

## **The Literary Merits of Maya Angelou's Choice of Narrative Style in her Autobiographies**

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### **Abstract**

Maya Angelou's autobiographies, which present a real life experience of a young black girl growing up in a little township in Arkansas earns her a place in what one can call a literary hall of fame. This is because her in-depth presentation of incidents with detail and her careful choice of narrative techniques show her mastery and craftsmanship as a writer. This study presents an analysis of the literary merits of Angelou's choice of narrative style in her autobiographies to explore the predominant themes in the texts. The study discusses the merits of the following literary techniques to highlight the dominant subjects in her narratives: humour, figurative language, the serial autobiography technique, authorial commentary, voice, time and time distortion, the story-within-a-story technique, name changes, among others like the blend of the first person narrative technique and dialogue. The study concludes that Angelou displays deep mastery over her craft as a writer and confirms that she was successful in exploring these techniques to drum home her message to her reading audience.

**Key Words: authorial commentary, literary style, comic elements, voice, first person narrative**

## 1.0 Introduction

After many years of slavery experience, the former slaves in America began rediscovering themselves after losing their real identity. This is because most of them were even given different names so as to cut all links they had to their ancestry and roots. Baker Jr. (1987) complements that assertion when he 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 created by themselves. Living without an identity was, of course difficult. As such, many of the descendants of these former slaves resorted to using different means to define an identity for themselves. Many resorted to working hard in many disciplines including education, law, sports, politics, and a host of others.

On the social front, many African American women made a difference in the way they managed their homes and communities. With the increase in the number of men who were getting imprisoned or dying through gang violence, or running off with other women, many women were left with no choice than to bring up their children single-handedly without any support.

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 seven 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 Elementary Features of a Narrative

The main aim of any narrator is to tell a story either from a very personal experience, someone else's experience or it could be purely fiction. Many writers have waded into the discussion of what narratives are and have thus offered varying explanations of the term.

Heywood (1971) edited a book *Perspectives on African Literature* in which he explains that a narrative is some kind of retelling, often in words, of something or a story that happened. The narrative is not the story itself but rather the telling of the story -- which is why it is so often used in phrases such as "written narrative," "oral narrative," etc. It is worthy of note that unlike a story which is just a sequence of events, a narrative recounts those events, perhaps leaving some occurrences out because they are from some perspective insignificant,

and perhaps emphasizing others. For example, when a writer is narrating a story which highlights a series of events, he may just mention an event like a motor accident briefly because it goes through a sequence and the accident may be just one of those series. The narrator may not do the same thing in a narrative account. A narrative account, however, might be almost entirely about the motor accident itself and the few seconds leading up to it. Narratives thus shape history highlighting the series of events and the story of what happened before each event occurred.

Every story also has a setting. Setting infuses two main questions into the minds of every reader. Specifically, the reader may want to know where the story took place and secondly when the story took place. These two parameters fall squarely in the domain of the story's "atmosphere". The time is very important in analyzing setting because it enables the reader to have an idea about the historical context in which the story takes place. When the reader gets to know this, his or her understanding of the story in its minutest detail becomes easy. The place is also very important in analyzing setting because the religious, cultural, politico-religio-socio-economic activities of that area may greatly or slightly influence the actions of the characters in a particular story.

Another important element that is worth considering in any novel is characterization. In this category, the reader is expected to consider both round and flat characters because they all play very important roles in developing the story line. It has been said that it is the problems the main character(s), otherwise called the protagonist(s) have to solve which become the main issues that carry a story along. The protagonist's problems he tries solving generate the conflict lines in every story. Therefore, it could be said that the plot is basically the story of the main character in his or her bid to solve either his personal or whatever problem(s) he or she is going through.

In effect, therefore, every narrative should establish a clear setting, have a beginning and an end, build to a climax where an action will come to a close, use sequencing or logical order, and finally, have a clear point of view. Clearly, the autobiographies of Angelou all portray traits of all the features outlined in the foregoing, which will serve as the framework on which this study will proceed.

## **1.2 Purpose of the study**

This research has the following as its purpose:

1. To explain the merits of Angelou's choice of literary style in advancing her major themes in her autobiographies

2. To show how successful Angelou was in using literary style to drum home her message to her readers.

## **2.0 Reviews on Angelou's Style**

In the development of the themes of identity, racism, motherhood and marriage, among others in her novels, it is important to note that Angelou uses a unique blend of narrative techniques and literary style. Aside the texts proper which attracted serious critique by scholars, the literary techniques Angelou used have also attracted lots of commentary as well. Several writers have commented on Angelou's literary style of presentation with different remarks. Kelly (1970) explains that Angelou accommodates her literary style to the various settings her story moves through. In explaining this assertion, she claims that Angelou describes a rural vignette, which is "sweet-milk fresh in her memory..." and a San Francisco rooming house where "Chicken suppers and gambling games were rioting on a twenty-four hour basis downstairs." Kelly identifies that Angelou uses very strong and appropriate metaphors but to her (Kelly) her (Angelou's) similes are less often so. However, despite these recognizable facts, Kelly explains that these lapses in poetic style are undeniably balanced by the insight Angelou offers into the effects of social conditioning on the lifestyle and self-concept of a Black child growing up in the rural South of the 1930's.

