

## **Survival of a Teenage Mother: Angelou's Treatment of the Subject of Motherhood in Her Autobiographies**

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### **Abstract**

Angelou's autobiography critically explores all the defining phases of her experience as an African-American. She uses the narratives to define her identity – who she is, her culture, her past, present and future. Maya Angelou's autobiographical texts chronicle her life from infancy to adulthood. In these collections, she recounts the hard and good times of her life. In the early part of her life, specifically since her adolescence, she became a teenage mother. As such, all her activities from there were centered on her portrayal of her mothering role to her son. Her readers are taken through different aspects of motherhood role play ranging from training she acquires from her grandmother, her biological mother and her surrogate mother. This study, therefore, discusses how Angelou developed the motherhood theme to define her identity as a woman. It explores Angelou's use of the motherhood subject to gain education about life, her tough-mindedness as a mother, the issue of the enraged mother, the concept of the working mother and the other mothers' role in African-American traditions. Different people are examined as characters who helped to shape her understanding of motherhood along the African American woman's concept of motherhood generally. The study concludes that Angelou is successful in using the motherhood theme to define her unique identity as an African American woman.

**Key Words: motherhood, African-American, theme of identity, Maya Angelou, the self**

**1.0 Introduction** After many years of existence of the slave trade, the American continent became the host country for the people who were enslaved. They worked under very inhumane conditions. Most of them lost their lives in the course of undergoing these pressures. Their ties to their ancestry were definitely cut. Most of them were even given different names so as to cut all links they had to their ancestry and roots. Baker Jr. (1987) explained that when slavery was abolished in the latter part of the nineteenth century on the American soil, many African-Americans still had no identity for themselves. Living without an identity was, of course difficult. When after many years, the awareness of the loss came to the fore, some notable leaders and thinkers among them in the African-American community like Alain LeRoy Locke, Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois started the formation of the critical period of the Harlem Renaissance between the 1920's and 1930 . There was a transformational period in the lives of many soul-searching African-Americans in three ways. In the first place, the period of the Harlem renaissance really created the awareness in them about their loss of identity and non-existence and so, this gingered them to wake up to face the challenges around them with much capability. Secondly, the period of the Harlem renaissance made them see their worth as African-Americans who have a lot to offer themselves and their fellow African-Americans by making use of available resources in every aspect of American life to better their lots in a very difficult economic terrain. Finally, the period created the awareness of the unified and persevering prowess of the black man creatively and intellectually in a white-dominated American continent. Most of the black intellectuals and artists that emerged saw the need to form clubs that helped to discover talents among them and they all supported any such person to either begin as a writer or artist. With these unified fronts, they helped to support each other intellectually and economically.

The period of the Harlem renaissance saw the emergence of men and women of letters both in the arts, music and entertainment and secular life. Some of the men and women that emerged were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Angelina W. Grimke, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Ida B. Wells – Barnett, Lois Mailou Jones, William H. Johnson and Palmer Hayden. Other artists and writers who emerged many decades later like Alice Walker, Lorraine Hansberry and Angelou became so much glued to some of the philosophies and ideologies of the renaissance, which was formulated around the issue of the reawakening of the black identity.

It is important to note that Angelou and others who took up these philosophies of the Harlem Renaissance carried on with them in their writings. It is, therefore, not surprising that Angelou's narratives all explore her relentless efforts to discover herself as an African-American woman. Angelou has a sequel of seven autobiographies, which reveal her life story to any reader interested in knowing about her life. These novels include *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (2000), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2012). All of these novels critically document Maya Angelou's strive to achieve and make an impression in life as an independent woman and mother, and finally, and most importantly, as a respectable African American.

### **1.1 The Concept of Autobiography**

It is very important at this stage of the work to present an explanation of the concept of autobiography as a literary genre. It is quite complex trying to explain the concept of autobiography because there is no set form or structure for an autobiography, and as well, there are no boundaries or limits to it as a literary genre. Different definitions have been offered to explain the concept of autobiography. The study will explain a few of these definitions and relate them to Angelou's autobiographies. It is important to note, however, that Olney (1980) has a definition which seems appropriate for this study. In his book *Autobiography Essays Theoretical and Critical*, he explained that everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers of an issue, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement. Olney after making this assertion explained firstly that the autobiography stands for, or memorializes something else out of someone's life. In a more detailed way, Olney explains that the autobiography is "...a fascination with self and its profound, its endless mysteries and, accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and the vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted." (p23).

