

**REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE  
ANKARA UNIVERSITY  
SOCIAL SCIENCES INSTITUTE  
DEPARTMENT OF WESTERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES  
DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE**

**A BLACK FEMINIST APPROACH TO MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS, THE HEART OF A WOMAN, AND ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES***

**Master's Thesis**

**Sena METİN**

**Ankara-2025**

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**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nisa Harika GÜZEL KÖŞKER**

**THESIS JURY MEMBERS**

**Name and Surname**

- 1- Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nisa Harika GÜZEL KÖŞKER**
- 2- Assoc. Prof. Dr. Şenol BEZCİ**
- 3- Assist. Prof. Dr. Defne TUTAN**

**Thesis Defense Date**

**03.07.2025**

**REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE**  
**ANKARA UNIVERSITY**  
**Directorate of the Graduate School of Social Sciences**

I state that all the information in my master's thesis titled "**A BLACK FEMINIST APPROACH TO MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS, THE HEART OF A WOMAN, AND ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES (Ankara 2025)***", which I prepared under the Supervision of **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nisa Harika GÜZEL KÖŞKER**, was collected and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical behavior principles, I fully indicated the information received from other sources in the text and in the bibliography, I declare that I have acted in accordance with the ethical rules, and I will accept any legal consequences in case the contrary arises.

**16.07.2025**  
**Sena METİN**

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I hope that this thesis will contribute meaningfully to ongoing academic discussions in literary and cultural studies.

Sena Metin

Ankara, June 2025

*I wish you a pleasant reading experience.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Black feminism originated in the 1970s as a reaction to the shortcomings of mainstream feminist groups, which, while promoting women's rights, occasionally failed to recognize the intersecting challenges of race, gender, and class encountered by black women. At the core of Black feminist theory is the concept of intersectionality, which is "highlighted as hallmarks of the knowledge/power dynamics that marginalize black women's interests, and that [Kimberlé Crenshaw] intended intersectionality to critique" (Alexander-Floyd 3). The term, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw, posits "that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (*Mapping the Margins* 1244). Black feminists have always contended that these interrelated power systems cannot be demolished by concentrating just on either race or gender; they must be addressed in entirety. Jennifer Nash argues that "discrimination can be race-based, gender-based, or race- and- gender- based, yet the possibility of racial and gendered discrimination is rendered impossible by anti-discrimination law that actively refuses to account for this form of violence" (*Black Feminism Reimagined* 126). Historically speaking, black women have occupied a position at the intersection of many types of oppression, experiencing discrimination that is accentuated by both their race and gender. Notwithstanding these afflictions, they have played significant roles in movements advocating for racial justice, civil rights, and gender equality, despite their efforts at times being disregarded or diminished. As such, Black feminist thinking acknowledges the contributions of black women as leaders, intellectuals, and cultural producers who have influenced both the course of feminism and broader social justice

“dedicated to fostering the empowerment of groups within an overarching context of justice” (*Black Feminist Thought* 19). In one with the aims of Black feminism, this thesis offers a critical perspective for examining Angelou’s autobiographies that focus on the experiences of black women while understanding the wider socio-political ramifications of their stories.

To understand Angelou’s narratives, it is important to first define the genre of autobiography. The history of the meaning behind the genre as James Olney articulates is “the word was fabricated toward the end of the eighteenth century at which time three Greek elements meaning ‘self-life-writing’ were combined to describe a literature already existing” (*Autobiography and the Cultural Moment* 6). As such, the literary genre can be conveyed as a form of authorial presence that allows individuals to narrate their personal experiences. For African American black women authors the genre has served as the primary site to express their identity and reclaim their agency. This is exemplified through Mary Burgher assertion that,

The autobiographies of Black women are rich and valid sources for further studies of the Black woman and for critical inquiries into how she has viewed herself historically despite labels, myths, and ideas about her place and role. If any form of literature is capable of aiding in the Black woman’s attempts to correct the record, it is autobiography, for nowhere does one find literature as a celebration of life more than here. Even when the writer is not an artist and although actual events and highly personal experience often abound, the life stories of Black women are poignant and sensitive definitions of self and compelling expressions of the unchanging needs and ideals of the Black race. (107)

As it did for Angelou, who contributed to genre with her series of autobiographies, expressing the intersection of race, sex, and class. Joanne Braxton adds to this stating that Angelou “moves toward

this same realism, which is not only a practical political philosophy but also one of the dominant modes of the autobiography” (182). In the context of African American literature, Nellie Y. McKay conveys that “challenging white hegemony, black autobiographers used narrative to fight their battle against chattel slavery and to engage in the search for political and psychological freedom for all black people” (96). Hence, Angelou’s autobiographies exemplify this as she incorporates the personal in the political.

Maya Angelou’s autobiographies, particularly *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Heart of a Woman* (1981), and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), are substantial texts to examine black femininity. Cheryl Wall asserts that her confluence with the oppressive forces enfolds “overcom[ing] oppression; the liberating power of words, both spoken and written; the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the use of biblical allusions as well as musical metaphors and quotations” (3). Here, Wall highlights the inner strength that defies oppression, the liberating force of speech and language, the connection between personal and public experiences, and the expressive power of biblical imagery and musical allusions Angelou uses in her narratives. autobiographies serve as key for revealing personal and public experiences, and as such, “scholars are turning their attention to the ways in which life stories, and life storytelling, are involved in campaigns for human rights, claims of citizenship, and disputes over property” (Smith & Watson 158). Angelou’s personal narratives, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Heart of a Woman*, and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, articulate the realities of historically silenced black women, elucidating the complexities of their lives in a context marked by aggression, racism, and marginalization. Her depiction of black female characters highlights the perseverance, autonomy, and unity that characterize the struggles of black women in personal and political contexts against a variety of oppressions.

This thesis argues that Maya Angelou's literary portrayals of black female characters serve not only as expressions of subjectivity but as theoretical contributions in Black feminist theory by asserting black womanhood as collective empowerment, political consciousness and cultural belonging within the broader theoretical context of Black feminism. Angelou's literature in which she focuses on the "raw data' or cultural artifact for the social scientist determined to explicate the 'true nature' of black people," serves not just as a personal narrative but also as a significant criticism of the societal frameworks (*Figures in Black Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* 43). Her willingness to intertwine the "public and the private, the personal and the political, was a hallmark of her work" (Wall 3) and a fundamental principle of understanding how the personal experiences of black women are profoundly political and important in Black feminism. This thesis will further examine how Angelou's autobiographical writings challenge prevailing narratives about black women, focusing on issues of sexual abuse, motherhood, survival, and identity. By utilizing Black feminist theory, Angelou's depiction of black women serves as an important framework for comprehending Maria del Guadalupe Davidson's articulation that their "concerns of race, gender, and more specifically, their place in social systems in which their race, gender, and sexuality designated them as absences from intellectual life" (*Convergences* 3).<sup>2</sup> Through her writings, Angelou exemplifies black female determination and endurance, making her works essential to the discourse on Black feminism and its influence in academic and activist realms.

Before analyzing the theoretical framework of Black feminism, it is crucial to define the idea and evaluate its historical progression. The history and development of Black feminism offers a foundational premise to understand its significance in Angelou's autobiographies. Black feminism is a movement and conceptual framework that emphasizes the rights, experiences, and liberation of black women, recognizing the distinct oppression they encounter as a result of the

intersectionality of race, gender, and class, and often, heteronormativity, which Nash argues, are “structurally organized and thus [...] allied with terms like ‘metalanguage of race’ that sought to attend to structures of power rather than identity and subjectivity” (*Black Feminism Reimagined* 11). In other words, Nash explains the complex relationship of different kinds of oppression, such as racism and sexism, within broader social structures, emphasizing that these power systems are merely individual identities or experiences. In contrast to mainstream feminism, which has mostly explored the experiences of white, middle-class women, Black feminism underscores the need to recognize the simultaneous impact of race and gender on the lives of black women. As such, Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis state that the “Black movement scorns feminism partially on the basis of misinformation, and partially due to a valid perception of the White middle-class nature of the movement” (6). By this, they contend that feminism is usually dismissed by black women because they see that it is mostly influenced by white middle-class interests and so they criticize white feminists for neglecting racial problems while advancing their own objectives. The tendency to disregard the intersections of race, class, and gender emphasizes the need for a broader perspective, which Black feminism provides or tries to provide for themselves. Inspired by the works of scholars, authors, and activists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and the Combahee River Collective, Black feminism contests racial injustice inside white and black communities as well as gender inequity in wider feminist and social contexts. Black feminism advocates the eradication of structural disparities that sustain discrimination against black women while simultaneously emphasizing their resilience, agency, and embodying “the metaphor of the strong black woman” (*Convergences* 94).

Black feminism originated as a vital critique of the constraints and exclusions inherent in mainstream (predominantly white) feminism, which Denise Thompson states, “originated with

women's experience, women's discontent, women's outrage at the confidence tricks perpetrated to keep us subservient, and women's sense of betrayal at being excluded from all kinds of rights, benefits, and privileges" (65). Conversely, Black feminism historically prioritized the experiences, issues, and struggles of all women, not limiting their voice to black women. For instance, whereas white feminists advocated for equal pay, they often neglected to recognize that black women not only earned less than their white counterparts but also encountered systematic racism that restricted their job prospects and exposed them to more severe working conditions. From a report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), who have stated that "from depriving black women of wages while they toiled under the system of slavery and its aftermath, to creating lasting disparities in health, education, safety and opportunity for Native women through land theft, to the legal and cultural limitations on women's ability to earn money, our nation's story is replete with discrimination and its consequences" (2). Mainstream feminism often characterized gender oppression in universal terms, supposing that all women faced patriarchy identically while neglecting the dual struggles of black women "to explain the lower rewards and outcomes received by women versus men, and black versus white people" (Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Fdn. 25). To further explain, stereotypes that claim distinctions between men and women or black and white people influence expectations for their roles, justify inconsistencies in outcomes such as financial status and possibilities, and promote unconscious prejudices that sustain systematic gender and racial discrimination. At the core of Black feminist philosophy is the focus on intersectionality, a notion essential for comprehending and addressing the many kinds of systematic oppression impacting oppressed groups. In contrast to conventional feminism, which is "an attempt on the part of whites to become black without the responsibilities of being black" (Morrison 8), Black feminism asserts that identity should be comprehended in a multifaceted

manner, recognizing the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other elements that generate unique kinds of oppression. Black feminists, like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective, criticized this reductive perspective, contending that genuine emancipation for women necessitates the consideration of the intersections of race, class, gender, and other identity dimensions. The 1977 statement of the Combahee River Collective was a crucial milestone in emphasizing the need for a feminist theory that comprehensively addressed the experiences of black women, promoting an intersectional approach much before Crenshaw explicitly defined the word. They openly state that they “are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as [their] particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (The Combahee River Collective 1). Black feminists highlighted that white feminists often had the amenities to concentrate only on gender oppression however, black women “find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in [their] lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (The Combahee River Collective 4). Consequently, Black feminism served not only as a criticism of mainstream feminism but also as a reclaiming of the feminist narrative, broadening it to include the perspectives and experiences of black women, who had been constantly disregarded and excluded within both feminist and civil rights organizations. In a similar manner, the Civil Rights Movement, while important in combating racial injustice, mostly focused on the experiences and leadership of black men, marginalizing the gender-specific challenges faced by black women where “racial solidarity seems to have muted sexual conflict within the freedom struggle” (Lawson 15). The emphasis mostly centered on racial equality, although it lacked a critical examination of how gender discrimination influenced the experiences of black women.

The exemption of black women in feminist and Civil Rights Movement highlights the pressing need for Black feminism, which ultimately has deep historical origins dating back to the antebellum period. Throughout this period, enslaved black women not only “stressed the importance of self-help” (Yee 85) but also actively opposed the intersectional systems of racial, gender, and financial degradation. Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Maria W. Stewart were important figures in the abolitionist and early women’s rights movements, using their experiences as previously enslaved women to advocate for the liberation of the ‘black woman.’ Sojourner Truth, who was born into slavery, became notably an iconic figure in both the abolitionist and women’s suffrage movements. Her formidable oratory abilities, shown in her renowned 1851 speech *Ain’t I A Woman?* at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention, highlighted the nexus of race and gender, challenging both white feminists and “the sexist imagery used by male critics, to justify the disenfranchisement of women” (*Demarginalizing* 153). Truth witnessed firsthand racial and gender discrimination, and her speech directly addressed the exclusions she observed in the mostly white women’s rights movement. Collins indicated that “by deconstructing the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group, they challenge notions of Barbie-doll femininity premised on middle-class White women’s experiences” (*Black Feminist Thought* 27). By this Collins means that the black women navigate repressive stereotypes by either resisting them or by internalizing them, highlighting the dual processes of defiance and psychological assimilation within racial and gender oppression systems. Truth sole-heartedly challenged the dominant beliefs of womanhood, and “analyzed the racialized and gendered production of the category ‘woman’ and its relationship to the social death of chattel slavery” (Dillion 260). During that period, white feminists advocated equality on the premise that women were fragile beings who required safeguarding and care, a perspective that entirely overlooked the experiences of black women,

particularly those like Truth who had endured enslavement. For example, Davis states how “leaders of the women’s rights movement did not suspect that the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women might be systematically related” (66). However, in her speech, Truth deconstructed the myth of women’s intrinsic fragility as “a kind of feminist battle cry used to proclaim the power and entitlement of white women, rather than to explain the particular predicament of black women” (Rooney 37). Her assertive declaration, “I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman?” (Truth) confronted the predominant feminist movement to acknowledge that black women were also central to the pursuit of gender equality, despite their distinct struggles compared to white women. Bearing this in mind, bell hooks asserts that “contemporary white females witnessing the militant demand for more rights for black people chose that moment to demand more rights for themselves” (*Feminism is for Everybody* 56). By this, she supports the idea that white women were inspired by the fight black women were putting up; however, they continued to theorize the concept of feminism through their own racial and socio-economic perspective instead of looking at and acknowledging the bigger picture of intersectionality. Truth’s words further sought to illuminate the racial prejudice inherent in the notion of femininity, showing that the protections and privileges sought by white women were not afforded to black women, who were compelled to do the same arduous jobs as men while being denied the acknowledgment of their gender (*Feminism is for Everybody* 40). Truth’s experiences, as a once-enslaved woman, revealed the stark fact that black women were marginalized from the advantages of white femininity and the racial unity of black men, resulting in a “double jeopardy” characterized by both racial and gender-based oppression. While it is difficult to be a woman in the American society and fight “male chauvinism”, being a black woman adds to the

“psychological outburst” (Beal 174). However, although white women advocated equal rights, their advocacy mostly focused on their issues, sometimes overlooking the intersecting injustices experienced by women of color. Truth’s speech also confronted the theological rationalizations used to subjugate women, with men often using the Bible to assert that women were intrinsically inferior, dealing “defeat to the men’s ‘weaker sex’ argument” (Davis 61). She notably refuted this argument by invoking Eve, saying, “Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him” (Truth). This assertion not only restored women’s authority within religious narratives but also emphasized that religion could not legitimize gender injustice and, thus, “men’s belligerence was quieted” (Davis 61). Using religious vocabulary in her speech, Truth established a profound cultural connection with her audience, contesting both the patriarchal interpretations of Christianity and the societal standards that perpetuated female subservience (Davis 61-63).

Despite the fact that the abolition of slavery represented a significant turning point, black women continued to face profound prejudice, frequently having their struggles disregarded by both the women’s suffrage movement and the black civil rights agenda. Given their active participation, they were left out as movements stressed either the liberation of black men or the rights of white women. Black women activists, nevertheless, refused to be excluded, constantly advocating for acknowledgment of their experiences and conditions (Taylor 238-239). Black women were instrumental in the struggle for civil rights and women’s suffrage; nevertheless, their achievements were often downplayed by both black male leaders and white feminists. As such, “feminism had made all women more aware of themselves as women and had extended support to black women as they confronted the sexism of black men”, while, on the other hand, black women felt betrayed

by the white feminists who “turned a blind eye toward major class and race differences” (White 47-48).

As the early 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged, the advocacy of black women evolved to confront emerging social and political challenges. Black women’s activism persisted through pivotal organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), “the first national secular black women’s organization,” (*Sojourning for Freedom* 28) and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), as these entities served as vital platforms for promoting racial justice, gender equality, and economic empowerment. As the NACW was founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they created a platform to galvanize women in the fight against lynching, Jim Crow laws, and various manifestations of racial injustice. Hence, Erik S. McDuffie argues that the NACW established a forum for Black women to articulate their issues and advocate for equality, thereby cultivating a spirit of community and collaborative engagement among black women throughout the United States (*Sojourning for Freedom* 28). The tagline, “Lifting as We Climb,” encapsulated the organization’s dedication to elevating the whole black community, emphasizing “belief in black womanhood’s common cause and recognition of differential values and socioeconomic positions” (Higginbotham 271). The efforts of black women leaders towards racial uplift sought to challenge prevailing negative stereotypes; however, they frequently perpetuated established norms related to gender, class, and sexuality by endorsing values like temperance, sexual restraint, and refined conduct, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities. The NACW advocated literacy, civic engagement, and political participation through local clubs and national campaigns, urging black women to actively influence the destiny of their communities and the nation (*Sojourning for Freedom* 28).

Founded in 1935 by Mary McLeod Bethune, the NCNW sought to consolidate diverse black women's organizations and tackle the challenges confronting black women and their families (*Sojourning for Freedom* 94). The NCNW concentrated on the realms of education, health, and economic empowerment, championing civil rights and the pursuit of social justice (Henry 256). It functioned as an essential framework for black women, fostering leadership and activism within the wider Civil Rights Movement. The NCNW sought to tackle the distinct obstacles encountered by black women during World War II, concentrating on matters such as employment, healthcare, and education. Karen Tucker Anderson asserts, in *The Journal of American History*, that "the NCNW sought to facilitate the integration and retention of black women in production jobs by helping them adjust to the imperatives of industrial work-and by encouraging conformity to white-middle-class specifications regarding dress, behavior, and attitudes appropriate for women (94). This statement supports how Bethune's NCNW predominantly aimed at assisting black women in maintaining their employment by encouraging adherence to the behavioral and aesthetic norms of the white middle class, illustrating a strategy that prioritized personal conduct rather than a push for more expansive employment rights. Throughout World War II, the NCNW significantly "adopted an accommodationist posture out of step with the growing militance of black organizations during the war and revealed a certain naivete regarding the real problems faced by black women at that time" (Anderson 95). As such, the group aimed to provide opportunities for black women in military sectors and other war-related employment, confronting the discriminatory hiring procedures that often marginalized them. Thus, these groups offered black women a platform to articulate their issues which were often neglected by both white feminists and black male leaders. Their advocacy transcended conventional gender norms, illustrating that black women were not only passive "victims of oppression" but also proactive agents of social change

to “actively resist [their] subordination” (Jarrett-Macauley 28). The efforts of the NACW and the NCNW established a vital groundwork for the contemporary Black feminist movement and perpetuated inspiration for subsequent generations of black women leaders.

The development of Black feminism, rooted in the historical activism of black women, presents a theoretical framework to examine and confront the distinct intersections of race, gender, and class which impact black women’s lives. Mainstream feminism, mostly influenced by white middle-class women, in which Nash states emerged “from an imagined black woman’s standpoint, from the collective and particular experience of black women’s gendered and racialized oppression” (*Practicing Love* 8). Further, the predominant feminist movement of the 1960s, often known as the second wave feminism, concentrated significantly on reproductive rights, employment equality, and sexual freedom (Roth 3). However, it mostly overlooked the economic and racial challenges that profoundly impacted black women. While keeping this in mind, it is important to note “the perception that white feminism lacked a class critique was the key obstacle to a joint Black and white feminist struggle” (Roth 101). For instance, when white feminists focused on securing higher-paying professional positions, several black women continued to fight for fundamental labor rights in domestic and service sectors, where they encountered exploitation and prejudice (Roth 101). In addition, the simultaneous disregard within the Civil Rights Movement and mainstream feminism provoked a significant feeling of exclusion for black women, who were against both racial and gender oppression but encountered no opportunity for their voices that Collins articulates, in “racially segregated terrain that characterizes American social institutions” (*What’s In A Name* 11). Consequently, several black women started to question the male-dominated leadership of the Civil Rights Movement and the racial oversights of white feminism. They advocated for a more inclusive approach to social justice that acknowledged

“intersectionality as a theoretical device [which] allows one to account for the ways that race, gender, class, and sexuality mutually construct one another and impact the lives of black women.” (*Convergences* 106). This criticism further established the basis of Black feminism, which arose as a separate movement addressing the specific issues encountered by black women which “entails taking the broader view that feminism is inherent in an antiracist struggle” (Roth 79).

To broaden this perspective, Black feminists, such as Beal, whose 1969 article *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* emphasized the simultaneous oppression of racism and sexism, initiated the articulation of a movement focused on the experiences and problems of black women (166). Consequently, black women faced a “double bind” or “double jeopardy” of concurrent racial and gender-based oppressions. This double bind arises from social misconceptions that have specifically targeted black women “to stem the tide of negative black stereotypes” (*Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power* 432). Carolyn West claims that stereotypes like the “mammy,” “jezebel,” and “angry Black woman” (459-463) are founded on deeply ingrained racist and sexist notions that persistently influence views and treatment of black women. The “mammy” stereotype depicts black women as devoted, loving, and self-effacing caregivers, legitimizing their exploitation in domestic positions where “her primary role was domestic service, characterized by long hours of work with little or no financial compensation” (West 460). In contrast, the “jezebel” stereotype hypersexualizes black women, “functioned primarily in the role of a seductive, hypersexual, exploiter of men’s weaknesses” (West 462); this not only legitimizes the sexual violence they often experience but also removes them from the safeguards and respectability granted to white women. Simultaneously, the “angry Black woman” stereotype pathologizes genuine criticisms and activism of black women, which “says more about maleness and whiteness than it does about black women” (Eddo-Lodge 111). Further, Eddo-Lodge states that “The angry

black woman cannot be reasoned with. She argues back. She is not docile, sweet or agreeable, like expectations of white femininity” (Eddo-Lodge 110). That said, black women were characterized as aggressive, unfeminine, and uncooperative, perpetuating sexist norms that demand them to be docile, agreeable, and submissive; this depiction constrains both genders by associating assertiveness and strength exclusively with masculinity, thus dehumanizing black women who exhibit anger. Beal mentions that white women’s organizations should also confront the intersectional structures of racial and sexual oppression, rather than recognizing oppression just as men’s “vicarious pleasure” (174-175) in the abuse of women’s bodies. The neglect of the intersection of race and gender in various social movements highlighted the need for Black feminism, which arose as a vital perspective advocating for the experiences of dual oppression, finding themselves in “an undeniable paradox” (Gerhard 103).

These movements, however significant in their own contexts, did not actually capture the “double trouble” between race and gender that defines the “distinct critique of their links to oppression on the basis of sexuality” which consequently “does not seem imminent” to the lives of black women (Jarrett-Macauley 33). For them, oppression included more than only opposing racism, as was generally the emphasis for black men, or solely tackling sexism, which many white feminists prioritized. Under this multiple oppression, Black feminists further urged “to dismantle the heteropatriarchal strictures that circumscribe their embodied movement and to allow them full subjectivity and autonomy uninhibited by hegemonic forces” (Bey 10).

It has been stated how the Civil Rights Movement mainly sought to eradicate institutional racism but often marginalized black women by promoting black males to leadership positions and overlooking patriarchal systems within the black community. Consequently, second-wave feminism, mostly spearheaded by white middle-class women, demonstrated considerable racial

oversights, leaving “only silence when it comes to issues of race” (Glazier 84). On the other hand, its emphasis on gender equality often neglected the distinct social, political, and economic challenges encountered by black women. This renunciation required the establishment of a political and theoretical framework among black women, leading to “the emergence of strength through solidarity” (*Convergences* 235) and, thus, to Black feminist theory. Hence, the deficiencies of the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism in addressing the concerns of black women positioned Black feminist thinking as a crucial intervention in the overarching pursuit of social justice “project that goes far beyond the experiences of African-American women” (*Black Feminist Thought* 19). Several activists, such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis, clarified how conventional feminist priorities, such as reproductive rights and equal pay, frequently overlooked the economic challenges encountered by black women, including poverty and the effects of institutional racism on family dynamics where “women are to assume a subordinate role” (Austin 60). To further elaborate, these activists contended that genuine emancipation for black women required an intersectional framework—one that acknowledged how race, gender, and class inextricably influenced their lives in ways that differed from those of black men or white women.

The emergence of Black feminist emancipation subsequently resulted in the formulation of core principles aimed to reinforce the struggle for racial and sexual freedom. These principles, based on intersectionality, serve to remove intersecting oppressions and validate the distinct experiences of black women amidst the larger struggle for equality. Intersectionality, a concept established by legal scholar Crenshaw in 1989, functions as a vital theoretical framework “to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape” (*Mapping the Margins* 1244) different types of oppression that are not independent phenomena but are profoundly interrelated.

This framework challenges the idea that these systems can be comprehended in isolation from one to another. To further emphasize this theory, Crenshaw states that “Black women, as both women and people of color, are situated within both groups, each of which has benefitted from challenges to sexism and racism, respectively, and yet the particular dynamics of gender and race relating to the rape women have received scant attention” (*Mapping the Margins* 1266). Crenshaw established this notion to rectify the shortcomings of both anti-discrimination legislation and feminist philosophy, which often neglect the intricacies stemming from intersecting disadvantaged identities. She emphasized that black women encounter prejudice in manners that cannot be fully comprehended by analyzing race or gender alone to foreground “the need to account for multiple identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (*Mapping the Margins* 1245). Further, Crenshaw states that legal safeguards often neglected the distinct obstacles encountered by black women “in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional” (*Demarginalizing* 139) since the law handled racism and sexism as isolated concerns. This limited viewpoint overlooked the intersectional discrimination that black women face, often leading to experiences that go beyond the mere aggregation of these factors.

