children as property and demonstrates the importance of sharing one's children with other women in the community. Thus, she upholds the traditional centrality of other mothers in black motherhood. Her motherhood experiences center around the concept of extended family to provide care for Guy.

During Guy's twelfth summer, Maya Angelou and Guy attended a party in Beverly Hills. The children's party had been catered at one end of an Olympic-size swimming pool, and Maya Angelou was on the adult side at the other end. That evening, Guy told Maya Angelou: "Mom everyone talks about Marilyn Monroe's body. But we were watching today and all the guys said you had a prettier shape than Marilyn Monroe" (HW, p. 130).

A Freudian analyst argues that in order to free himself from his Oedipus complex, Guy needed to deflect Holiday's affections away from himself and his mother, just as he needed to discourage Maya Angelou's affair with Vusumzi Make, the African leader. Not only did Guy get into and recover from a car accident, but also he desired to sever himself from his loving mother, who, according to his friends, had a prettier shape than Marilyn Monroe. Some critics have even suggested that Guy desired the accident unconsciously so that he could be saved from his sexual desires for his mother.

Thereafter, Maya Angelou avoided wearing provocative dresses and stopped buying a form-fitting dress or a blouse with a plunging neckline. Here we see a proof of motherly attention. After the recovery of Guy, their relationship which was in a constant flux, moved once again from dependence to independence, climaxing in a scene in which Maya Angelou learned that her son was having an affair with an American woman, a year older than herself. Here Maya Angelou authentically faces and records the confusions of seeing one's child achieve
selfhood, universalizing the pain a mother experiences when her “boy” is transformed into a “big confident strange man,” who refuses to be his mother’s “beautiful appendage” (GC, p. 186):

Mom, I’ve thought about this seriously and continuously since you left you have finished mothering a child. You did a very good job. Now I am a man. Your life is your own, and mine belongs to me. I am not rejecting you. I’m just explaining that our relationship has changed (GC, p. 185).

Guy had reached that stage of development, where, as one of ‘God’s children,’ he had earned the right to wear traveling shoes. While those shoes would carry him away from his mother, they simultaneously confirmed his autonomy, his independence. Yet it was not the end, for as Maya Angelou insisted, motherhood is never over.

In the African-American community, motherhood represents maturity and the fulfillment of one’s function as a woman, and thus is greatly respected. But African-American motherhood is also a battleground for racist and sexist ideology and exists within the context of the prevailing view of motherhood in the United States. Maya Angelou says, “I was a lonely unmarried mother and held myself to be free than married woman I met” (GT, p. 145).

Motherhood also provides the series with a literary unity, as Maya Angelou shifts positions from mother to granddaughter to child in a non-ending text that, through its repetitions of maternal motifs, provides an ironic comment on her own sense of identity. Maya Angelou, despite her insistence on motherly love, is trapped in the conflicts between working and mothering, independence and nurturing—conflicts that echo her ambivalence towards her mother, Vivian Baxter, and her apparent sanctification of Grandmother Momma Henderson, the major adult figure in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Ultimately, by analyzing her own experience of motherhood, Maya Angelou is able to challenge the prevailing notions of maternity by questioning the feasibility of a domesticated motherhood for working-class black women, the supremacy of the nuclear family structure, and the idealization of marriage. Although patriarchy exists at this moment of transition from traditional culture to feminism, Maya Angelou demonstrates how she has always striven towards a self-empowering identity, one which can be seen as an inspiration for women—both black and white.

References
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