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# Dissent, Desire and the Expression of Selfhood: A Reading of Maya Angelou's Autobiographies

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**Abstract**:

The publications of Maya Angelou's autobiographies[1] mark significant moments in the history of Black American women's literature. Angelou writes a narrative of female desire and political dissent in her autobiographies by engaging in an act of conscious re-membering and re-creation of her personal past. The strategic deployment of discursive techniques of the autobiographical genre enables Angelou to inscribe the Black American female experience and selfhood in literary discourse. This paper attempts to read Angelou's autobiographies in the larger context of Black American women's autobiographies and delineate the narrative strategies through which the texts represent the process of the evolution of the "new Black female self" in the twentieth century.

"History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again."
-Maya Angelou, "On the Pulse of the Morning"[2]

The Black American autobiographical tradition offers us powerful self-narratives of the marginalized and dispossessed section of the American population. The autobiographical genre has been used extensively by Black American writers (from Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to the twenty-first century writers) to enunciate a new identity and selfhood of the Blacks that

[1] Maya Angelou has written and published six volumes of her autobiography, namely, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002).

[2] This poem was delivered at the Inauguration of President Clinton in 1993. From Karen A. Waldron, Janice H. Brazil and Laura M. Labatt (eds), *Risk, Courage, and Women: Contemporary Voices in Prose and Poetry*. 2007.

emerges from the historical experience of humiliation and pain. There is a constant preoccupation in African-American literature with the representation and assertion of selfhood along with a critique of the naturalized violence of slavery. This impulse emerges as a response to the denial of selfhood and humanity to the Blacks in the times of slavery. Therefore, the act of publicly proclaiming their selfhood through literary expression (albeit in the idiom of their perpetrators) becomes a conscious political project for Black American writers.

However, what validates the existence of Black American women's autobiography as a separate literary discourse? How does the Black American woman emerge as a subject through specific structures of power? How does the Black American woman's critique of institutionalized oppression get inflected by gender? These are some of the questions that my paper seeks to address. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that what qualifies the Black American women's autobiography to exist as a separate literary discourse is that it talks about "the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment and over succeeding generations".[3] Although in the autobiographies the Black American female selfhood is shaped by the (re-collected) individual experience of the subject, it is also representative of black women's "collective experience" of the historical conditions "or interlocking structures of gender, class and race".[4]

Likewise, Angelou's act of publicly enunciating the growth of her private self in the text is not simply a self-referential exploration of her inner life but is undertaken as a conscious political act. The autobiographical narrative is deeply embedded within the larger historical narrative of the Afro-American community. Angelou's autobiographies chart the emotional and intellectual growth of the subject from her formative years in Stamps to her evolution as a politically conscious subject in America. The process of the subject's inner growth also represents and maps the trajectory of the increasing political consciousness of the Black American social body during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Genovese observes that:

> "For…critics of and participants in black women's culture, the relevant history concerns the coming to consciousness of Afro-Americans during the second half of the twentieth century, and perhaps the growth of American women's consciousness during the same period. The

[3] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, my Self". *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (ed.). 179.
[4] Ibid, 178.

black movement and the feminist movement, with all their internal currents and tensions, have presided over the recent developments in Afro-American women's political and self-consciousness".[5]

Discursively, the autobiographies deal with multiple themes of identity, displacement, sexuality, womanhood and motherhood among others. The first book entitled *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings* (1969) opens in a small town, Stamps located in the heart of the racist South during the years of the Great Depression (the 1920s). The opening chapter directly addresses the dilemma of Maya, a "Southern Black girl" who desires to "look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world"[6]. The little reverie that Maya engages in to escape the "silly" Colored Methodist Episcopal Church rituals signifies her "painful" awareness of growing up in the "cage" of a society fraught with racist prejudices and hatred.