Crenshaw states that “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which black women are subordinated” (*Demarginalizing* 140). For black women, it is essential to comprehend that racism and sexism are not separate entities; instead, they intersect to create distinct kinds of oppression that cannot be fully understood by analyzing each aspect of identity in isolation. Consequently, second-wave feminism, mostly spearheaded by white middle-class women, concentrated on concerns such as reproductive rights

and equal pay, sometimes neglecting the distinct challenges faced by women of color, working-class women, and LGBTQ people. To further elaborate, Charlene A. Carruthers articulates that “the dominant stories about Black liberation often leave out significant woman, LGBTQ folks, and people from across the African diaspora outside the United States” (55). For example, Black Lives Matter, emerged as an organization whose “goal is to eliminate the racial injustice which permeates and surrounds a wide variety of places in society” (Clayton 449) driven by activists who “are women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)” (Clayton 475). As Felice Blake states in her chapter entitled “Why Black Lives Matter in the Humanities” in the book *Seeing Race Again*,

Recent calls for the dismantling of Black and ethnic studies, the delegitimization of feminist and women’s studies, the opposition to queer theory, especially its attention to transgender studies and analysis, and the hostility toward related student groups should compel us to examine and articulate how race-conscious reading practices can produce critical analyses attuned to the perspectives and visions of social movements. (320-321)

Black feminists acknowledge that LGBTQ populations, especially queer women of color, often encounter intersecting oppressions identical to those faced by black women, making coalition-building a logical progression of Black feminist ideology. This dedication to coalition-building embodies the fundamental tenets of intersectionality, whereby Black feminists recognize that fighting one type of oppression is insufficient without confronting others. Audre Lorde, a pivotal figure in Black feminism and queer theory, continuously emphasized the need for collaboration across divides, “learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to” (*Sister Outsider* 112) undermine the collective fight against patriarchy and white oppression. Black feminists have

emphasized the need to address and dismantle homophobia and transphobia within both mainstream feminist and black liberation groups, paralleling the imperative to combat racism and sexism. This comprehensive perspective advocates for a unified struggle against all manifestations of oppression, rather than only those that most overtly affect a specific group. This theoretical invention has significantly influenced feminist thinking and extended beyond its original emphasis on black women, informing other movements for social justice and fairness. It is therefore understood that the outcome of this theory has extended beyond its original scope and become an important tool to analyze and criticize the concept of inequality and power.

Established on the principle of intersectionality, Black feminism further advocates “for critiquing social institutions and dominant logics” (Coles & Pasek 2) of black women by confronting both personal and institutionally reinforced inequality. Black feminism acknowledges the distinct issues faced by black women due to intersectionality, aiming to address these complex oppressions using collective action and socially conscious approaches. Advocates contend that the interconnected systems of oppression, anchored in white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and heteronormativity, must be deconstructed “to halt the metamorphosis in the Civil Rights Movement from nonviolence to nationalism, from beloved community to black power” (Evans 100). This “consciousness-raising” (Rhodes 34) strategy necessitates a unified endeavor to address institutional racism and sexism, as well as to tackle the more insidious kinds of daily prejudice encountered by black women in both their personal and professional spheres. For example, activist organizations such as the Combahee River Collective epitomized this dedication to community empowerment. The Collective’s assertion that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy,” (5) highlights their recognition of the need to confront interrelated forms of oppression

collectively. The freedom of all marginalized groups demands the abolition of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, and the restructuring of labor for common benefit as opposed to profit. A socialist revolution must be both feminist and anti-racist to effectively address this distinct class position and interconnected oppressions that black women experience in the labor force, elements inadequately represented in conventional Marxist theory (Bannerji 53). This emphasis on an intersectional approach not only amplifies the issues faced by black women but also enhances wider social justice movements by making them more inclusive and comprehensive in their objectives. From this perspective, Black feminism goes beyond personal empowerment as it aims to reshape the society to guarantee justice and equality for black women and especially all disadvantaged communities. Bannerji further explains this intersectional and intertwining discrimination:

One can see how gender matters within the ‘raced’ groups and between them. Both black men and black women are subject to racism, but there is a distinct gender-appropriate difference in ‘raced’ stereotypes regarding them. Similarly, though white and black women both suffer from sexism, there is a ‘raced’ difference in the cultural common sense regarding how they are to be gendered. (128)

This collaborative perspective emphasizes that the emancipation of black women is crucial for obtaining comprehensive social justice, necessitating that their views and experiences be integral to every initiative aimed at creating a more equal future.

Despite significant progress achieved by Black feminism in confronting the distinct challenges faced by black women, the movement has encountered criticism, especially from certain factions of black nationalist groups. Mainly, the marginalization of black women within

mainstream feminist forums has been accused of being “too focused” on race and further “having to deal directly with the far-reaching implications of their own racism” which has subsequently undermined the larger feminist goal (Joseph and Lewis 7). This minorization illustrates the “produced boundaries” (Gerhard 157) and persists conflicts between Black feminists and mostly white feminist groups, whereby race has long been marginalized or seen as a subordinate concern relative to gender. Gerhard explains how “in their search for a positive view of woman-as-difference, white cultural feminists continued to marginalize the powerful analysis made by feminists like Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, and others about the racism that continued to plague feminism” (163). By this he means that black women’s bodies and sexuality were often perceived solely through narratives of victimhood, resulting in an incomplete and exclusionary feminist movement that inadequately acknowledged black women’s humanity and autonomy. Although these concerns are clearly significant, they do not entirely address the compounded prejudice faced by women of color, particularly black women. It is roughly argued that mainstream feminism places a limited emphasis on gender, neglecting “all but sexual identifications” (Gerhard 171). This neglect has resulted in considerable conflicts as Black feminists have resisted dominant narratives, championing a more inclusive and intersectional feminist movement. Some white feminists fail to acknowledge the interrelation of race and gender as systems of oppression, seeing discussions of race as diversions from what they consider “real” feminist problems, mostly shaped by their own experiences. This unwillingness to address race marginalizes black women in feminist forums and reinforces a hierarchy of oppression that emphasizes the concerns of white women while “they have been most interested in the authors’ white selves and their white history” (Breines 28) diminishing or disregarding those of women of color. As a result, several Black feminists have experienced alienation from the wider feminist

movement, seeing it as inadequate in addressing their humanity and lived realities. This repudiation has resulted in the creation of distinct spaces for Black feminist discourse, enabling black women to champion their concerns without diminishing their racial identities.

All in all, the important effects of Black feminism to intersectional theory have profoundly influenced culture, literature, and the arts, strengthening visibility and encouraging a more nuanced representation of black women's experiences (Feldstein 56). By questioning the boundaries of mainstream feminism and highlighting the connected realities of race, gender, and class, Black feminism has contributed to a broader social and artistic discussion, enabling a "contradictory project that not only obscures conflicts among black women but also destabilizes the meaning of identities such as woman, white, and black" (White 28). Black feminist authors, filmmakers, and artists have played a crucial role in contesting the stereotypes and constrained narratives historically assigned to black women in society. Their efforts have established a forum for black women to narrate their own experiences, highlighting the intricacies of their lives while examining the interconnections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Figures such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks have been pivotal in transforming literary and cultural landscapes by establishing platforms for black women's voices and perspectives, frequently emphasizing experiences of resilience, trauma, and empowerment that have been historically neglected or misrepresented. This thesis will further focus on Maya Angelou who has "not only identified [her own] personal struggle and individuality with the general conditions of the black Americans, but with all the humans struggling for their existence" (Abdelmotagally 90). Black feminists in literature have innovated narrative techniques that focus on the lived realities of black women, contesting the erasure and distortion of their identities within the literary canon and popular culture. The profound influence of Black feminist figures is notably illustrated through the

contributions of Angelou, whose life and oeuvre have motivated numerous black women to assert their identities and seek personal empowerment (Wise Whitehead 77).

This thesis consists of three main chapters, each examining the portrayal of black female characters in Angelou's autobiographical works through a Black feminist framework, highlighting how issues of race, gender, and social marginalization converge to shape their experiences and resilience within a patriarchal society. To this end, the first chapter of this thesis focuses on Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, analyzing the importance of the black female influence and examining life through the lens of Black feminism, which forms the common ground. Particularly, Maya's grandmother, Annie Henderson, stands as a powerful example of black womanhood within a racially segregated Southern community, embodying values of self-sufficiency and moral fortitude that defy the limitations imposed on black women.<sup>1</sup> As many black women were disregarded in almost all institutional, educational, and societal areas, Annie, or Momma, was a business owner and respected community figure, providing Maya with a solid foundation and an example of resilience, acting as a source of stability in an environment driven by racial and gender oppression. Her portrayal highlights the crucial function of black women as both familial figures and community pillars who maintain dignity and perseverance in the face of systematic suffering. On the other hand, Maya's mother, Vivian Baxter, symbolizes an exceptional representation of black femininity characterized by boldness, assertiveness, and unequivocal independence. Vivian's influence, although inconsistent throughout Maya's formative years, emerges into a transforming force as Maya matures, presenting her with a picture of black femininity that is bold and self-assured. Vivian's urban resilience, self-assurance, and defiance of societal norms compel Maya to assert her own voice and independence. The divergent influences of Annie and Vivian offer Maya an in-depth understanding of black femininity: Annie's subdued

strength grounded in rural tradition and Vivian's assertive independence in an urban context collectively form a composite representation of resilience that profoundly shapes Maya's identity. This chapter employs Black feminist theory to examine how Annie and Vivian embody the intricate roles of black women throughout their communities. While Annie represents a foundation of stability and ethical direction, Vivian exemplifies contemporary, independent femininity, both of which facilitate Maya's evolution as a writer and academic. From the perspective of Black feminist theory, Angelou highlights the essential role of black women as a key base, guiding and representing cultural resilience within different structures.

The second chapter centers on Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*, which examines the intricate lives of African American and African women Maya encountered in the United States and Africa during the 1950s - 1960s, emphasizing her relationships with other black women, particularly regarding sisterhood, activism, and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. The chapter analyzes how these women, especially Maya, manage within the repressive frameworks of racism, sexism, and economic disparity that exist in both personal and political spheres. This chapter utilizes Black feminist theory to emphasize the significance of black women's lives and voices in the pursuit of social justice and equality, demonstrating how their intersecting experiences inform their identities and collective resistance. Within this framework, the chapter delves into the concept of sisterhood among black women and especially African American women, how these connections function as a source of empowerment and resistance against systematic oppression. Maya's developing comprehension of her position within the interlocking systems of oppression is crucial to the study, as the story explores the intricacies of black femininity amid the broader Civil Rights Movement and the feminist battle of the 1960s. Utilizing critical race feminism, this chapter seeks out how Maya and her contemporaries contend not only

for racial justice but also for gender equality and economic autonomy. The role of African American women in the civil rights struggle, emphasizing their accomplishments, sacrifices, further illustrates Maya's personal and professional path within the framework of Black feminist movement, showing how these women's lives, despite being characterized by oppression, are nevertheless imbued with agency, resilience, and transformational force.

The third chapter examines Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, focusing on Maya's encounters with Efua Sutherland, a significant figure in black history. Maya's developing consciousness of her position within the worldwide African diaspora and the significant influence Sutherland has on her comprehension of African ancestry, identity, and the empowerment of black women in African freedom movements are the common ground for the discussion in this chapter. Thus, it highlights how her work and activism enhance Maya's comprehension of the role of African women in the pursuit of liberation and self-determination. Maya's engagement with Sutherland presents a model of black womanhood characterized by power, political engagement, and intellectual rigor, significantly influencing the development of her feminist consciousness. Sutherland's contributions as an intellectual and activist underscore the significant influence of black women in the decolonization process and the wider initiatives aimed at restoring and reclaiming African traditions. Through the inspirations of the works of scholars such as Amina Mama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, this chapter examines the role of African women who have influenced liberation movements and cultural preservation, addressing the important contributions of black women to worldwide efforts for justice and equality.

The conclusion, then, states that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Heart of a Woman*, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* are more than only personal memories of Maya Angelou but contain deeper political and philosophical initiatives through a Black feminist lens.

By weaving together Angelou's ideological and literary contributions, this thesis concludes by emphasizing Angelou's role in penning the importance of black womanhood and the ideologies around it. Through her engagements with identity, belonging, motherhood, and activism, the conclusion reinforces how Angelou's voice continues to be heard across generations, illuminating the significance of Black feminist theory.

## Chapter I: Uncaging the Self: Intersectionality, Resilience and Black Womanhood in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

### 1.1 Introduction

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a seminal text in African American literature, especially depicting black womanhood as an autobiographical narrative to reveal the problems of sexual abuse, racial prejudice, and identity development in the lives of black women. Published in 1969, the autobiography became one of the first to "serve as a testament of resilience and strength" (Wise Whitehead 5) and emphasized the intersections of race, gender, and identity from the viewpoint of a black woman traversing in a profoundly restrictive sociocultural environment. The first volume of her autobiography chronicles her life from age 3 to 16 (1931-1944) when young Maya and her brother Bailey are sent off to live with their grandmother, Momma or Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas, a segregated Southern town. Angelou explains how she got her name expressing, "After Bailey learned definitely that [she] was his sister, he refused to call [her] Marguerite, but rather addressed [her] each time as 'Mya Sister,' and in later more articulate years, after the need for brevity had shortened the appellation to 'My,' it was elaborated into 'Maya' (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 58-59). The 1930s, was a time mostly influenced by the Great Depression which "significantly impacted Americans of all backgrounds, but African Americans experienced some of the most serious effects" (*United States in the 1930s*). Angelou further articulates that "In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 21). It is in Stamps where Maya begins to understand her black identity and the structurally imposed limitations she encounters because of it. Following these years, Maya travels from Stamps

to St. Louis, and later California, living with her mother and father separately. She experiences racism, abandonment, trauma, and especially rape at eight years old from her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman, which left her mute for several years. Throughout these events, she is also exposed to healing by a black teacher, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who helps her develop a sense of love for literature and language. The autobiography culminates with Maya getting pregnant at sixteen, signaling her transformation from childhood to young womanhood.

To further elaborate, Angelou's autobiography was not considered a conventional narrative, rather it serves as a cultural and political criticism, resonating with the fundamental principle of Black feminist philosophy, which argues that the personal is political in the depiction of the black female experience. The autobiography's combination of the personal and the political issues is in alignment with feminist ideology, as it "redefined personal experiences as political, making self-reflection and sharing personal struggles essential tools for exposing and addressing systemic inequalities" (McClaurin 70). As such, Angelou's narrative provides a core structure for comprehending Angelou's "dubious sense of womanhood" as "she inadvertently reenacts the earlier trauma of childhood molestation" (Henke 30).

In her portrayal of black women's lives, Angelou criticizes prevailing myths that Barbara Smith explains as "eliminating racism will completely alleviate black women's problems" (*Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement* 5) that have traditionally neglected black women while also highlighting the double jeopardy of racism and sexism by using her personal journey. This chapter ultimately corresponds with the fundamental aim of Black feminist theory, which emphasizes "the world through a both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression" that further "creates new possibilities for an empowering Afrocentric feminist knowledge" (*Black Feminist Thought* 221). Angelou uses intersectionality as

the most important narrative technique as “one finds variations on the common theme of interplay” (McPherson 15) to employ the inextricable nature of the public and personal elements in the characters’ lives that is central to the understanding of social injustice on both personal and social levels.

According to Gates’s observations, through the adoption of a framework that acknowledges the interconnected oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, alongside the individual and collective agency of black women, Angelou redefines Black feminist thought through the dynamics of social domination and resistance (Gates & Smith 944-956). Additionally, this autobiography serves as an illustration of the principles that Deborah E. McDowell and other Black feminist scholars have advocated, which underscore the significance of reclaiming the voices of black women in intellectual discourse (154). McDowell additionally argues that the revolution cannot be achieved solely through literary journals; it necessitates a political movement that actively addresses the challenges faced by black women and elevates their voices (154). Angelou not only contributes to the discourse on Black feminism by emphasizing black femininity but also assures that her work will persist as a critical cultural artifact for perceiving the historical and social contexts of black womanhood.

## **1.2 An Autobiographical Journey of Resilience, Identity, and the Power of Voice**

Expanding upon the examination of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a groundbreaking work in Black feminist literature, it is essential to analyze how Angelou’s narrative technique explicitly embodies the values of Black feminism. According to Valérie Baisnée, Angelou intertwines personal narratives with extensive socio-political analysis not only to highlight the interrelation between the personal and the political but also to expose the depth and intricacy of

black women's lived experiences (62). This shift enables a thorough examination of Angelou's autobiographical style and its correspondence with Black feminist ideas, "a personal and psychological one" (Mostern 17), illustrating how her narrative both challenges and reinterprets social structures.

Angelou's use of the autobiography surpasses ordinary event narratives, serving as a deliberate statement of individuality and a kind of resistance against social suppression. Thus, this chapter argues that Angelou's narrative creates a political voice that functions as sociopolitical criticism of the ill-doings of all kinds of oppressions black women experienced. Angelou's autobiographical narratives exemplify the fundamental principles of Black feminism, especially by stressing the need to prioritize black women's experiences in debates about systematic discrimination of racism and sexism (King 43). Although Angelou wanted to be a voice for all black women, Maria Lauret notes that she accomplished a remarkable feat of building a literary reputation based on autobiographical writing (118). While making the impossible possible, Angelou's illustration of the personal and social memory method becomes plausible by avoiding "the danger of fictionalization as incredibility which often comes as an effect of vivid storytelling; if it were not for the reader's assumption of referentiality and the assumption that all five volumes are about the same real historical person, the work would not hold together as a single fiction of subjectivity" (Lauret 119). As such, this function of the narrative validates the key component of Black feminist theory, which is the acknowledgment of personal experiences as a valid and essential "lens through which to describe and analyze ethnographic data" (McClaurin 18). Angelou exemplifies this notion by detailing her experiences with profound personal adversities, including sexual assault, racial discrimination, and the quest for self-identity.

Furthermore, Angelou's narratives interrogate and reconstitute the "autobiographical genre a powerfully candid, bordering-the-absurd, style of writing about true-life black woman's tragedy, trauma, and survival" (Barnwell 48). With this in mind, Crenshaw asserts that since "Black women face subordination based on both race and gender, reforms of rape law and judicial procedures that are premised on narrow conceptions of gender subordination may not address the devaluation of Black women" (*Mapping the Margins*, 1270). By this, she means that the problem primarily arises from the convergence of established gender roles for women and the deeply rooted sexualized perceptions prevalent in white American cultural standards. In her pen, Angelou's autobiography transforms into a communal act of defiance, illuminating the intersectional oppressions that characterize the lives of black women. This corresponds strongly with Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality which states that "for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast" (*Demarginalizing* 140). Angelou's narrative technique reflects this complexity by intertwining her personal adversities with contemplations on the cultural influences that formed them. White states that "the politics of black respectability included the expectation that black women would represent the race by fighting for racial equality" (36). As such, Angelou also denounces "respectability politics," a widespread pressure that has traditionally limited black women's self-expression. White's words clearly link to Angelou's autobiographical narrative structure which intricately intertwines personal experiences with wider social and historical contexts, thereby reinforcing her challenge to respectability politics. Thus, by confronting taboo issues such as sexual assault, teenage pregnancy, and poverty, she challenges traditional norms of propriety and offers a dedication to "break the silence" and genuinely speak

out about black women's experiences (Thiam 2). This rejection of homogenized narratives highlights the fundamental Black feminist determination to honesty and the deconstruction of repressive stereotypes. Angelou's openness not only humanizes her characters but also enables readers to see strength in weakness.

The collective attitude that is the core of Black feminist thought is reflected in Angelou's autobiographical approach. In these terms Davidson claims that "agency is the core of Black feminism and black women's collective action" (*Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism* 84). Angelou utilizes an autobiographical narrative in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to exemplify the agency of black women, enabling her to dictate the way in which her story is conveyed. This approach allows her to frame her life experiences according to her own perspective, rather than consenting to prevailing narratives that frequently suppress or misrepresent the voices of black women. Through figures like her grandmother, who symbolize resilience and stability, Angelou demonstrates how communal bonds, and shared struggles influence personal identity. In the fifth chapter, Angelou recounts an incident where a group of "powhitetrash" (poor white trash) (in the text, Angelou uses this as a derogatory expression to explain impoverished white individuals who are perceived as lacking manners, education, and social status) mock Momma in front of her yard. Simultaneously, Maya's silent observations and "lifelong paranoia was born in those cold, molasses-slow minutes" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 26). In reaction to the "aping," Momma "held on" and only hummed to her songs (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 26). When the mockeries came to an end, Momma retained equanimity and said, "'Bye, Miz Helen, 'bye, Miz Ruth, 'bye Miz Eloise'" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 27). This scene exemplifies the dehumanizing influence of the white gaze, as the mockery from the "powhitetrash" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 24) diminishes Momma's dignity to a mere spectacle, thereby reinforcing

racial hierarchies through acts of humiliation. Momma's determined calmness amidst the ridicule she experiences exemplifies a profound resilience, highlighting the strength and stability that black women have historically upheld as a means of resistance. This emphasis on interconnectedness is reminiscent of the African American oral tradition and supports the Black feminist principle that individual liberation is inextricably connected to collective empowerment.

### **1.2.1 Autobiography as a Tool for Social Critique**

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* recounts the experiences of Maya who navigates a world filled with racial, gender, and class oppression while simultaneously serving as a literary testament to the power of storytelling as Joanne Braxton considers it “a spirit of black resistance metamorphosed into a budding nationalist consciousness, uniquely Afro-American in character” (*Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 120). This supports Ida B. Wells's claim that the oppression of black women is fundamentally rooted in their racial identity (108-109), highlighting that Angelou's narrative serves as both a personal reflection and a wider critique of the racialized frameworks that define black womanhood in America. Angelou's autobiography illustrates that recounting one's life transcends personal experience to interconnect with political implications. The convergence of personal experiences and political realities is prominently illustrated in Angelou's portrayal of racial etiquette in Stamps, where social interactions were governed by an implicit code that upheld white supremacy and marginalized black individuals (*Black Women Writing Autobiography* 181-182). Through the examination of these oppressive structures, Angelou's narrative serves to document individual survival while simultaneously critiquing the endemic forces that have influenced black life:

Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn't cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet 'They.' If she had been asked and had chosen to answer the question of whether she was cowardly or not, she would have said that she was a realist. Didn't she stand up to 'them' year after year? Wasn't she the only Negro woman in Stamps referred to once as Mrs.? (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 40)

Momma's perspective should be understood not as cowardice, but rather as a form of pragmatic resistance within an oppressive structure that offers minimal opportunity for defiance without facing significant repercussions. The designation of "Mrs." serves as a rare and almost subversive acknowledgment of dignity within a framework that systematically undermines the basic respect afforded to black individuals. Through the lens of systemic injustice, Angelou recontextualizes her autobiography, elevating her personal experiences to a significant social critique that aligns profoundly with the tenets of Black feminist aesthetics.

At its essence, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* highlights the significance of autobiography as a means of reclaiming agency and her "aim was to present a text that represented her voice and the voices of the personae within her narrative" (Stover 35). For Angelou, the act of writing her life story is imbued with significance "at the center of critical discourse and her own literary experience" (*Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 10) which cannot be considered neutral. Through Braxton's indications, it is clear to understand that Angelou's writing transcends mere personal narrative, serving as a formidable challenge to the historical silencing experienced by black women. Momma exemplifies the necessity for black individuals to navigate through

racial power dynamics for their survival. This intentional selection of genre illustrates a wider tradition in Black feminist thought; wherein personal narratives function as instruments for revealing structural injustices while honoring the resilience and “triumphantly claimed agency for themselves and confounded the attempts of their oppressors to render them powerless” (Stover 60). Similar to the strategies employed by 19<sup>th</sup> century African American women who embedded concealed significances within their writings for their communities as Stover indicates (59-60), Angelou meticulously organizes her autobiography to articulate the intricacies of black womanhood. This approach directly addresses those who endure comparable challenges, thereby transforming what white society frequently trivializes into a formidable declaration of identity and resilience.

### **1.2.2 Momma as a Metaphor: Resilience, Survival, and Black Female Strength**

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* serves not only as a recount of personal experience but also exemplifies exceptional literary skills of her narrative voice. The effectiveness with which she communicates intricate social realities and individual challenges is enhanced through her use of symbolism and metaphors, as she “does not shout its themes, but embodies them metaphorically in the episodic structure of a picaresque tale” (McPherson 16). The incorporation of these elements adds to the structure of autobiography while simultaneously creating a unified literary structure that highlights the significant impact of both personal and collective resilience. The metaphors and symbolic imagery used by Angelou are not merely incidental; they are deeply interconnected with the socio-political context she criticizes and the lived experiences of black women (Baisnee 68). The titular metaphor of the caged bird serves as a significant example, functioning on various levels throughout the book. McPherson indicates that the search for identity and freedom are the most prominent aspects,

within an environment that has a coherent pattern; the persistence of the past in the present; the necessity of creating one's own world by a transforming act; of seeking, at the price of isolation, one's own truth in the moment of crisis; the drive toward particularity and permanence; the image of the narrator participating vicariously in the heroic act of another.