One other writer, Lejeune (1989) explained that the autobiography is a retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of personality. For Egan (1999) an autobiography is a memory that reaches tentacles out into each of these different times: the time now, the time then, and the time of an individual's historical context. It is clear from the above explanations given that in a sense, autobiography is the writing of one's own life story. An autobiography may thus be based solely or entirely on the writer's memory. In recounting her life vividly to her readers

in the form of a story, Maya Angelou succeeds in writing an autobiography. Angelou tells her life story from her own viewpoint only. Readers, therefore, get the chance to experience firsthand the situations that Angelou goes through in her life, travels, struggles and successes, through the journey of life. She, therefore, uses the first person narrative to present her story to show that she wrote the story herself. It is worth noting, however, that Angelou deliberately presents her life's hardships and achievements not just as a mere story for entertainment but for reflection by all who read it to learn something from her life.

Autobiography, which is about the self or the autos or the "I" can be as varied as the self is. Autobiographers can mix their fantasies with facts in their writings and this can create problems for readers, as they will have difficulty trying unsuccessfully to differentiate between the autobiographer's fantasies (fiction) from facts. Autobiographers can vary their use of time as well as their mix of fantasy and reality. Just as people have difficulty pinpointing when a human life begins, so does the autobiographer have difficulty pinpointing at what point the self begins. Is it at conception, at birth, at the first moment of conscious thought, or perhaps during a particularly relevant fantasy or dream? There is also the other question of when the autobiography ends. Is it at the moment that the writer stops writing? Unlike the biographer who includes the beginning, middle and end of a person's life, the autobiographer may live on and on and perhaps long enough in several more lives or changes of the self (Lejeune, 1989).

Angelou's autobiographies, which would be the primary source of this study, are thus based entirely on her memory of different times in her life. They start from her childhood days as a girl of four with her brother Bailey of five years when they go to live with their grandmother, Momma Henderson, at Stamps, Arkansas. These accounts are recollected through flashbacks in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and concluded with the novel, *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (2000). In this final account, Angelou recounts her return to America to work for Malcolm X who had just changed his name to Malcolm Malik-Shabazz and his politics from Black Nationalism to a socialist version of Pan-Africanism. The final autobiography, *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, however, ends with Angelou beginning to write her first story of her life. The end of her autobiography is not really known since she could have written more about other events that occurred in her life after she finally goes back to settle in America. Of course, all authors or novelists, in particular, transform the events of their lives into art, but the autobiographer purports to tell in novel form, the author's own story. Usually, the author and other characters are given different names in their narratives. During the narration

when the author recounts incidents in his or her life, he or she is presumed not to pretend to be neutral in the event where the reader should take a stance.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

This research has the following as its purpose:

1. To explain Angelou's use of the subject of motherhood through different concepts to define her identity as an independent African-American woman.
2. To show how successful Angelou was in using the marital theme to define her identity.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

As it has been noted earlier, this research aims at exploring Angelou's presentation of her role as mother to define her identity. It is hoped that this study will create an avenue to open up new paths for further research into the study of autobiography as a unique genre in the area of prose. The study is a step to empower women through the exemplification of Maya Angelou's derivation of her identity as a woman of African-American descent through motherly roles.

## **2.0 Related Literature**

The Black American's search for the self, using either violent upheavals or less resilient means, would be considered. In the heat of the racially-motivated forms of discrimination, most black people tried to escape by venting their anger on their fellow blacks who were under their authority. Since the theme of identity is to be treated as the underlying thematic impression running across all the autobiographies, the discussion of the marital trope present in the narratives would be regarded as a very important medium through which the study would be conducted. The researchers decided to choose these autobiographies because out of the works of the writer, these books contain striking traces of the development of the theme of motherhood that easily stand out as a useful data source needed by the researcher to conduct the research.