Maya's narrative of incessant dislocations begins with her journey with Bailey as abandoned and "frightened Black children travelling alone"[7] to the house of Grandmother Henderson, where they spend their childhood away from their divorced parents. The society of the Blacks in the South is depicted as mired in extreme poverty and deeply anchored in religion. The Black church is the moral centre of the Black people's lives as it offers a protective haven, spiritual solace and a sense of identity and belongingness to its members. Grandmother Henderson who owns "the only Negro store in Stamps" is shown as an economically independent, religious-minded woman whose influence is felt by Angelou long after she has geographically separated from Henderson. Angelou recalls the strong moral power wielded by "Momma" when the latter resists the humiliation heaped on her by the "powhitetrash" girls. The defiant act of relentlessly humming a hymn while the White girls mimic her and expose their private parts enables Momma to assert her solemn dignity and preserve her selfhood from being violated by the White intruders: "Through the fly-specked screen-door, I could see that the arms of Momma's apron jiggled from the

[5] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, My Self". *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (ed.). 183. The relationship between Black American female writers and American Feminism shall be discussed in the course of my paper.

[6] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings*, 1969.4. Patricia Hill Collins notes in this context that "Since U.S. Black women have been most uniformly harmed by the colorism that is a by-product of U.S. racism, it is important to explore how prevailing standards of beauty affect U.S. Black women's treatment in everyday life…In her Autobiography, Maya Angelou records her painful realization that the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white." Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought.* 99.

[7] Ibid. 6. This is the first of the several travels that occur in the autobiographies. The theme of uprooting and loss of home through spatial displacement is sustained throughout the narratives and is symptomatic of the larger condition of the Black American self.

vibrations of her humming. But her knees seemed to have locked as if they would never bend again. She sang on. No louder than before, but no softer either. No slower or faster…Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won."[8]

The reality of Southern Black life is punctuated by a constant fear of White bigots, an instance of which appears in the text when the Sheriff announces the threat of the Ku Klux Klan to "ride" in the Black part of the town. The crippling effect of racial hatred and intolerance in the South causes the already "crippled" Uncle Willie to "lay low" in a "bin" of vegetables in order to escape being lynched by the Ku Klux "boys". The ironic manifestation of the Sheriff's "authority and power" by warning every Black male to hide reveals the ineffectiveness as well as the complicity of the State authorities with the unlawful activities of the white militants.

The laws of school segregation in the South denied Blacks the access to the basic means of self-improvement and economic advancement. Highlighting the qualitative differences between the White high school and the school for the "colored" children, Angelou relates: "Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy. Its two buildings…were set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit…its boundaries"[9]. The speech of Donleavy on "the wonderful changes" to be introduced in the "Central School" (for whites) immediately punctures the spirit of Booker T. Washington invoked by the principal of the school for blacks in the graduation ceremony.[10] Angelou begrudges "the white kids…going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises…We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to be farcical and presumptuous"[11].

The "pond and the railway tracks which separated white town from the black town"[12] was a painful reminder to the Blacks of their marginal and liminal status in society. However, their spatial location outside the mainstream society of America also offers them a critical vantage point to assess social reality with greater accuracy. These first-hand experiences of racial discrimination

[8] Ibid. 30.
[9] Ibid. 165.
[10] The black American leader Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) advocated that the only way for black Americans to make socio-economic progress was by acquiring industrial education, accommodating white supremacy and following the philosophy of self-help. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 1901.
[11] Ibid. 174.
[12] Maya Angelou, *Gather Together In My Name*. 90.

very early in her life give Maya an acute sense of the inherent injustices prevalent in American society and motivate her later to raise her voice against racial abuse through her writings and through political action.

Maya and Bailey's stay in Stamps is interrupted by the arrival of their flamboyant father who takes the children to their mother in St. Louis. Maya and Bailey form a closely knit family with their exuberant and beautiful mother who also possesses entrepreneurial skills and is economically independent like Grandmother Henderson. However, Vivian Baxter and Momma are depicted in exactly opposite lights. While Momma lives day to day in complete submission to the Christian tenets of duty and righteousness, Vivian Baxter displays an absolute love of liberty and sexual indulgence. However, notwithstanding the differences in their natures both women exercise the strongest influences on Angelou's life.