(16)

As such, Momma serves as the embodiment of the singing caged bird throughout the book while Maya eagerly navigates through her youth learning and understanding the forthcoming of life. This can be exemplified through the passage where the powhitetrash children come to Momma's yard and mock her. The vibration of Momma's humming numbs the mockery; "She sang on. No louder than before, but no softer either. No slower or faster" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 26). Humming and singing were the way Momma perceived resilience as a black woman in the community and frankly this was her way to nest her baby birds. The scene ends as Momma approaches the enraged Maya:

She stood another whole song through and then opened the screen door to look down on me crying in rage. She looked until I looked up. Her face was a brown moon that shone on me. She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand, but I could see that she was happy. Then she bent down and touched me as mothers of the church 'lay hands on the sick and afflicted' and I quieted. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 27-28)

Historically, it is possible to argue that black women have always been restrained and caged due to racial oppression in the institution of slavery. As such, Momma navigates her life to find a way to uncage and free herself. Throughout her life in Stamps, Maya witnesses how the community

perceives Momma and “creates a metaphor that places Momma’s power above any apparent submissiveness” (Lupton 261) as a strong black woman figure. This not only illustrates Maya’s challenges with confinement, be it physical, emotional, or societal, but also reflects the broader experience of marginalized groups facing pervasive racial oppression as in the case of the U.S. history.

### **1.3 Exploring Race, Gender, and Identity Within the Narrative Through Intersectionality**

By delving into Angelou’s use of autobiography, one may better grasp the ways in which her narratives connect the many oppressions that black women face. In order to understand the magnitude of her work, one must analyze how intersectionality shaped the characters lived reality in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Crenshaw firmly asserts that “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (*Demarginalizing* 140). Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that recognizes the interdependence of gender, class, and race. Crenshaw further explains that “in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women” (*Demarginalizing* 140). From this perspective, it is clear that Angelou’s narrative not only emphasizes personal difficulties but also functions as an in-depth examination of the systemic socioeconomic structure that perpetuates racism and inequality.

Angelou’s narrative illustrates the ways in which multiple forms of cumulative oppression results in complex challenges that cannot be addressed by examining any single factor in isolation. This underscores the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to emphasize how “the

intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (*Mapping the Margins*, 1245). By this Crenshaw highlights the importance of integrating multiple identity factors in the examination of social world construction, as social structures and power dynamics are influenced by the concurrent effects of diverse forms of oppression and privilege. As Collins points out, “black women’s ability to forge these individuals, often unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women’s survival” (*Black Feminist Thought* 36). Collins argues that the resilience of black women to oppression arises from a synthesis of individual and collective consciousness. Further she asserts that the individual experiences of black women acquire enhanced significance when articulated, discussed, and collaboratively molded into a collective comprehension of oppression (*Black Feminist Thought* 36). This can be linked to Angelou’s portrayal of these interdependent networks that shed light on the complex character of oppression and its effects on personal and collective identities.

From her early years forward, Angelou’s experiences are profoundly impacted by her race, gender and class which are defining forces throughout the entirety of her autobiography. In terms of race, Maya is very conscious of her racial stratification as a child growing up in the divided South. Throughout her childhood in Stamps, “Maya learned that beyond barriers of race, all men and women are the same, they share the same fears, same loneliness and same hopes” (Walia 108), which show her that the core emotions that define human existence remain universal. For example, one of her teachers in San Francisco, Miss Kirwin, “never seemed to notice that [she] was Black and therefore different” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 184). Angelou further realizes that Miss. Kirwin did not treat her differently but, acknowledged her as “Miss Johnson and if [she] had

the answer to a question [Miss. Kirwin] posed [she] was never given any more than the word “Correct,” which was what [Miss. Kirwin] said to every other student with the correct answer” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 184). The internalized nature of the systematic racism she experiences shapes her view of herself and her value in the world.

As such, gender also adds another layer of difficulty in dealing with racism. The vulnerabilities that black women endure are brought into focus by Maya’s rape scene, where she adds that “the act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 68). Additionally, in her chapter about *The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood*, Collins indicates that rape victims are “victimized again by family members, community residents, and social institutions such as criminal justice systems which somehow believe that rape victims are responsible for their own victimization” (*Black Feminist Thought* 147). Following the rape by Mr. Freeman, Maya endures not only the immediate trauma of the incident but also the subsequent secondary victimization that ensues. The choice she made to remain silent regarding the assault made her think that even though “Mr. Freeman had surely done something very wrong” she was convinced that she “had helped him to do it” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 73). This illustrates a wider societal phenomenon whereby victims often experience apprehension about facing disbelief or retribution, rather than receiving the protection they deserve. The eventual response from the justice system, when she finally articulates her concerns, is markedly insufficient: Mr. Freeman is met with merely a brief sentence of “one year and one day, but never got the chance to do his time” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 74), thereby underscoring the structural shortcomings in ensuring accountability for perpetrators. The cultural norm of excluding black women’s voices, in both private and public domains, is mirrored

in this silence. Collins supports this incident as she observes that “Black women are less likely to report their rapes, less likely to have their cases come to trial, less likely to have their trials result in convictions, and, most disturbing, less likely to seek counseling and other support services” (*Black Feminist Thought* 147-148).

Another major factor that shapes the framework of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is class. While discussing the black community and the era of the Great Depression, Angelou questions how white people could “spend money so lavishly” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 42). As such, she also highlights the condition of Momma’s store in Stamps during that era. Angelou shows that class affects not only material conditions but also the accessibility of resources, power dynamics, and the lived experiences of black individuals:

The Depression must have hit the white section of Stamps with cyclonic impact, but it seeped into the Black area slowly, like a thief with misgivings. The country had been in the throes of the Depression for two years before the Negroes in Stamps knew it. I think that everyone thought that the Depression, like everything else, was for the whitefolks, so it had nothing to do with them. Our people had lived off the land and counted on cotton-picking and hoeing and chopping seasons to bring in the cash needed to buy shoes, clothes, books, and light farm equipment. It was when the owners of cotton fields dropped the payment of ten cents for a pound of cotton to eight, seven, and finally five that the Negro community realized that the Depression, at least, did not discriminate. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 43)

This passage illustrates Maya’s awareness of her grandmother’s financial impact within the community, emphasizing the economic interdependence that existed between black and white

residents during the Great Depression. In the light of the pervasive racial hierarchy that systematically marginalized black individuals, “Angelou makes a special point to note that her family did not have to go on relief” (Hagen 14). It is important to note that Momma’s financial stability provided her with a certain level of respectability and leverage, thereby complicating the established class and racial boundaries.

### **1.3.1 Racism and Denied Dignity**

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a particularly noticeable instance of racism that Maya encounters arises when Momma brings her to a white dentist named Dr. Lincoln to address an excruciating toothache. Despite having previously borrowed money from Momma during the Great Depression, Dr. Lincoln refuses to treat Maya solely because she is black, stating, “Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don’t treat colored people” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 160). This moment exemplifies the deeply rooted racial hierarchy that influences fundamental services like healthcare, thereby perpetuating pervasive exclusion and dehumanization. The dentist’s refusal to treat Maya exemplifies the concept of structural violence as articulated by Paul Farmer, highlighting a systemic form of oppression wherein social structures, including racial segregation, inhibit marginalized populations from obtaining essential services such as healthcare (8). In *Pathologies of Power*, Farmer posits that institutional racism within the medical field transcends individual biases, representing a profoundly embedded mechanism of social inequality (210-214). Furthermore, Dr. Lincoln’s assertion illustrates that racism operates not merely on an interpersonal level but is also deeply ingrained within societal structures, as he possesses both legal and social authority to withhold treatment from a suffering child without facing repercussions.

The autobiography's portrayal of racial injustices reflects the widespread prejudice and segregation that existed in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. As an example, the inherent obstacles that controlled every aspect of "Black women constituted a distinctive Black women's standpoint on gender-specific patterns of racial segregation and its accompanying economic penalties" (*Black Feminist Thought* 24). Maya's grandmother defies expectations with calm dignity as she stands firm against the white power structures, creating a scene of tangible emotional and political conflict. While examining the many interconnected traumas of white patriarchal supremacy, Suzette Henke exemplifies Momma's mastery of dealing with such situations and further sets an example for Maya:

And yet, paradoxically, this heroic grandmother continually triumphs over white racism through wise-woman strategies of faith, patience, self-respect, dogged persistence, enduring courage, and a tenacious adherence to principles of social justice. Through cunning silences and wicked locutions, she not only endures, but prevails in the face of outrageous bigotry. Her quiet, unassuming victory over the abominable dentist Dr. Lincoln, proves morally superior to, and more pragmatic than, the hyperbolic 'Captain Marvel' scenarios her granddaughter conjures by dint of a vivid and fanciful imagination. (24)

Henke emphasizes Momma's capacity to navigate and counter endemic racism through nuanced, practical approaches instead of confrontation. Her actions, characterized as "wise-woman strategies," (Henke 24) exemplify an intergenerational knowledge and resourcefulness that enable her to outsmart and overcome racist figures such as Dr. Lincoln. This moment captures the larger struggle for civil rights and shows how little acts of defiance add up to big changes. There is a

profound connection between oppressed people's social and political battles and Angelou's clear expressions on difficulties with belonging, self-esteem, and identity.

Angelou's portrayal of this incident resonates with W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of 'double consciousness,' which discusses the ongoing struggle faced by black individuals as they reconcile their self-perception with the perceptions imposed by white society (Du Bois 37). Maya, in the face of her suffering, endures a process of dehumanization that compels her to acknowledge that, even during a medical crisis, her racial identity diminishes her access to fundamental healthcare services. Analyzing the incident through Du Bois's eyes, Dr. Lincoln is "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 37). This moment underscores the psychological weight of institutional racism, as Maya is compelled to internalize the notion that her life and suffering are deemed inconsequential by the white society. Consequently, the financial stability of Momma, evidenced by the "number of whitefolks in town that owed her favors" such as Dr. Lincoln, appears to afford her a certain level of influence (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 158). This incident reveals the constraints of economic capital within a profoundly racialized framework. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality defines the reasons behind the inability of Momma's class status to shield Maya from racial discrimination. Crenshaw's assertion highlights that race and class are not isolated categories; rather, they intersect to uniquely influence the dynamics of oppression (*Demarginalizing* 142-143). As such, the importance of race and gender, as Crenshaw puts it, "should be centered on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties" (*Demarginalizing* 166). Although Momma is a respected black business owner, her economic contributions to the community do not afford her equal standing within a society that is predominantly white. Dr. Lincoln's refusal underscores the predominance of racial hierarchy over

financial relationships, demonstrating that financial influence alone is insufficient to dismantle institutional racism.

Despite her inability to compel the dentist to deliver treatment, Momma exhibits her own method of resistance. In a fictionalized retelling, Momma confronts Dr. Lincoln, asserting her dignity by reminding him of his financial debt and metaphorically establishing her dominance. This reinterpretation of the event functions as a form of narrative defiance, enabling Angelou to reclaim authority over the experience by converting humiliation into empowerment. It is apparent that Maya gets the courage to express her reinterpretation of the event freely due to the will she inherits from her grandmother. Similarly, hooks also states that she “claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech” (*Talking Back* 28). hooks posits that storytelling functions as a mechanism of resistance for black women, allowing them to assert agency amidst concurrent oppression. Consequently, Angelou articulates that she recognizes a family tradition of strong women, highlighting how her grandmother demonstrated courage and confidence. Momma valued strength but also taught Maya to avoid being too openly defiant. Through the narration of this event from Momma’s perspective, Angelou critiques racial injustice while simultaneously asserting the resilience and strength of black women who, despite facing psychological and structural limitations, discover ways to uphold their dignity.

### **1.3.2 Sexual Violence and Trauma**

Angelou’s skillful investigation of intricate themes, such as personal growth, empowerment, and resilience, culminates in a more extensive analysis of structural oppression. The convergence of these layers of discrimination reveals a profoundly distressing and significant

element of the narrative: the depiction of sexual violence and its subsequent consequences. Angelou presents Maya's rape "by her mother's frustrated and demented boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, whose confusing attentions initially mimic paternal expressions of physical affection" (Henke 25). Thus, this analysis offers an essential perspective for examining how the interconnected dynamics of race, gender, and power influence experiences of violence and its resulting impacts. The traumatic experience of rape and its subsequent repercussions serve as a crucial turning point in Maya's personal development, signifying a significant transformation in her self-perception and her interactions with the surrounding environment.

Maya's narration of the rape reveals how shocking and traumatizing that moment is: Maya awakens to an unfamiliar and disconcerting "thing" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 63) on her leg, which in a state of confusion and surprise, she realizes is Mr. Freeman's genitalia. He attempts to reassure Maya by stating, "I ain't gonna hurt you" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 63), and although he physically and mentally does, Maya does not interpret being raped as an eight-year-old child by someone she considers her "real father" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 63). But it is only when Mr. Freeman tells Maya that if she tells anyone, he will have to kill Bailey that "the benevolent father figure turns out to be a demonic predator enacting a torturous nightmare" (Henke 25). Michael Foucault proves Henke's words by observing that,

[e]ither sexual relations will be imposed through violence and the individual who undergoes them will feel only anger, hatred, and desire for revenge. Or they will be consented to by an individual who, because of his 'softness,' his 'femininity,' 'enjoys being passive' (*hsdomenos tai paschein*), which is a 'shameful,' 'unnatural' thing, and which reduces him to the lowest condition. (206)

This analysis holds significant relevance within the context of Maya's experience of rape. It challenges reductive classifications of consent and victimhood. The incident represents a clear manifestation of violence and coercion; however, Maya's ensuing feelings of guilt and confusion are worsened by societal narratives that shame victims, particularly in cases where violence is not only brutal but rather manipulative and psychologically coercive. The grooming tactics employed by Mr. Freeman create a complex interplay between coercion and manipulation, leading Maya to experience a sense of complicity in her own victimization, even as her status as a victim remains evident. Angelou's decision to situate this event within the broader context of Black feminist thought enables her "to understand the sociopolitical context surrounding Black girl sexuality" and examine "Black girl voices" in both public and private spheres (French 46). Angelou highlights, through Maya's experience, the subtle mechanisms by which societal structures not only allow but also sustain violence against vulnerable individuals, effectively silencing them through fear, shame, and neglect.

Angelou recounts the second incident following the initial abuse when Mr. Freeman maintains a significant degree of control over Maya, manifesting in both physical and psychological dimensions. Upon Maya's return from the store, the scene is distinctly characterized by Mr. Freeman's physical presence, as his unbuttoned pants and exposed genitalia create a stark visual trigger that provokes traumatic recollections of the initial abuse. This shows that trauma is not just about past events; it can be triggered again by things one sees, hears, or feels, which keeps the cycle of emotional pain going. Mr. Freeman's response to "No, sir, Mr. Freeman," which dismisses her refusal and asserts that she "liked it before" while assuring her that "the discomfort you will experience will be minimal" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 67), exemplifies the manipulative language frequently utilized by abusers to distort reality. By characterizing the abuse

as consensual, he not only undermines Maya's fear but also seeks to alter the narrative to his advantage, thereby shifting the responsibility onto the victim. Subsequent to the assault, Mr. Freeman's actions introduce an additional dimension in which "physical and emotional boundary violations converge as the child feels both her pain and the pain of the abuser" (Jacobs 62). His endeavor to "tend to her" through bathing and articulating regret, "I didn't mean to hurt [you]" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 68) complicates Maya's understanding, obscuring the distinctions between harm and care. Maya's hesitant decision to stay silent regarding her assault highlights the profound psychological influence that Mr. Freeman exerts on her, "resulting in the development of an empathic bond in which the feelings of the perpetrator take precedence, displacing the child's emotional connection to the violated self" (Jacobs 62). As seen in Maya's case, victims of rape might unintentionally nurture empathy for their abuser as a means of coping. Therefore, her silence should not be interpreted as passive; instead, it represents a multifaceted reaction to trauma, influenced by the perceived threats to her brother's safety and the bewilderment caused by Mr. Freeman's misleading expressions of affection. The enforced muteness serves as a poignant reflection of the profound powerlessness experienced by numerous abuse survivors. In this context, the inability to articulate trauma emerges not only as a coping mechanism but also as a critical form of self-preservation.

Further, Angelou's depiction of Maya's silence in the aftermath of her assault extends beyond the realm of individual coping mechanisms. In an interview with *Writers Dreaming*, Angelou shares the aftermath of her rape:

You know, from the age of 7 1/2 to 12 1/2, I was mute. I believed at the time that I could make myself, my whole body, an ear. And I could absorb all sound. Those years I must have done something to my brain, or with it, so that the part of the brain which would have

been occupied in the articulation of speech and the creation of sound, those electrical synapses, did something else with themselves. They just reinvented themselves so that I'm able to remember incredible amounts of data. I would say I get along reasonably well in seven or eight languages. I have spoken as many as twelve. I have taught in three. I seem to have total recall or none at all. And so, when I need to get inside myself, I can do it without going to sleep. (qtd. in Epel 27)

Angelou proposes that this self-imposed silence significantly transformed the operational dynamics of her psychological processes. The brain pathways used for speech changed, which improved her memory, language learning, and deep-thinking skills. The duration of silence unknowingly fostered her exceptional linguistic skills, enabling her to acquire several languages and enhance her remarkable memory retention. The underlying theme presented in this context revolves around the concepts of resilience and transformation. Within the framework of trauma, Wagner-Martin states that Angelou “creates an emotional construct, so that Marguerite’s feelings of abandonment on the train parallel her physical destruction as she is being pursued—at first gently—and finally raped” (35). The “abandonment on the train” Wagner-Martin refers to becomes the metaphor of Maya’s fear of abandonment. Hence, this fear emerged after her parents “put an end to their calamitous marriage” and sent Bailey and herself to Momma (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 5). Furthermore, Angelou’s silence profoundly reflects the complexities within Black feminist discourse, serving as both a form of resistance against oppressive norms and a means of reconstitution and self-reclamation. Maya ultimately “finds solace” (Walia 108) and empowerment through language and storytelling, highlighting the transformative potential of breaking silences, both on an individual level and within the context of a larger communal struggle. In this context,

Angelou compels readers to engage with difficult realities regarding shared responsibility and the overarching cultural structures facilitating such disregard.

### **1.3.3 Community and Solidarity**

Angelou writes in detail about the deep personal aspects of trauma, silence, and recovery. She shows how unfair social systems are and emphasizes the community's strength and resilience as a source of support, identity, and resistance. Maya perceives the black community in Stamps as a dual entity, functioning as a place of support and empowerment which becomes "vitaly important in developing strategies of resistance" (*Black Feminist Thought* 101). It is a realm where solidarity underpins survival, yet it is also characterized by its inherent complexities and conflicts. Angelou employs this setting to examine the dual nature of community life, highlighting both its ability to nurture and its potential to inflict harm. Maya's grandmother exemplifies these characteristics, providing Maya with a paradigm of strength and resilience through her steadfast moral compass and profound faith. Momma's store serves as both the heart of the community and the location where she experiences the greatest psychological impact. The black community in Stamps serves as an "arena for moral agency" (*Black Feminist Thought* 171) and a representative microcosm of the broader societal dynamics that influence Maya's existence.

The store Momma operates serves as a symbol of economic independence and self-sufficiency in a society marked by racial segregation. According to Maya, Momma "had the Store built in the heart of the Negro area" and it serves as "the lay center of activities in Stamps," a crucial location for the black community to gather for shopping, exchanging news, and building solidarity in the face of common challenges (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 6). The store serves a purpose that exceeds business: "On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the

porch of the Store, and troubadours on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The Brazos while they played juice harps and cigar-box guitars” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 6). The environment provides Maya with insights into the resilience and ingenuity of her community, demonstrating that economic spaces can function as venues for financial independence and cultural validation. Adding to this, Audre Lorde asserts that,

as women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. (*This Bridge Called My Back* 99)

By this, Lorde means that genuine liberation is achieved through the establishment of communities that recognize and celebrate differences, rather than disregarding or downplaying them, as true solidarity necessitates the acknowledgment and appreciation of diversity. In alignment with Lorde’s assertion that genuine liberation is achieved through the recognition of differences rather than their elimination, Angelou exemplifies how the store represents both the resilience and vulnerability of the community. It serves as a place where unity prospers not in spite of differences, but through their ongoing negotiation. Momma’s store also serves a dual purpose, functioning as both a tangible and symbolic hub of black resistance in response to the socio-economic constraints established by white supremacy and independence.

Nevertheless, the store’s significance as a representation of community resilience is intricately intertwined with its role as a place where racial tensions are prominently manifested. In

this context, Momma confronts some of her most degrading interactions with whites, underscoring the mental strain associated with preserving one's dignity amidst inherent oppression. Referring to the scene where a distressing instance transpires when a couple of 'powhitetrash' girls ridicule Momma by mimicking her manner of speaking, compelling Maya to observe her grandmother's quiet resilience: "I wanted to beg her, 'Momma, don't wait for them. Come on inside with me.' But of course, I couldn't say anything... She stood there, her arms folded, a proud and solitary figure, while their laughter cracked like whips around her" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 25). The silence exhibited by Momma during these instances serves as a dual mechanism of survival resistance. As Lorde articulates, the meaning of fear in silence is important "because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (*Sister Outsider*, 42). The psychological burden associated with this strategic silence accumulates over time, manifesting as an invisible yet profound form of violence that significantly impacts Momma's spirit. As Lorde states:

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson - that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (*Sister Outsider*, 42)

The paradox Lorde illustrates articulates Momma's silent endurance wherein black women experience hyper-visibility due to their race while simultaneously being rendered invisible through dehumanization. Her stoic resilience in confronting racist humiliation exemplifies a survival strategy that prioritizes the maintenance of dignity without direct confrontation, underscoring the duality of visibility as both a potential source of vulnerability and a subtle form of strength within an oppressive societal framework.

#### **1.4 Where the Personal Meets the Political**

Through the employment of intersectionality in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it becomes apparent that the narrative is multi-layered, combining the intimate with the political on a grand scale. The strength of Angelou's work is found in her capacity to weave together the personal and the structural, demonstrating the profound connections between individual experiences and the larger frameworks of racial, gendered, and economic oppression. The struggles and achievements of black Americans, and black women in particular, in a racially stratified nation are encapsulated in Angelou's life. One of the things that makes her writing stand out within the context of Black feminism is the way it weaves together the personal and the political: "In redrawing the boundaries between self and society and analyzing their lives in new ways women sought to establish what was, indeed, personal to them and what might be an effect of social structures larger than themselves" (Lauret 61). Through a critical examination of her personal traumas, including racism, sexual violence, and gender oppression, Angelou proves that these experiences are not merely isolated individual incidents. Instead, they are direct manifestations of institutional forces such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and economic inequality. Individual experiences are affected by and can be used as a critique of larger societal frameworks that determine identity, power dynamics, and oppressive systems. The

autobiographical work demonstrates this by transforming personal problems into political discourse. This resilience, however, is depicted not in isolation but rather as a component of a shared narrative of resistance and survival. Angelou weaves her personal narrative with the socio-political concerns of her end to create a personalized and universal narrative. As such, this “concept of personal politics enabled women to see themselves and their lives as in part determined by power structures operative in society as a whole” (Lauret 61). In this way, Angelou exhibits how societal forces affect, change and limit the lives of black women. What might have seemed like personal suffering becomes a powerful commentary on the political and social structures that support all forms of oppression. Beyond its autobiographical nature, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* transforms into a scathing indictment of the structural oppressions that black people face, cementing its place in history as an important contribution to the discussions around black feminism and social justice.

#### **1.4.1 Education as Politics of Identity Formation**

As *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that Maya’s path of self-discovery is profoundly connected to the oppressive contexts she experiences. Consequently, education serves as a platform for resistance and self-empowerment. Maya’s determination to learn serves as a form of defiance, particularly in the face of systemic barriers that prevent black children’s access to quality education. Furthermore, it is brought to the fore that Maya’s journey toward self-awareness is significantly influenced by the oppressive societal structures she encounters, having been initiated not in the realm of privilege or reflection but within a hostile environment where her identity is perpetually scrutinized. In this regard, Roslie Riegle Troester generates the term “othermother” which she defines as:

The turbulent stream may be kept from overflowing, however, by spillways in the form of other adult women who help guide and form the young girl, thus relieving some of the pressure on the mother-daughter relationship. Sometimes these women, whom I call ‘othermother,’ are grandmothers, aunts, or cousins, united by kinship with the blood mother. But sometimes othermothers live different lives and exemplify values widely divergent from the biological mother. (13)

This illustrates Collins’ assertion that “examining one specific version of the community othermother role—namely, black women’s support for education—illustrates this important dimension of Black women’s political activism” (*Black Feminist Thought* 210). This aligns with the assertion regarding the significance of black women’s support for education as a crucial form of political activism, exemplified by the impactful roles of figures such as Momma and Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Both women exemplify the concept of “othermothers” (*Black Feminist Thought* 210), offering not only care and guidance but also actively promoting Maya’s intellectual development as a form of resistance to institutional oppression. Maya's educational experiences exemplify this dynamic, wherein learning serves as a form of resistance against the forces that aim to silence and marginalize her. Her early schooling in segregated schools shows how institutional inequality is common, with black students not getting enough resources and having lower expectations reflected onto them. A significant event transpires at her eighth-grade graduation when “Whitefolks would attend the ceremony, and two or three would speak of God and home, and the Southern way of life, and Mrs. Parsons, the principal’s wife, would play the graduation march while the lower-grade graduates paraded down the aisles and took their seats below the platform” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 145-146). Maya does not yield to this degrading narrative; instead, she channels it into motivation for resistance:

My work alone had awarded me a top place and I was going to be one of the first called in the graduating ceremonies. On the classroom blackboard, as well as on the bulletin board in the auditorium, there were blue stars and white stars and red stars. No absences, no tardinesses, and my academic work was among the best of the year. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 147)

In Angelou's words, it is understood that Maya's intellectual development represents not only personal victory but also a bold challenge to societal oppression. A moment earlier, Angelou stresses on the joyous moment saying she "was the person of the moment. The birthday girl. The center" (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 146). Therefore, Collins' assertion aligns with the autobiography regarding the significance of black women's support for education as a crucial form of political activism, exemplified by the impactful roles of figures such as Momma, the "protector" (Hagen 38) and Mrs. Bertha Flowers, "a community intellectual" (Hagen 28). Hence, both Momma and Mrs. Flowers serve as the fulfill the role of the "othermother" through their nurture and direction.