On another platform, Walker (1995) believes that the first volume is not even 'accurate,' and to him, when the book is looked at critically after almost thirty years on the shelves, it is full of bias, authoritative, and is almost wildly funny, like certain urban myths. However, Walker is quick to say that Angelou is not the stylist that Himes is, nor a Richard Wright and that she (Angelou) manages, however, a witty poetic flow (intensely more successful than in her book of poems, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diie*) that is sometimes cute, sometimes lax, and often apt. One begins to wonder what basis Walker has for comparing Angelou with Himes and Richard Wright because he does not justify this assertion. However, the fact still remains that Walkers' point that Angelou's *Caged Bird* is inaccurate because of its bias and authoritative nature is irrelevant. This is because as expected of every writer using the first person narrative approach, he or she should stamp an authority over the narrative. As for the bias nature of the work, every writer decides what he wants to do with his or her narrative.

Walker again reveals that Miss Angelou has the right instincts, which anyone who is given to prattling about his life seems to possess. Walker in his critical review develops the theory of "mythomania" and refers to it as Angelou's forceful power of narration. He actually suggests

that this particular quality of Angelou to her narratives gives life to her stories and makes them seem so real to life. Walker suggests that this “mythomania” quality in Angelou’s narration is something that “she applies cannily, preserving the fiction that one can recall and, from a distance, whole conversations and surrounding thoughts - as if she were a reel of recording tape, consuming for later regurgitation a problematic life.”(p99) Further, Walker argues that Angelou is schooled in situation ethics, licensing them retroactively to cover her having been a prostitute and indulging in so many other immoral acts, and yet, she makes them seem almost enviable that she pulled them off so well.

In the February 1991 edition of *Journal of Reading*, Graham writes in “Making Language Sing: An interview with Maya Angelou” that Angelou explains personally that she deliberately chooses to write in a language that will be very universal. Graham (1991) questions Angelou to explain what she (Angelou) means by the choice of the word “universal” since she (Angelou) writes her novels in standard American English. Angelou explains that it is not the language type she is referring to but the simplicity of the language. Angelou adds that her choice of very simple words and familiar diction has made her novels universal. Angelou uses language that goes down well with all her readers, be it young or old, highly educated or less educated. She explains that in order to drum home her message further, she tries to achieve verisimilitude by enhancing her descriptive ability. Angelou describes incidents into its minutest detail using many adverbs and adjectives as far as possible so that vivid images are created. She explains that it is for the sake of enhancing her description and narration that she uses many metaphors, similes and some few examples of personifications and hyperbole that in totality help to explain her message of celebrating motherhood and enhancing the role of women in the institution of marriage.

Still on Angelou’s narrative style, Walker (1995) again suggests that Miss Angelou possesses an ear for folkways; the fact that they spawn abundantly in the warm stream of narration, adding enough mother wit and humor to give the events a "rightness." To Walker, Angelou is to some extent coy, and never allows her readers a really good, voyeur's glimpse into the conjugal bed that several male characters enjoy with her; rather, she teases. It is important to say here that Walker is rather praising Angelou in this enterprise for not being so “raw” and “sexy” in her narration of incidents related to her bedroom, and to some extent, her “behind-closed-doors” interaction with her male bedfellows she comes into contact with during her relentless search for romantic love bliss encounters. Walker explains further that though the author is never mawkishly sentimental, she shows herself to have been, like most people,

silly, only more so, than many of us will admit. Despite all these shortfalls in the life of Angelou, Walker concludes that she is still so proud, as depicted in her narratives. She stumbles, falls, but like the phoenix, she rises renewed and becomes whole again.

Suckernick (1980) also writes a review on Angelou's second autobiography *Gather Together in my Name*. In this review, Suckernick carefully criticizes the book as an entertaining piece of funny elements, and more specifically, what she calls "chain of anecdotes" that places too much importance on the tale and not the teller even though the other way round (where focus should be placed on the teller rather than the tale) is rather the correct option. Suckernick's review, to some extent, adds more value to the assertion made by Arensberg (1976). Arensberg is very critical on Angelou's work saying that the humour in the narrative helps to tone down the seriousness in the message, and this is no different from Lynn Suckernick's argument. Suckernick, therefore, believes that the "chain of anecdotes" makes the narrative lack the temperament needed to "linger and infuse [readers] long after the anecdotes are forgotten" (p12). Suckernick and Arensberg, therefore, have the opinion that it is the funny elements (comic elements and pieces of anecdotes) Angelou injects into her narratives that help to sustain the interest of readers in their reading of each narrative from cover to cover.

On another platform, Lupton (1998) in analyzing the first five volumes of the narrative in respect to the autobiographical tradition, Lupton (1998) writes an essay "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity" and in that he concludes that Angelou is considered a major contemporary author and contributor to the black autobiographical tradition whose literary reputation is based on her volume of autobiographical series and her poetry. Her storytelling abilities are marked with wisdom and humor as she reveals herself to the scrutiny of the reader with an often painful but honest candour. Angelou's memoirs inspire hope in the face of adversity and reveal the resiliency of the human spirit as she "leads her readers to recognize that the human spirit needs not cave in to ignorance, hatred, and oppression" (p14).

Still on Lupton's discussion of Angelou's literary style, she writes in *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* that "the writing techniques Angelou uses in her autobiographies are the same devices used in writing fiction: vividly conceived characters and careful development of theme, setting, plot, and language" (p30). Another feature of Angelou's work that Lupton identifies is the employment of the serial autobiography style to convey her story. Lupton contends that "the volumes of Angelou's series far exceed the standard number of volumes in an autobiography ...so that they are in a sub-genre known as 'serial autobiographies'" (p32).