The presence of strong independent elderly women as mothers or grandmothers is a recurrent feature in the fictional and life writings of Black American Women. Due to the absence of the father figure in the broken and unstable Black American families, these women often take up the responsibility to provide, care for and protect their children single-handedly. Collins notes that,

> "The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women. Black daughters identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives. Mothers and mother figures emerge as central figures in autobiographies such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*"[13]

Paternal presence in Angelou's childhood is limited only to occasional meetings with Bailey Sr. while the conventional male role of being the provider of the family is partially performed by Vivian's boyfriends, Mr. Freeman being one of them. However, the presence of Freeman at such proximity to Maya has devastating consequences as it initiates an early, untimely sexual awakening in the child and causes her eventual sexual violation in an act of incestuous rape. What begins as casual fondling with Freeman stimulates a physical desire in the child's body for the man. However, physical contact with Maya swells a monstrous sexual impulse in Freeman which results in the violent act of sexual abuse and annihilation of Maya's sexual "innocence". The preoccupation with the female body and its complexities remains a dominant theme in the

[13] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought.* 113.

autobiographies. Angelou complicates the simplistic and objectified representation of the Black female body in White racist discourse by delineating in her work a detailed image of her Black female subject with all her needs and desires. The subject is no longer a merely sexualized being but is capable of experiencing a wide range of complex emotions like love, lust, guilt and even pain. Maya re-members the physical pain and confused shame that the sexual act produced in her as a child: "(T)here was the pain. A breaking and entering when the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot".[14] In writing the autobiography, Angelou explores the relationship between bodily experiences of pain and humiliation and the making of female subject hood. The burden of sexual knowledge and the guilt caused by the murder of Freeman renders Maya silent and uncommunicative: "I used silence as a retreat"[15]. However, Maya's retreat into mute seclusion was also a period of active intellectual engagement with literary works which facilitated the growth of her "inner life". [16]

The early encounter with sexual violence mutilates Maya's understanding of her body's needs and desires. The persistent paranoia and befuddlement about her sexual orientation misleads Maya to engage in an irresponsible sexual relationship which results in unwanted pregnancy at the age of sixteen. The introduction to motherhood heralds the beginning of a new phase in Maya's life and facilitates a new self-definition and identity. Angelou's model of unwedded motherhood registers her resistance to the ideological correlation of maternity with marriage, thereby challenging the supremacy accorded to the institution of marriage in Western society. The unquestioning acceptance of Maya and her child, Guy, by her family and the community in Stamps serves to reveal the progressive cultural attitude of the Black community as well as the elevated status of motherhood in Black American culture. The textual critique of the institution of marriage is also later articulated by juxtaposing Maya's idealized notions of (financial and emotional)

[14] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. 76.
[15] Ibid. 82.
[16] Angelou recalls in an interview that "I memorized poetry, I would test myself, memorizing a conversation that went by when I wasn't in it. I memorized 60 Shakespearean sonnets. And some of the things I memorized, I'd never heard them spoken, so I memorized them according to the cadence that I heard in my head. I loved Edgar Allan Poe and I memorized everything I could find. And I loved Paul Laurence Dunbar…so I would memorize 75 poems…If I wanted to, I'd just run through my memory and think, that's one I want to hear… So I believe that my brain reconstructed itself during those years." Lucinda Moore, "A Conversation with Maya Angelou at 75". www.ebsco.com. Web.

security and stability as concomitant factors of marriage with her real life experiences of two failed marriages.

As a working-class mother, the subject straddles both realms of the public and the domestic spheres, thereby transgressing the traditional Western model of domesticated motherhood.[17] Since historically, slave women have had to engage in physical labor, the tradition of female work (outside the home) has been a longstanding feature in the Black American community. Collins comments that,

> "Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American women have 'possessed the spirit of independence,' have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity…Black women's autobiographies, such as…Maya Angelou's *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings* typify Black women's self-valuation of self-reliance."[18]