Essentially, Hagen expresses how "Momma solicits her aid with the mute Maya, and at her sanctuary-like home Mrs. Flowers gently and graciously draws out Marguerite and encourages her to continue an interest in literature" (63). The emphasis placed on discipline, resilience, and moral integrity, alongside Mrs. Flowers' introduction of literature and the transformative potential of language, underscores the significance of black women's mentorship within the community as a dual act of personal development and political engagement. Not only was she a mentor, but she was also an inspiration for Maya:

She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roaring fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets. Women who walked over the ‘heath’ and read morocco-bound books and had two last names divided by a hyphen. It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 82)

Mrs. Flowers profoundly inspired Maya by revealing the beauty and power of language, which sparked her passion for reading and enabled her to see words as instruments of self-expression, healing, and empowerment. Maya’s relationship with literature highlights the main purpose of education as a source of personal comfort and a means of political empowerment. Her interaction with a diverse array of texts, including those by Shakespeare, who became her “first white love” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 12), and notable Black literary figures such as “Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 12), equips her with a framework to analyze her own experiences and to express her identity in a manner that transcends the limitations imposed by systemic oppression. According to Braxton, for the black women, “there is a veil within a veil, a realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation, both through literature and the oral tradition” (*Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 3). Literature becomes a form of escapism for her because it serves as a framework for comprehending the extensive historical and cultural dynamics that influence her existence. Mrs. Flowers teaches Maya that words are more than just a way to communicate and that they are powerful tools for speaking out against dehumanization and expressing personal truths. Maya, comes to recognize the intricate beauty of language, developing an appreciation for

both the rhythm and the nuance inherent in spoken words as well as in the written text. This mentorship displays how important it is for black communities for knowledge to be passed down from one generation to the next. It also confirms that education includes more than just formal academic learning; it also includes the cultural and emotional insights that come as a catalyst “to defend herself physically and psychologically” (*Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 206).

#### **1.4.2 The Personal Mother and Political Woman**

Education provides Maya with the intellectual resources necessary for resistance, while the ideals of motherhood and womanhood, particularly through the influence of her mother, Vivian Baxter, instill in her resilience, self-sufficiency, and the imperative to assert her agency in a society that aims to marginalize black women. Angelou’s portrayal of her mother offers a complex examination of black womanhood and motherhood, highlighting how these identities are profoundly influenced by the intersecting factors of race, gender, and class oppression. In contrast to the nurturing and traditional maternal archetype typically portrayed in mainstream narratives, Vivian represents a form of mothering that is both unconventional and defiant, characterized by her independence, resilience, and self-possession. In alignment with this, Nash offers her perspective on the black mother/woman:

If black motherhood is imagined as a death-world, black feminist theory has become squarely invested in reimagining and amplifying the potential, power, and possibility of black motherhood. Here, black feminist theory performs its political work by reimagining feminism’s relationship to motherhood, particularly popular (white) feminist representations of motherhood as a site of ambivalence, unhappiness, and obligation. Instead, black motherhood is cast as powerful, strong, capacious, creative, and spiritually

rooted, as an act of life-affirmation staged in (or against) a cultural moment that seeks to relegate black bodies to the space of death. (*The Political Life of Black Motherhood* 702-703)

Nash addresses the ways in which Black feminist theory seeks to reclaim and redefine the concept of black motherhood, diverging from mainstream feminist narratives that frequently center on white experiences and portray motherhood predominantly as a burden, obligation, or locus of oppression. This perspective reframes black motherhood as a form of resistance, embodying strength and affirming life within a societal context that systematically devalues and aims to erase black bodies. This is directly related to Vivian, as she represents a paradigm of black motherhood characterized not by sacrifice or passive suffering but by power, self-sufficiency, and defiance. Maya articulates that “to describe [her] mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 51). Hence, it is understood that instead of adhering to limiting, idealized maternal roles, Vivian emphasizes her autonomy while providing Maya with the resilience and confidence required to navigate through a challenging environment. For example, on their drive from Los Angeles to San Francisco, Angelou articulates that “[her mother] strung humorous stories along the road like a bright wash and tried to captivate [them]. But her being, and her being [their] mother, had done the job so successfully that it was a little distracting to see her throwing good energy after good” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 173). The approach to motherhood exhibited here goes beyond affection, focusing instead on equipping her daughter for survival. This perspective aligns with the Black feminist framework, which conceptualizes motherhood as a politically significant domain of empowerment, rather than solely a site of struggle (*The Political Life of Black Motherhood* 703). Vivian’s life exemplifies a significant divergence from the historically imposed limitations on

black women, who have often been relegated to roles characterized by domestic servitude and subservience. Through the characterization of Vivian as a mother who exceeds these constraints, Angelou, like Wells, finds “that motherhood was a profession by itself, just like school teaching and lecturing, and that once one was launched on such a career, she owed it to herself to become as expert as possible in the practice of her profession” (250-251). Vivian’s assertiveness, financial independence, and capacity to navigate male-dominated environments establish her as a subversive figure, challenging the conventional archetype of maternal self-sacrifice. Her capacity to support Maya and Bailey beyond traditional frameworks, whether through her nursing profession or participation in informal economies, illustrates how she had “done the job so successfully that it was a little distracting to see her throwing good energy after good” (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 173). This defiance is a key part of the feminist claim that the personal is political. Vivian’s choices as a mother are more than just her own; they are acts of resistance against the social and economic structures that limit black women’s options and control their bodies, work, and identities (Shulman 596).

Vivian’s conception of motherhood challenges conventional ideas of maternal nurturing by emphasizing empowerment rather than emotional intimacy, a dynamic that significantly influences Maya’s understanding of womanhood and survival. Maya continues to praise Vivian’s motherhood:

Mother’s beauty made her powerful, and her power made her unflinchingly honest. When we asked her what she did, what her job was, she walked us to Oakland’s Seventh Street, where dusty bars and smoke shops sat in the laps of storefront churches. She pointed out Raincoat’s Pinochle Parlor and Slim Jenkins’ pretentious saloon. Some nights she played pinochle for money or ran a poker game at Mother Smith’s or stopped at Slim’s for a few

drinks. She told us that she had never cheated anybody and wasn't making any preparations to do so. Her work was as honest as the job held by fat Mrs. Walker (a maid), who lived next door to us, and 'a damn sight better paid.' She wouldn't bust suds for anybody nor be anyone's kitchen bitch. The good Lord gave her a mind, and she intended to use it to support her mother and her children. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 175)

In contrast to the sentimental and self-sacrificing maternal archetypes frequently celebrated in Western literature (Üstün Kaya 875), Vivian represents a more pragmatic and self-sufficient model of black motherhood. This approach emphasizes the importance of equipping her daughter with necessary skills. In *Ain't I a Woman?*, hooks contends that the experiences of black mothers should be contextualized within the extensive historical framework of racialized oppression, wherein the conventional expression of maternal tenderness is frequently compromised in favor of equipping daughters for a reality that provides minimal safeguarding (124). Vivian's strong sense of independence, assertive confidence, and focus on self-reliance function as a type of maternal influence grounded in the principles of survival rather than emotional attachment. The influence she exerts on Maya's upbringing is characterized not by unwavering affection but by pivotal instances of empowerment. This is exemplified when she instructs Maya to advocate for herself and when she validates Maya's beauty and intrinsic value, effectively challenging the pervasive racist and sexist narratives present in the society. Angelou, through the character of Vivian, demonstrates that black motherhood overcomes the act of child rearing; it encompasses the vital responsibility of providing children with the necessary tools to confront systemic oppression and affirm their identities within an adversarial environment.

## 1.5 Conclusion

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* expands upon the structure of an autobiographical narrative, offering a profound exploration of the black women who had meaningful impact on her life. The importance of this autobiography is rooted in its seminal capacity to intertwine personal narrative with cultural critique, establishing a text that functions as a foundational element for both literary advancement and social activism. Angelou's autobiography fundamentally exemplifies the resilience inherent in black womanhood amidst oppression, with its influence reaching well beyond the text itself, shaping how "trials and tribulations of life and her experiences emerged parallel to Black Feminism" (Walia 104). Angelou interrogates conventional literary structures by foregrounding the experiences of a young black girl within a societal context that has historically marginalized her race and gender. In this regard, she challenges the established norms of the autobiography genre, which Olney praises:

If black autobiography is a paradigm, the history of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a paradigm of a paradigm. Until fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature—if mentioned at all it was usually in some other context—and until very recently, autobiography received the same treatment. Moreover, women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of literature. But here we have an autobiography by a black woman, published in the last decade (1970), that already has its own critical literature. ... We can only conclude that something like full literary enfranchisement has been won by black writers, women writers, and autobiography itself. (*Autobiography* 15)

Olney contends that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* signifies a pivotal moment in literary history, as it confronts the conventional marginalization of black writers, women writers, and autobiographical narratives within the established literary canon. The acknowledgment of Angelou's first autobiography indicates a significant cultural transformation regarding the incorporation and affirmation of voices that have been historically marginalized in mainstream literature. This shift implies that the criteria for literary merit are evolving beyond traditional white, male, or Eurocentric frameworks. Her dedication to pointing out how race, gender and class all affect each other turns her story into a powerful critique of societal structures that falls within the framework of Black feminism. Her narrative is direct, whether it is about sexual violence trauma, the hurtful realities of racial discrimination, or the complicated dynamics of identity formation. It breaks the silence that surrounds the experiences of black women and posits that their stories are not only valid but necessary for a full understanding of the human condition as a whole.

It is important to note how this autobiography redefines the feminist discourse by broadening its parameters to encompass the distinct challenges and victories experienced by black women. During an era when mainstream feminism faced scrutiny for its tendency to center on the issues of white, middle-class women, Angelou "has acted as an eye opener exposing the assorted degrees of subjugation and oppression faced by black women" (Walia 109). For example, Angelou "develops a strategy of valorisation and confrontation" (Baisnee 55) through the examination of themes including sexual agency, economic survival, and community solidarity, highlighting issues that were frequently overlooked within the feminist discourse. In this manner, she established a framework to employ "the art of feminism" (Walia 109), acknowledging the complex nature of oppression and the essential role of intersectionality. Angelou's emphasis on the political importance of personal narratives impacted Black feminists, who aimed to affirm the lived

experiences of black women as a vital source of knowledge and empowerment. The study emphasizes the importance of autobiography as a form of resistance, demonstrating how telling personal truths can challenge predominant stories and inspire group action (*Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 16).

Moreover, the significance of Angelou's autobiography extends beyond the feminist discourse, positioning it as a crucial work within the African American literary canon. Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, imbued with symbolism and metaphor, transformed the landscape of black literature, demonstrating that narratives grounded in black culture and experiences could attain significant critical and commercial acclaim. Thus, while Braxton analyzes Angelou's work, she states that

[t]he narrative voice at work in *Caged Bird* is that of the older autobiographer who is not only aware of the journey but also enlarged by it, an achievement that is emphasized by the affirming nature of the work. In *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou undergoes the archetypal American journey of initiation and discovery. (*A Casebook*, 44)

Braxton argues that autobiography is influenced by the autobiographer's retrospective comprehension of their personal evolution, as exemplified in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where Angelou's introspective narrative voice illustrates the ways in which her past experiences inform her spiritual and intellectual growth. Viewed in this context, Angelou's autobiography goes beyond simple remembrance, providing deep reflections on the human experience, shaped by the significant process of self-exploration and validation. In examining Maya's journey, Angelou prompts readers to engage in a critical analysis of the overarching social forces that influence personal identities, urging them to interrogate and challenge these systems of power. For example,

her depiction of the black community in Stamps not only underscores the resilience of marginalized groups but also reveals the internalized oppression that may impede solidarity and progress. Through an examination of these complexities, Angelou offers a detailed perspective on the challenges and opportunities that are intrinsic to the quest for liberation.

By looking at the different ways that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has affected Black feminist thought, it is clear that the work is more than just a personal story; it is an important part of analyzing literature and culture. Angelou's intricate examination of identity, resistance, and structural oppression serves to highlight the experiences of black women while redefining the boundaries of autobiography as a means of social critique. This foundational text, however, should not be regarded as only an isolated accomplishment, but also "as an attempt to define a life work retrospectively and as a form of symbolic memory that evokes the black woman's deepest consciousness" (*Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 9). This chapter serves as the initial segment of a comprehensive autobiographical series that collectively delineates Angelou's experiences as a black woman confronting the intricacies of her era. Although *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* emphasizes the early experiences of Maya, revealing the difficulties of maturing in a racially-divided environment, it concurrently establishes a foundation for the ongoing investigation of black female identity (*A Casebook*, 79) and agency in Angelou's later writings.

The progression from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to *The Heart of a Woman* illustrates a notable change in narrative focus and thematic depth, indicating Angelou's increased involvement within the difficulties of adulthood, the expression of agency, and the convergence of personal and sociopolitical aspects. The narrative of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* primarily addresses endemic limitations, whereas the following discourse delves into the negotiation of agency within these constraints, thereby providing a broader understanding of survival,

motherhood, and self-determination. This progression facilitates a detailed examination of Black feminist praxis, emphasizing the relationship between personal experiences and systemic inequalities. Angelou's ongoing exploration of identity, vulnerability, and resilience in *The Heart of a Woman* expands upon the core themes established in her previous work, enhancing her portrayal of black womanhood as a complex and evolving experience. This transition establishes a foundation for a theoretical analysis of the text's contributions to Black feminist thought and its lasting sociopolitical relevance.

## Chapter II: Maya Angelou's Journey Through Activism and Transnational Black Feminism in *The Heart of a Woman*

### 2.1 Introduction

Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*, published in 1981, signifies an influential shift in her autobiographical series, progressing from the intimate developmental arc examined in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to a more momentous contribution in political activism and the broader African American pursuit for liberation. The fourth autobiography covers her life from her early to mid-30s, spanning the years 1957 to 1962. Beginning in Los Angeles, while Maya is raising her son Guy, she also becomes involved in the Black arts and civil rights communities where she later moves to New York to participate in the Harlem Writers Guild and Work for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She eventually moves abroad to Egypt, then Ghana, following her romantic relationship with a South African activist, Vusumzi Make. In Africa, Maya continues writing and working as a journalist, and steering through cultural, political and personal challenges. Angelou's development signifies the overarching path of her existence as she becomes extensively integrated into the Civil Rights Movement, Pan-Africanism, and the intellectual and artistic communities of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Among all the struggles she went through, Angelou starts off the autobiography in optimism stating, "I had to trust life, since I was young enough to believe that life loved the person who dared to live it" (*The Heart of a Women* 3). These words foreshadow the resilience that Angelou will build along her journey in this autobiography. In her review of Angelou fourth autobiography, Daily Alden captures how Angelou "deals largely with the vibrant years of the blacks' struggle for civil rights, a time when the black community was alive with rebellion and change" (697). The narrative presented in this autobiography functions as both a personal and collective recount, demonstrating how Black

women grappled with the intersections of race, gender, and activism amidst a period of significant revolutionary change.

Shifting from an independent struggle against racism and sexism into an important role in the collective struggle show the reason behind Angelou's political activity. Referring to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou retells her early years as a child who went through a period of resilience and personal growth while struggling with racial prejudice, sexual assault, and the difficulties of growing up as a black girl in the United States. Moving on to the fourth autobiography, in *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou broadens her story to cover a range of events consistent with the historical changes of the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, "the energy and support at the grassroots level was often supplied by female recruits" which encouraged black scholars, authors, and activists who became major forces determining the course of racial justice in the United States (*Women in the Civil Rights Movement*). As both an activist and an artist, Angelou found herself in the middle of these significantly transforming years, thus building important relationships with people like James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Abbey Lincoln, Cicely Tyson, and Eflia Sutherland, which shaped her perspective as well as highlighted black artists' part in political opposition. What is significant about Angelou's interactions with these figures is that because she is embedded within black feminism, she is endowed with the ability to highlight how the intersection of race and gender are critical sites of both oppression and resistance. As discussed, in contrast to predominant feminist movements that frequently centered on the experiences of white women, black feminism arose from the urge to confront the distinct challenges encountered by black women, who were often overlooked in racial justice and gender equality initiatives. Collins underscores the significance of black women who "have managed to do intellectual work" which "aimed to foster Black women's activism" (*Black*

*Feminist Thought* 3). In comparison, Angelou's work exemplifies this concept, as she actively engages in political struggles while also narrating them through the lens of a black woman. This approach ultimately emphasizes that the voices of women like hers are preserved and acknowledged, rather than being marginalized or disregarded.

Moreover, *The Heart of a Woman* interrogates prevailing narratives surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, which frequently emphasize male leadership and marginalize the critical roles played by black women. Scholar Elleke Boehmer comments on this idea by stating that post-colonial nations are "historically a male constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition" (22). Therefore, this perspective aligns with the marginalization of black women during the Civil Rights Movement. Despite their significant contributions, they have often received less recognition than their male counterparts, like the experiences of women in nationalist movements. As such, this connection stresses how there is a tendency to minimize women's contributions in historical movements, emphasizing the need for a more diverse historical narrative. Experiencing this, Angelou challenges and undermines these conventional representations by further showcasing black women as central figures in her narratives. She also focuses on the significant labor, resilience, and intellectual contributions of black female activists and writers, whose roles in reshaping the movement are often dismissed in prevailing historical narratives. For instance, Angelou's engagements with women associated with the Harlem Writers Guild, alongside her experiences in Egypt and Ghana related to the African liberation movement, illustrate the transnational aspects of Black feminism. Thus, in this autobiography, Angelou illustrates how black women were more than only participants in the movements but also took on leadership roles, like herself.

In addition to their labor being overlooked, *The Heart of a Woman* also delves deep into psychological toll black activist women overcome. What is meant by this is that the struggles of these women like Angelou, who juggle motherhood and political obligations while raising their children, mirrors the more general challenges encountered. In his review of the autobiography, Adam David Miller states while raising a black child, “beyond the brute struggle to provide, there must be the constant watchfulness to ensure that the child is not physically maimed or spiritually stunted” (48). This statement proves that male leaders sometimes oversaw how there was gendered responsibilities imposed on women in the movements. As such, Angelou’s dissent with emotional resilience, financial uncertainty, and the difficulty to maintain agency in such environments draws attention to the inherent injustice black women faced. Eventually, this chapter aims to contextualize how *The Heart of a Woman* analyzes Angelou’s interactions with black activists, artists, and intellectuals both mirrors and strengthens a black feminist consciousness through the lens of Black feminist thought. Her experiences exemplify the realities of black womanhood, activism, and artistic expression in the Civil Rights Movement and other liberation movements. Illustrating that the narratives of black women are not only an addition to historical discourse, but Angelou’s autobiographies also provide a framework for analyzing the intertwined challenges of race, gender, and political participation.

## **2.2 Maya Angelou’s Political and Intellectual Awakening: Intersections of Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement**

Being an engaged and active participant in the Civil Rights Movement, Angelou’s involvement with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and relationship with Harlem’s black intellectuals, embedded her at the intersection of black political ideology. While observing her experiences within these groups, she directly

acknowledged the importance of black women's labor, which solidified her dedication to criticizing both racial and gender oppression. Furthermore, Angelou's engagements with members of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement significantly enriched her perspective, where in terms of cultural and literary realizations of black identity, ultimately shaped her literary contributions. During the Harlem Writers Guild meeting at John Killen's house, Killen articulated the importance of Maya's contribution to the group stating "'Maya Angelou, show them you can take anything they can dish out' ... 'Maya, you've got a story to tell'" (*The Heart of a Woman* 43). This exemplifies that the guidance of influential figures, together with the emergence of black nationalist ideologies, played a significant role in shaping her developing political awareness. Through these interactions, Angelou obtained a significant understanding of the importance that literature, poetry, and art had in influencing the movement. In terms of racial justice, Angelou was well aware that black women needed to be elevated in both literary and political contexts. She had a devotion to expressing a political voice which became stronger as her artistic talent became more evident in literature and drama. In contextualizing *The Blacks* play Angelou states that "as a black woman married to a South African and raising a black boy, [she] should damn well understand the play before [she] started laughing at it" (*The Heart of a Woman* 203). She goes on to say that "and as for ridiculing the white men, at least they were going to put the play on, and all [she] could do was laugh at them" (*The Heart of a Woman* 203). Angelou further displays this by showing that *The Blacks* play is evidential by expressing how:

During the third reading, I began to see through the tortuous and mythical language, and the play's meaning became clear. Genet suggested that colonialism would crumble from the weight of its ignorance, its arrogance and greed, and that the oppressed would take over

the positions of their former masters. They would be no better, no more courageous, and no more merciful. (*The Heart of a Woman* 204-205)

Accordingly, by analyzing her work with the SCLC, her participation with the Black Arts Movement, her contacts with black women intellectuals, and the gender challenges she encountered, this chapter demonstrates how Angelou's experiences during this period were vital in confirming her dedication to black feminism. The changing conceptions of race, gender, and activism not only affected her journey but also helped to shape the larger view on black women, justice, and resistance. This autobiography celebrates black women's indispensable contribution to the struggle for equality while offering criticism of the restrictions imposed on them in political activities.

### **2.2.1 Angelou's Place in the Civil Rights and Black Feminist Movements**

Angelou's incorporation into the political and intellectual environment of the Civil Rights Movement marked a turning point in both her artistic output and personal life. Her interactions with prestigious black intellectuals and her work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) set the stage for a more significant participation with activism and black feminist ideas, as was already discussed. Though Angelou's involvement in these movements was dynamic, it changed from simply observing to dedicated involvement. The experiences she encountered in Harlem, her time spent as an expatriate in Ghana, and her increasing engagement with the African American community collectively led to her understanding that the struggles faced by black women cannot be adequately addressed within a wider civil rights framework without acknowledging their distinct experiences related to race, gender, and class oppression.

The closeness she had with the intellectual and activist community in Harlem was the main reason she engaged politically in these movements. In the midst of the emergence of the Renaissance, Nathan Irvin Huggins states that “the quest was intensified because of the general postwar uncertainties, because American intellectuals generally were displeased with the manifestations of American culture, and were themselves in search—in Paris and elsewhere—for themselves” (138). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Harlem emerged as a pivotal hub for radical black intellectual discourse, with Angelou actively participating in the vibrant community of intellectuals, artists, and activists who shaped this transformative period. She encountered major names, for instance, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Abbey Lincoln, Efuah Sutherland, and notable black nationalists who underscored the importance of self-determination and cultural pride. The relationships in question contributed significantly to Angelou’s comprehension of the structural obstacles encountered by black individuals, thereby reinforcing the idea that systemic racism is intrinsically related to inequality “under the oppression of industry and finance” (*Harlem Renaissance* 146). The influence of Harlem provided her with insights into the artistic dimensions of activism, wherein poetry, music, and literature emerged as vital instruments of resistance. Her engagement in these environments broadened her political awareness, compelling her to pursue activism that transcended the boundaries of artistic expression.

Over and above, Angelou’s involvement with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) alongside Martin Luther King Jr. marked a significant transformation in her position within the Civil Rights Movement. Within the origins of the movement, Aldon D. Morris asserts how “although the SCLC was officially incorporated to function in sixteen Southern states, it was clear from the beginning that the black community outside the South had an important role to play” (90). Influentially, in her role as the Northern Coordinator for the SCLC, she undertook

the responsibilities of “putting on affairs and sending out mailing lists and speaking and arranging speaking engagements to raise money” (*The Heart of a Woman* 103). This emphasizes that the movement’s accomplishments were not based only on community organizations and demonstrations within the South, but also depended significantly on the resilient activism, funding, and institutional support emerging from black communities outside the region. Northern activists, among them Angelou, were important figures that promoted funding, enhancing its message through various public speaking engagements, and applying political and economic networks to apply pressure on national leaders. Accordingly, Ewell Reagin states this adding that “the importance of systematic study of the SCLC’s involvement in Chicago was heightened by the intention that this, their first project in a northern city, would provide experience for similar projects in other northern metropolitan centers” (88). This interconnected activism illustrates that the pursuit of civil rights went beyond regional boundaries, resulting in a national attempt that required extensive participation and assistance.

Respectably, the Civil Rights Movement sought to eliminate the institutional racism that supported white supremacy in America; however, it also reflected numerous patriarchal hierarchies present in the mainstream society, thereby placing black women in a paradoxical position. Taylor states that “despite the fact that the most celebrated leaders of the modern civil rights movement were men, African American women participated at every stage in the struggle for justice and equality” (239). Black women, however, “played a pivotal role in the movement” (*Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement: 1960-1970*), spearheading voter registration initiatives, coordinating boycotts, and acting as strategists and educators. For example, in their attendance at the General Session of the United Nations, Angelou states that:

Abbey thought some men might join us. She knew Max would like to come along. Amece, Rosa's sister, knew two West Indian revolutionaries who would like to be included. If men joined us, we would make elasticized arm bands, and at the proper moment, the men could slip the black bands up their sleeves and stand with the women. That was the idea. No mass movement but still a dramatic statement. (*The Heart of a Woman* 175)

Yet, the black women's contributions were rarely recognized within the leadership frameworks of the movement. When it came to leadership roles, however, men still had all the authority to make decisions. Taylor further adds that "although Black women clearly had issues with male chauvinism, they could not abandon the civil rights struggle" (241). Being immensely dedicated to the movement, Angelou acknowledged the inherited conflict in advocating for freedom. This contradiction is clearly illustrated in *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya travels through the environments that require her labor yet simultaneously restrict her influence. The exclusion of women from leadership positions is not because they do not have the ability or the voice to do so, it is wholly due to the fact that a institutional problem where the movement maintains conformist gender roles, demanding women to sacrifice their visibility in the pursuit of common progression.