The excitement of autobiography as a category of study is that it links together many different subjects – literature, history, sociology and cultural studies. It is also true that within each of these fields, the study of autobiography explodes disciplinary boundaries and requires an understanding of other approaches and practices. Maya Angelou's texts in autobiography incorporates other disciplines ranging from her narration of her personal historical accounts, sociological implications of incident she witnessed and experienced and the cultural background information she gives to her readers. Her narratives have generated both critical and popular interests since their publications. The works made by some writers

about Maya Angelou's narratives are on the whole interesting and enlightening because of the way they speak together while others diverge on major issues. The major issue this study will tackle involves the motherhood trope and its impact on shaping her thoughts and experiences in her later life as a woman, and as an African American.

### **2.1** *The Unifying Theme of Motherhood*

Motherhood refers to the state of being a mother. A mother refers to the female parent of a child or a person who is acting as a mother to a child. It is noteworthy that the narratives of Angelou are flooded with this subject from the first novel right up to the last. Many critics, therefore, have had their fair share of the discussion on how it really affects the whole message Angelou wishes to convey to her readers. The texts mention Angelou's role-play as a mother, Angelou's mother's earlier neglect of her children's welfare and upkeep, the role played by Angelou's grandmother, the surrogate motherhood role-play by Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Vivian Baxter Johnson's boldness to take on her rightful place in Angelou's life as a mother, and other women who take on motherhood roles to take care of Angelou's son. Lupton (1990) in her article "Singing the Black Mother: Angelou and the Autobiography Continuity" discusses the unifying theme of motherhood in Angelou's narrative. She argues that this theme is scattered throughout the texts in autobiography and that it serves as the centre stage around which the story revolves. Lupton believes other themes are highlighted in the texts, but the one which is more enforced is that of motherhood. She even argues that motherhood is explained from different angles: biological motherhood, family motherhood, surrogate motherhood and communal motherhood. These types of motherhood role plays, she explains, are more prevalent in marginalized societies than among very privileged groups. This point is further complemented by Bloom (1999). Bloom's argument is that Angelou explores the theme of motherhood so successfully than most writers of the genre ever did. In his opinion, Angelou's texts in autobiography transcend barriers and boundaries and reveal the ever-nurturing heart instilled in Angelou and the members of her black community in the area of mothering a child. This statement of Bloom helps, therefore, to enforce the point that people help one another within the Black community to raise children.

### **2.2** *The Concept of Other Mothers in the African-American Tradition*

There is also the Other-Mother concept that Collins (2000) propounds and it becomes central to the foregoing discussion. Collins explains that other black American women take up the role of caretakers of children of their family members and neighbours to enable the parents go about their daily activities without having to pay for the expensive services of nannies. To Collins, this practice is ideal to the Black American community and it plays a central role in

black motherhood and culture. This study agrees with Collins because taking a look at the life of Angelou, it is obvious that other women play mothering roles to relieve Angelou of the duties of motherhood while she goes about her duties to make some money to take care of herself and family.

Neubauer (1983) also discusses the subject of motherhood from another angle. She limits her discussion to the issue of displacement and begins with the neglect of motherhood responsibility on the part of Vivian Baxter Johnson, Angelou's mother. Neubauer argues that Angelou and her elder brother Bailey become displaced at the beginning of the story because of the divorce which exposes the children to parental neglect. Neubauer specifically tackles the displacement of Angelou and her brother, Bailey due to the neglect from their biological mother. Neubauer continues to say that despite the fact that the loss of motherhood begins Angelou's problems and the search for home, it is in this same subject of motherhood that Angelou discovers that brings a solution to her early problems in life. Specific reference is made to the motherhood care offered Angelou and her brother Bailey by their paternal grandmother Momma Henderson and to Angelou by Mrs. Bertha Flowers. In this light, therefore, Neubauer's argument seems to be similar to that of Lupton, specifically in the area of motherhood in general.

Bloom (1999) comments on the subject of displacement that Neubauer mentions saying that "such rejection a child internalizes and translates as a rejection of self: ultimately the loss of home occasions the loss of self worth." (p7) Bloom explains implicitly that the loss of home (occasioned by the divorce of the parents and the temporary loss of biological motherhood) influences Angelou's self image and identity." (p7) Neubauer, therefore, brings meaning to this comment by Bloom when she argues that Angelou, right from the beginning "continually reminds the reader that the quest for a place to call home is virtually endemic to the human condition" (p206). This study agrees with Neubauer when she says that the divorce of Angelou's parents begins the loss of motherhood care that Angelou and her brother go through during their early life period. The study again agrees with Neubauer when she concludes that the finding of a mother's care in the persons of Momma Henderson and Mrs. Bertha Flowers represents Angelou's discovery of meaning and hope in life. This is because, Angelou learns a lot of very positive things from her grandmother Momma Henderson and Mrs. Bertha Flowers who both instill in her the strong sense of femininity and character and the discipline of literature, respectively as traits, which according to her, help shaped her for her future career as a writer.

