

## Self-Identify And Cultural Assimilation In Maya Angelou's *The Heart Of A Woman*

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### Abstract

The personal narratives of African American women play a crucial role in challenging and redefining societal preconceptions about race and gender. These autobiographies persist in articulating the complexities of Black women's identities and their resistance to stereotypes. The literary legacy of African American women's autobiographies has paved the way for contemporary authors to further explore and enhance expressions of individual identity. Maya Angelou, as a prominent successor in this tradition, continues the work of her predecessors in her autobiographical writings. In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou elucidates the experiences of being both a Black mother and a Black woman, considering the political, social, and psychological contexts that shape her identity. Her historical and cultural context significantly influences her narrative. This paper examines the themes of Self-Identification and Cultural Assimilation in *The Heart of a Woman*, establishing a framework for understanding African American autobiography from both theoretical and thematic perspectives.

**Key Words:** Black women, race and gender, Cultural Assimilation, Black woman.

### Introduction

Maya Angelou's depiction of white, racist tyranny reflects her maternal anxieties and underscores her opposition to white racism from the perspective of a Black mother. Moreover, the act of writing her autobiography encapsulates Angelou's maternal politics. By recounting her own experiences, she positions herself as a maternal figure, offering guidance to the youth who can derive lessons from her life. A historical examination of Black literature, along with significant events in Black history, reveals how these societal transformations have shaped literary expression. The autobiographical tradition among Black women has been a powerful means of linking race and gender in their narratives. Through this tradition, Black women have used autobiography as a distinctive medium to articulate their lived experiences and emotions.

Maya Angelou was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Bailey Johnson, a doorman and then a naval clinician, and Vivian Baxter Johnson. She gained popularity as a novelist, poet, singer, composer, actress, dramatist, and film director. She is most recognized for her series of autobiographies, with the first book released in 1970. President Bill Clinton honored Maya Angelou by having her recite her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," during his inauguration ceremony in January 1993.

This research explores the autobiographies of Black American women, highlighting how they differ from those of Black men within the broader African American autobiographical tradition. Although the term "autobiography" emerged in the late eighteenth century, the theoretical study of autobiography did not begin until the early 1960s. By the 1980s, the autobiographies of Black women gained increasing significance. In the nineteenth century, women documented their daily experiences, household responsibilities, and familial relationships. The female authors sought to both amuse and educate their peers.

Women's autobiographies typically focus on their own roles and experiences, as well as those of other women. Women, via the composition of autobiographies, establish a public voice that enables them to articulate their own narratives. Moreover, women highlight elements of their domain, including childcare, family, housekeeping, and marriage, in their autobiographies, thereby encapsulating the familial and domestic spheres.

Women's autobiographies have redefined the genre since its inception. The women expressed their identities in a way that set them apart from the white bourgeois male, exposing the conventional autobiography as primarily a reflection of a male perspective. The consistent and stable identity established by most white male autobiographers did not align with that of female autobiographers. The conventional male autobiographer narrates his life from infancy, primarily intending to present his experiences as a model to emulate. However, there was little opportunity for women inside male-dominated traditions. The confinement of women to the home sphere led to their marginalization.

Contemporary American women authors use autobiographies as a resource for their works while interrogating the boundaries of the autobiographical genre. They articulate their history by narrating their own experiences and conveying their emotions to the reader. Individuals of African descent mostly see themselves through the lens of art, therefore transcending their challenges. This is the rationale for the black writer's use of autobiography as a literary genre.

Ultimately, researchers examined black women's autobiographies as a sub-genre that allowed them to express their suffering and challenge distorted perceptions of black womanhood. The portrayal of black women was biased; hence, autobiography allows them to construct their own representations. Consequently, the redefining of the self remained within

the control of the autobiographer, allowing her to articulate her identity and transform outdated representations. Historically seen as inferior, the autobiographical writing process enables black women to reflect profoundly on their life narratives, allowing them to dismantle negative stereotypes and cultivate a positive identity.

In America during the 1940s and 1950s, women associated motherhood with domesticity. Black women have inextricably linked parenthood to their jobs, which has prompted black women autobiographers to incorporate it into their narratives. The concept of motherhood weaves itself throughout Angelou's autobiographical narratives, inextricably linking her experience of motherhood to her art.

