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## **Crossing Boundaries: Mobility and the Shaping of Black Identity in Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman***

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper examines the transformative journey of selfhood and Black identity in the writing of a remarkable writer Maya Angelou and her selected work *The Heart of a Woman*, focusing on how mobility – both geographic and emotional- shapes her sense of self and her black identity. Tracing Angelou's movements from San Francisco to New York, then to London, Cairo and ultimately West Africa sets in Liberia but en route in Ghana. The study explores how each relocation becomes a catalyst for personal growth, independence, and the assertion of her identity as a Black woman. Central to this narrative is Angelou's experience of motherhood, which is depicted as both a source of vulnerability and strength, influencing her decisions and deepening her commitment to her son's well-being and autonomy. The paper also highlights Maya's engagement with the Harlem Writers Guild and her activism, which further solidify her political consciousness and self-assurance, after she influenced by Martin Luther King Jr. Through these experiences, Maya Angelou not only negotiates the complexities of race, gender and belonging but also offers a powerful model of resilience and self-realization for the marginalized women in global context, including Indian women writers seeking to overcome adversity and claim their own identities and freedom.

**Keywords: identity, mobility, motherhood, gender, race and resilience.**

Maya Angelou, a remarkable writer in African American literature is renowned for her autobiographical fictions that intimately reveals the contours of her life. Through her literary works, Angelou chronicles the disruptions and continuities that marked her journey from childhood to adulthood, employing her unique sensibility to illuminate personal as well as collective experiences. The dislocation in the consistent journey of her life from childhood till her survival is portrayed in her series of literary works.

Angelou's first autobiographical fiction *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. (1970), vividly depicts the early separation of her parents and the subsequent journey she and her brother Bailey undertook- at the ages three and five, respectively- to Stamps, Arkansas to live with her paternal grandmother Momma. This formative displacement is further compounded when, at the ages eight and ten, Maya and her brother Bailey move to St. Louis, where their mother Vivian Baxter and their maternal grandmother, experiencing a sophisticated life than Maya and Bailey live in Stamps, Arkansas. The trauma of Maya's childhood rape by her mother's boyfriend and her subsequent five-year period of silence(mute) are central to her narrative. With the efforts of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Maya regains her speech and, after graduating with honors in San Francisco, pursues dance and theatre- skills that prove invaluable in her later career while living with her mother Vivian and stepfather Daddy Clidell. Her's narrative approach finds parallels in works such as Jamaica Kincaid, *An Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) and Maxine Hong Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior* (1976), recounts the life stories through maternal perspectives. James McBride, in *The Color of Water* (1996) represent the connections and antagonism between African American son and Jewish mother. Zora Neale Hurston in her work *Dust Track on a Road* (1942), presents negative self-perception. The book open with: "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me" (03). For Maya, the negative sense of self continues into her fourth volume *The Heart of Woman*, where she learns to appreciate more



fully her changing character and her identity as an individual. *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Marry Like Christmas* (1976) narrates Angelou's life in chronological lines for most of the part and in continuity to this, her work *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) would proceed with the account of her career as entertainer, writer, and an activist. Her own struggles with self-image persist into her fourth volume where she learns to appreciate her evolving identity. In the beginning chapter of *The Heart of a Woman* captures Maya's confrontation with racial prejudice upon arriving at the Desert Hotel, highlighting both the external societal challenges faced by Black individuals and internal fortitude required to navigate them. Maya's mother, Vivian Baxter exemplifies resistance to racism, teaching her daughter to maintain dignity in the face of adversity. As bell hooks notes in *Ain't I a Woman*, responses to racism are varied, and confrontation is not always the optimal choice for every individual or circumstance. This chapter concludes with the mother-daughter relationship as well as encapsulates themes of racial identity, family dynamics, personal ambition, and the courage to confront societal challenges. Her journey toward self-discovery and the complexities of her relationships set a poignant tone for the narrative further. Maya's subsequent moves to Brooklyn to stay with John Killen and his wife Grace introduces further dialogue on racial tensions in America. John urges Maya to view New York through a writer's lens, prompting her to reflect on her identity as a mother and the anxieties of raising a son, Guy, in a challenging society. The recurring motif of displacement-both geographical and emotional-mirrors Maya's own childhood instability and is echoed in her son's experiences. Their interaction reveals the emotional distance that has developed between them. Maya grapples with her identity as a mother and the fears associated with raising a son in a challenging society. She continues with her son's youth period which takes her repeatedly to her own childhood to show the similarity between her son's childhood and her own. Her mobility from one place to another caused a burden to her son, Guy. The significant part of the childhood can be noticed

as the displacement and instability which is similar in the life of Maya as well as her son, Guy in the manner of dislocation and a geographical sense. Both of them displaced from their families. They moved from state to state in care of relatives or family friend. Maya decides to move to New York, when Guy is fourteen and does not allow him to come with her until she is not finding any place for them to live, and when he arrives after a month separation, he initially resists her attempts to make a new home for them. She writes:

The air between us [Angelou and Guy] was burdened with his aloof scorn. I understood him too well.