### 2.3 *Celebration of Motherhood*

Angelou (2004) explains in “*Phenomenal Mothers I Have Known*,” an article she wrote and published in the magazine *Ebony* that she is what she is today because of the wonderful roles played by some women who were very instrumental and phenomenal in bringing her up. Making reference to some names she mentions in her texts in autobiography including Momma Henderson, Mrs. Bertha Flowers and her own biological mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, she showers praises on them for the wonderful upbringing they give her, especially about the African – American way of life. She confesses that all the inspirations she gets to move her on are from these wonderful women. However, Angelou singles out her paternal grandmother, Momma Henderson and comments that her unique sense of parentage and motherhood out of which emanates her strong sense of will-power as a woman is worthy of emulation for every African-American woman. Angelou adds that she herself is one such phenomenal woman.

Similar to Angelou’s exaltation of her “mothers” in “Phenomenal Mothers”, Braxton (1989) advances the claim in “Song” that Maya Angelou celebrates black motherhood in her “grandmother’s feminine heroism, wisdom, and un-selfishness” (p127). Braxton uses Angelou’s grandmother as a blueprint to exalt the level-headedness, the strong-willed nature, the hardworking and industrious nature, and above all, the virtue of submissiveness to authority and the possession of a very humble spirit of many positive-minded African-American women. These are virtues, which according to Bloom help to make the Black mother exceptional.

Again, Demetrakopoulos (1980), in “The Metaphysics of Matrilinealism in Women’s Autobiography:...” makes an argument quite similar to Angelou’s statement in “Phenomenal Mothers” when he describes Angelou’s grandmother Momma Henderson as “an archetype of those noble, barely educated black women who inspire their children with a faith in themselves against the severest odds” (p33). Both Annie Henderson and Vivian Baxter act as nurturers and protectors in their roles as grandmother and mother, respectively. To the writer, Demetrakopoulos, Angelou who in turn gives birth at the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* learns to fulfill the role of nurturer and protector as a new mother to her young son, Guy.

Braxton (1989) writes that Maya Angelou’s relationship with Mrs. Bertha Flowers “represents another important turning point in the development of the autobiographer’s consciousness” (p136) when her maternal influence helps Angelou tap into her creative resources and finds self-healing. Lupton (1998) explores the subject of motherhood as a

controlling element in *Gather Together in My Name*, stating that it “controls the plot...” (p74). Lupton explores

the theme of motherhood further by saying that it is Maya Angelou’s motherhood that keeps her connected to the world of responsibility” (pp 86-87). The theme of motherhood also aligns Angelou’s quest for acceptance by Mother Africa with the theme of identity and displacement. Her quest for racial identity and “home,” a place of belonging is interwoven within a complex context of the subject of motherhood.

Carby (1987) in the book *Reconstructing Womanhood* adds more flavour to the point advanced by Angelou in “Phenomenal Mothers”. Though Carby does not directly mention Angelou and the influence of her paternal grandmother, Momma Henderson, he carefully explores the motherhood roles that most grandmothers within the African-American tradition play in the lives of many successful Americans. Carby’s argument directly enforces the argument of Angelou in “Phenomenal Mothers” when she specifically recognizes her grandmother’s role in shaping her adult life. Carby educates his readers to learn positively from grandmothers and appreciate them since within the African-American tradition most grannies have assumed the role of mothers who nurture and train individuals that will take on the mantle of power in the future. Carby emphasizes that in reconstructing womanhood, the character traits of fairness, the zeal to protect, the instinctive drive of industry and the power to sustain one’s

emotion and independence in the face of adversity should be duly enforced by all mothers.