Angelou's experiences in the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement contributed to the development of a political identity that resonated with "'political actors' or 'messengers' aiming to craft a Black feminist 'message'" (*Black Feminist Thought* 245). For example, when she met Killens, he told her to "come to New York" and "be in the Harlem Writers Guild", which she interpreted the invitation as "definitely alluring" (*The Heart of a Woman* 169). Angelou further reciprocates that "since the entire power of the United States was arrayed in fury against the very existence of the Afro-Americans, we, members of CAWAH, would offer ourselves to raise money for, promote and publicize any gathering sincerely engaged in developing a just

society” (*The Heart of a Woman* 169). In this regards, Abdelmotagally states that “Angelou learned not to be a passive onlooker on the ordeal of the African-Americans and Africans in general but to be an active participant willing to reach solutions for such an ordeal” (88). Given these contributions, it is safe to say that Angelou was active in the movements. Furthermore, hooks highlights that black feminist thought arose as a direct reaction to the marginalization of black women’s experiences because “when feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 20). In this context, the sexism in the Civil Right Movement “marked the first time black people engaged in a struggle to resist racism in which clear boundaries were erected which separated the roles of women and men” (*Ain’t I A Woman* 18). Angelou’s literary and political contributions exemplify this viewpoint, showing that she is an active participant and an unbiased critic of the movements she was involved in. This autobiography demonstrates the intersectional awareness, where she emphasizes the experiences of black women as they overcome political and social resistance. Angelou progression as an artist in Harlem and a political activist and feminist intellectual showed her success within the movement. From an artist in Harlem to a political activist and feminist, Angelou’s development was not a simple yet, it was shaped with her journey, exposure to radical philosophy, and direct participation in movement-building. Her work in civil rights organizing exposed the ways in which black women’s labor was important but often underappreciated. Thus, her endurance strengthened her to a point of critically examining racial and gendered injustice, thereby articulating her as a major role in the continuous fight for black women’s independence.

## 2.2.2 Harlem Renaissance Influence and the Black Arts Movement

The intellectual and political emergence of Maya was significantly shaped by the artistic and literary community of Harlem, which historically supported the black radical thought and cultural expression. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s established a foundational framework when “the vanguard of young black writers and painters had moved to Harlem” (Beach 115) for the reformulation of black identity through various artistic expressions. In contrast, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 1970s built upon this legacy by making a direct connection between creative ventures and the goal to become politically independent. Beach states that “poetry, prose fiction, drama, and criticism written by African Americans during this period expressed a more militant attitude toward white American culture and its racist practices and ideologies” (130). By this statement, he means the Black Arts Movement embraced a confrontational approach by directly addressing white American culture, dismissing conformist ideas, and employing various forms of expression. Harlem thus served as a central point for these movements, and Angelou, deeply internalized in this cultural landscape, engaged with many of the most significant black intellectuals and writers of the time. The engagement with influential figures like James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Abbey Lincoln, and Amiri Baraka has great influence on her understanding of black identity, culture, and feminism, thereby influencing her activism and literary contributions.

Particularly significant in Angelou’s growth as a writer, Aunye Boone states how James Baldwin “played a key role” in shaping her approach to autobiography and strengthening the belief that personal stories may have political transforming power. The capacity to intertwine the personal with the political motivated Angelou to perceive her autobiography as transcending mere recollection of events and thus, it emerged as a significant act of resistance. During a period when

the narratives of black women were often overlooked, Baldwin's support was instrumental in her realization of the critical importance of recording the lived experiences of Black individuals. Baldwin played a key part in encouraging her to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, thereby positioning her as one of the first black women to produce a widely recognized autobiography (Boone). In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou reflects on Baldwin's piercing wit and dedication to attribute truth, which significantly "gave [her] heart" and shaped her literary expression (*The Heart of a Woman* 267). The critique of racial identity presented, akin to benevolence, serves as a structure for understanding how literature can effectively litigate existing hierarchies while also encouraging the dignity of black lives. Furthermore, Baldwin's consistent focus on black women in his novels illustrates that their struggles and resilience are not marginal to the black experience but rather a component of it. In his striking novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin embodies resilience through Hilda, a black woman who owns a restaurant in downtown New York:

She worked hard, she worked silently. I understood her reasons, although we never discussed them... She had, after all, taken on something quite formidable. With or without partners—and I didn't know whether she had any partners or not—for a lone Negro woman to open a Negro joint in downtown New York was the kind of challenge that could easily lead to reprisals... And this gave her a black dignity, hard to assail. (367-368)

In these lines, Baldwin recognizes various challenges faced by black women and the resilience with which they navigate these difficulties. This appreciation, evident in Angelou's subsequent writings, reinforced her comprehension that black feminism transcended a mere gendered reaction to oppression and constituted an essential element of the wider liberation movement.

In the process of developing her literary voice, Angelou was influenced by many figures, while although not mentioned in the autobiography, Amiri Baraka played a momentous role in exposing her to the radical ideologies associated with the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which served as an artistic extension of the Black Power Movement (*Culture and Black Power*). Baraka, recognized as a poet, playwright, and cultural critic, perceived art as a vehicle for revolutionary change. For example, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (originally published under the name of LeRoi James), present a fascinating argument for the necessity of black cultural production to renounce reliance on white authorization and instead advocate for a focus on black identity, struggle, and autonomy (Baraka 137). Baraka explains how jazz, the most important component of BAM, came to be:

Jazz, as it emerged and as it developed, was based on this new widening of Afro-American culture. In the best of jazz, the freedman-citizen conflict is most nearly resolved, because it makes use of that middle ground, the space that exists as the result of any cleavage, where both emotional penchants can exist as ideas of perhaps undetermined validity, and not necessarily as 'ways of life'... The blues as a fully integrated American experience was what was called 'classic' blues... Blues in its most significant form again returned underground, into the house parties and black cabarets that existed in the new black communities of the North, with all the wild 'un-American' abandon which was supposed to typify the pre-middle-class Negro society. Without the jazz players, blues would have existed as an American music, i.e., considered as such by the mainstream, only during the time of the classic singers. Before their time and after it, autonomous blues was the product of a subculture. (140-141)

Baraka argues how Black music encompassing spirituals and jazz transcends the realm of entertainment, while serving as a significant emotional and historical articulation of a community grappling with oppression, wherein the themes of Black pain, pride, survival, and protest intersect. In her autobiography, Angelou exemplifies this concept through her multifaceted roles as a singer, writer, and activist. Angelou writes “I began to write. At first I limited myself to short sketches, then to song lyrics, then I dared short stories” (*The Heart of a Woman* 23). Her experiences in Harlem and Africa illustrate her navigation of artistic identity, which is profoundly influenced by political struggle. The BAM principles connect with Angelou’s conviction of an “ethical movement” that narratives serve as a mechanism for liberation (Neal 30). In contrast to the Harlem Renaissance, which aimed for amalgamation within mainstream artistic environments, BAM emphasized the importance of self-sufficiency, evidentially in Neals’ words stating how “Black Arts group proved that the community could be served by a valid and dynamic art” (Neal 32).

While the Civil Rights Movement and the related artistic movements were frequently characterized by male superiority, Angelou’s interactions with such important figures show that the patriarchal standards that disregarded black women should not be generalized to all black men. The acknowledgment of her talent and the support for her voice played a crucial role in her evolution from an artist to a political thinker. Angelou depicts that there is an inclination of both civil rights and black nationalist movements to ostracize women. However, she also recognized the significance of male counterparts who supported and elevated black women, which is also a very important aspect. It is worth emphasizing that Angelou had a respect for her male counterparts as she mostly encouraged their attributions in her autobiography. While talking about the *Cabaret for Freedom*, she praises Hugh Hurd, an important actor and civil rights activist of the time, saying that “playing the title role,” he “reminded us all that although as black people we had a dignity and

a love of life, those qualities had to be defended constantly” (*The Heart of a Woman* 78). Significantly enhancing her acknowledgement of how literature, music, and performance contribute to the formation of black identity, stressing the importance of political engagement, Angelou’s engagement with the intellectual and artistic groups of Harlem served as an instrumental framework for the development of her black feminist perspective. As such, the literary salons, spoken word performances, and radical political gatherings in Harlem served as critical environments for Angelou to refine her voice, both as an artist and as an activist.

### **2.2.3 Angelou’s Work with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**

As she evolved from a literary figure and performer into a proactive civil rights organizer, Angelou’s involvement with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) alongside Martin Luther King Jr. represented a significant turning point in her political journey. Her participation in black activism was already well-established through her connections in Harlem; however, it was her position as the coordinator for the SCLC’s New York office that firmly entrenched her in the practical aspects of movement-building. For Angelou, SCLC serves as a clear illustration of how women were frequently assigned the responsibilities related to logistics, finance, and organization that were essential for the success of large-scale civil rights efforts. This is exemplified in her co-organizing *Cabaret for Freedom* which was a fundraising revue that was aimed at secure support for the SCLC:

Time, opportunity and devotion were in joint. Black actors, bent under the burden of unemployment and a dreary image of cinematic and stage Uncle Tom characterizations, had the chance to refute the reflection and at the same time, work toward the end of

discrimination. After *Cabaret for Freedom*, they would all be employed by suddenly aware and respectful producers. After Martin Luther King won freedom for us all, they would be paid honorable salaries and would gain the media coverage that their talents deserved. (*The Heart of a Woman* 81)

In her role as the Northern Coordinator of the New York office, Angelou was appointed with the critical responsibility of securing financial support, which necessitated her ability to maneuver through elite donor circles while also connecting with the working-class black communities that constituted the foundation of the movement.

Angelou's participation in the SCLC was distinguished by her ability to serve the purposes of the organization by drawing on her creative and cultural heritage. Her realization became a tool as interest and participation in theater, poetry, and narrative started to have enormous impact. Events for fundraising often included artists, musicians, and authors, and Angelou used her contacts to bring powerful cultural leaders into the fold. She gave place to important names in her autobiography, stating, for example, that "Harry Belafonte and Miriam Makeba were performing fund-raising concerts for the freedom struggle" (*The Heart of a Woman* 236). Her belief that social change needed not only deliberative changes and direct action but also an "understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures" (*Talking Back*, 201). Through combining the strategic with the creative, she increased the civil rights message's propagation. As such, her ability to negotiate in both political and artistic environments made her a particularly successful organizer. With these experiences, she shed light on the layered dynamics of movement-building, brought attention to the gendered hierarchies that often limit black women leadership, and amplified her dedication to prioritize black women's experiences within the realms of activism and literature. Angelou praises King and his goal as she pens:

We, the black people, the most displaced, the poorest, the most maligned and scourged, we had the glorious task of reclaiming the soul and saving the honor of the country. We, the most hated, must take hate into our hands and by the miracle of love, turn loathing into love. We, the most feared and apprehensive, must take fear and by love, change it into hope. We, who die daily in large and small ways, must take the demon death and turn it into Life. (*The Heart of a Woman* 64)

Her admiration for King and the movement occurred alongside the experiences that consolidated her conviction regarding the necessity of an intersectional approach to the liberation of black people, an approach that must tackle not only racial injustice but also the systemic oppression faced by women. The lessons she learned significantly shaped her goals as a writer, performer, and activist, establishing her as a key figure within the realms of black feminism and civil rights.

#### **2.2.4 Black Women Intellectuals and the Foundations of Black Feminism**

Experiences with the SCLC and the male-dominated leadership of the Civil Rights Movement strengthened Angelou's awareness of the critical necessity of black women's voices to be heard in both political activity and intellectual debate. This understanding drove her to interact more closely with black women intellectuals who were actively strengthening black feminism by means of their scholarly work, activism, and cultural contributions, thereby confronting racial and gendered injustice. Additionally, Angelou also made connections with important black feminists such as Lorraine Hansberry, Abbey Lincoln, and Audre Lorde as she negotiated the Civil Rights Movement and grew to know systematic injustice. Angelou asserts,

People I admired were doing important things. Abbey and Max Roach were performing jazz concerts on liberation themes. Lorraine Hansberry had a play on Broadway which told

some old truths about the black American Negro family to a new white audience... Belafonte included the South African singer Miriam Makeba in his concerts, enlarging his art and increasing his protest against racial abuse. (*The Heart of a Woman* 50)

Each in their own manner, contributed to the intellectual and cultural conversation challenging the patriarchal proclivity of black nationalist groups as well as the racial blind spots of white feminists. Through her contacts with these women, Angelou grew to consider black feminism not just as a criticism of exclusionary politics but also as a revolutionary paradigm insisting on the visibility, agency, and leadership of black women. Sociologist Rose M. Brewer asserts that “the writings of Black feminist intellectuals give us some new insight into how race and class might be viewed in the context of gender” while also suggesting “that scholarly work must accomplish a number of difficult theoretical tasks, especially around interrelationships” (35). By this she means that black female intellectuals like Angelou redefine our understanding of what racial and gender inequalities are.

Among the first inspirations for Angelou’s feminist awareness was Lorraine Hansberry, whose play “told some old truths about the black American Negro family” (*The Heart of a Woman* 50) in her well-remembered drama *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry was an academic who closely interacted with both feminist ideas and civil rights, more than just a writer. Her writings gently highlighted the gendered aspects of such oppression and challenged the racial and financial systems that limited black existence in America. To justify this, in Act one, Scene two, Hansberry portrays Beneatha as a black woman who expresses liberation while being ridiculed by Joseph Asagai, an African boy:

BENEATHA: You see! You never understood that there is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman—or, at least, there should be.

ASAGAI: (Shaking his head negatively but gently) No. Between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling. I have that for you ... Now even ... right this moment ...

BENEATHA: I know—and by itself—it won't do. I can find that anywhere.

ASAGAI: For a woman it should be enough.

BENEATHA: I know—because that's what it says in all the novels that men write. But it isn't. Go ahead and laugh—but I'm not interested in being someone's little episode in America or— (With feminine vengeance)—one of them! (ASAGAI has burst into laughter again) That's funny as hell, huh!

ASAGAI: It's just that every American girl I have known has said that to me. White—black—in this you are all the same. And the same speech, too!

Angelou considers the influence of Hansberry's work in *The Heart of a Woman*, especially how she created stories with black women's complexity at the front stage. By complexities it is meant that both the female characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Heart of a Woman* resist the gendered confines imposed by their partners, repudiating the idea that love or allegiance to a man's cause should dictate their identity. Angelou's disillusionment with Make began with him being against Maya playing in *The Blacks* as she was "chafed under Vus's attitude of total control" (*The Heart of a Woman* 206). It is no secret that although Maya had respect for Make and all he did for Africans, she envied his perspectives of being a wife, most particularly the wife of an "African leader" (*The Heart of a Woman* 205). Consequently, Angelou connected with Hansberry's assertion that literature had a political purpose, strengthening her belief that narrative was not just a tool for

creative expression but also a means of political opposition. The capacity of Hansberry to combine personal hardships with systematic criticism proved to Angelou that the personal was, in fact, political, a fundamental principle of black feminist theory.

From the viewpoint of *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou turns the autobiography into a melting pot of autobiographical elements, political criticism and cultural reflections to highlight the historical roles black women had in social movements. Through this intersection of literary expression, political engagement, and feminist ideology, the autobiography serves as a reflection of the wider intellectual movements of the period. Angelou reflects this political engagement in her conversation with Jack Murray, a male activist, says ““Miss Angelou, I assure you; you don’t have to convert the converted. Historically, the exploited, the enslaved, the minority, has had to strive harder and be more qualified just in order to be considered in the running. Stanley and I understand that. That’s why we are full-time volunteers at SCLC. Because we understand”” (*The Heart of a Woman* 69). This statement by a male activist builds a foundation for male counterparts supporting black women and therefore, the Black feminist thought. Collins asserts that “knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (*Black Feminist Thought* 257), focusing on the experiences of black women who offer a distinctive perspective for comprehending oppression. Angelou’s autobiographies effectively exemplify this theoretical framework because with such details of her personal journey, she embraces activism, artistic expression, and creative analysis. Consequently, Angelou’s work established a ground that mirrored her own evolution and enriched the wider discourse surrounding Black feminism.

On another note, Angelou’s political and literary views bolstered the belief that because black feminism was a radical reevaluation of mainstream feminism, it showed that it was not a

reaction to being excluded but, and interpretation of what freedom looked like. Looking back at why Black feminism emerged, it was because white, middle-class women tended to focus on the legal and economic rights of women, while black women wanted their voice heard and advocated for race, gender, class, and sexual equality. Shelley Winters, a white woman who donated money and time to SCLC states that “‘It’s not that I love Reverend King or all black people or even Harry Belafonte. I have a daughter. She’s white and she’s young now, but when she grows up and finds that most of the people in the world are black or brown or yellow, and have been oppressed for centuries by people who look like her, she’s going to ask me what I did about it. I want to be able to say, ‘The best I could’” (*The Heart of a Woman* 106). Reflecting on this, Angelou’s autobiography honors the white women’s resistance next to the black women fighting against systemic oppressions. Therefore, the autobiographies as a whole become a historical archive for the movement, capturing the voices and struggles of women who endeavored to ensure that the issues faced by black women were acknowledged as integral to the broader fight for justice.

### **2.3 Transnational Black Feminism: The Influence of Pan-Africanism and Global Solidarity**

In her activist journey, Maya’s move to Africa represents a significant turning point in her personal and political development. She becomes enlightened by the idea that black identity was beyond the limitations of the United States racial struggle and put her within a worldwide context of adversity. During the early 1960s, her experience in Africa placed her at the center of the Pan-African movement. She interacted with African nationalists, expatriate intellectuals, and fellow African Americans, all of whom aimed to establish a link between the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the wider decolonization initiatives occurring in Africa. Angelou proposes that “‘The actual earth of Africa was “black and strong like the girls back home” and glinted with gold and diamonds” (*The Heart of a Woman* 150). In this period of her life, she depicts a notable

ideological change, as she begins to understand the struggle for racial and gender liberation as fundamentally transnational. To serve as an example, although she was highly motivated by the radical spirit of Ghana's independence under Kwame Nkrumah, where she acknowledged that African women "supporting roles in African-American organizations has been an obstacle to Black political empowerment" (*Black Feminist Thought* 88). In this context, Collins further asserts that "the task now lies in fleshing out dialogues and coalitions with Black women who live elsewhere in the Black diaspora, keeping in mind that intersecting oppressions have left a path of common challenges that are differently organized and resisted" (*Black Feminist Thought* 235). In this statement it is understood that in order to perceive Black feminist internationalism, Angelou needs to understand the intertwined suffering of black women across the diaspora. As such, she comes across many literary and politically active people who have facilitated the connection between African and African American feminism, demonstrating that the struggle of black women transcended national boundaries. Influenced by her experiences in Africa, Angelou challenges confined notions of black liberation, advocating for an intersectional and global perspective that saw race, gender, and class as interconnected elements of oppression and resistance.

### **2.3.1 Angelou's Experience in Ghana and Its Impact on Her Political Identity**

During the early 1960s, Maya spent years in Ghana, where she increased her awareness of black identity and started to support the idea that a global system for racial and gender justice is extremely important. Her stay in Accra brought her close to influential members of the Pan-African movement, most famously Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, whose "ideological framework advocating [for] the unity and complete liberation of African people" connected with the ethical foundations of the American Civil Rights Movement (Sesanti 449). As a ray of hope for Africans as well as for those of the African diaspora trying to visit their ancestral country, "In

1957, under the dynamic and influential leadership of its first President Kwame Nkrumah—an ardent Pan-Africanist—Ghana became the first sub-Saharan African country to become independent” (Martin 528). Though Angelou was greatly inspired by Ghana’s nationalist passion and revolutionary ideas, she also saw personally the shortcomings of Pan-Africanism in tackling gendered injustice, which impacted her changing feminist awareness even more.

Through her contacts with Nkrumah and the citizens of Ghana, Angelou first encountered Pan-Africanist ideas in ways that radically changed her political viewpoint. In chapter 11 she states how “Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure were the Holy African Triumvirate which radical black Americans held dear, and we needed our leaders desperately. We had been abused, and so long abused, that the loss of one hero was a setback of such proportion it could dishearten us and weaken the struggle” (*The Heart of a Woman* 170-171). A strong supporter of African self-determination, unity and the “African hero” (*The Heart of a Woman* 310), Nkrumah supported the theory that the challenges of African countries and the situation of African Americans were closely entwined. Seeing black expatriates from the United States as essential to the post-colonial healing of Ghana, he urged their involvement in the country’s development. Thus, Nkrumah states that:

Black Power is part of the world rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, of the exploited against the exploiter. It operates throughout the African continent, in North and South America, the Caribbean, where ever Africans and people of African descent live. It is linked with the Pan-African struggle for unity on the African continent, and with all those who strive to establish a socialist society. (*Revolutionary Path* 426)

Along with other African American expatriates, Angelou further developed an interest in these discussions and interacted with the idea that the American civil rights struggle and African emancipation fit the same worldwide fight against white supremacy and imperialism.

Even so, in light of the uniting discourse relating to Pan-Africanism, Angelou promptly recognized the gendered constraints inherent in nationalist movements. Although Nkrumah and other male leaders advocated for black liberation, their understanding of freedom frequently emphasized the collective struggle of the nation, often at the expense of addressing the distinctive circumstances of women. In her gathering with African women, Angelou referred to Sojourner Truth's story in her autobiography mentioning:

I related the story of the six-foot-tall exslave speaking at an equal rights meeting of white women in the 1800s. That evening a group of white men in the hall, already incensed that their own women were protesting sexism, were livid when a black woman rose to speak. One of the town's male leaders shouted from the audience: 'I see the stature of the person speaking and remark the ferocious gestures. I hear the lowness and timbre of the speaker's voice. Gentlemen, I am not convinced that we are being addressed by a woman. Indeed, before I will condone further speech by that person, I must insist that some of the white ladies take the speaker into the inner chamber and examine her and then I will forbear to listen.' (*The Heart of a Woman* 162)

In Ghana, Angelou noted that women were integral to both the independence movement and the subsequent nation-building efforts, despite the persistent expectation for them to conform to traditional gender roles. Women participated in political organizations; however, their contributions were frequently characterized by their support for male leadership rather than having their own political agency. This feature can be seen in Iris Berger's review about African American

women where she indicates that “such issues as violence against women (both public and private), political inequality, poverty, human rights, and reproductive rights, these global movements inspired a new political environment in which women from the global South, including Africa, became equal, and sometimes dominant, voices in shaping the agenda of transnational women’s movements” (8). Within this context, Berger asserts that globally the feminist movement started focusing on issues like violence, inequality, and human rights, therefore reinforcing the voices of the women from the Global South and acknowledging them as equals and main participants. While Maya’s stay in Africa, she interacted with African women and participated in Pan-African politically active women, thereby widening her perspective on black womanhood beyond the American realm.

Her understanding that African nationalism does not automatically align with gender equality broadened her feminist perspective beyond the confines of the United States. Before her experience in Ghana, Angelou’s comprehension of racial oppression was predominantly influenced by the American context, where black women faced double jeopardy within the Civil Rights Movement and White feminism. Collins persists that “the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persists” (*Black Feminist Thought* 23). This observation can be related to the comparable challenges faced by African women which led Angelou to understand that gendered oppression is not merely a consequence of Western societies but rather a pervasive global issue that must be confronted in coexistence with racial and economic justice. Her ideological concordance with African feminists who were starting to criticize post-colonial governance, and the male-centric nationalist movements emerged. After she told the story of Truth, the African women were “proud of their sister, whom they had not known, a hundred years before” (*The Heart of a Woman* 163). Research conducted by academic

and activist Amina Mama in her work, *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*, has illuminated the ways in which the voices of African women have frequently been marginalized by male leaders, who prioritized their liberation over that of women in the context of national independence (70). Angelou's experiences in Ghana serve as the prototype for these critiques, as she meticulously documented the expectations placed on women to remain in the background, despite their important contributions to the formation of their nations.

### **2.3.2 Black Feminist Internationalism**

According to Angelou's perspective, black feminist internationalism was notable for her comprehension of economic injustice. Through her contacts with African women, she saw how colonialism had produced economic systems that disproportionately affected women, therefore restricting their access to political power, financial independence, and education. Through her experiences first in America, then in Africa, Angelou was certain that this situation was also multinational. Angelou supports this with her dialogue with Make:

'I was the first Pan-African Congress member to escape. But, Miss Angelou, when I left exile without water or food, I intended to reach Ethiopia. When I knew I was coming to the yew ess, I came with the intention of finding a strong, beautiful black American woman, who would be a helpmate, who understood the struggle and who was not afraid of a fight. I heard about you and you sounded like the one. I met Guy and was impressed with his manliness and intelligence, obviously your work, and then I saw you.' (*The Heart of a Woman* 138-139)

To support this idea, McDuffie and Woodard further affirm that "black women radicals not only found common ground through their associations with Malcolm but also how they forged a

community of black women radicals who shared a passion for black self-determination, the dignity of black womanhood, internationalism, and the study of comparative revolutions” (531). As such, Angelou is flabbergasted by the motivation in Malcom X’s words as she asserts in chapter 11 that “Malcolm’s words were harsh, but too close to the bitter truth to argue. Our people were alone. As always, alone. We could not expect protection from whites even if they happened to be our relatives. Slave-owning fathers had sold black sons and daughters. White sisters had put their black sisters in slave coffins for a price” (*The Heart of a Woman* 173). This realization strengthened her conviction that feminism had to be about more than simply reaching gender equality within one country; it also had to challenge the economic mechanisms that supported inequality all around. Whether through slavery, segregation, or post-colonial economies, black women’s labor was exploited. She thoroughly embraced a vision of activism that was intersectional and international, not considering the struggle for racial equality as something separate from gender or economic justice. Her travels in Africa helped her to become politically aware beyond the confines of the mainstream feminist movement and the male-dominated black liberation movement of her day. She saw that the fight of black women was vital to any movement aiming for actual emancipation, not peripheral.