One of the foremost examples of serial autobiography in the black literary tradition that Lupton makes reference to is Frederick Douglass's two-part autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1845 and 1855, respectively. Lupton continued that there is a freedom, and a continuous fluctuation in the serial form of autobiographical writing that the single form does not allow, but there is also the increased need for transitions, cross-references, continuity, and discipline.

In a similar analysis made about the form of autobiography that Angelou has adopted, Fox-Genovese (1990) argues on the subject of structure in Angelou's autobiographical text. To her, the text is that of a journey or an odyssey in a quest for self-knowledge, self-identity, and "home." The first volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, finds the child Maya crisscrossing the United States from place to place with no permanent place of home. Fox-Genovese, therefore, explains that Angelou's literary journey begins with a literal journey as she travels from California to her Grandmother Henderson's home in Stamps, Arkansas, when she is three years old. The journey will continue eastward from California to New York, ending finally on the Mother Continent of Africa throughout the next volumes of her autobiographical text. Angelou's linear journey, in search of home and self-definition, according to Fox-Genovese, comes full circle when she realizes that no matter how much she loves Africa, the root of her ancestry, it is not her true home, and so she returns "home" to America. Fox-Genovese, thus examines the texts as a literal journey conveyed through a literary vein from chapter to chapter and book to book.

Lupton (1998) comes out with a similar argument to that of O'Neale's presentation after her wide-ranging investigation of Angelou's works. In her work titled *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, Lupton sees authenticity in the "episodic series of fragments that mirror the kind of discord found in actual life" (p78). Lupton argues almost on the same lines as O'Neale (1984). As it would be recalled, O'Neale mentions the loosely structured plots, which she (O'Neale) asserts are skillfully controlled by Angelou. This issue by O'Neale is authenticated by Lupton when she says that the loose nature of the arrangements of the plot recognizes a simple but basic universal fact of life: that life will not always be straight and perfect as one will want it to be, and that there will surely be ups and downs. Thus, since the narratives recount the life of Angelou with all its good and bad times, especially with Angelou trying hard to overcome the bad ones, her use of the loosely connected plot sequences, according to Lupton, is timely and appropriate.

### **3.0 Angelou's Narrative Style**

However, to successfully highlight the subject of motherhood, Angelou uses literary style to present it in the way she wanted. Some of the aspects of style that Angelou chooses to highlight her narrative are her blending of the first-person narrative point of view and some elements of dialogue, the story-within-the-story technique, time and time distortion, figurative language and the use of the serial autobiography style. These aspects of style help Angelou to successfully explain the subject of motherhood.

#### **3.1 The Blend of Dialogue and the First Person Narrative**

Angelou uses the first person narrative technique, which is very normal for every writer of an autobiography. The first person narrative technique is aimed at making the story achieve a sense of reality. Readers, therefore, see the narrator using expressions mostly dominated by the first person singular and plural pronouns. However, in Angelou's autobiography, despite the fact that she uses the first person narrative technique, she uses this with a special blend of dialogue with the characters she comes into contact with. Even though the blend of dialogue with the first person narrative is quite unusual with autobiographies, Angelou chooses to do this for the reason of bringing her readers close to the heart of the narrative to have a first-hand feel of her actual experiences. She does this by using direct quotations to present her actual words and that of her speakers in the various narratives. All six narratives contain the blend of first person point of view and dialogue. Since the use of dialogue is not very common in the choice of the first person, it also provides readers with the chance to see more into the relationship between Angelou and other characters. By so doing, readers are able to see what other characters think of the protagonist and what the protagonist also thinks of them. This is an effect of the Eye-of-God narrative style but which Angelou is able to achieve by the use of dialogue in her autobiographies. Dialogue is recorded mostly between Angelou and her brother, Bailey; Angelou and Bailey with their grandmother, Momma; Angelou and her mother, Vivian; Angelou and Tosh Angelos; Angelou and Vusumzi Make; among others. These incidents of the blend of dialogue and the first person point of view help to develop the discussion of Angelou on the subjects of motherhood and marriage and again enhances her strive to achieve verisimilitude.

Aside the dialogue, Angelou's usage of the first person narrative technique is admirable. Since all the narratives are autobiographies that chronicle her life's story, Angelou in narrating her infancy narratives, achievements, life crisis, among others is compelled to use this technique judiciously to achieve her aim of writing – to showcase the admirable

successes of lessons of failure that she chalks in the areas of motherhood and marriage to redefine her identity. The most important things worth noting about Angelou's use of the first person narrative technique are very simple to explain. In the first place, readers of her autobiography tend to appreciate the stories to be non-fictitious works of art rather than fiction for the sake of art. This is very easy to explain. By her use of the first person narrative, readers believe that the main character who is herself Angelou, the author of the various autobiographies, is right in the centre of the action, hence the fact that she does not dilute her stories by adding or subtracting incidents from her stories. She tends to be very sure of every incident that she narrates because the writer herself who also happens to be the heroine of the story is a direct or first-hand witness of the account, and more, she experiences everything herself. This issue, therefore, explains why the narration seems so real and so she narrates incidents without leaving any minute detail out. After she has exhausted every incident, she carries a good impression to her readers about the story at whichever level the story has attained, and so her (readers) get abreast with the present state of affairs, and all past incidents.