The celebration of motherhood is further given prominence by Nelson (2002) in his book *African-American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* when he mentions the zeal of some women to single-handedly face their hardship without any help whatsoever. He explains that some women refuse help even in the face of hardship because of their zeal to protect their ego and prove their independence. This makes Nelson’s argument quite similar to that of Carby. Nelson’s explanation gives meaning to Angelou’s behaviour at the time when she goes looking for a job that will bring her recognition, money and independence, but lacked the skills necessary to achieve these goals in a dominant white economy. Additionally, Angelou according to Nelson believes that to achieve her goals, she must leave her mother and stepfather who have supported her as a child, and define a new life for herself and her two-month old son.

The discussion of the literature on motherhood cannot be complete without the mentioning of the mother-child relationship that exists in the narratives. All the critics mentioned earlier in this discussion share the view that the underlying issue behind all the arguments being made

is motherly love exhibited by all the characters concerned. It is true that Mrs. Bertha Flowers develops some form of maternal love for Little Angelou at the time when she recuperates from her rape ordeal; it is also true that even though Vivian Baxter Johnson because of the divorce leaves her children at very tender ages of their lives, she still loves her children and even tries to make up with her when she (Angelou) becomes a teenage mother. It is also true that Momma Henderson exhibits love for her son and his children; hence she accepts young Angelou and Bailey into her home in Stamps, Arkansas. According to Lupton (1990), the mother's love for her child becomes one of the most important issues brought up in the narratives of Angelou, a point which this study strongly agrees with.

### **3.0 The Treatment of the Subject of Motherhood in Angelou's Autobiographies**

Maya Angelou is one writer who has contributed immensely to the genre of autobiography in America. By boldly and, most importantly, carefully exposing issues such as rape, pedophilia and incestuous abuse within the black community, Maya Angelou breaks new grounds in the whole area of autobiography. Maya Angelou again uses her maturing understanding of community and family to project an individual's attempt to maintain relentlessly, a sense of self-esteem within a societal group that is undergoing a cultural metamorphosis or transition. This study seeks to focus on Angelou's motherhood role as a controlling device, which helps to propel her presentation of the theme of identity.

#### **3.1 *The Enraged and Tough Mother***

Black mothers expressed themselves in what Collins (2000) refers to as the trope of "the enraged mother". Black women in this regard were supposed to be tough-minded in the course of providing for and protecting their children. This, obviously, is due to the ready assumption that America is a dangerous place for children and mothers.

Angelou, as a young struggling mother is clearly depicted in her autobiography as someone who has much knowledge about what was going on around her. Her tough mindedness is exhibited in one clear instance when she stands firm by her son Guy at the latter's school. The white school administrators tried to discriminate against her son at school saying he has been cursing and Angelou would not just allow that to happen. In her own words, Angelou proclaims that she knew it was one sure way of giving her only son an assurance that he can always count on her for survival, love, care, support and, most importantly, protection. Angelou confesses in her writing that she knew that incident was one sure way of asserting her grounds and individuality, first as a co-equal to the white school administrators and, secondly, as a loving mother who cares for and supports the interest of her son. The narration

of that incident ends with the decision of Angelou to transfer her son, Guy from that school to another school despite the discomfort and all that she is aware may evolve from that decision. However, she confirms her happiness about her ability to prevent the white school administrators from humiliating, chastising and degrading her only son.

In yet another episode, Angelou clearly narrates the incident of her mother Vivian Baxter's ultimate defensive and protective attitude towards her, especially at the hotel. This incident goes a long way to develop the trope of the enraged mother. When the hotel administrator discovered that Angelou is black, they told her there is no space available. It was there that her mother Vivian Baxter Johnson comes to her aid. Vivian Baxter's strong will and threats cow down the hotel attendants into instant submission. She manages to establish her bravery using the philosophy of the enraged mother.

### **3.2** *The Concept of the Working Mother in Angelou's Autobiographies*

Again, Collins mentions the term "mother work" and explains in no uncertain terms that it shows that the institution of motherhood and work in the black and other oppressed communities are inseparable. In his view, white feminists succeed in allocating domestic work to women and serious economic and political work to men. This is regrettable as far as the study is concerned because it sharply disregards black women's realities. Working class and racially-oppressed women often work at home in many income-earning activities. Some of these income earning activities include, for example, letting out rooms, as we see both Vivian Baxter Johnson, Angelou's mother and Momma Henderson, Angelou's grandmother doing, child-minding as we see young mother Angelou and Momma Henderson doing, sewing, washing and pressing laundry, and a lot other things like we see Maya Angelou doing at night club dancing floors, bus terminals, among a host of other things. It can, therefore, be said, especially using young mother Angelou as a point of discussion, that black mothers can never exclusively be domesticated. It is very important to say that contrary to the white notion of "true womanhood" that was still rife or upheld in the middle of the twentieth century when productive work was still seen as separable from motherhood, black mothers always made work part of their daily existence.