Along with political and personal development, Angelou’s stay in Ghana was a significant turning point in the evolution of her black feminist perception. Her contacts with other African American expatriates in Ghana for example Alice Windom, who “took [her] heart the moment [she] saw her” (*The Heart of a Woman* 308) exposed her to more general global challenges and strengthened the need for an intersectional method of advocacy. Like many black feminist activists, “Windom made her way to this West African nation out of disgust with racism back home” (McDuffie & Woodard 524). Angelou grew to consider these movements as part of a far broader

war against colonialism, economic injustice, and patriarchal oppression, whereas the American Civil Rights Movement concentrated on eliminating racial segregation and systematic discrimination. Through interacting with a transnational network of academics and activists, Angelou gained a better awareness of how the struggle for black emancipation “adhered to and challenged prevailing gender roles” while also denying the “claims of women’s intellectual inferiority to men and demanded a voice for women in the global struggle for black freedom” (McDuffie & Woodard 525). Thus, she had to include solidarity with other oppressed peoples around the world, especially black women who confronted intersecting layers of marginalization, not limited by national borders.

In addition to her relationships with African American expatriates, Angelou’s stay in Ghana strengthened her views about the need for political intersectional activism, an idea that was developing among feminist and racial justice groups during that period. Crenshaw explains that “the concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (*Mapping the Margins* 1251-1252). In contrast to the predominant feminism of the 1960s, which primarily focused on the experiences of white middle-class women, and the Civil Rights Movement, which frequently marginalized the issues of black women, black feminist internationalism advocated for a structure that simultaneously addressed various forms of oppression. Crenshaw thus argues that to combat these many forms of oppression, black feminist internationalism arose, calling for a broader, more global perspective that puts Black women’s experiences front and center. In her trip to London, Maya met with many African women who also voiced their opinions about their disregard. For example, a Luo woman said ““Sister, you have asked, completely, my question. We, in Kenya, are women, not just wombs. We have shown during Mau Mau that we have ideas as well

as babies” (*The Heart of a Woman* 159). Another woman who was a lawyer from Sierra Leone stated that “‘In all of Africa, women have suffered’... ‘I have been jailed and beaten. Look, my sisters. Because I would not tell the whereabouts of my friends, they also shot me’... ‘Because I fought against imperialism’” (*The Heart of a Woman* 159-160). Angelou saw the relationship between anti-colonial movements and black feminism as she engaged with these African women. In terms of her experiences in Ghana, under Nkrumah’s leadership, the nation was a pioneer of Pan-Africanism, seeking to unify African states against neocolonial influence. Nonetheless, despite the transformative discourse of Pan-Africanism, “Pan-Africanist women employed a radical politics that sought to eliminate racism, sexism, and class discrimination” (Blain et al. 143). Angelou observed that gender inequalities continued to exist even inside nationalist groups “despite the central role black women have played as key political thinkers and leaders in various contemporary social movements, their contributions continue to be overshadowed” (Blain et al. 143). Women were instrumental in the struggle for independence; nevertheless, after Ghana’s achievement of sovereignty, women were mostly anticipated to revert to conventional gender roles. This scenario reflected the experience of black women in the United States Civil Rights Movement campaign, where they were often confined to administrative and supportive positions despite their essential contribution to organizing the campaign.

#### **2.4 Black Womanhood, Labor, and Literary Resistance: The Feminist Aesthetics of *The Heart of a Woman***

*The Heart of a Woman* further demonstrates a significantly personal and highly political exploration of black womanhood, highlighting the intersectionality of race, gender, labor, and resistance during the Civil Rights Movement. The autobiography is centered around Maya’s experience as a single mother as she navigates through the challenges of political activism while

prioritizing the well-being of her son. Her journey further illustrates the frequently neglected contributions of black women, including their roles in the private sphere and involvement in liberation movements, as they faced the concurrent difficulties of caregiving and social activism. In a theoretical manner, “Psychoanalytic feminist attention to the core constituents of civilization, to the nuclei of sexual difference and communal affiliation, helps explain the perpetuation of masculine power and enables feminist theorists to articulate possible correctives, challenges, routes of amelioration, or ethical interruptions...” (Zakin & Leeb). Mama supports this theory as she states that “the female subject of which feminist psychoanalysis speaks is located in culturally and historically specific notions of femininity which cannot be taken as given for all the many manifestations of femininity and womanhood that exist in a diverse and changing world, and the problem of ethnocentrism and universalism therefore remains” (129). There is shared criticism of the normative assumption between psychoanalytic feminism, Mama and Angelou’s experiences. On one hand, according to feminist psychoanalysis, there is no such thing as the “female subject” (Zakin & Leeb). It is rather impacted by contingent, historical, and cultural elements. On the other hand, Angelou questions the traditional works in the Civil Rights Movement period, which primarily emphasize male leadership, as she calls attention to the important contributions of black women, who were central to the movement’s sustenance at all levels.

The way in which black women’s activism is shown in *The Heart of a Woman* emphasizes the truth that activists struggled in families and communities where women organized, nourished, and gathered in addition to courts, streets, and political gatherings. Often without acknowledgment, black women worked beyond conventional lines of employment; they were strategists, teachers, mothers, and financial contributors. King gives historical evidence of the “backbones” who fought for racial uplift and equality:

Harriet Tubman led slaves to freedom on the underground railroad; Ida Wells Barnett led the crusade against lynching; Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker were guiding political spirits of the southern black efforts that gave birth to SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; the 'simple' act of Rosa Parks catapulted Martin Luther King to national prominence. Black women, therefore, did not experience sexism within the race movement in quite the ways that brought many white women to feminist consciousness within either civil rights or New Left politics. (54)

Additionally, in the midst of these activists, as a writer, performer, and activist, Maya also highlights how black women aptly used every place at hand to support their families as well as fight for justice. Angelou pens Tubman's significance and "how she stood on free ground, above a free sky, hundreds of miles from the chains and lashes of slavery" (*The Heart of a Woman* 162). It is not in question that Maya had always idolized her mother for her independence as a woman and as a mother. During her closing show, the one where she performed to raise money and support for the movement, she was reminded "of [her] Mother's advice: 'Since you're black, you have to hope for the best. Be prepared for the worst and always know that anything can happen'" (*The Heart of a Woman* 59). As such, Angelou captures the feminist aesthetics of resistance using literature, therefore recording how black women's contributions were crucial for the movement, but it is often omitted from popular history. By means of this chapter, this autobiography becomes a compelling feminist work reclaiming the story of black women's labor and political agency, thereby exposing their struggles and resilience at the heart of the debate on racial and gender justice.

### **2.4.1 Angelou as a Single Mother Navigating the Civil Rights Movement**

Adding to the perspective of political activism, this autobiography serves as a profound introspection into Maya's experiences as a single mother raising her son, Guy. In contrast to the prevailing feminist discourses of the period, which frequently depicted motherhood as a barrier to the empowerment of women, Angelou's narrative suggests that motherhood can be understood as a mode of activism. Her depiction of black motherhood speaks words within an encompassing structure of justice. In her autobiography, she questions prevailing myths by highlighting the emotional and political work that black mothers undertook during the Civil Rights Movement. An inherently political act requesting resilience, sacrifice, and a defiant attitude against oppression, Angelou expresses,

The black mother perceives destruction at every door, ruination at each 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. If she is unmarried, the challenges are increased. Her singleness indicates she has rejected, or has been rejected by her mate. Yet she is raising children who will become mates. Beyond her door, all authority is in the hands of people who do not look or think or act like her and her children. Teachers, doctors, sales clerks, librarians, policemen, welfare workers are white and exert control over her family's moods, conditions and personality; yet within the home, she must display a right to rule which at any moment, by a knock at the door, or a ring of the telephone can be exposed as false. In the face of these contradictions, she must provide a blanket of stability, which warms but

does not suffocate, and she must tell her children the truth about the power of white power without suggesting that it cannot be challenged. (*The Heart of a Woman* 40-41)

This statement asserts how the black mother must manage fear, insecurity, and oppression while constructing an image of a strong and stable mother. This internalized oppression is depicted by Du Bois who states that “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (3). Angelou articulates this statement wherein her maternal self is caught between an internally endorsed identity and an externally imposed role shaped by racialized regulation. Furthermore, this characterization of the black mother is portrayed by Nash stating that the “black motherhood is cast as powerful, strong, capacious, creative, and spiritually rooted, as an act of life-affirmation staged in (or against) a cultural moment that seeks to relegate black bodies to the space of death” (*The Political Life of Black Motherhood* 703). In her depiction of single black motherhood, Angelou broadens the conversation surrounding feminism and civil rights, interrogating conventional ideas of leadership by emphasizing the essential contributions of black mothers in upholding the movement.

Angelou’s double life as a mother and activist demonstrate the expectation for black women to manage several responsibilities with little institutional support. She narrates the emotional and financial challenges of single parenthood while being deeply engaged in political activism. During her political engagement, where she met Make, her husband, Guy, was the major reason, besides politics, that made her marry him. She states, “Guy would have the chance to have an African father. There could be no greater future for a black American boy than to have a strong, black, politically aware father. His being African would add an enriching spice” (*The Heart of a Woman* 140). The contradiction between individual accountability and social dedication is a

persistent motif in her work, highlighting the distinct responsibilities faced by black women who aimed for the demolition of oppressive structures while trying to protect their children from its effects. Siphokazi Koyana adds that Angelou married “because her need for a spouse is linked to her desire for a male role model for her son, by successfully raising Guy to be an independent, balanced, and well-rounded son, she proves that despite prevailing myths, the father’s presence is not always necessary in the consolidation of identity” (42). Her representation of parenting contrasts with prevailing stereotypes that often characterize activism as a male sphere, where males are not constrained by domestic obligations. Angelou’s experiences as a mother and an activist illustrate that, for black women, the struggle for justice was not only a political concept; it was also very personal and inherently linked to their survival as mothers.

Motherhood, as depicted in this autobiography, criticizes conventional feminist beliefs that often overlook the challenges faced by black women. In the second wave of feminism throughout the 1960s and 1970s, white feminist activists often saw motherhood as a constraining and patriarchal institution, contending that actual freedom required independence from domestic responsibilities. Koyana explicitly states that “Angelou’s experiences as a working-class mother ‘demythify’ the socially accepted white notions of domesticated motherhood, the supremacy of the nuclear family structure, and the blissfulness inherent in the institution of marriage” (35). The perspective denounced several middle-class white women restricted by conventional gender norms, although it neglected to represent the realities of black women, whose motherhood has historically been influenced by the brutality of slavery, economic exploitation, and systematic neglect. In that sense, with everything that Angelou tried to accomplish as a black single mother, she in fact embodied her mother, Vivian, as she too rejected the “racially and economically oppressed women’s motherwork” (Koyana 37) and redefined the concept of being a family. It can

be argued that black women were compelled to engage in a struggle to protect their children from racialized violence, all the while striving to tear down the systems of oppression encircling them, even though they faced the harsh reality of not being able to reject motherhood in their quest for personal liberation. Angelou's narrative contests these restrictive feminist viewpoints by asserting that motherhood was not an obstacle to activism but rather an essential component of it.

#### **2.4.2 The Significance of Black Women's Labor in the Movement**

As previously touched on, this autobiography persuasively highlights the significant yet often neglected contributions of black women to the Civil Rights Movement. By highlighting the crucial roles played by black women in organizing, strategizing, and sustaining activism, Angelou challenges the dominant narrative of the movement as primarily male-driven. This discussion is stated in chapter 11, where Angelou says "The Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage had its second meeting at Abbey's luxury penthouse apartment on Columbus Avenue. Several weeks before, we had agreed on a charter, a policy statement and a name: CAWAH. It sounded exotic" (*The Heart of a Woman* 169). Hence, Belinda Robnett adds that despite being "channeled away from formal leadership positions and confined to the informal level of leadership" (1676), black women worked actively behind the scenes to establish the essential structural foundation for the effective operation of the movement. Although the work and leadership in general were quite significant, Robnett states that "[black women] do not adequately answer the question, Who, on a daily basis, provided the local leadership necessary to bridge, extend, amplify, and transform the movement's message for potential recruits? Women, as bridge leaders, performed this task in the civil rights movement" (1688). Both Angelou's autobiography and Robnett's analysis reimagine the movement as a joint, often feminine, aspiration that was shaped by the determination, ambition, and strategic brilliance of black women, rather than as a single male-led campaign. By penning

her life, Angelou is not only telling her experience but also giving voice to women who have not been seen or heard.

The way Angelou presents her own work as a fundraiser and organizer reflects the historical efforts made by women such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Septima Clark, who was regularly underappreciated yet were important in helping movements grow. In *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, Barbara Ransby emphasizes how Baker, a major strategist and mentor to many civil rights activists, opposed the male-dominated model of leadership “that belittled the seriousness of their contributions, resisting models of organizing that placed men and men’s work at the center, and carving out public identities that focused on singular charismatic figures instead advocating for community organizing and collective decision-making as leaders, strategists, and public intellectuals—identities that were generally reserved for men.” (4-5). Angelou’s seeking of activism and the way she guarantees women’s active participation and contributions reflect Baker’s ideology where she states that “the newly founded organization included dancers, teachers, singers, writers and musicians. Our intention was to support all black civil rights groups” (*The Heart of a Woman* 169). While men were frequently the public face of the movement, women were its operational force; Angelou’s annoyance with the gendered power structures within civil rights groups mirrors the larger conflicts that Baker asserts as to the fact “that black women had to bolster the ego of the male” (Ransby 311).

Apart from the legal structure of civil rights groups, Angelou emphasizes the mental and domestic tasks black women did to support activity. She shows how women in the movement were expected not just to organize but also to care for their families, assist their male colleagues, and preserve the emotional stability required for group resistance. Angelou further adds in her discussion about CAWAH:

The charter, as drawn up by Sarah Wright and signed unanimously by the membership, stated that since the entire power of the United States was arrayed in fury against the very existence of the Afro-Americans, we, members of CAWAH, would offer ourselves to raise money for, promote and publicize any gathering sincerely engaged in developing a just society. It further stated that our members, multitalented, would agree, after an assenting vote, to perform dance concerts, song fests, fashion shows and general protest marches. (*The Heart of a Woman* 169)

Collins referred to this idea by explaining that “Black women see the unpaid work that they do for their families more as a form of resistance to oppression than as a form of exploitation by men” (*Black Feminist Thought* 46). Thus, through her work, Angelou confirms this truth by demonstrating how equally important women’s emotional fortitude and dedication to their families were as public activity accumulated recognition for them. Through centering black women’s work, Angelou recovers a past too often lost or ignored. She presents wider picture of the basis of the movement, therefore subverting the conventional civil rights narrative that gives prominent personalities and heroic male leadership priority. Her autobiography offers a personal narrative as well as a more general criticism of the ways black women’s work has been methodically underappreciated in society at large and in activism.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Documenting Angelou’s personal and political journey, *The Heart of a Woman* serves as a significant black feminist text, while emphasizing the foundational contributions of black women to activism. Highlighting the ambivalences between the pursuit of racial justice and the ongoing marginalization of women within the movement, Angelou’s experiences as a single mother,

activist, and writer provide an important examination of the gendered structures in the Civil Rights Movement. Angelou portrays gendered activism emphasizes black feminism's need as a political force apart from both mainstream feminism and black nationalism. In this regard, The Civil Rights Movement often reflected patriarchal systems that disregarded women, even as it aimed to fight racial inequality. Although seldom recognized, women's experiences in groups like the SCLC exposed their importance. Thus, Angelou's autobiography chronicles the efforts of women who planned, fundraised, housed, and handled the logistical details, allowing major events to take place. Through centering this sometimes-disregarded labor, Angelou questions the dominant narratives of the Civil Rights Movement that give charismatic male leaders top priority while neglecting the group effort that maintained it.

In addition to its historical importance, *The Heart of a Woman* serves as a literary work that utilizes autobiography as a means of feminist resistance. In their notable book entitled *Names We Call Home*, Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi proclaim that "autobiography illustrates why racial identity formation occurs at the intersection of a person's subjective memory of trauma and collective remembrance of histories of domination" (xii). Angelou's capacity to integrate personal narrative with extensive political analysis illustrates the influence of storytelling in the formation of historical memory. Towards the end, when Maya moves from Egypt to Ghana, she remembers her grandmothers' words "'Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more'" (*The Heart of a Woman* 306). She further articulates "the loneliness of women who would never know appreciation or a mite's share of honor... Every ill I knew at home, each hateful look on a white face, each odious rejection based on skin color, the mockery, the disenfranchisement, the lamentations and loud wailing for a lost world, irreclaimable security, all that longonerous journey to misery, which had not ended yet, had begun just below our plane" (*The Heart of a Woman* 306).

Not only does she portray her experiences, but she also employs them to highlight the pervasive circumstances that black women have faced and resisted. She argues that the lives of black women are essential for understanding the distinction of racial and gender oppression and are deserving of recognition. The autobiography does not only contest the notion that activism is confined to public arenas; instead, she further emphasizes that resistance is integrated into daily lives of black women who embrace encompassing activities such as child-rearing, artistic creation, and political organization.

In Angelou's fourth autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, she presents herself as an activist and feminist but also prepares the ground for the next part of her journey in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. Angelou is now beyond the borders of the United States and enters into the heart of the African diaspora, where she further delves deep into the concepts of belonging and alienation as a black woman in Ghana. Within acknowledging the wider historical elements of displacement and Pan-African solidarity, she starts to perceive the black identity not only through the prism of American racial politics, which represents a significant turning point in her political and intellectual evolution. In her experiences in Ghana, the themes of Black feminist internationalism expand on the ones presented in *The Heart of a Woman*. Similar to their African American counterparts, African women also encounter challenges of being single mothers, activists, and writers while navigating through patriarchal systems. Eventually, in the fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou will continue her journey examining the constraints of nationalism, further understanding the black liberation struggles through a more global perspective. Through these acknowledgements, she addresses the complexities of inherited diasporic identity, evoking her to touch on African and African American unity and tension. On the whole, she illustrates the transition from national to transnational black

identity in Black feminist thought, which increasingly acknowledges the intersectional struggles of black women worldwide.

## Chapter III: Diaspora, Belonging and Black Feminist Sisterhood in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*

### 3.1 Introduction

Maya Angelou's fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, continues to add depth to her intellectual and political progression by amplifying her analysis of the national scope of the United States to widen her view of the African diaspora. Adding to the fundamental observations in *The Heart of a Woman*, while penning the importance of Black feminism within liberation movements, Angelou address issues such as diaspora identity, belonging, and sisterhood in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. Covering her life form approximately age 34 to 37, the autobiography is set in Accra, Ghana, from 1962-1965. During this period, Angelou searches for her African culture and ancestral roots within her political lifestyle. Along with many others, she finds herself among African American expatriates, intellectuals, and artists who are also searching for their identity, belonging, and collective memory. She explores what it is like to be African American on African soil, while working as a journalist and engaging in discussions of black identity and diaspora. The autobiography ends with Maya returning to the United States as a black women grounded in her identity, and intensified by her diasporic journey.

Looking at the bigger picture, the autobiography emerges at a specific period in the history of global decolonization and the intellectual cataclysm of Pan-Africanism. Under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, "who had a vision of a liberated and united Africa," Ghana had gained its independence in 1957 (Martin 75). Martin further explains Nkrumah's beliefs that "African revolution, which included the liberation of the masses from international and domestic capitalist exploitation, was a prerequisite to adopting the best economic path for Ghana: socialism." (75). Namely, Angelou illustrates the indecisiveness expressed by Ghanaians towards the African

Americans, who were often seen as outsiders. She quotes, “the need to believe in Africa’s maternal welcome was painfully obvious. They didn’t want to know that they had not come home, but had left one familiar place of painful memory for another strange place with none” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 91). Angelou points out that while Ghana welcomed the symbolism of the diaspora, the substantial inclusion of African Americans into the society proved to be complex. Although Nkrumah’s socialism aimed for international black solidarity, it greatly emphasized national sovereignty, leading to a doubtfulness towards foreigners, even those of African descent. However, putting this aside, in the newly established sub-Saharan African country, Angelou gained further acknowledgment of black identity outside of her experiences in the United States. Accordingly, her autobiography mirrors the larger diasporic search for home and solidarity in spite of postcolonial difficulties in Africa. In this context, Angelou illuminates both the difficulties and the unity as she portrays relationships within the diaspora by challenging how race, gender, and culture connect. This exposure is witnessed by the many experiences she has with black people, especially with the black women that shed light on their importance in preserving the culture and political change.

Contextually, this chapter argues that Angelou’s feminist consciousness intensifies, adding to the previous emphasis on the important contributions of black women to liberation movements, further extending them to the lengths of transnational perspectives on cultural reclamation. The most essential example of this is her interaction with Efua Sutherland, who embodies an ideal of black womanhood specified by intellectual complexity, cultural upkeep, and political engagement, thus opposing the American-centric perspectives on feminism and activism. This chapter also argues that Angelou’s diasporic experiences are influenced by her involvement with African women activists and intellectuals who are crucially important in establishing the

transnational Black feminist framework that values women's autonomy in their search for justice and decolonization. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates the lengths to which *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* goes beyond being only an autobiography but also a narrative voicing Black feminist internationalism, exhibiting the bigger picture of liberation embedded by the contributions of black women throughout the diaspora.

### **3.1 African Diaspora and Global Black Feminism**

From a Black feminist perspective, Angelou's life experiences in Africa showcase a notable re-evaluation of the concept of home. Although the aim to reinstate Africa as an ancestral homeland demonstrates a more amplified diasporic urge for connection, it additionally unveils the difficulties and discrepancies associated with the idea of belonging. However, while highlighting the idea of home, instead of romanticizing the idea of Africa only as a place of origin, it is important not to overlook the complications of historical trauma, loss, and displacement. To exemplify, bell hooks in her book, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* states how "historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension" (42). By means of this, hooks articulates that in acknowledging the "homeplace," one has to understand that it becomes beyond the borders of the private sphere and into the realms of political significance that serve as an affirmation and restoration of black people. Thereby, this becomes an important configuration to analyze Angelou's understanding of homeplace in Africa. As such, it is crucial to define home not only as a stable geographical site but also as a dynamic space engrained with emotional and political importance.

Angelou further explores the intricacies of her diasporic identity by reflecting on her journey to Ghana, which can be interpreted as a literal return to the African continent. Yet, this return is more than just returning home, it is an attempt to reconnect with her ancestral roots. Angelou explains this by stating “[she], or any Black from the diaspora, could really return to Africa. [They] wore skeletons of old despair like necklaces, heralding [their] arrival, and [they] were branded with cynicism” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 76). While acknowledging her symbolic ties to Africa, she also articulates the important history of oppression, slavery, and struggle proclaiming that “in America [they] danced, laughed, procreated; [they] became lawyers, judges, legislators, teachers, doctors, and preachers, but as always, under our glorious costumes we carried the badge of a barbarous history sewn to our dark skins” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 76). This reflection illustrates that the African diaspora cannot only be defined by physical displacement but by the continuous struggle to integrate a fragmented identity.

Within this context, Angelou conceptualizes Africa through ancestral memory, whose “members of a diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land” (Palmer 29) characterized by the alienation caused by centuries of displacement and racial oppression. Through the concept of what and where homeland is, the featured dichotomy focuses on the psychological stress between belonging and alienation. Regarding this, Palmer further argues that “members of diasporic communities also tend to possess a sense of ‘racial,’ ethnic, or religious identity that transcends geographic boundaries, share broad cultural similarities, and sometimes articulate a desire to return to their original homeland” (29). Consequently, the collective memory of the African people’s historical trauma, such as the transatlantic slave trade and colonial exploitations, constructs Angelou’s experiences of dislocation while also foregrounding her search for cultural

reclamation and solidarity. On another note, the formation and dissent of racial, gendered, and national identities within the African diaspora are highlighted by the clash between alienation and nationalist unity. Angelou's awareness through Black feminist thoughts and decolonial solidarity ideas broadens a progression that highlights the interrelated struggles against racial injustice, colonialism, and patriarchy. In examining decolonial feminist theory and transnational Black feminist concepts, the similarities and differences between Angelou and other African women activists' struggles become apparent. From this Black feminist viewpoint, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* expresses a shared empowerment, political solidarity, and historical memory while recalling a personal quest for belonging.

### **3.1.1 Reviewing the Concept of 'Home' Through a Black Feminist Lens**

As a symbolic act of diasporic return, Maya's visit to Ghana not only represents a physical move but also a determined one in an act of pursuit to reclaim what has traditionally been seen as the ancestral homeland of black people. However, this pursuit is filled with many emotional turbulences, as Maya needs to balance her internalized perception of Africa with the realities of postcolonial Ghana. As for her earlier experiences with race, gender, and belonging within the American framework, this autobiography serves as an enhanced piece of work that examines the concept of home from a Black feminist and diasporic perspective. Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley state that Africa as an idea of home is contemplated as "many members of this diaspora see themselves as an oppressed 'nation' without a homeland, or they imagine Africa as their (future?) home" (7). Ultimately, to further contribute to the wider perspective of feminist and diasporic work, Lemelle and Kelley accentuate that "gender offers perhaps the freshest and most exciting possibilities for the study of diasporic political and cultural movements" (6). In relation

to this, Angelou adds a new perspective to this study while serving as a threshold that challenges essentialist notions of origin and belonging.