Maya continues to perform "alienating", "menial" jobs in order to fend for herself and her baby but hopes to be relieved of economic responsibilities by matrimonial transaction. Maya's desire to be liberated from the concern of work can be understood in the light of Bell Hooks' comment on what "work" signifies for Black women and their privileged White counterparts. Hooks observes that unlike the White bourgeois feminist interpretation of work outside home as liberating, "workers, poor and working class women knew from their experiences that work was neither personally fulfilling nor laboratory—that it was for the most part exploitative and dehumanizing"[19]. Maya's failure to acquire a well-paid job in an otherwise flourishing economy is circumstanced by the prejudices of a racist-capitalist society which strategically inhibits Black women from engaging in white-collar jobs. For women like Maya, who work only for "economic survival", Hooks says that "interpersonal relationships are the area in which they will develop personality, self-definition, etc.[20]

As a struggling mother in the post War years, Maya experiences the most vulnerable phase of her life: "erratic, sporadic, fractured".[21] Her desire to provide a stable home for Guy and experience

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[17] Siphokazi Koyana observes that "Given her race and class background, it should come as no surprise that Angelou's experience of motherhood is so inseparably intertwined with work".
[18]Collins, *Black Feminist Thought.* 128. Among the self-reliant, independent women in the autobiography are Grandmother Henderson and Vivian Baxter who inspire Maya to cultivate the spirit of economic and emotional independence.
[19] Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre.* 97.
[20] Ibid. 104. This explains the significance of marriage and motherhood for Maya.
[21] Carol E. Neubaer, "An Interview with Maya Angelou". *JSTOR.*

love and domestic bliss with Curly (in *Gather Together in My Name*) motivates Maya to perform "work" as alienating as prostitution.[22] Maya's involvement in prostitution is another instance in the text (the first being the traumatic encounter with Freeman) of Black men acting as conduits for perpetuating the practices of "objectification, commodification and exploitation" of Black women in American society.[23] Collins notes that "sexual violence against African-American women…(is) a site of intersecting oppressions".[24] The dominant image of the black man as the rapist with a bestial sexual appetite sanctions the corollary image of the black woman as naturally promiscuous in the cultural imagination. These images are ideological constructions aimed at strategically legitimizing and perpetrating sexual violence against Black women.[25]

By inserting the narrative of the trials of working-class motherhood in this text, Angelou makes a conscious attempt to consolidate a unique identity for her protagonist outside the discourse of White bourgeois feminism. Bell Hooks observes that unlike White feminists' view of motherhood as a "serious obstacle to women's liberation" black women "would not…(say that) motherhood prevented us from entering the world of paid work because we have always worked".[26] For the Black women, motherhood rather appears to be an enabling feature "that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing".[27]

It is not until Maya gets employed as a singer and dancer in the best night clubs of America and that she attains a considerable means of autonomy and self-development through "work" and a new identity in the world of show business. As a part of the opera group "Porgy and Bess" Maya gets international exposure in Europe and Africa. Selwyn R. Cudjoe observes that in *Singin' and*

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[22] It must noted in this context that initially Maya herself plays the agent in the sexual exploitation of colored women in San Diego. Maya runs a "whorehouse" in San Diego for a living where the lesbian prostitutes, Johnie Mae and Beatrice "turn tricks" for customers. However, the tables are turned on her when ironically she is forced to consent to prostituting her own body in the interest of her lover, Curly.

[23] The issue of violence perpetrated by Black men on their women is closely related with the history of "emasculation" of Black men during the days of slavery and the ramifications of the same in contemporary America. Koyana and Rosemary Gray argue that "In the United States race and sex have always been overlapping discourses, a fact that has its origins in slavery. Angelou…depicts rape as a political act by which men attempt to assert their domination over women". Siphokazi Koyana and Rosemary Gray, "Growing Up With Maya Angelou and Sindiwe Magona: A Comparison". *JSTOR.*

[24] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought.* 159.

[25] This connects with my point made earlier in the paper about Black American female critique of institutionalized violence being inflected by gender. The formation of the Black male self is premised not only on the rejection of White domination but also on the marginalization of the Black female self. Therefore, the Black female subject emerges as doubly marginalized by the power structures.

[26] Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre.* 133.

[27] Ibid.

*Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* Maya "encounters the white world in a much fuller and more sensuous manner, seeking to answer the major problem of her life: What does it mean to be black and female in America"[28]. Not only that, Maya's arrival in the "native continent" and the encounter with "real Africans" in Cairo enables her to sympathize and identify with the "common suffering and fraternity that bind (the Black Americans)…with the larger African community and its diaspora"[29]. Angelou recalls her most poignant moment in the streets of Cairo where she was surrounded and followed by a family of beggars up to her hotel. The sight of beggars and the overwhelming poverty of the African masses bring into sharp relief the degrading consequences of European colonization of Africa. This moment in Cairo stands as a moment of the subject's self-exploration and facilitates a clearer recognition of her own identity as an outsider (American) in Africa: "I was healthy and compared to the horde of beggars, rich. I was young, talented, well-dressed, and whether I would take pride in the fact publicly or not, I was an American". [30]

On her return to America, Maya resigns from show business and is introduced to the new worlds of the Harlem Writers' Guild, on the one hand, and the political activism of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, on the other. Being particularly influenced by the work of the SCLC[31] and Martin King, Maya undertakes the task of raising funds for the SCLC by organizing and producing the "Cabaret for Freedom". Later, she also serves the SCLC as its co-ordinator after Bayard Rustin. Maya's involvement in political action through her participation in the Civil Rights Movement facilitates an evolving political-historical consciousness and intellectual growth of the subject. However, after her marriage to Vus Make, a revolutionary leader from South Africa, Maya forgoes her position in the SCLC and endeavors to build and sustain a fulfilling domestic life with her husband and her son. Make's announcement of their "marriage" takes the form of a political statement: "This is the joining of Africa and Africa-America! Two great peoples back together again".[32] The "marriage" with Make signifies the continuity between the two continents

[28] Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated". *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology.* Henry Louis Gates Jr., (ed.). 1990.
[29] Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated". *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology.* Henry Louis Gates Jr., (ed.). 1990.
[30] Maya Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas.* 207.
[31] South Christian Leadership Conference.
[32] Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman.* 120.

(homelands) in the consciousness of Maya. Literally too, Make's insolvency compels them to move to Egypt, where Maya begins her sojourn in the "native continent".

The marriage with Make introduces Maya to the institution of unquestioned and naturalized patriarchy that prevails in African culture. Maya tries to follow the norms of behavior expected from a wife in African culture while her "husband" remains incessantly unfaithful to her. Maya eventually registers her resistance to the overbearing demands of the marriage by asserting her right to take charge of her own life thereby recovering her arrested sense of independence: "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"[33]. Maya's political activism remains undeterred by her domestic and marital commitments. She becomes a member of the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH): "The newly founded organization included dancers, teachers, writers and musicians. Our intention was to support all black civil rights groups…Our members, multitalented, would…perform dance concerts, song fests, fashion shows and general protest marches"[34]. While in Egypt Maya engages in journalistic work with the *Arab Observer* writing profusely on the politics of Africa. Her decision to move to Ghana was dictated both by a personal cause (Guy's accident) as well as an underlying political motive to be a part of and identify with "Mother Africa".

Maya's arrival in Accra, Ghana occurs at a historical moment of great socio-political changes in the newly independent nation[35] under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah. Following the philosophy of Pan-Africanism, Nkrumah declared that "Ghana's independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent".[36] With the objective to integrate and unify all peoples of the African origin, President Nkrumah opened the doors of his nation for all diasporic African communities, including Afro-Americans. Several Black Americans, like Angelou relocated themselves in Ghana in order to fulfill their quest for "recognition and identification in their imagined homeland"[37]. Africa signified the spiritual haven where oppressed Black Americans could recover their fractured sense of selfhood and identity. It would be the first time in their lives that they would encounter no discrimination or discomfort on

[33] Ibid. 143.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ghana achieved its independence from colonial rule on 6 March 1957.
[36] From www.google.com
[37] Michelle D. Commander, "Ghana at Fifty: Moving Toward a Pan-African Dream". www.projectmuse.com.

the grounds of color difference. However, as Angelou observes, the arrival of Afro-Americans was welcomed either with indifference or even utter distrust by the Ghanaian citizens[38]:

> "So I had finally come home. The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers, having squandered her mother's gifts and having laid down in cruel gutters, had at last arisen and directed herself back to the welcoming arms of the family where she would be…seated at the welcoming table…Our arrival had little impact on anyone but us…The citizens were engaged in their own concerns."[39]