For example, at the point where Angelou narrates the incident where the disrespectful white girl comes to tease her grandmother in front of her shop in Stamps, Arkansas, Angelou narrates how she felt about the action of the white girls. Readers really get to know the social and economic state of affairs through her narration. The fact remains from that narration that the Blacks in Stamps are under-privileged and that they fear the white population, as displayed in Momma's reaction towards the girl who disrespectfully teases her.

The same can be said about Angelou's narration of the incident of her rape by her mother's "husband", Mr. Freeman when she (Angelou) and her brother go to live with their mother. With her use of the first person narrative technique, Angelou makes readers aware of the feelings she has or develops for Mr. Freeman even though at her age, she is considered an infant and so should not under any circumstance develop that kind of passionate feeling for her rapist. As she uses the first person narrative technique, readers recognize her authority over the story, as she is the narrator and so really appreciates the after-thoughts and comments that she adds to the narration. She goes the step further to interpret and add her opinion to most issues that crop up in the course of the narration. The first person narrative is used in many parts of her autobiographies and these help the reader a lot to understand some of the fundamental issues like the subjects of motherhood and marriage in the stories.

### 3.2 The Story-Within-a-Story Technique

Angelou chalks some success in developing the subjects of motherhood and marriage in her autobiographies by adopting the story-within-a-story technique in her narration. The story-within-a-story technique is realized when different stories are brought into the narration of a particular story by a narrator for the sake of helping readers understand a particular incident better. Readers get the chance to know why the main character may be behaving in a particular way at the present time or another. Readers may also understand why certain issues are tackled or approached by certain characters or the main character in a particular way and not in another way. Maya Angelou uses this technique in her narration and it successfully helps to develop her discussion of the subjects of motherhood and marriage to her readers. The narrator, actually, succeeds in bringing in a different story mostly through flashback when she takes readers back to the past to narrate another story mostly when she remembers why something she is doing at the present is like that or taking a particular shape in the present.

However, it is important to state here that the story-within-a-story technique is not always brought in through flashbacks. The narrator may fantasize about something she or he wishes to experience in life in future and that may also be delivered to readers through the story-within-a-story technique. Of course, in Angelou's autobiography, especially in *The Heart of a Woman*, readers get the chance to appreciate another story within this same story she was narrating about her life. Angelou narrates her fancy concerning the type of marriage bliss she would like to experience, one that is based on the euro-centric romance love bliss where the woman becomes a domesticated housewife whose business is to take care of the children and chores at home while her husband goes to work to bring home money to fend for the wife and children and make them happy at all times. Anyway, Angelou realizes that these romantic ideals could not materialize; hence she had to discard those dreams and hallucinations and move on with her life. These are dreams that she created in her mind by viewing movies and other pictures at the cinema. It is right to note that when she realized that these pictures she fantasized about are not real, she had the encouragement to go live her life devoid of fantasy – work and fend for herself and her growing son, which would finally give them liberty and freedom from all forms of oppression; be it racial, sexual, social and economic. The subjects of motherhood and marriage are highlighted in this instance.

The story-within-a-story technique is expertly used by Angelou when through her thoughts, readers are sent into the future to experience first-hand the romantic ideals of Maya Angelou

and all her aspirations for a romantic marriage. Before Angelou gets married to Tosh Angelos and later Vusumzi Make, she engages through fantasy a time when she is married to a lovely handsome, a man of her dreams. This fantasy involves a marriage full of eternal bliss. The story continues that she becomes a housewife and all her activities for the day are limited to the house. She thus has the responsibility of taking care of the home and providing sexual satisfaction for herself and her romantic fantasy husband. This husband, however, makes sure that his wife (Angelou) is well catered for and provided with everything she needs. It is unfortunate, however, that his fantasy does not become a reality after all, and she herself acknowledges that by way of an after-thought. All these incidents are based on her fantasy and she tells them in a story form within the main narration. This helps to further develop the discussion of the subjects of motherhood and marriage to her readers.

### **3.3 The Feature of Time and Time Distortion**

There is yet another literary feature that Angelou introduces to enhance her discussion of the subjects of motherhood and marriage in her narratives in autobiography. This is the feature of time and time distortion. Angelou begins the story when young Angelou is in church and cannot hold her bladder any longer. Young Angelou's age is not noted in this particular incident, which serves as the introduction to the story, but the reader can guess that she is somewhere between five and seven years old. Then the author switches the story back in time to when young Angelou is three years old and her brother is four. Their parents are divorcing, and the children are shipped alone with their name tags on their wrists from California to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson. There is a sudden "flash-forward" to young Angelou's school years where she talks about falling in love with William Shakespeare and enjoying passionately Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and many other writers. After this, there is a foreshadowing of a major change in Angelou's life when she departs from Stamps for good at the age of thirteen. Following this, there is a flashforward to a traumatic scene where Angelou, at the age of ten, was forced to watch her grandmother being taunted cruelly by the racist children of Stamps. In between the flashforwards, the story follows Angelou's early years in chronological order with frequent references to her ages five, six, and seven years old. A flashback to the marriage of Grandfather Baxter, a West Indian Black, to Grandmother Baxter, an octoroon or quadroon, who was raised by a German family in Cairo, Illinois follows. This flashback into Angelou's maternal family heritage gives the reader an understanding of Maya's mother's life, especially about how she came to lead an unusual and exotic gambling life in St. Louis. This

is typical of women's autobiography. Writers give an insight into people's history to explain why some particular lifestyles are adopted by their characters. In this particular instance, Angelou's mother's exotic lifestyle is linked to her family background.