In Angelou's case as a jobless poor black young girl, she had the option of seeking government assistance and support in looking after herself and her fatherless child. Because of her strong will, she rejects the options of seeking government assistance and support in bringing up her child, even though she is still a very young mother. Angelou makes this decision due to her reliance on her experience of black culture, which integrates self-reliance and motherhood. It is, therefore, clear from the reading of her autobiography that Angelou's

fight and struggles to ascertain an identity for herself and child was done because of her African American culture. Her decision leads her to work situations that highlight how the racist economic system, Capitalism drives black women into a kind of poverty that is not only financial but at times also moral. In *Gather Together In My Name*, the sequel to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou writes about the problems she faced as a working teenage mother, a black girl with no professional background to whom only the most menial jobs are available. Readers see Angelou living along the periphery of society. This occurs simply because the young Maya Angelou has no skill and she refuses her mother, Vivian Baxter's offer to take care of her son so that she (Angelou) can continue with her education. It is important to note here that Angelou's rejection of her mother, Vivian Baxter's offer to help her during a time when she needed it most is driven by lack of trust for her mother. The issue of lack of trust becomes understandable once readers remember that Vivian Baxter had earlier on during Angelou's childhood neglected her two young children; Angelou and her older brother, Bailey. Since the young Angelou believes that her present predicament of being a young jobless uninformed teenage mother could have been avoided if her mother, Vivian Baxter had been there to tutor her about the imminence of such unfortunate situations in the life of a black girl, Angelou's distrust of her mother in the area of child upbringing deepens. She thus rejects her offer and takes upon herself the task of struggling to gain an identity for herself and her son.

It is relevant to say that ironically, however, when the going gets tougher, readers later realize that Angelou leaves her son Guy with Vivian Baxter, this same mother whom she had initially displayed a vehement distrust of. In fact, Angelou leaves Guy in the care of his grandmother Vivian Baxter for a whole year when she had to go on an international tour with the "Porgy and Bess" group across Europe. This situation can also somehow be explained in another dimension. During the time, Angelou had lived close to her mother for quite some time and probably had grown confident that she could after all be a good mother when offered the chance. The other obvious reason was economic. The "Porgy and Bess" tour of Europe was the first real traveling experience outside the U.S.A that Angelou had ever had at the time and a way of making some money for her savings that will keep her and her child going for quite some time before she gets another job.

### **3.3** *The Concept of Other Mothers in Angelou's Autobiographies*

The issue of "other mothers" as depicted by Collins (2000) appears in most parts of Angelou's autobiographies. It would have been very difficult or almost impossible for Angelou to work full-time if she did not have her mother and community of other willing-to-

help women around her to rely on for assistance with the care of her child. It is not only women who help mothers to bring up and take care of children; some men who are willing to help, which of course include some husbands who are available, also form part of the crop of people that help make mothering and work easy tasks. In Angelou's autobiographies, we see some men taking the challenging responsibility to be caretakers of Guy Johnson, Angelou's son. One thing, however, is very clear as far as the discussion is concerned. This is realized in the fact that Angelou boldly uses the issue of being a working mother an aspect of motherhood to define an identity for herself and all black women in this regard.

Angelou implicitly shows her identification with the black community where the feel or sense of belongingness to a community is well entrenched. Angelou relies basically on other mothers, especially in the upbringing and caretaking of her son, Guy because the extended family in black communities includes even people outside one's line of kinship who are willing to display or show a sense of loyalty and obligation. It is based on this explanatory premise that Angelou comfortably leaves her son, Guy, in the care of different care providers or friends while she goes on searching for a new job which is quite sustainable. It is quite important to say that this sense of obligation, community and yet again the tendency and love to share the responsibilities of motherhood are all values which, most importantly, have ensured the survival of many African families. Clearly, it becomes obvious that Angelou is able to use this to explore the theme of identity fully.