Angelou's autobiographical work amplifies the voices of her ancestors who endured enslavement, attesting to their experiences of oppression as women of color in American history. The slave narratives of her female ancestors serve as poignant testimonies to the helplessness of the enslaved Africans against humanity's capacity for cruelty. Angelou's ability to address racial injustice two decades later reflects the enduring status of her community within American culture. Moreover, it underscores the significant role of inspirational and political discourse in African American autobiographies. In her series of autobiographies, Angelou establishes a thematic connection between the overt manifestations of racial oppression in the eighteenth century and the subtle manifestations of it in the late twentieth century. She does this reconstructing pictures of self, family, and community dislocation. In this context, displacement quantifies the distance between the living experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century and those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Maya Angelou's writings, situated within current American culture, articulate the nuanced realities of racial oppression faced by African Americans in the late twentieth century, contrasting with the overt circumstances of servitude experienced by her ancestors. Her life experiences parallel those of her ancestors in that she succumbs to societal preconceptions; yet, her particular circumstances differ due to her firsthand encounters with such biases. While slavery encompassed the whole of an individual's being, Angelou's American culture manifests racial oppression via economic, political, and social dimensions.

Through Angelou's episodic representations of self, family, and communal experiences with racial oppression, we can analyze the disparity between contemporary forms of oppression depicted in modern African American women's autobiographies and earlier manifestations illustrated in prior writings. Moreover, due to her relocation, Angelou grapples with emotions of disappointment, remorse, and fury over the disparity between the democratic ideals of American society and her experience as a contemporary African American. Her depictions of self, family, and community relocation provide the author the necessary freedom to examine the disparities of her situation and her emotional responses to those disparities.

Undoubtedly, Angelou's quest to define her autobiographical identity compels her to consider the implications of her racial lineage. Angelou's dual identity as a woman and an African American, as we will explore, ultimately enhances her self-development. Maya Angelou's works are distinctive; however, they also include characteristics typical of African American autobiographical literature, including perpetual movement and continual redefinition of the autobiographical self. In the conclusive examination of Maya Angelou's autobiographies, the reader finds that Angelou transforms adversity into opportunity; specifically, her gender and racial marginalization evolve into a quest for self-discovery. Each generation of African American women autobiographers has uniquely navigated the intricate tension between conforming to an imposed American identity, which diminishes their cultural distinctions, and remaining loyal to their own heritage.

African American women have recognized and opposed these conflicts for over three centuries, as evidenced by the tradition of their autobiographies. Angelou's coherent and literary memoirs originate from the recollections of hardly literate slaves, some recorded by others or ghost written by sympathetic Whites. Furthermore, her personal tone signifies a transition from the depicted anguish typical of slave tales to the exuberant celebration of resilience seen in Angelou's work. As an African American autobiographer, Angelou conveys the anguish of history while commemorating the hard-earned achievements of the present. Similar to the women autobiographers who came before her, Angelou interprets and articulates her biography via her engagement with the narratives of those who came before her. Her autobiography asserts that the acknowledgment of black motherhood is the key narrative, although she elaborates on a network of relationships: mother-son, female-male, and white-black. She navigates the realms of business, political rights, and the institution of marriage while raising a child.

*The Heart of a Woman* also dismantles the dualities present in Maya Angelou's life as she transitions from America to Africa, from optimism to pessimism, from joy to sorrow, and from daughter to mother. Her autobiography intricately intertwines these contrasting depictions, highlighting her dual identity. Ultimately, Angelou articulates the evolution of her fragmented identity via a synthesis of separations. Dolly Aimee Mcpherson documents the dualities of Maya Angelou's themes in "In Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou," noting that "There are themes in *The Heart of a Woman* that originated in the earlier volumes of the autobiography, which critics will continue to examine: the precarious balance between reality and fantasy; the manner in which the autobiographer chronicles events; the transition from innocence to knowledge; and the instances of decision and indecision" (143).

Captivated by the notion of development and sexuality, Maya begins to introspect. Maya's journey of self-discovery culminates in her experience of motherhood at the conclusion of her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She inquires with her mother about her physique and the perplexing development of her vagina. Her mother says these are normal development for every girl. Upon seeing one of her acquaintances unclothed, Marguerita finds her breasts

very attractive. She begins to fear her sexual orientation as a lesbian. In order to gain a deeper understanding, she believes it would be beneficial to engage in sexual intercourse with a male. Maya approaches a man for sexual relations and asks if he is interested in having sex with her. The man inquires, “Are you implying that you will provide me with a haircut?” (281).