At the age of seven, Angelou and her eight year old brother Bailey move away from the relatively quiet and safe environment of Stamps and their grandmother to St. Louis. Life in St. Louis with their beautiful and fun-loving mother is exciting and fulfilling for Bailey, but the city remains a foreign country to Maya who in this chapter foreshadows her silent, post-rape departure with the saying, "I didn't come to stay." Angelou further describes her painful rape by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman, and its after-effects of anxiety, fear, and guilt. The incident where Bailey cries at the side of the sister's bed at the hospital gives the reader an insight into the close and supportive relationship between Bailey and his sister. Angelou then tells the break in that relationship by her passing remark that it would be fifteen years before she, Maya, would see her brother Bailey cry again.

Further in the narration, Angelou introduces flashback of eleven-year-old Angelou's feelings about having attended the funeral of Mrs. Taylor to illustrate her fanciful, sensitive, and superstitious mind. The memory of the funeral was triggered when Mr. Taylor, a possible suitor of Mrs. Henderson, Angelou's grandmother, came to call and described a dream that he had had of his wife who came to him saying that she wanted some children. When young Angelou, who believed in ghosts was asked by her grandmother to leave the light of the family circle around the warm pot-bellied stove to fetch a long-handled fork in the dark kitchen, the two minute trip of fear and panic in the dark took Maya through cemeteries, gravestones, and black cats. This flashback gives the reader an insight into the inner life of the child Maya, the future novelist and poet.

The rest of the novel follows young Angelou in fairly straight chronological order through to age sixteen when, in doubt about her own sexuality, she loses her virginity. Although the sexual experience, which was awkward and unromantic, does not give her the answer to her question, it does give her an unwanted pregnancy which she manages to hide from her parents until the final month. The novel ends with her giving birth to a son three weeks after having graduated from high school. Now, every reader will be somehow confused if he or she does not keep track of references to historical time periods and at the same time keeping track of other time references. The next three novels chronicle Angelou's later teenage years in which she gets involved in prostitution, loses her son temporarily to a kidnapper, has a short marriage, travels in Europe, and works in Africa. She becomes a singer, dancer,

educator, editor, and a prolific writer of prose and poetry. These incidents of time distortion are carefully interwoven into the mainstream narration of Angelou's autobiography with such flexibility that it does not really make the stories difficult to appreciate.

### **3.4 Use of Symbols and Figurative Language**

The next literary technique Angelou successfully uses to develop her themes in her autobiographies is her vivid use of symbols and figurative language. For this part of the study the predominant autobiography that contains striking examples of symbols and figurative language is *I Know Caged Bird*. Starting with the title of the first novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and that of the last one *Mom & Me & Mom*, which is taken from the poem, "Sympathy" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, she makes extensive use of imagery, similes, and metaphors to express her feelings of entrapment, anger, and violation. The short excerpt of the poem reads:

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!  
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
And the river flows like a stream of glass;  
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,  
And the faint perfume from the chalice steals---  
I know what the caged bird feels!

(Dunbar, 1913).

Using the poem above, she expresses the issue of entrapment in a way that Maya Angelou, the black American black, is like the Caged Bird who beats its wings till its blood is red on the cruel bars of the cage that society has put her into. The poem contains striking images of the theme of entrapment developed through imagery and symbolism, and these are tied closely with the imagery of the novel. Again, Angelou develops the image of an angry personality. This is expertly explained with the incident where Angelou, upon hearing the racist graduation speech imagined a pyramid of flesh with the white folks on the bottom, as the broad base, then the Indians with their tomahawks and teepees and wigwams and treaties, the Negroes with their mops and recipes and cotton sacks and Spirituals sticking out of their mouths. The image of violation is also introduced into the narratives with the rape of Angelou. The image of the violation is closely tied to that of pain. Angelou presents the picture of the breaking, tearing and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The poem, therefore, helps Angelou to vividly paint those images she wanted to portray to her readers.

Angelou makes use of similes, metaphors, and personification to further develop her subjects of motherhood and marriage. Angelou uses the following figurative language to give further meaning to her message in all her autobiographies. In the area of similes, some few illustrations will be explained. She uses similes in the following expressions “My mother was like a pretty kite that floated just above my head. If I liked I could pull it in to me by saying I had to go to the toilet or by starting a fight with Bailey.” (*Caged Bird*, p54). Again, she uses the expression “For nearly a year, I sobbed around the house, the store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible.” (*Caged Bird*, p77). The above expressions, among several others, add beauty and colour to Angelou’s autobiographies. They add beauty and enforce her power of creating mental pictures in the mind’s eye of her readers. In expressing her fondness and admiration for some women-figures like grandmum Momma Henderson, or her biological mother Vivian Baxter Johnson, or even Mrs. Flowers, Angelou likens herself to them choosing their admirable qualities. These comparisons help in her development of the subjects of motherhood.