In using the concept of Other Mothers propounded by Collins to firmly develop her theme of search for identity, Maya Angelou can be said to have launched a powerful attack on the nuclear family structure. Although Angelou's writings demand respect for the working mother, the extended family and for other mothers (other neighbours in the society who give helping hands in motherhood role-play), her struggles demonstrate clearly the tensions inherent or present in belonging to a group that values these notions of family, while living in a far larger society that has no regard for them (Collins, 2000). The tension being referred to became evident in Angelou's feeling of rejection while she is still a child in her grandmother's care and, of course her own frustration when faced with the sole responsibility of raising her own son, Guy Johnson.

In another area of discussion under the concept of the working mother, Angelou's explanation in her first narrative text in autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, of how she comes to have two mothers, Vivian Baxter Johnson, her own biological mother and Momma Henderson, her paternal grandmother and how the latter helps to shape her thoughts in adult life are worth discussing. She refers to both women as mother because they both

played a major role in bringing her up during her formative years. Actually, Angelou spends a major part of her formative years with Momma Henderson, her paternal grandmother more than with her biological mother, Vivian Baxter. It is true that she spends some time with Vivian Baxter Johnson during such times when she is very young but most of her days as a child are with Momma Henderson. Momma's visions and worldview, therefore, help to shape young Maya Angelou's thoughts to a very large extent. This pattern of living with one's grandmother continues in Angelou's narratives when her (Angelou's) son, Guy is sometimes left in the care of his grandmother, Vivian Baxter Johnson. As a young black single mother, Angelou single-handedly provides both emotional and physical care and support for her only child.

Angelou's experience of family as recorded throughout her volumes of autobiography follows a set of principles, which are particularly different from that of Americans who belong to the white middle-class population. It is clear from the foregoing that Angelou, as a single mother goes through a lot of struggles to maintain herself and her growing son. She is undoubtedly a very strong individual who determines to get what she sets out to get for herself. It is quite obvious that the whole idea of motherhood that she plays in the story is conceived by herself and so, if she becomes a sufferer or struggling woman out of choice, the more reason why she needs not blame anybody.

#### **3.4** *Surrogate Motherhood*

In discussing the subject of motherhood in Angelou's autobiography, the surrogate mother – figure role played by Mrs. Bertha Flowers in the life of Angelou becomes very important. This is because in Angelou's search for an identity, the very genesis of her quest for true ideals as a woman, a Black and above all, a creative writer began with the teachings of Mrs. Flowers. Mrs. Flowers is a polished, refined and highly educated Black American widow. Because of the way she is, she was highly respected in the Stamps community. Mrs. Flowers comes into Angelou's life during young Angelou's period of silence at Stamps, Arkansas, where her grandmother decides to help her recuperate after her rape by Mr. Freeman. It will be recalled that just after the rape incident, Mr. Freeman was murdered by Angelou's violent uncles who just could not come to terms with seeing their young niece of eight years old being abused in such a way by no other person than their own sister's boyfriend. Angelou, therefore, becomes timid, silent and non-resilient. The reason is that Angelou felt she is to blame for the whole situation; the fact that she feels she initiated the rape made her feel she is the cause of Mr. Freeman's death.

When Bailey and Angelou are sent back to Momma Henderson, their father's mother, Angelou recalls that she becomes withdrawn and recoils into a world of her own such that she would not talk to anybody except to Bailey. Her granny becomes disturbed and reports the case to Mrs. Flowers who also decides to help bring young Angelou out of her predicament. Mrs. Flowers begins her surrogate mother – figure role in Angelou's life from this time. She invites young Angelou to her apartment, which Angelou describes as very beautiful and has a sense of simplicity about it. As a surrogate mother – figure to Angelou, Mrs. Flower teaches Maya Angelou the very important aspects of being a woman: neatness, kindness, hard work, confidence, a feature which Angelou confesses she holds on to without any reservation, and above all, literacy. In fact, it is Mrs. Flowers who instills the discipline of creative writing in Angelou. Angelou learns how to be a creative writer and this is a talent that helps her in her whole lifetime. Readers can recollect that she takes on career jobs related to creative writing when she finds herself in Africa, precisely in Egypt and Ghana. The discipline of creative writing which Mrs. Flowers teaches her during her recuperating period in Stamps, Arkansas after her rape, helps her to make a living for herself and her son, more especially, during the time she falls out with Vusi Make, her second husband in Africa. The attention of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, an elegant black woman whom Angelou viewed as an aristocrat amidst the poverty of Stamps, helped Angelou regain her voice. Mrs. Flowers told young Angelou: "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning". (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, p98). Sharing afternoons of reading literary classics in her home, Mrs. Flowers introduced Angelou not only to a love of books but to a world of imagination, creativity, and the power of the written word, as well as teaching her that she "must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy". (*Caged Bird*, p99)