In Ghana, Maya becomes part of a political circle, a group of Afro-American émigrés who called themselves the "Revolutionary Returnees". With her desire to "go native" Maya also dons traditional African costumes, braids her hair in the ethnic style and learns a few African languages, like Fanti. However, her pursuit for identification and unification with the "soul of Africa" is answered only with a more painful awareness of her "otherness" even in her (imagined) homeland—an acute sense that the African-Americans "had not come home, but had left one familiar place of painful memory for another strange place with none"[40]. However, on two significant occasions Maya does feel accepted and unified in the larger African collective—first by the tribal villagers and secondly, by the vendors of Keta market. On being identified as a "Bambara" woman by the villagers Maya says that "at that moment I didn't want to remember that I was an American. For the first time since my arrival, I was very nearly home. Not a Ghanaian, but at least accepted as an African".[41]

Maya's arrival in Keta elicits mournful cries from the village vendors who are reminded of the painful loss of their people in the slave trade. On being introduced to an "American Negro" in the figure of Maya the history of violence of the slave trade is poignantly evoked in the minds of the villagers, as Maya records: "Here in my last days in Africa, descendents of a pillaged past saw their history in my face and heard their ancestors speak through my voice".[42] However, what Maya discovers in Ghana is a dynamic and complex Africa far different from the idealized and static

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[38] When an assassination attempt was made on President Nkrumah the Ghanaians suspected the involvement of Black American immigrants in the crime. Black Americans were distrusted since they were thought to be spies sent to Ghana by the American government. Angelou records: "A high ranking pundit said, 'America can use its Black citizens to infiltrate Africa and sabotage our struggle because the Negro's complexion is a perfect disguise.'…He suggested finally that Africans should approach all American Blacks with caution, 'If they must be approached at all.'" Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 80.
[39] Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 21.
[40] Ibid. 40.
[41] Ibid. 102.
[42] Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 207.

land of her imagination. An active engagement in theatre[43] and political activism enables Maya to view the Afro-American problem in a broader international perspective. The sight of the American flag outside the American embassy in Accra generates several complex and ambiguous emotions (of both love and hatred) in Maya and the other protestors during the "supportive march" event. The decision to gather outside the American embassy was a gesture of rendering support to the Washington March led by King on 27 August. However, the flag of America, "the symbol of hypocrisy and hope"[44] which they otherwise condemned and "jeered at" was a poignant reminder that the Black American identity is derived from this very flag and not from Africa. America never ceases to be the central point of reference in the consciousness of the self-exiled subjects:

> "Many of us had only begun to realize in Africa that the Stars and Stripes was our flag and our only flag, and that knowledge was almost too painful to bear. We could physically return to Africa, find jobs, learn languages, even marry and remain on the African soil all our lives, but we were born in the United States and it was the United States which had rejected, enslaved, exploited, then denied us…I shudder to think that while we wanted that flag dragged into the mud and sullied beyond repair, we also wanted it pristine, its white stripes, summer cloud white. Watching it wave in the breeze of a distance made us nearly choke with emotion. It lifted us up with its promise and broke our hearts with its denial."[45]

Meanwhile, Malcolm X's visit to Ghana and his correspondence with Maya inspires the latter to go back to America and participate in the racial struggle for equality of the Blacks. This was the later phase in Malcolm X's political career when he had drifted away from the extremist agendas of the Nation of Islam towards a more inclusive worldview.[46] He inspired and convinced Maya to work for the Organization of African-American Unity (OAAU). Maya's departure from Africa

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[43] Angelou's performance in Genet's play *The Blacks* takes her to Germany, where she witnesses the deep seated German hatred of the Jewish community. She perceives that the German-Jew dynamic is similar to the White-Black relationship in America. In Germany, she learns that racial politics is played out in a different disguise. In Torvash's words, "Jews are for German women as Blacks are for the nice White women in the States. They dream of us, the untouchables, and maybe we dream of them. But we are unsafe, except as toys". Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 165.