Aside the use of similes, Angelou also uses some figurative forms of language in the area of metaphors. A few of these will be discussed. She writes thus; “Mother was a blithe chick nuzzling around the large, solid dark hen. The sounds they made had a rich inner harmony.” (*Caged Bird*, p126). In another incident, Angelou writes “Momma’s deep, slow voice lay under my mother’s rapid peeps and chirps.” (*Caged Bird*, p171) Another illustration of metaphor is realized when Angelou writes; “I hefted the burden of pregnancy at sixteen onto my own shoulders where it belonged. Admittedly, I staggered under the weight.” (*Caged Bird*, p242). The subject of motherhood is further enforced by these mental pictures she creates. This is because the examples above all point to aspects of motherhood roles that she plays or other women played that deserve admiration.

Personification is another feature of imagery that Angelou explores to add colour and beauty to her narratives and helps to develop the subjects of motherhood and marriage. She uses the expressions: “The Depression must have its [toll] on the white section of Stamps with cyclonic impact, but it seeped into the Black area slowly, like a thief with misgivings.” (*Caged Bird*, p41). There is also another example of personification in the expression; “After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds.” (*Caged Bird*, p73). There are a lot more aspects of figurative language used in the various autobiographies that together help Angelou to better drum home her message to her readers. It is important to note that there are several other instances of

personification and other forms of imagery that Angelou uses in her in the narratives that all help Angelou to further deepen the pictures that she hopes to send to her readers.

### **3.5 Use of Humour and Comic Elements**

Humour is employed by Angelou in most parts of her autobiographies. She expertly uses this technique to heighten the interest of her readers. One medium she uses to inject humour in her narration is by being very blunt about some of the things she was saying. It is not very common for a writer to be very blunt and so candid to the extent that she will tell her own story and mention things like rape, incidents about her practice of prostitution, among others. Well, Angelou candidly mentions some of these things that she was involved in. In the midst of the tension that builds up during her narration of some of these events, she injects comic elements to overshadow if not to “erase” totally the supposedly “shameful” impression around these incidents. Angelou narrates such incidents with comic elements alongside the narration such that readers become convinced to accept these shameful situations just as they are since for most of these incidents, she had to endure them because she was either a child or a teenage single-mother who had to work extra hard to care for herself and her growing son. On a particular occasion, Angelou narrates the incident where the “powhitetrash” girls of Stamps come to tease her grandmother, Mrs. Henderson, at her store. The descriptions Angelou gives to the white girls were enough to make a reader see the extent of her (Angelou’s) anger. Angelou describes how “very dirty”, “uncultured” and “ill-mannered” they are. The descriptions of their underwear and dresses are elements that lie underneath her seriousness during the narration.

Angelou’s narration of her mother’s intervention at the hotel where they were meeting is another very good example of the successful use of humour. Angelou explains how the hotel attendant nearly disgraced her by denying her of the room she had booked earlier on telephone, simply because of racial discrimination. The story goes that Vivian Baxter Johnson, Angelou’s mother, comes to her (Angelou’s) rescue with anger at the hotel attendant. Even though she seemed serious, the description she gives about Vivian Baxter Johnson’s reaction to the action of the attendant was funny enough to send every reader laughing, especially after her triumph over the attendant. The humour becomes noticeable when Angelou describes the shrewdness with which her mother crows the white attendant into submission. Angelou’s narration points out the vehemence with which the attendant refuses to rent out the room to her because of racial undertones only for him to “melt” and change his attitude like an obedient child who is being forced to do the right thing at the verbal

explosions of her mother. The humour that arises here goes to highlight the subject of motherhood since it is related to an instinctive maternal defence and protection of one's child in the face of danger and oppression.

There are several other incidents where Angelou uses humour to develop the dominant subjects of motherhood and marriage. One of these includes Angelou's first experience at the Harlem Writers' Guild. Her narration and description of her emotion and composure at the guild is sure to at least create some humour. She narrates in *The Heart of a Woman*:

“I read the character and set description despite the sudden perversity of my body. The blood pounded in my ears but not enough to drown the skinny sound of my voice. My hands shook so that I had to lay the pages in my lap, but that was not a good solution to the tricks my knees were playing. They lifted voluntarily, pulling my heels off the floor and then trembled like disturbed Jello.” (p42).

One other episode where Angelou's humour becomes noticeable is where she narrates the story of her first meeting with Vusumzi Make, the man who becomes her second husband. She tells of an invitation that Vusumzi Make made to her son to see her off in *The Heart of a Woman*:

“At the door, Make stopped us. ‘Miss Angelou, just a minute. Guy, I would be honoured to see your mother home.’ Make knew that asking Guy's permission would please us both. My son smiled, loving the old world formality, straight out of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Corsican Brothers*. ‘Thank you, Mr. Make, I am seeing her home.’ I could have pinched him till he screamed.” (pp128-129)

It is Angelou's candour and openness about issues that bring about the humour in her. This incident tells of Make's early attempts at courting Angelou for marriage. The subjects of marriage and motherhood, therefore, get highlighted in this humorous appeal by Angelou.

### **3.6 Authorial Commentary**

Angelou also employs after-thoughts and comments, which otherwise would be called authorial commentary in a prose narrative written in the third person point of view. These after-thoughts and comments help make Angelou's readers get to know her impressions about incidents which occur around her. Authorial commentary refers to the after-comments that a writer passes after the narration of an incident. These comments represent the view, impression and after-thought of a narrator concerning particular incidents being narrated in a

story. Authorial commentaries are particularly even more effective when the voice of the narrator or the point of view is in the third-person. The reason is that once the narrator is all-knowing (as is the case in the third person narrative voice or the omniscient), he or she can pass his after-thoughts or comments about some incidents just to make the incidents sound credible. In the case of the use of authorial commentary in the first-person narrative voice, readers get to know what the narrator himself thinks about particular incidents unfolding. In this case, however, the incidents are not left to the sole subjective judgment of readers. Maya Angelou does a good job by presenting her after-thoughts and extra comments on some incidents she narrates which go a long way to help in her presentation of the subjects of motherhood and marriage.