When I was three my parents divorced in Long Beach, California, and sent me and my four-year-old brother, unescorted, to our paternal grandmother. We wore wrist tags which informed anyone concerned that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, en route to Mrs. Annie Henderson in Stamps, Arkansas.

Except for disastrous and mercifully brief encounters with each of them when I was seven, we didn't see our parents again until I was thirteen. (pp.34-35)

With the above lines, Maya understood that she cannot prevent the displacement recurring in her son's life. Angelou's experience of displacement for the survival strategy is the common factor in case of the black families. From slavery to free black journey there was a great migration happened in black community. Providing stability to her son she shows the disintegrate family is a virtually impossible task, not only for her but for many women in similar situations. The single parent is often left with an overwhelming sense of guilt and inadequacy; and, for Angelou, the burden is all the more taxing because she has been solely responsible for her son from the very beginning of his life. Guy expects his mother to offer him constant attention and affection as well as the basic requirements of food and shelter, for which Angelou must often work long hours at more than one job. Guy's needs, however, are not simple, and in addition to love, companionship, and the basic necessities, he frequently



intimates that his mother should be responsible for order and security on a universal level as well. “my son expected warmth, food, housing, clothes and stability. He could be certain that no matter which way my fortune turned he would receive most of the things he desired. Stability, however, was not possible in his” (p.123).

Angelou’s sense of personal failure in caring adequately for Guy lingers for many years is compounded by the challenges of balancing work and motherhood. Her romantic relationship with Thomas, a bail bondsman is characterized by practicality rather than emotional connection, reflecting her ongoing quest for stability and for genuine love. This internal conflict between the desire for companionship and the need for genuine intimacy is a recurring theme in her work which truly indicates her reflections on identity, relationship and the quest for fulfilment.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou blends elements of fiction and fantasy with biographical and historical modes to capture the nuances of her relationship with her son and to emphasize the parallels between their lives. Her marriage to South African freedom fighter Vusumzi Make, and subsequent move to Cairo introduces new forms of restriction, as Make’s expectations confine her to the domestic sphere. When they leave for Egypt with Guy, the family looks forward to a period untroubled by the abusive telephone threats that riddled the domestic peace of their lives together in New York. But although the threatening telephone calls end when they move to Cairo, Angelou finds a different restriction on her life that has little to do with political sanctions of the South African government: As the wife of a well-known activist, she ironically finds her own life less free and is not at liberty to find work for herself, because her husband prefers that she stay at home and devote her time fully to her responsibilities as housewife and mother. This mobility is not offering freedom and proper shelter to Angelou and her son but rather restricted her to bound in the rules and regulations imposed on her by her new husband Vusumzi Make. His stereotyped behaviour restricted her economic independence and her

individual identity as a free human being but Make being as a black activist restricting her from doing the work outside the home after Make family suffers with financial restraints, and Angelou takes the decision without the consultation with her husband to seek employment to overcome on the fulfilment of financial crisis. Despite these constraints, Angelou ultimately seeks employment as Editor of *The Arab Observer*, overcoming both financial hardship and the challenges of working as a Black American woman in a male-dominated, Islamic context. Although she has not been trained professionally in journalism, Angelou accepts the position, partly to supplement the family income, but more importantly to meet the challenge of the job. The challenge of being Editor is a significant one, not only because of the demanding and diverse responsibilities but, more critically, because as a black American woman working with a male staff in a country deeply influenced by the Islamic faith, Angelou has to prove herself on more than one level.

When Angelou gives an account of the relief she experienced when moved from her centrally located desk into a rather secluded library, she borrows a popular tale from Joel Chandler Harris' *Brer Rabbit*. From the *Brer Rabbit* narrative, Angelou makes an implicit comparison between her own position as a black American woman in an African, Islamic, male-oriented world and the inhumane conditions of black Americans in slavery. Just as her experiences as a black American in Africa call to mind *Brer Rabbit* on occasion, so she recalls the stories of several slave heroines while attending an informal gathering of African women in London. All of the women present are the wives of political activists in the struggle to end apartheid and second-class citizenship for black Africans. Although their national backgrounds are quite different, they share the same sense of frustration and ineffectualness in comparison with their husbands, who ironically enjoy more autonomy in the fight for freedom. To ease their sense of uselessness, they gather one day in the home of Mrs. Oliver Tambo, the wife of the leader of the African National Congress. Here the women narrate traditional tales for African folklore.