[44] Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 207.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Working independently of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X formed an Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) whose "basic aim…is to lift the whole freedom struggle from civil rights to the level of human rights and also to work with any other organization and any other leader toward that end". Malcolm's emphasis on "human rights" was a direct result of his recognition of the Afro-American experience as a part of the large-scale dehumanization and exploitation of African peoples in the Third World countries in Africa. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* 1985.

occurs with the consciousness that she is carrying African values and culture back with her to America just like several years before her ancestors did:

> "This second leave-taking would not be so onerous, for now I knew my people had never completely left Africa. We sung it in our blues, shouted it in our gospels and danced the continent in our breakdowns. As we carried it to Philadelphia, Boston and Birmingham we had changed its color, modified its rhythms, yet it was Africa which rode in the bulges of our high calves, shook in our protruding behinds and crackled in our wide open laughter".[47]

Having reconciled her African roots with her American identity, Maya embarks on a new phase of her life determined to serve Malcolm X. However, the untimely assassinations of Malcolm X and later Martin King thwart Maya's resolve to participate in organized political action in the volatile climate of the Civil Rights Movement. Angelou's voice in the autobiographies emerges as a critical voice, evaluating not only the racist policies of the American government but also identifying the shortcomings of the leaders of the Black Liberation struggle like Martin King, Malcolm X and Eldridge Clever.[48] Angelou's critique of the radical politics of the time is a gendered critique (from within the camp) of the male-led political movements of the time. Angelou has been a close observer and participant in the political struggles of the Black Americans. Her physical proximity with radical writers like James Baldwin and her direct witnessing of violent uprising of the ghetto Blacks in Watts facilitate a deeper understanding of the "entrenched racism" of American society. Angelou's narrative addresses the political participation of one of the several women whose contributions to the Black Freedom Struggle otherwise go unacknowledged in the annals of history. Margo V. Perkins notes that "Because the narratives by women activists implicitly address the question of how women became radical subjects in this society, their stories begin to demystify the process by which some Black women, in the context of ongoing racist and sexist oppression, have been (and continue to be) able to move from the social and discursive status of objects to active subjects, capable of transforming their environment."[49] Likewise, Angelou's

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[47] Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 208.

[48] Angelou records in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* that she was suspect of the philosophy of love adopted by Martin King to "cure America of its pathological illnesses, that indeed our struggle for equal rights would redeem the country's baleful history…I became more resolute in rejecting nonviolence and more adamant in denying Martin Luther King". (122) Maya's initial rejection of King certifies to the fact she actively and critically engaged in the politics of the time. Similarly, when Maya was invited by Malcolm X to join the OAAU she quickly identified its shortcoming and the contribution that she could make to the organization: "There were good people working for the OAAU, full of energy and enthusiasm, but none had the organizational skills to set up and run an efficient office. What they needed was an experienced coordinator". Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes.* 194.

[49] Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties.* Introduction, xiv.

narrative records the triumph of the Black Woman who has been able to uplift herself from her experience of victimhood instead of succumbing to it:

> "I thought about black women and wondered how we got to be the way we were. In our country, white men were always in superior positions; after them came white women, then black men, then black women, who were historically on the bottom stratum. How did it happen that we could nurse a nation of strangers, be maids to multitudes of people who scorned us, and still walk with some majesty and stand with a degree of pride?[50]...I thought if I write a book, I would have to examine the quality in the human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Rise out of physical pain and the psychological cruelties. Rise from being victims of rape and abuse and abandonment to the determination to be no victim of any kind."[51]

Angelou's act of writing her autobiographies is thus a project driven by the dual motives of self-empowerment and self-assertion. The appropriation of the autobiographical and the novelistic discourses by Black American women writers is aimed at a strategic insertion of a new gendered subjectivity in the cultural imagination.[52] It is through the deployment of the expressive resources and representational strategies of these literary styles, as I have attempted to outline, that Black women have been able to initiate a radical counter-discourse of dissent, desire and selfhood in contemporary literature.

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[50] Maya Angelou, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven.* 211.
[51] Ibid. 212.
[52] The novel as a genre has also been extensively employed by the Black American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor among others to the serve a similar ideological purpose.

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