#### **4.0 Summary**

It is clear from the foregoing that Angelou vividly paints a picture of how she performs creditably in the area of motherhood taking inspiration and support from Momma Henderson, her paternal grandmother, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, other women who helped her as caretakers of her son while she got busy making some money to fend for herself and her son, and to some extent, Vivian Baxter Johnson, her biological mother.

The study has presented an analysis of Angelou's role as a mother and how it helped shape her mentality and wellbeing as an independent young woman and mother living in a community that does not give equal opportunities to women. The study also re-enforces the inspiration that Angelou draws from the motherhood roles that some women like Momma

Henderson, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Vivian Baxter Johnson and other African-American women and men who helped in the care of her son played in her life.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The study has examined the trope of motherhood presented in the autobiographies of the famous African American writer Angelou. All the narratives are altogether written to drive home a certain point. They all paint the picture through the work of art about the life of a talented artist; an intelligent young girl; her childhood, her ordeals, her adulthood, and almost everything she does by way of finding survival for herself and her growing son. The narratives in autobiography are unified through the major theme of motherhood and through the developing character of the narrator.

The subject of motherhood, which is the primary thematic interest of the study, was explained in the study as the blueprint which Angelou uses to get herself educated about her challenges in life. It was mentioned that this subject that enables her to redefine her identity threads its way through all the volumes of Angelou's narratives. However, the study categorically concludes that although there are many psychological and emotional setbacks for Maya Angelou throughout her life in her quest for self recognition, she does find her identity along the journey.

It has been established that throughout the volumes of Angelou's narratives, motherhood remains a dominant theme and unifying element. The study mentions how the need to protect herself and most especially, her young baby becomes one way of asserting herself as an independent woman. Both Annie Henderson, her grandmother and Vivian Baxter, her mother act as nurturers and protectors in their respective roles. In turn, Angelou, who becomes a mother at the end of *Caged Bird*, learns to fulfill the role of nurturer and protector as a new mother. The study can boldly conclude that Angelou's relationship with Mrs. Bertha Flowers represents another important turning point in the development of the autobiographer's consciousness when her maternal influence helps young Angelou tap into her creative resources and find self-healing.

Again, the significance of motherhood as a unifying element in the autobiographies was highlighted. The study of Angelou's life reveals that she debunked right from the time she became a mother the idea of working inside the home. However, the study has revealed that Angelou refutes this whole idea and proves that she identifies with the tradition of feminist independence and responsibility which takes its roots from working slave women who worked from dawn to dusk to feed whole households including their male counterparts and even white slave owners and their families. Her mother as a working mother, and her

grandmother as a workingwoman, also practically bring to life Angelou's link to a family of working mothers. As a mother, Angelou is seen to be working tirelessly to make ends meet to prevent her from being dependent.

Angelou again succeeds in using the issue of motherhood to drive home her message of search for an identity. She portrays herself as a tough-minded mother and an enraged mother all in the process of protecting her son. On the subject of motherhood again, the fact that Angelou was raised by two mothers was also discussed as a strong factor that increases Angelou's understanding of the Black American tradition of motherhood. Angelou succeeds when she points to two very able women, and probably three in the persons of Vivian Baxter, Momma Henderson, and Mrs. Flowers, who raised her. These three women, were, therefore, recognized by the study to have served as mothers and role models for Angelou, and so, they used their motherhood role plays to influence Angelou in her search for an identity. The study finally concludes that Angelou is successful in using the trope of motherhood to define her identity as an African-American woman within the African-American tradition.

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