In the various narratives, Angelou presents more commentaries after her graduation, her early sexual experiences, and the disobedient behaviour of the “powhitetrash” girls at Stamps, her impression about her rape ordeal by Mr. Freeman and his subsequent murder by her maternal uncles. Some other incidents in which readers see Angelou giving her after-thoughts about her impressions about her mother after she [Angelou] narrated the incident about her visit to the cinema to watch movies about the ideally sophisticated lady who behaved and looked exactly like her mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, and finally, the comments she passes to convey her impression about her grandmother, Momma Henderson and finally Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the lady who first introduces Angelou to the beautiful art of reading and creative writing. In relation to the subjects of marriage and motherhood, some specific incidents are worth referring to.

Angelou makes reference to the time when she expresses doubts about her feelings for her son taking into consideration the thoughts expressed by most black women in the face of changing situations in the family and society as an after-thought. In *The Heart of a Woman* she writes thus:

“The black mother perceives destruction at every door  
ruination at every window, and even she herself is not beyond her own  
suspicion. She questions whether she loves her children enough  
- or more terribly, does she love them too much? Do her looks cause  
embarrassment – or even more terrifying, is she so attractive her sons  
begin to desire her and her daughters begin to hate her. (pp40-41)

Again, after Angelou’s marriage to her first husband collapses, readers get to know much about how she felt about the dissolution of the marriage through an after-thought comment.

After the marriage falls on the rocks, Angelou critically comments on all that have happened during her short married life, and one very distinguishing thing that can be made up of those comments is that she claims she felt maturer and became very open-minded. She lamented that she had realized that everybody makes a mistake at one point in his or her life mostly through youthful exuberance and anxiety for experience and adventure. These comments really helped in the development of the subjects of motherhood and marriage.

### **3.7 The Serial Autobiography Technique**

Aside the after-thoughts that Angelou presented as a stylistic technique to present her narratives, there is yet another technique she used and this is the serial autobiography style. Serial autobiographies are a collation of autobiographies written and published serially but which all have the same person as the object of focus for its readers. A writer, therefore, may write his or her life story in a serial form. Angelou does a similar thing in her narratives with each capturing a particular period in her life beginning with the first one *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* published in 1970 and ending with *Mom & Me & Mom* also published in 2012. In-between the first and the last autobiographies, there are four others. Each autobiography categorically narrates specific incidents of Angelou's life and begins from where the previous autobiography that comes before it ended. The series format, therefore, becomes a very important stylistic technique Angelou uses to drive home her message to her readers. This is because the various narratives individually represent part of a whole series that collectively present the story of a journey in a search for love, home, self-knowledge and identity and develops the subjects of motherhood and identity.

It is very important, however, to indicate that when one out of the serial autobiography is omitted from the collection, it will indicate an incompleteness that will do the whole collective narrative a big disservice. This is because in terms of chronology, should any of the narratives be left unread, one cannot adequately follow the story in its wholeness. For example, should a reader finish reading *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976) and move on straight away to *Gather Together in my Name* (1974) one may miss most of the details that touch on the subject of marriage since all the details of Angelou's marital experiences with Vusumzi Make are spelled out in *The Heart of a Woman* (1981). Right from the ending of *Caged Bird*, (1970) Angelou becomes a mother and she plays this role throughout all the remaining autobiographies. Logically, therefore, when a reader foregoes the reading of any one of the narratives in the series, he or she may miss

Angelou's discussions on the subjects of motherhood and marriage, which may not be adequate for a clearer understanding of the narratives.

### **3.8 Change and Distortion in Names of Characters**

Change or distortion in names of characters is also another stylistic feature that Angelou introduces in her work. In the various narratives the names of some characters are used interchangeably, hence increasing the possibility of confusion within readers as to knowing who the character really is. It is very important for any creative writer to show consistency in the use of names of his or her characters in the narrative process. If there is no consistency, readers will be very confused about the character's identity and that of other characters. However, Angelou breaches the rule of name consistency in the creative writing process, yet her readers do not get confused as it would be expected, but rather get along very well with her. Angelou herself uses five different names in all the autobiographies to refer to her heroine in the various narratives. She gives the heroine names like "Maya", "Marguerite", "Ritie", "Margaret" and finally, "May". This distortion is obviously supposed to be confusing to any reader yet, in the case of Angelou's autobiography, the narration is presented in such a way that the narrator allows readers to know who a different name is referring to. She does this by giving further explanations as to how the name change came about and she continues to make references to these names so often such that her readers get used to the different names for the same character.

Moving the argument away from Maya Angelou, it again becomes evident that her son is also given three different names in the autobiographies. He is introduced to readers as Guy Johnson from birth. Readers get to know this at the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first autobiography in the series, when he is born. Yet, as the story unfolds, readers will realize that Guy Johnson is given another name as Claude Johnson in the third autobiography, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas*. A further reading of the autobiographies gives another revelation of another change in Guy's name from Claude Johnson to Clyde Johnson. Angelou employs the use of some descriptive attributes to erase any confusion bound to occur in the minds of readers about the specific identity of her characters. Thus, even though, she changes the names of some of the characters within the individual series of narratives, readers still get along with her without any problem or confusion. Again, Angelou's grandmother is given two names within the narratives. These are Momma and Mrs. Henderson. Once again, Angelou carefully steers her narration using

detailed description and detail in such a way that readers intimately know who Angelou is referring to at any episode where her grandmother is mentioned.