Also, in Paul Gilroy's book, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, he addresses the importance of diasporic writing. Consequently, through his lens, he pinpoints an important aspect by stating that recounting diasporic stories "plays a special role, organizing the consciousness of the 'racial' group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity-the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity" (198). It is emphasized that this aspect is essential because it leads us to further understand Angelou's experience as it underlines the depths of migration, hybridity, and especially the absence of a concrete homeland resulting from slavery and forced relocation. Maya is left to confront her idealization of Africa due to the alienation and cultural distortion. In one instance, Maya is on her way to Koforidua, a town northeast of Dunkwa, where she is trying to find a place to stay. She stops a woman named Foriwa and tells her that she is "a stranger looking for a place to stay," leaving the woman awfully confused, who replies, "Stranger? You are a stranger? No. No" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 99). While Angelou goes on to explain how "to many Africans only Whites could be strangers. All Africans belonged somewhere, to some clan," she still feels like she is not considered as a person with a home, saying she is "not from there" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 99). As such, Maya explains to the woman that she is from Accra, and the woman smiles, saying, "Oh, one Accra. Without a home" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, 99-100). Through her lens, we see the truth that the same skin tone does not guarantee cultural affinity or reciprocal acknowledgment. Although Maya expects an immediate friendship with the people she meets, she does not consider the

indifferences or national apprehension, which reveals the fragility on which diasporic homecoming is often imagined.

Serving as a symbolic homeland for Maya, Africa becomes infused with the longing for a spiritual and historical understanding that focuses on ancestral return and cultural affiliation. On her trip to Koforidua, Maya stops at Cape Coast and meets a small black woman names Foriwa who takes Maya to meet with her husband to ask for his help to find a place to stay overnight. While the three talk, Foriwa and her husband, Kobina, come to the conclusion that Maya is from the Bambara tribe, saying, “She is Bambara. I could have told you when Abaa first brought her. See how tall she is? See her head? See her color? Men, huh. They only look at a woman’s shape” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 101). Maya goes on to introduce herself; however, she does not want to tell them that they are wrong about her tribe because “at that moment [she] didn’t want to remember that [she] was an American” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 102). The feeling of being at home filled her with excitement because maybe for the first time, she had been accepted as an African, “not a Ghanaian, but at least accepted as an African. The sensation was worth a lie” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 102). Through these words she announces the desire and essence of the homeland. On another note, her assertion aligns with Brent Hayes Edwards’ concept of “*décalage*” (13) where black intellectuals and artists try to find their identity through their connection and cultural memory, rather than through concrete, fixed geographies:

This black diasporic *décalage* among African Americans and Africans, then, is not simply geographical distance, nor is it simply difference in evolution or consciousness; instead it is a different kind of interface that might not be susceptible to expression in the oppositional terminology of the ‘vanguard’ and the ‘backward’... It is a changing core of

difference; it is the work of ‘differences within unity,’ an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed. (14)

After arriving in Ghana, Maya is in search for a lost homeland which might heal her wounds of racism she experienced in the United States. Primitively, she casts Ghana a sense of familiarity, which is thus driven by ancestral memory and diasporic longing. This is also argued in Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, where he undermines “the continuing aspiration to acquire a supposedly authentic, natural, and stable ‘rooted’ identity” (31), just like how Angelou does through her depiction of Ghana as “home,” which ultimately desires to resolve a generational divide caused by slavery and colonialism.

Looking from the gendered perspective, the traditional idea of home in Angelou’s autobiography becomes further complicated. Referring to hooks’s idea of the “homeplace” takes on a strong theoretical foundation. According to hooks, the home is more than just a place to live; it is also a site of resistance, where black women are “making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world” (*Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* 42). Given this perspective, Angelou’s search for a home in Ghana becomes less of a reclamation for physical territory and more about building a sense of emotional and cultural belonging. This desired belonging becomes a realm where black women, artists, and political activists come together. Therefore, the concept of “home” for black women should not only be passed down from generation to generation but also acknowledged in a political and emotional manner.

Consequently, the essentialist attachment to the homeland as an inherited or predetermined space for developing an identity has long been contested by feminist critics. Carole Boyce Davies, for example, contends that in the construction of the concept of home, it is realized that “‘home’ (as expressed in a wide range of feminist theoretical and creative works) is one of the principal sites of domination and conflict for women” (49). This perspective is exemplified in Angelou’s autobiography as she illustrates Ghana as a metaphorical sanctuary and historical coherence while also being confronted by the limitations of belonging. Maya internally conflicts with herself, going back and forth between thrill and rejection and thus reflecting on “every moment in Ghana [that] called attention to itself and each social affair was self-conscious... ‘Here I am, Maya Angelou, dancing in Africa. I know I’m having a good time’” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, 147-148). In such disparity between identity and assertion, Angelou highlights the complexities of diasporic subjectivity, especially for black women who are influenced by intersecting histories of racial, gendered, and cultural deficiency.

To boot, collective memory and historical traumas ground Maya’s diasporic longing. Like many African Americans who return to Africa as expatriates, Angelou’s journey is also linked to the memory of the slave trade and the effect it had on families, cultures, and spiritual heritages. For example, in her stop at Cape Coast, Angelou states “Cape Coast Castle and the nearby Elmina Castle had been holding forts for captured slaves. The captives had been imprisoned in dungeons beneath the massive buildings and friends of mine who had felt called upon to make the trek reported that they felt the thick stone walls still echoed with old cries” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 97). This can also be depicted in Marianne Hirsch’s idea of “postmemory” which she describes as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the

stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (*Postmemory*). Given this comment, the trauma of historical events, like slavery, has caused the identities of later generations to inherit their emotional and cultural weight. Maya points this out in her following experience, saying, “I needed to get away from Africa and its cache of subtle promises and at least second-hand memories. I blamed the entire continent and history for my malaise when the real reason was more pointedly specific and as personal as a migraine” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 148). This goes to show that her connection to Africa operates within this postmemorial context. Thus, as she becomes emotionally committed to re-narrating the stories that were obliterated, her motivation to reclaim becomes apparent. Yet, returning to her homeland shows that historical memory is not enough to bridge the structural and cultural division caused by centuries of racial and colonial traumas. As such, the feeling of belonging and alienation comes together as an unresolved fulfillment. Through her Americanness as a national identity and a cultural formation, Maya continues to shape how she is regarded and the way in which she views herself, regardless of Ghana permitting her to engage in African political and cultural life. Although she is home, the feeling of alienation never leaves her side, exemplifying the complexities of diasporic black identity.

### **3.1.2 Belonging vs. Alienation**

Within the diasporic atmosphere, Angelou’s reflection of the concept of home as a place of refuge and rupture leads to a deeper examination of the ideas of belonging and alienation. In the autobiography, Angelou pens black women, profoundly herself, seeking friendship and acceptance in postcolonial Ghana while ultimately confronting the inconsistencies in her identity. This can be exemplified by referring to her comment where she blames the “entire continent and history for [her] malaise when the real reason was more pointedly specific and as personal as a migraine” (*All*

*God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 148). On one hand, Maya is emotionally drawn to Africa as a motherland; however, on the other hand, the political and cultural differences she faces start to blur the lines between her American and African identities.

Her journey to find a deeper connection with these ancestral roots, her American accent, Western clothing, and behavior differentiated her. In her visit to the Ghana Broadcasting office, Maya encounters a receptionist lady who dismisses her while Maya states her familiarity, contending that they could have been relatives. She states that “her scorn was no different from the supercilious rejections of Whites in the United States” (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 35). She resented this, stating, “the questions temporarily sobered my intoxication with Africa” (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 35). This instance shows that racial similarity does not automatically initiate political and emotional unity, especially when the diasporic return is complicated with the privileges of the West and historical disconnect.

Despite feeling alienated, there were still moments of belonging throughout her stay in Ghana. We can see instances of these in the moments where she gives us a taste of the culture in her interactions with Ghanaian intellectuals, teachings, and the friendships she makes. Significantly, her involvement with the African American expatriate community becomes the most essential source of support and way to authenticate her identity. After her encounter with the receptionist, Maya concludes, stating, “for a few days, I examined whether in looking for a home I, and all the émigrés, were running from a bitter truth that rode lightly but forever at home on our shoulders” (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 35). This group of expats shares the same diaspora perspective since they all share the same struggle with the paradox of being and not belonging at home in Africa. Gilroy adds to this perception as he characterizes the diasporic identity as having “routes” rather than “roots,” and thus “the need to locate cultural or ethnic roots

and then to use the idea of being in touch with them as a means to refigure the cartography of dispersal and exile is perhaps best understood as a simple and direct response to the varieties of racism which have denied the historical character of black experience and the integrity of black cultures” (112). To interpret it as such, belonging does not emerge from reductionist views linked to land or blood; rather, it emerges from a shared historical background and experiences.

Hence, the juxtaposing feeling of inclusion and exclusion ultimately drives Angelou to redefine the meaning of belonging. The meaning of belonging for Angelou becomes more than the destination but rather the journey within, balancing internalized cultural norms and experienced realities, especially between political unity and personal alienation. Sociologist Avtar Brah states in *Cartographies of Diaspora* that,

Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. Here, tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time. What is at stake is the infinite experientiality, the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities. (205)

By this, Brah means that the outcomes of displacement and hybridization are caused because diaspora is a lived and challenged place where people’s intersecting identities are not formed by fixed origins but rather through the dynamics of social standards and cultural recollections.

Angelou embodies this diasporic space as a mother, a writer, an African American woman, and an expat in Africa, all while trying to find herself in something more persistent than political ideology.

Ghana was where Angelou felt a sense of both belonging and alienation. Her intention to depart from Ghana occurred after Guy got into a relationship with a woman and had a “withdrawal,” from his mother (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 152). She ends her Ghana experience stating, “here in Ghana where neither of us was threatened by racial hate, where we both had separate and reasonably good lives, where it seemed we could both be happy, he had moved beyond my reach and into the arms of a cradle robber” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 152). Afterwards, Angelou travels to Berlin and meets “a group of sophisticated New York actors, some of whom were [her] friends” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 154). Her friends ask her about her experiences in Africa and further have discussions about Black Americanism. Afterwards, Angelou explains that *The Blacks* play had been translated into German, becoming “*Die Negers*” and further watches the play in the language (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 157). In a moment of awe, she reflects her perception of her Americanism and Africanism stating,

I listened and participated in the sardonic responses and realized again the difference between the Black American and the African. Over centuries of oppression we had developed a doctrine of resistance which included false docility and sarcasm. We also had a most un-African trait: we were nearly always ready and willing to fight. Too frequently we fought among ourselves, rendering our neighborhoods dangerous to traverse. But Whites knew that our bellicosity could disperse into other places, on jobs, in elevators, on buses, and in social gatherings. (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 158)

Although united by racial heritage, the realities and histories of Africans and African Americans differ significantly. By describing herself and others, Maya alludes to a threshold place, one that is neither fully within nor completely outside. This distinction is also reflected in Stuart Hall's description that "cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture" (226). Aspects such as cultural practice, language norms, and historical knowledge have been continually depicted in her search for an identity.

### **3.1.3 Global Black Feminism and Decolonial Solidarity**

Building upon Angelou's exploration of postcolonial Ghana and her views on belonging and alienation, the autobiography takes a more political turn, depicting parallels between Maya's life and the universal battle for black women's equality. While she emotionally struggles to balance her American and African identities, it ultimately becomes a base to help her establish a transnational Black feminist consciousness grounded in the collective experiences of oppression, resistance, and cultural assertion. Most importantly, Maya meets many African intellectuals, activists, women, and academics, especially Efua Sutherland, who offer crucial opportunities to reflect on and unify the experiences, shared histories, and gender inequality of both African and African American women. Rather than challenging the assumption that African and African American feminist struggles are entirely different, Maya's interaction with these women shows that they have a common denominator in their history of resistance. This observation is further exemplified in her visit to Lagos where Mr. Adadevo was explaining the story of the period during slavery in Keta. Angelou writes,

The women wept and I wept. I too cried for the lost people, their ancestors and mine. But I was also weeping with a curious joy. Despite the murders, rapes and suicides, we had survived. The middle passage and the auction block had not erased us. Not humiliations nor lynchings, individual cruelties nor collective oppression had been able to eradicate us from the earth. We had come through despite our own ignorance and gullibility, and the ignorance and rapacious greed of our assailants. (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 207)

In her words, she touches upon the shared pain and ambition that link the women across the African diaspora. However, it is also crucial to note this shared vulnerability. Inequality is more than just emotional; rather, it forms a basis for empowering one another and political identification. Angelou's words are embodied by Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who asserts, "rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together" (*Feminism Without Borders* 7). Mohanty rejects the idea that all women are united by gender-based oppressions but rather through active engagement, mutual recognition, and respect for cultural, historical, and experiential differences that emerge from a shared political commitment. As such, referring to Maya's experience in Logos, she feels an emotional and historical remembrance and shares the collective grieving of colonial violence and survival.

As Maya starts to become more aware of this shared ground, she adopts what contemporary scholars identify as decolonial feminist thought, which is defined in the translator's introduction of *A Decolonial Feminism* as:

Decolonial feminism is the name for overcoming the project of civilizational feminism. It embraces a project of global transformation beyond the limits of capitalism, liberalism, and the state. As a politics, decolonial feminism demands the abolition of these institutions in order to bring about a world of true liberation. As a theory, Vergès' decolonial feminism requires a fundamental shift in how we understand logics of exploitation and oppression and the institutions that reproduce them. It is not enough to take pre-existing theories of capitalism, liberalism, and the state, and to simply 'add colonized women and stir.' Rather, we need to fundamentally rethink the meaning, histories, and logics of these terms. (Vergès xiv)

In her own words, Vergès states that "I defend a decolonial feminism whose objective is the destruction of racism, capitalism, and imperialism" (*A Decolonial Feminism* 5). In Angelou's observations of the way Ghanaian women live, she notes the stress between tradition and independence, stating how women allowed "their men certain sexual freedom, but they were very strict in money matters" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 38). Focusing back on the alienation she endured during the American Civil Rights Movement is ultimately mirrored by the nationalist debate over independence, which eventually upholds male political voices while overlooking the achievements of women. Thus, Angelou agrees with Amina Mama's assertion that "in international forums, women from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean were challenging the domination of the scene by white western women, challenging such domination as imperialistic, and articulating their own concerns in no uncertain terms" (*Beyond the Masks* 1995). This autobiography thus serves as more than just an autobiography but also as a political statement that highlights the contributions of women in liberation movements while exposing the gendered limitations of nationalist discourse.

Furthermore, Angelou's transnational experiences develop into a critical intersectional understanding of racial, gendered, economic, and geopolitical oppressions that aligns with the concepts of universal Black feminism. Also, Davies asserts that Black feminist politics "would therefore have to be more deliberately and practically located at sites of resistance to, and struggle against, multiple oppression: whiteness, maleness, bourgeois culture, heterosexuality, Anglo-centeredness and so on" (27). Through drawing the parallels between her experiences and those of African women, Angelou clearly expresses a diasporic kinship that is neither romanticized nor presumed but thoroughly realized through critical reflection and dialogue. In capturing her increasing awareness on this matter, Maya has a dialogue with Efua about Africa and angrily asks, "weren't the African gods showing their anger when they allowed the strongest daughters and sons to be carried beyond the seas' horizon?" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 189). Within this recognition, she finds solidarity in the common grounds of the psychological and materialist effects of the cultural and national boundaries.

As such, these experiences she brings to attention signify the transnational Black feminist concept, which particularly fabricates unity while opposing patriarchal nationalism and racist capitalism globally. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins indicates that the experiences of black women serve as "strategies of everyday resistance [that] have largely consisted of trying to create spheres of influence, authority, and power within institutions that traditionally have allowed African-Americans and women little formal authority or real power" (209). Angelou's autobiography supports this possibility, as her life in Ghana allows her to reimagine and reinterpret the diasporic African women's contributions to a collective feminist consciousness. This is further exemplified within her interactions with influential black women like Efua Sutherland. Sutherland's importance becomes a crucial focus because she represents the African feminist

praxis due to her contributions to education, art, and activism (*Black Literature Criticism*). The relationship that these two have demonstrates feminist solidarity on the basis of engagement within difference and historical context. Ultimately, Angelou is influenced by her diasporic longing and learning that situates her within a globally precise and politically critical ideal of black femininity.

### **3.2 Feminist Intellectual Kinship**

As a result of Angelou's entanglement within global Black feminism and decolonial solidarity, she gains a deeper understanding of the intellectual and interpersonal relationships with black women that serve as an ideological blueprint for resistance. Having laid the basis for acknowledging the parallels between African and African American women's struggles, Angelou further focuses on everyday manifestations of feminist consciousness. Especially, her relationship with Sutherland emerges as one of the most transformative, providing a powerful illustration of what Black feminist academics define as intellectual and intergenerational sisterhood. As such, this chapter contends that Angelou and Sutherland's relationship exemplifies what hooks explains as politicized sisterhood, which is "the sisterhood that is necessary for the making of feminist revolution" (*Ain't I a Woman* 210). The relationship between Maya and Sutherland transforms into one that "can be achieved only when all women disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy, and competition with one another that has kept us vulnerable, weak, and unable to envision new realities" (*Ain't I a Woman* 210). Through communications and support, their sisterhood is formed on the ground of sentimentality and strengthened through their contributions to the diasporic legacy of Black feminist thinking.

### 3.2.1 Intergenerational and Intellectual Sisterhood

The shift in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* moves from Angelou's escalating involvement with Black feminism and decolonial solidarity to her personal relationships that keep her political awareness and cultural belonging alive. Among these intergenerational intellectual relationships, her sisterhood with Sutherland sparks her political awakening. Sutherland, who serves as a mentor and idol of female leadership, further strengthens Angelou's African intellectualism and cultural ties. While Maya learns the struggles of the shared history and difference in cultures, Sutherland commits to teaching the affirmation of African women's emotional and cultural resistance. The concept of sisterhood has become an essential yet continuous aspect in feminist theory. As such, hooks argues that mainstream (white) feminism's inclination to "openly disavow[ing] feelings of empathy and political solidarity with black people" reflects on the failure to address the intersecting oppressions of especially black women (*Ain't I A Woman* 230). Consequently, hooks reimagines sisterhood as a radical political project, which adds to the notion that "women need to come together in situations where there will be ideological disagreement... to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc." (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 63). The bond between Angelou and Sutherland comes to exemplify this political form of sisterhood within the grounds of mutual respect and ideological harmony. Angelou recounts her first impression of Sutherland, stating,

She was a poet, playwright, teacher, and the head of Ghana's National Theatre. We talked in the car of Shakespeare, Langston Hughes, Alexander Pope and Sheridan. We agreed that art was the flower of life and despite the years of ill-treatment Black artists were among most glorious blossoms. (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 13)

Angelou introduces her not only as a friend but also as an intellectual and nurturing figure whose life exemplifies the coexistence of activism and culture. Unlike the nationalist figures Angelou encountered in the United States and in Ghana, Sutherland presented a different vision, which was more nurturing, communal, and based on a strong dedication to the African identity. Sutherland resonates with Kwame's teachings, saying, "Kwame has said that Ghana must use its own legends to heal itself. I have written the old tales in new ways to teach the children that their history is rich and noble" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 13). Reading between the lines, Sutherland expresses a belief that cultural healing comes from reclaiming indigenous legends. While further expressing and teaching the history to children, she does so in a feminist and pedagogical act of cultural restoration, using storytelling as a tool for empowerment.

Contrary to the patriarchal structures that have excluded Angelou within the liberation movements in the United States and alienated her in Ghana, her relationship with Sutherland became a locus of recognition and recovery. As an African American woman, Angelou's presence becomes more recognized, allowing her to embrace her diasporic African identity. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Hazel Carby argues that "the call for class solidarity is paralleled within contemporary feminist practice by the concept of sisterhood" (17). Carby questions the essentialist concept of sisterhood by stating that solidarity can only be arisen by recognizing diverse experiences and struggles. Correlating this assertion to Maya and Sutherland's relationship, they too connect on a shared dedication to healing diasporic communities and resurrections of African culture. Thus, Sutherland's strength as a black female figure offers Angelou an influential role model and also a mirror through which she better understands her own voice as a black woman.

Within the scope of the intergenerational nature of feminist learning, Sutherland bonds with Angelou as a mentor by teaching her resilience within political realities and opening a door for Angelou to enter the intellectual world. This mentorship reconciles with Collins' concept of the "othermother," a figure in black communities who "explains the 'mothering the mind' relationships that can develop between African-American women teachers" (*Black Feminist Thought* 191). Collins explains this relationship as "unlike the traditional mentoring so widely reported in educational literature, this relationship goes far beyond that of providing students with either technical skills or a network of academic and professional contacts" (*Black Feminist Thought* 191). Within this perspective, Sutherland's position is beyond familial terms for Angelou; it is in the realms of cultural and political mentorship that offer a form of non-patriarchal leadership. For example, Sutherland becomes a reference for Maya and helps find a job at the university. Maya says, "Efua introduced me to the chairman of the Institute of African Studies at the university and pleaded with him to hire me... She smiled at him and said I was already trying to hear Fanti, and would make a good Ghanaian" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 16). At length, their relationship represents the diasporic feminist alliance withstanding integration into either Western feminism or African nationalism.

### **3.2.2 Efua Sutherland as an Idol for African Feminist Thought**

The deep intellectual and emotional bond between Angelou and Sutherland foregrounds Sutherland's legacy as an important African feminist theory. Within this relationship comes a strong paradigm of political sisterhood where Maya interprets Sutherland as a symbol of Indigenous female agency whose contributions transformed postcolonial Ghana beyond the broader Black feminist tradition. Respectably, in their visit to the National Theater of Ghana, Angelou characterizes Sutherland as a black woman of remarkable vision, stating, "Efua

Sutherland could have posed for the original bust of Nefertiti. She was long, lean, Black and lovely, and spoke so softly I had to lean forward to catch her words” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 11). This humble but powerful portrayal underscores Sutherland’s feminist leadership, characterized not by assertiveness or charm but by a grounded presence rooted in cultural authority and intellectual conviction. Contrary to male-dominated political spheres, Sutherland focuses on preserving and enhancing African history and memory. All but while her dedication corresponds with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s thoughts about how “language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature,” adding that “thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world” (*Decolonising the Mind* 16). As such, Sutherland’s motivation to retell Ghanaian “legends to heal itself” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 13) shows her she is engaged to shape a national consciousness rooted in historical knowledge.

The influence Sutherland had on Angelou extends far from mentorship while illuminating her path of African feminist convention. Thus, Angelou encounters a form of feminism that is far from the American paradigms but emerging through the cultural, historical, and political contexts of African women’s lives. Mama further adds to this concept, arguing that “the articulation of black identities was about changing into a different kind of human being—about changing one’s consciousness of one’s position in the world, about constructing new subjectivities and rejecting the disempowering legacies of centuries” (*Beyond the Masks* 1995). Sutherland’s work in education, theater, and community resembles this dual resistance, further aiming to restore African values while challenging social hierarchies that have devalued women. She further enhances an emancipatory African feminist tradition through her plays, initiatives, and efforts to culturalized education in local epistemologies. Thus, this urge symbolizes her resistance to disassembling

colonial residue that was present in cultural and intellectual knowledge while repositioning African women as powerful transmitters of knowledge and creativity within their communities. This resistance is exemplified in Sutherland's play, *Edufa*, which reinterprets prehistoric Ghanaian narratives and performance techniques to address contemporary issues like gender roles, justice, and ethical leadership. For example, in *Politics of the Female Body*, Ketu Katrak notes that "wives who feel physically enslaved and mentally colonized within marriages often deploy bodily resistances including the use of speech and silence in Ghanaian Efu Sutherland's *Edufa*" (168). In scene one, act one of *Efuda*, Sutherland voices through a chorus of women, "while we mourn another's death, it's our own death we also mourn" (22). This representation of solidarity and collective female mourning is also seen when Sutherland tries to accompany Maya when she is desperately crying about Guy's accident. Sutherland says, "Sister, you have need of a Sister friend because you need to weep, and you need someone to watch you while you weep" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 12). As such, this cultural activism affected Angelou, who was also a talented figure in the literary, dramatic, and political spheres.

While Angelou used her voice in her autobiographies as a means of resistance, she saw that the Ghanaian women did as well, however, with their cultural work. This was a subsequent influence on both her narratives and activism because it was an initiation into African feminist techniques of resistance through narration and performance. Likewise, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that "African feminists can learn a lot from the methods of feminist scholarship as they have been applied to the West, but they should scorn methods of Western, imperial, feminist Africanists who impose feminism on the 'colonies'" (21). Oyěwùmí further adds that "African scholars need to do serious work detailing and describing indigenous African cultures from the inside out, not from the outside in" (21). As such, Sutherland's literary method is also rooted in collective stories,

traditions, and egalitarian education. The way in which Angelou reflects on Sutherland shows how feminist idolism does not need to conform to the dominance of visibility or authority but rather mutual respect. While Sutherland does not lead any political activity, her cultural labor resonates politically, the kind of non-imperial feminist practice advocated by Oyěwùmí. This conveys that as Sutherland's feminist acknowledgment is impacted by her educational and cultural influences, this aligns with Oyěwùmí's uphold for an indigenous and decolonized feminist practice. Keeping this in mind, Sutherland is further acknowledged as a black feminist who produces children's books and African theater, and her mentoring diasporic and Ghanaian artists represents radicalism. Angelou concludes, stating, "through the centuries of despair and dislocation, we had been creative, because we faced down death by daring to hope" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 207). The realization shows the essential role of narratives in Black feminist resistance and confirms Sutherland as a guiding star in the constellation of ideas that influence many, like Angelou, in the global awareness towards Black feminist rights.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* serves as an important literary and political testimony that documents Maya's diasporic awareness, which further strengthens her Black feminist perspective. This chapter argued how Maya's life in Ghana triggered deeper political and personal changes, emphasizing the correlation between belonging, memory, and identity. Conceptualized as a return to Africa, her journey evolves within the emotional and intellectual realms of nationalist ideologies and the intricacies of diasporic solidarity. In addressing the tension between alienation and belonging, Angelou fabricates a narrative that is beyond conventional definitions of home. Instead, she embraces the multinationalism of Black feminism, transcending borders.