Although Angelou initially feels somewhat estranged from the spontaneous ceremony, she is soon moved to share folktales from the tradition of slave narratives concerning women who led the fight for freedom in America.

Angelou draws on folklore and slave narratives to articulate her experiences of displacement and resilience. At a gathering of African women in London, she shares the stories of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, celebrating the strength and heroism of Black women in the fight for freedom. She recounts:

“Tubman, Angelou tells them, ‘Stood on free ground, above a free sky, hundreds of miles from the chains and lashes of slavery and said, ‘I must go back. With the help of God, I will bring others to freedom,’ and.... although suffering brain damage from a slaver’s blow, she walked back and forth through the lands of bondage time after time and brought hundreds of her people to freedom” (p.137).

Angelou’s exploration of displacement extends to her reflections on marriage and the American Dream. She employs irony to critique her earlier belief in the promise of stability through marriage, as illustrated in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou had accounted for her illusory belief that she had finally met the man of her dreams who would give her everything she had always lacked- love, domestic tranquillity, security, children, and an attractive house in the suburbs modelled after Better Homes and Gardens:

At last, I was a housewife, legally a member of that enviable tribe of consumers whom security made as fat as butter and who under no circumstances considered living by bread alone, because their husbands brought home the bacon. I had a son, a father for him, a husband and a pretty home for us to live in. my life began to resemble a Good Housekeeping advertisement. I cooked well-balanced meals and molded fabulous jello desserts. My floors were dangerous with daily applications of wax and our furniture slick with polish. (*Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’..* p.26)

When Angelou describes her fantasy about marriage and its power to bring normalcy and stability to her life, whether in *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas* or *The Heart of a Woman*, she uses an ironic stance invites readers to recognize the complexities and limitations of the American Dream, particularly for Black women. The tension between the demands of motherhood and the pursuit of a professional career is a persistent dilemma, often leaving her with no satisfactory solution and perpetuating the cycle of displacement.

This illusion of the American Dream is reminiscent of Willy Loman's aspirations in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, where the protagonist's relentless pursuit of success for his sons ultimately leads to his downfall. Both Angelou and Loman experience mobility and instability in their quests for fulfilment.

A comparative perspective with Dalit literature reveals that Dalit women writers also explore displacement through physical migration and multidimensional experiences of social, cultural, and existential alienation. Their narratives assert agency and reclaim identity from the margins, challenging dominant narratives and transforming experiences of displacement into tools for political activism and social change. Their narratives describe being forced to live on the outskirts of villages, denied access of basic needs like water facilities and postal services and forced to sit separately in schools and at ceremonial feasts. They are denied the "privacy like dignity of education" is a core aspect of their displacement. They experienced double alienation that is from caste and patriarchy, cultural and historical silencing, identity formation and agency, physical displacement during partition and a large-scale migration of Dalit refugees during the Partition of Bengal depicted in the writing of Jatin Bala who document the unique struggles of these marginalized communities. The writers like Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble highlights how Dalit men, also victims of caste oppression sometimes their frustrations on Dalit women through domestic violence, further displacing them within their own homes. These writers used their narratives as a source of un-silence their voices and reclaim their own



histories, challenging the dominant narratives that often portrayed them solely as victims or hyper sexualized objects. The act of writing itself becomes an act of resistance against displacement. Authors like Bama Faustina in *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan (The Weave of My Life)* use their personal experiences to assert a collective identity as 'we', fostering a sense of community and advocating for social justice and empowerment. A contemporary writer and an activist, Meena Kandasamy's poetry and prose focus heavily on caste, sexuality, violence and gender oppression, often written with rage and a call to action against social injustice and empowerment. Through their literature, these writers transformed their experiences of displacement into powerful tools for political activism and social change, demanding dignity and equality. Angelou's own activism, including her involvement with Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for fund raising for Martin Luther King Jr. and later joined Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH) alongside Rosa Parks further underscores her commitment to social change.

In conclusion, Maya's Angelou's life and work are marked by continual displacement in pursuit of the American Dream- a dream that remains elusive amid the realities of race, gender, and economic hardship. Through her autobiographical narratives, Angelou not only documents her personal traumas and triumphs but also offers profound insights into the broader struggles of Black women, single mothers and marginalized communities. Her literary legacy is one of resilience, resistance, and the ongoing quest for dignity and self-realization.

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