### **3.9 Use of Multiplicity of Voices**

The next stylistic feature Angelou uses is that of voice and voice changes. The voice tells who is telling the story. Angelou uses the technique of voice to enable readers distinguish between the private self of Maya as a person and the public self, Maya, and the representation of all Afro-American women. A look at this quotation from the first in the series, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) will give an insight into the discussion of voice and voice changes in the narratives.

“I ran, peeing and crying, not toward the toilet or back; But to, our house I’d get a whipping for it, to be sure, and the nasty children would get something new to tease me about. I laughed anyway, partially for the sweet release; still, the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge that I wouldn’t die from a busted head.” (P7)

This is the private self of Maya Angelou. The “I” is not young Maya speaking in her own childish voice although some of the words are the words of a child, as in words like “silly church” and “busted head” These are the words of the mature writer looking back on her life and describing a relatively minor but still traumatic childhood experience from an adult point of view using at times adult words and phrases, as in words like “sweet release” and “the greater joy”. But, as the adult Angelou describes an incident which she most likely actually experienced as a child, she is also recalling her personal feelings about it as she later reflects back upon it as an adult. At this point a careful look will be made into another quotation on that same page.

“If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat...It is the unnecessary insult”. (P7)

It is still the adult Angelou speaking but gone are the adult personal feelings. Here she is speaking for the representative young Black female experience which she summarizes in different words near the end of her novel: she uses the literary style of voice and voice change to reveal that the Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power.

During Angelou's graduation from Central High in Stamps, Arkansas, the reader hears both voices of Angelou as Maya reflects on the words of the white racist speaker. Thus her voice confesses in *Caged Bird* thus: "It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead."(p153). This is Angelou, the young teenager thinking privately to herself. She uses words that she did not dare to speak aloud. At the same time it is Maya Angelou, the public self, speaking for all Blacks. Notably, it can be said here that the sense of collective responsibility, a sensibility charged by the disparagement of the group, is reflected. In the impotence of childhood there is nothing the narrator can do, but the charges which have been leveled against her people will not soon be forgotten as she made it clear to her readers. This narrative feature of voice and the changes that come within its usage, therefore, helps her readers to carefully follow her line of thought in her narratives. She speaks as a child,

#### **4.0 Summary**

The study has explained some features of literary style that Angelou chooses to present her narratives. The study highlighted that the significance of these techniques has been hinged on the fact that they reveal Angelou as a crafty writer who writes with style to enable her stories come out with a clear message.

Finally, the study has discussed Angelou's choice of some literary techniques she employs in her exposure of the dominant subjects of search for identity, displacement and stability, motherhood and marriage in her autobiographies. This brings to the fore the argument of whether the literary style of Angelou allows for her autobiographies to be considered as fiction or non-fiction. However, it is logical that for every story, be it fiction or non-fiction, there must be a way of narrating it with a bit or more of artistic and literary flavour. It is, therefore, very factual for any reader of the autobiographies of Angelou to acknowledge that her life stories are interestingly told by a master story-teller in the person of Angelou. Some of the literary techniques she employs which have been exhausted in this study include the following: her use of humour and comic elements, authorial commentaries, symbols change and distortion in names of some characters, and voice and voice change, the serial autobiography technique, her blend of the first person and dialogue, time and time distortion and the story-within-a-story technique.

## 5.0 Conclusion

It is noteworthy that Angelou's narratives in autobiography have conformed to the standard stylistic features of autobiography. These features which include the use of the first person narrative point of view, employment of imagery and other stylistic techniques used in prose, have been used effectively in sending down her message to her readers. However, it is clear that she has added a different twist to the standard form by blending dialogue with the first person point of view. Her success in doing this is noticeable in how she enables her readers to get a real feel and experience of the activity that unfolds during the occurrence of the various incidents, especially by way of using dialogue.

The aspects of literary style that have been carefully explored in this study have opened up the Pandora box to enable readers and critics alike to continue the debate on the concept of autobiography as being real or fictitious. It is, in fact, the expert use of literary style that enables her to successfully develop the dominant subjects of motherhood, marriage and search for an identity her narratives which together help her to portray the theme of search for identity. It is important, however, to state that Angelou uses identical methods in her use of literary style to write almost all her autobiographies despite the passage of time. However, it is only her third series that looks more like a travelogue rather than a normal story, since the third volume recounts mainly incidents of Angelou's travels across Europe when she toured with the Porgy and Bess group. Despite the argument of the third volume being branded as a travelogue, it still maintains all the literary flavour prevalent in the other autobiographies. The literary style she adopts in all the narratives is successfully employed to carefully develop the theme of search for identity. These literary techniques that Angelou employs do, to a very large extent, help her readers to appreciate her point of view and relive her experiences as if they were going through the same situations. The fact that Angelou was able to tell her true life story with a blend of fact and art makes her a successful storyteller. This study, therefore, concludes that Maya Angelou's choice of literary techniques in her autobiographies was spot-on and appropriate in developing her themes.

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