At the heart of this autobiography is Angelou's intentional use of the autobiography not only as a personal testimony but also as a political tool for diasporic manifestation. Angelou's narrative is full of introverted details and interactions, which mirrors Gilmore's term:

Constitutive of the autobiographical scene is a self-representational practice through which a subject-in-process is constructed. This construction occurs in two locations of becoming: in one is the subject-who-writes; in the other, the subject-in-the-text. They are joined to each other in this emergence-through-enactment, and form a representational figure capable of signifying beyond any single text. (*The Limits of Autobiography* 97-98)

Angelou enacts this function by situating her personal awakening within the context of shared histories such as slavery, colonialism, and activism. As such, Angelou's autobiography embodies what Gilmore calls "emergence-through-enactment" (97) by inviting her audience to witness and engage with the development of her diasporic identity. As she gets ready to leave Ghana, Angelou writes, "if the heart of Africa still remained allusive, my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 196), capturing an intricate state of "becoming" (Gilmore 148). Gilmore defines this stratified locating as the ability of the autobiographical characters to "signify beyond any single text" (Gilmore 97-98). Besides voicing her experiences, she also talks about the diasporic condition as a whole fragmented, hybrid, and evolving form. Angelou's autobiography not only grounds her personal story but also echoes culture, histories, and stories of others.

In essence, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* should not only be interpreted as an autobiography that mirrors Maya's personal journey but also as a transnational feminist work that theorizes the dynamics of diasporic identity, memory, and resistance. Angelou interrogates the

prevailing nationalist narratives that dominate American and African political contexts by emphasizing the contributions of women who have been historically overlooked globally. Integrating herself with various identities like African American, mother, activist, artist, poet, and author, she creates a distinguished autobiography that is both reflective and revolutionary. To finalize, Davies states that the work of black women, in a broader concept, “can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or ‘subalternization,’ but in terms of slipperiness, else-where-ness” (*Black Women, Writing, and Identity* 36). In this light, Angelou expresses a fluid, diasporic, and subjective narrative that amplifies these expressions that have been globally and internally voiced.

## CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Heart of a Woman*, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* move beyond conventional literary canons by utilizing autobiography to subvert hegemonic silencing and break traditional canonical frameworks. In Angelou's hands, autobiography transforms from an individualist narrative and becomes a collective one, serving as a powerful form of feminist resistance. Not only does she recount her life, but she also contributes to the radical feminist archive that declares black femininity a source for personal, political and literary strength. She further strategizes her narratives to redefine the traditional notion of autobiographies by highlighting how her life is written through the lives others while interrogating power structures that marginalize black women. Canonical literature and history have continuously dimmed the experiences of black women; however, Angelou articulated the lives of mothers, grandmothers, intellectuals, artists, activists, politicians, and expats to make their lives and experiences heard. The objective of this thesis is not to piece together the chronological events of the narratives but to analyze how they fit in with the larger epistemological framework of Black feminism, especially challenging marginalization, stillness, and historical exclusion. Thus, this thesis portrays Angelou's autobiographical voice beyond the African American literary canon, revealing her narratives as a site of intersectional resilience, diasporic inquiry, and literary invention.

In the three aforementioned autobiographies, a coherent and developing portrait of black women who overcome numerous intersecting oppressions while navigating to find their voice, identity, and agency emerges. It is important to note that Angelou does not declare a fractured narrative of liberation; however, she highlights the uncertainties and contradictions of the essential figures of black womanhood. First and foremost, she foregrounds this structural criticism in *I*

*Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which she shows how Mr. Freeman caused her sexual trauma, how the racist dentist Dr. Lincoln showed her what racial segregation was, and how she emotionally felt dislocated from the concept of home. In *Talking Back*, hooks states that “certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (6). On the other hand, hooks further refers to the illusionist understanding of freely speaking as “there would be no need to even speak of the oppressed and exploited coming to voice, articulating and redefining reality, if there were not oppressive mechanisms of silencing, suppressing, and censoring” (*Talking Back* 16). In reference to this, Angelou’s narrative voice points out the importance of this survival as a political act of resistance. Angelou’s method is foreseen in what Smith and Watson refer to as the “life narrative as a mode of cultural production in which various voices and versions contest, and contend for, authority” (56). She does not display her autobiographies as something fixed but as a way of making social, historical, and diasporic concepts possible in the sense of where she finds herself. Hence, Angelou does not present a singular “I” in her autobiographies but rather an amalgamation of black women who have been impacted by intergenerational memory, racism, and politics. Smith and Watson also assert that the autobiographical “I” distinguishes the author “whose life is far more diverse and dispersed than the story that is being told of it” (59). What is meant by this is that Angelou voices the various marginalizations of black women through the experiences of her life and the many characters she portrays. For example, characters like Momma, Vivian Baxter, and Mrs. Flowers embody the portrayal of motherhood through a Black feminist ethics of resistance and care. The importance of these women rests within the line of education, moral idealism, and storytelling that nurtures Maya’s sense of political awareness.

Eminently, Angelou does not restrain black femininity to only the United States. This is evident in *The Heart of a Woman*, where the personal is shifted to the political, and the child Maya becomes the activist, Maya. In her interactions and organizational ties, her autobiography maps her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and her engagement with revolutionary politics. For example, she portrays her experiences in SCLC, where she works alongside Martin Luther King Jr. as a coordinator. In this context, Angelou presents a Black feminist criticism of the male-dominated activism where she reveals the gender-focused labor behind the immense emotions of humble support and the marginalization of black women in spaces apparently devoted to justice. Referring back to Collins, who stated that “far too many African-American women intellectuals have labored in isolation and obscurity,” clearly reflects on the racial and gender struggles (*Black Feminist Thought* 2). Initially, Angelou alludes to Maria W. Stewart’s words, saying, “turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power” (41). Angelou, as such, brings attention to this by showcasing the various forms of resistance black women must go through, like raising children alone (which she does by herself), fundraising for liberation movements, and, most importantly, writing to stay alive and be heard.

Reflecting on this transnational consciousness, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* continues to broaden the black women’s voice beyond the United States’ borders to further emphasize the diasporic identity and communal memory, which are important to Angelou’s analysis of Black feminism. By situating Black femininity as a continuous negotiation between Africa and the United States, this autobiography challenged the notion of nationalist belonging. The sense of alienation Angelou experiences in Africa is not embedded in geography, but in understanding the idea of coming from a place of both loss and the urge to reclaim identity. Angelou’s statement, “not a Ghanaian, but at least accepted as an African,” expresses her ongoing

struggle with an unsettled, intrinsic notion of home (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 102). However, Angelou's stay in Ghana does not end her dilemma of belonging but rather deepens it. Angelou's interpretation of diasporic feminism transposes intersectionality to transnational, where she questions the Western feminist prototypes by asserting that the voices of black women should be liable to resistance, displacement, and colonization. Remarkably as a single mother, writer, and foreigner, Angelou reveals the gender dynamics of cultural belonging, sexism, and heterosexism through echoing Collins's assertion that "group-based consciousness emerges through developing oppositional knowledges such as Black feminist thought" and "individual self-definitions and behaviors shift in tandem with a changed consciousness concerning everyday lived experience" (*Black Feminist Thought* 275). Thus, empowerment genuinely emerges when they happen together, situating Angelou's interpretation of the black women's voices in the diasporic realm and internally.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou sheds light on the sexual and racial atrocities of the Jim Crow laws in the United States; in *The Heart of a Woman*, she recounts the work and disenchantment ingrained in the liberation movements; and in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, she marks the philosophical and geographical acknowledgement. Therefore, the subject of the autobiographies extends to negotiating a diasporic journey beyond black American femininity. By doing so, Angelou does not only focus on racial identity in the United States but also moves her borders to challenge the ideas of blackness and home in Africa.

Upon her experiences in her first autobiography in Stamps as a child and later teenager, Maya has always been in search of her identity and belonging. This search then shifted to her journey in Egypt and Ghana, where she tries to fit in with the crowd. Angelou makes this diasporic turn, building on what Gilroy explains as the "the history of the black Atlantic since then,

continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people-not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship-provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory” (16). Moving to Ghana became a vigorous encounter with both a mythical and realistic homeland. The idealized Pan-African vision brings her to Accra; it is the tensions, not the harmony, between the diasporic and continental Africa that show the analytical power of the autobiography. This recognition is evident in her words, where she says, “I needed to get away from Africa and its cache of subtle promises and at least second-hand memories. I blamed the entire continent and history for my malaise when the real reason was more pointedly specific and as personal as a migraine” (*All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* 148). Hence, Angelou’s acknowledgment undermines essentialist ideas of cultural genuineness and opens room for what Davies explains how “Black female subjectivity then can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or “subalternization,” but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhere” (36) in diasporic subjectivity. Regarding Maya’s awareness of the diasporic subject, her feeling of belonging becomes biased, contingent, and frequently intervened. Through her status as an African American woman, she has been affected by the United States’ racial history and the mythologized wrench of Africa. Ghana then can be conceived as an essential stop in her transnational journey, which validates the diasporic condition as an intellectually rich, variable, and vigorous space in her identity search.

Furthermore, in *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou shifts her autobiographical self from an observer to a participant and from an American expatriate to an African home comer. Thus, this unification intensifies the positioning of the people of the African diaspora either as outsiders or misfits. Especially the illustrations of the politics of diaspora are

shown in her interactions with Ghanaians when it comes to the issues of culture, language, and her black American privileges. Angelou exemplifies this when she says,

I admitted that while Ghana's domestic and foreign policy were stimulating, I was captured by the Ghanaian people... So I had finally come home. The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers, having squandered her mother's gifts and having laid down in cruel gutters, had at last arisen and directed herself back to the welcoming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment and seated at the welcoming table. (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 20-21)

What makes these autobiographies so significant is that Angelou does not see these experiences as problems; rather, she voices how to live with them. As such, she observes that although African Americans are considered heroes who survived slavery, they are also met with skepticism and contempt because they have later been privileged as Americans. This twofold disposition shows how the narratives of Pan-African solidarity confront the historical fractures caused by colonialism and slavery.

Crucially, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* also records Maya's search for belonging in Africa and fight with patriarchal and matriarchal norms of Ghanaian culture. Within this diasporic search, Maya is guided through her interaction with Sutherland, who embodies feminist solidarity based on mentorship and mutual awareness. Angelou describes Sutherland as someone that shows guidance, nurturing, and teachings in the postcolonial era. This thesis depicts that within this nurturing, she does not content herself to provide only comfort; however, she intends to challenge Maya into rethinking black cultural awareness. On the contrary, it is also important to note that Sutherland illustrates the crossroads of feminist praxis and nationalism

through her assertion through Nkrumah Kwame's words, saying, "For too long in our history Africa has spoken through the voice of others. Now what I have called the African Personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it through the voices of its sons" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 77). Angelou further comments on his remarks stating, "When he declared that West Indians and Black Americans were among Africa's great gifts to the world, the immigrant community gleamed with gratitude" (*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* 77). Referring to Thiong'o's concept of decolonizing the mind, he states that "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (13). In this regard, Angelou shows how the act of storytelling may be used as a political tool aimed at resisting colonial epistemologies. In drawing attention to this, Angelou affirms her dedication to writing as a revolutionary act of depicting not only her life but also the collective experiences of diasporic women who have historically been misrepresented and marginalized. The important contribution of this autobiography to African American literature is its insistence that diasporic identification is a political and ethical way of being or existence. Angelou highlights the complexity of a diasporic yearning, which is shaped through the emotions led by colonialism, collective historical memories, and feminist reconnections. Through connecting with these emotions, her autobiography becomes a transnational Black feminist work linking African Americanism to African postcolonial nationalism.

In the three autobiographies, Angelou does not only document her own journey but also a collective recount of positioning the black female experience at the center of literary, political, and theoretical analysis. Often, autobiographies privileged the linear and masculinist trajectory where Smith states, "the bar that serves metaphorically as site of the universal subject and its normative

masculinity, requires barring” (*Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* 2). However, Angelou challenges this by embodying memory, diasporic desire, and feminist articulation, which is “perhaps double-crossed, before it can signal the trace of female subjectivity in an autobiographical text” (*Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* 2). Hence, Angelou adds to the genre a cognitive way of resisting the challenge to the hegemonic acknowledgement by voicing marginalized black women. Then, the main purpose of this thesis is to regard Angelou’s autobiographies as a site of resilience and existence. Whether it is childhood traumas, political activism, or diasporic alienation and belonging, Angelou turns every page to illustrate the battlefield for redeeming identity. Angelou’s autobiographies can be viewed as bearing what Chela Sandoval terms as “differential consciousness” as she reconstructs a narrative style that “recognizes and works upon other modes of consciousness in opposition to transfigure their meanings: they convert into repositories within which subjugated citizens either occupy or throw off subjectivity, a process that simultaneously enacts yet decolonizes their various relations to their real conditions of existence” (62). Autobiography is then not fixed but flexible, dynamic, and fundamentally feminist in its reluctance to confine womanhood to a single narrative.

What further differentiates Angelou’s autobiographies is how she stresses the interconnectedness of the autobiographies that also reflect one another. First and foremost, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* lays the groundwork for the fundamental trauma of sexual abuse and racism that Maya tries to navigate through. Following that, *The Heart of a Woman* captures her political maturity, and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* amplifies her sense of identity into transnational ground. In reviewing these autobiographies, this thesis shows how they layer the narratives from a collective point of view of black femininity, which adds to the feminist argument of rebellion and search for change. Significantly, in discussing the philosophical use of the

autobiography, Thomas Mathien states that, “in this kind of writing the personal is not merely incidental but intrinsic to the philosophical task at hand. What is more, the personal element cannot be one involving an individual who could be any person. The author’s own individuality must figure in the subject matter and must figure in a way amenable to narrative treatment though perhaps not... to a unified narrative” (19). Thus, Angelou’s autobiographies strongly relate to this statement as they have a powerful political and philosophical voice that is analytical rather than anecdotal.

Building on this framework of the autobiographies as a collective black feminist subjectivity and epistemological potential, this thesis also examines how Angelou exposes and challenges the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Through her depiction of motherhood, work, political activism, and intellectualism, Angelou challenges the obliteration of black women’s labor in both the public and private spheres. Referring to the narratives, Angelou portrays figures such as Momma, Mrs. Flowers, and Sutherland as Collins’ figure of “mothers, othermothers, teachers, and churchwomen in essentially all Black rural communities and urban neighborhoods, U.S. Black women participated in constructing and reconstructing these oppositional knowledges” (*Black Feminist Thought* 10). These figures in Angelou’s autobiographies therefore play an important role in conveying the acknowledgement of resistance based in dignity, survival, and self-determination. As mothers, mentors, and caregivers, they demolish patriarchal norms in black communities. From Kathleen M. Kirby’s perspective, these women’s “becoming politically conscious might mean becoming conscious of one’s own boundaries, feeling the way we live them; becoming politically active might mean attempting to transform the shapes culture projects for us” (188-189). Thus, Angelou portrays how this statement is rooted in the experiences of black women who speak, remember, and resist, yet also shifts over time.

Moreover, this thesis situates Angelou's autobiographies within the larger framework of African American literature, asserting that she is not only a literary icon but a theorist in her own way. What makes her work so noteworthy is that she blends them with political, cultural, and feminist characteristics. Remarkably, she writes her autobiographies not only for the activist and the academic but for everyone who can familiarize themselves with her experiences. As such, Angelou additionally complicates national frameworks by fighting for a diasporic awareness against the containment of black identity within the United States' borders. By this, she adds a new level to African American literature as she moves her borders as an American to Ghana and interacts with Ghanaian intellectuals and activists. Further, she urges sharing the colonial histories, which makes her a key contributor to transnational black feminist discourse. This thesis rightfully emphasizes that Angelou's autobiographies show how African American and African identities are not only simplified to black and white but rather focus on the tension, potential unity, and hybridity between the two. This intervention enlarges the scope of African American literature while placing it within the global context of anti-colonial struggle and feminist unity. In this sense, Angelou's autobiographies provide a roadmap for resistance, a structure for unity, and a voice for survival. Amidst the era of racism, political suppression, and cultural appropriation, Angelou calls for narrative independence.

Importantly, Angelou's autobiographies are not only her story but essentially an ode to literature's power as a living, breathing testament to inspire change. This thesis argued that the style and political weight in penning her voice show the significance of her work. Thus, they have become an example of Black feminist praxis that is grounded in history and rooted in intersectional criticism. Although these three autobiographies voice different periods of her life, they are linked in a way that provides an ideological and literary framework for articulating the versatile nature of

diasporic black femininity. Angelou's work progresses towards what hooks defines as an intervention, which she asserts, saying, "This "we" is that "us" in the margins, that "we" who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space. This is an intervention" (*Yearning* 152). She manifests remembering and resisting the objectification of black women's experiences. Therefore, her autobiographies are considered archival and rebellious as she reshapes the possibilities of what autobiography can be. Through the process of self-reflection, Angelou performed what Hortense Spillers states: "in order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness" (443). Eventually, by making her experiences visible, Angelou authorizes a space for black women's intellectual, emotional, and political lives to be seen and heard.

In terms of contribution to the aforementioned theories and fields, this thesis reasserts that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Heart of a Woman*, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* are seminal works within American and African American literature. Their importance is not only for cultural impact but, mostly, for their structural, rhetorical, and philosophical innovations. By using the Black feminist theory as a lens, this thesis has offered to reveal how Angelou transcends the boundaries of the literary canon. What is so unique about Angelou's style of writing is that there are so many various black female figures in the entirety of her autobiographies; therefore, racism, sexism, and classism are the focus. Significantly, this has enlightened the Black feminist artists, activists, scholars, etc. to gain both experience and empathize with the characters in her autobiographies. Respectively, the principal reason that these three autobiographies were studied is because they portray, firstly, Maya's life and then her

experiences both in the United States and Africa. Beyond her experiences are those of mother figures, sisters, mentors, teachers, and friends, which every black woman can relate to at some point. Although Angelou is considered an exceptional voice, she is also the central figure for understanding 20<sup>th</sup> century literary modernity.

Likewise, this thesis provides a foundation for further associative exploration into the literary realm. What is meant by this is that Angelou's autobiographies are acknowledged as African, African American, and Black feminist literature; therefore, they take into account the variety of history, sociology, politics, activism, feminism, and Black feminism. It is also important to note that to comprehend the importance of Black feminism, one needs to delve deep into feminist theory first. The reason that Angelou's autobiographies are so powerful is because they add a new insight into what Black feminism is. She has written these not to degrade feminist literature, however, but to add to the missing piece of the feminist theory puzzle. On another note, trauma theory, migration, expatriatism, and postcolonial studies may benefit from the valuable intersections of such topics.

Conclusively, this thesis does not only contain Angelou's autobiographical works but also delves into the Black feminist academic works that assert the political and philosophical importance of storytelling and autobiographies. Angelou's voice has long been a site of resilience for many black women who have read, written, and lectured about the racism, sexism, and oppression she has gone through. Angelou's autobiographies do not offer closure to the issues but instead a place to dwell on the complexities between power and vulnerability and alienation and belonging. This further portrays the idea that in acknowledging the experiences of black womanhood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, freedom is not a firm target; it is an ongoing journey of believing, defining, becoming, and telling one's story. Through highlighting and honoring the variety and

variability of identities, Angelou's autobiographies affirm the fundamental principles of Black feminist thought, which state that the personal is political. In understanding this political aspect of the personal, one finds these autobiographies serve as an important platform for many women, especially black women, to fight against marginalization and for liberation. Honorably, Angelou has lived a long and difficult life. With every experience, through all her journeys, another one of the feathers on her wings has been stripped away. However, she has always found courage in herself and from the influential people around her to grow every lost feather again. Alongside flying with her own wings, the women around her have all been an inclusion, adding their beautiful voices to the chorus of their shared life song. This thesis concludes that with the voices of resilience, courage, and innovation, Angelou continues to sing and be heard.

## NOTES

1. I refer to her as *Maya* when discussing the character within her autobiographies and as *Angelou* when addressing her more broadly as the author and public intellectual.
2. I shortened Maria del Guadalupe Davidson's work *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy* to *Convergences*.

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## ÖZET

Bu tez, Maya Angelou'nun yedi otobiyografik eserinin arasından *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (*Kafesteki Kuş Neden Şakır, Bilirim*), *The Heart of a Woman* (*Bir Kadının Yüreği*) ve *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (*Tanrı'nın Bütün Çocuklarının Seyahat Ayakkabılarına İhtiyacı Var*) adlı eserlerini Siyah feminist bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Edebi ve kuramsal analiz bağlamında bu çalışma, Angelou'nun otobiyografi türünü kolektif bellek, epistemolojik direnç ve politik aktivizm için bir mecra hâline dönüştürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Her bir anlatı, ırk, cinsiyet, sınıf ve cinsellik eksenlerinde kesişen bir ağ tarafından şekillenen siyah kadınlık ifadesini incelemektedir.

Angelou'nun kullandığı anlatı stratejileri, bastırılmış travmadan diasporik etkileşimlere kadar uzanmakta olup, siyah kadınların yaşam deneyimlerini tali anekdotlar olarak değil, bilginin üretildiği anlamlı mekânlar olarak vurgulamaktadır. Giriş bölümü, Angelou'nun otobiyografilerinin incelenmesi amacıyla Siyah feminizmin tarihsel ve kuramsal gelişimine dair bir zemin sunmaktadır. Birinci bölüm *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* kitabındaki kadın özneliği, cinsel travma ve sistematik ırkçılıkla birlikte siyah annelik kavramını incelemektedir. İkinci bölüm *The Heart of a Woman*'ı inceleyerek Angelou'nun Sivil Haklar Hareketi'ndeki sorumlulukları ile Harlem ve Gana'daki entelektüel ve aktivist topluluklardaki rolüne odaklanmaktadır. Üçüncü bölüm *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*'u mercek altına alarak Angelou'nun Gana'daki aidiyet ve dışlanmışlık deneyimi aracılığıyla Siyah feminist düşüncenin entelektüel düzenini, kesişimsel ve diasporik bilinç yapısını vurgulamaktadır. Sonuç bölümünde, Angelou'nun otobiyografilerinin, otobiyografi türünü kolektif, diasporik ve epistemolojik olarak radikal bir şekilde yeniden tanımladığı ve Siyah feminist direniş ile güçlenme için bir arşiv oluşturduğu ileri sürülmektedir.

Bu tez, anneliđi, kız kardeřliđi ve kltrel yerinden edilmeyi eleřtirel biimde ele alarak zc kimlik politikalarını sorgulamakta; kırılđanlık, fark ve iliřkisel olma hlini kadın dayanıřmasının temeli olarak onaylamaktadır. Angelou'nun anıları yalnızca Siyah feminist tarihe bir yansıma sunmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda hafıza, diren ve dayanıřma yoluyla Siyah Amerikan edebiyatının geleceđini derinden etkilemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Afrikalı Amerikalı Diaspora, Otobiyografi, Siyah Feminizm, Kltrel Kimlik, Kadın znelliđi, Kesiřimsellik, Anelik, Siyasal Aktivizm, Direniř*

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores three of Maya Angelou's seven autobiographical works, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Heart of a Woman*, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, through a Black feminist perspective. In terms of literary and theoretical analysis, this study shows how Angelou transforms the autobiographical genre into a site of collective memory, epistemological resilience, and political activism. Each narrative examines an enunciation of black femininity shaped by the intersecting web of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

The narrative strategies Angelou uses span from suppressed trauma to diasporic transactions, accentuating the lived experiences of black women not as minor anecdotes but significantly as sites of knowledge production. The introduction lays the groundwork for Black feminism and its historical and theoretical developments to examine Angelou's autobiographies. The first chapter delves into *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, highlighting female subjectivity, sexual trauma, and structural racism while depicting the concept of black motherhood. The second chapter explores *The Heart of a Woman*, focusing on Angelou's responsibilities in the Civil Rights Movement and the intellectual and activist communities in the United States and Africa. The third chapter focuses on *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, emphasizing the intellectual scheme of Black feminist thinking and intersectional and diasporic consciousness by exploring her journey of belonging and alienation in Ghana. Finally, the conclusion affirms that Angelou's autobiographies form a literary base for redefining autobiography as collective, diasporic, and epistemologically radical to form an archive for Black feminist resistance and empowerment.

Thus, this thesis depicts motherhood, sisterhood, and cultural displacement critically to challenge essentialist ideas of identity politics by affirming the importance of vulnerability, difference, and

relationality as a foundation for female solidarity. Angelou's autobiographies do not only reflect on Black feminist history; they substantially affect the future of black American writing through memory, resilience, and solidarity.

**Keywords:** *African American Diaspora, Autobiography, Black Feminism, Cultural Identity, Female Subjectivity, Intersectionality, Motherhood, Political Activism, Resistance*