Maya perceives her remarks as derogatory; indeed, she aims to “extract something from him.” Subsequent to engaging in sexual intercourse with the man, she discovers that she is pregnant. Upon discovering her pregnancy, she reflects, “The minor satisfaction derived from the realization that my ability to conceive indicated I was not a lesbian was overshadowed in the recesses of my mind by an overwhelming influx of fear, guilt, and self-loathing” (284). Consequently, her journey as a mother starts with this atypical sexual encounter.

Maya’s first remarks on her parenting reflect her exhilaration over the experience. She perceives her child as her property and never dismisses the anguish she endured during his delivery. She links motherhood to suffering and “gray months,” indicating to the reader that the experience would be challenging. She understands that raising a black child will be more arduous than giving birth to him. Maya’s first autobiography concludes with an image of a mother and her infant boy, signifying a new chapter of life with her newborn. Vivian’s want for Maya to sleep with her infant while “touching her side” signifies the connection between mother and child.

Mary Vermillion, in “Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in Incidents in *the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” remarks on Vivian’s last words: “See,” Vivian murmurs, “you don’t have to think about doing the right thing.” “If one supports the correct course of action, one acts without hesitation” (246). This concluding scene depicts the mother-child link as a representation of Maya’s newly acquired autonomy, reversing her previous emphasis on the verbal over the physical and celebrating the harmonic interplay of her body and will. Vermillion asserts that Maya Angelou’s “celebration of black motherhood” signifies “personal autonomy.” Maya Angelou depicts the hugging scenario as an idealization of the mother-child relationship. Conversely, Angelou achieves this depiction by illustrating not just a single mother-child relationship but also the approaches of two mothers. Vivian hugs Maya, and Maya embraces Guy. Consequently, Angelou effectively depicts the last scenario as a representation of three generations: Maya, Vivian, and Guy. Stephen Butterfield asserts in his 1974 work, *Black Autobiography*, that the interaction between mother and child, the instinctive generation of life that occurs automatically despite, and perhaps due to, the surrounding chaos, establishes continuity.

Three concepts examine the mother-child relationship in *The Heart of a Woman*: the child’s displacement, the mother’s essential role in the child’s growth, and the psychological perspective of the Oedipal stage. Displacement is the common topic of Angelou’s autobiographical books, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Heart of a Woman*. Maya’s feeling of alienation starts with the first two words of her prior autobiography: “What are you looking at me for?” “I did not come to remain...” (1).

Maya was sent to her grandmother’s home in Stamps after her parents’ divorce. These sentences illustrate how Maya’s feeling of dislocation renders her incapable of acclimating to her new surroundings. She has a profound sense of dislocation, preventing her from ever feeling entirely at home. She articulates her derogatory emotional dislocation in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: “If maturation is agonizing for the Southern black girl, the awareness of her displacement is the corrosion on the razor that endangers the throat.” It constitutes an unwarranted affront. Throughout the novel, Maya seeks a residence where she may feel at home. Her feeling of alienation stemmed not just from her emotional detachment from her family but also from her ethnicity. Nancy A. Walker, in “Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women”, asserts that the Black Southern community is a politically and historically vulnerable institution.

The relocation issue affects not just Maya but also other people, including her father Bailey and her uncle Willie. Bailey’s displacement is attributable to his societal status, influenced by his race and socioeconomic level. Despite his occupation as a hotel porter, he tries to ascertain his socioeconomic status from his attire and manner of speaking. Uncle Willie, another victim of relocation due to his disability and race, is also present. Maya and Guy’s disconnection from their world stems from their absence of a familial unit. They send Maya to her grandmother’s home, where she seeks both maternal and paternal affection, as well as a home where her parents coexist. The individual lacks a father despite having a mother. He needs a paternal figure to serve as a role model.

Maya understands the experience of being without a father, which is why she forms a bond with Guy. Upon the arrival of a new guy in Maya’s life, Guy perceives him as a danger. He feels relief upon discovering that the guy is concerned about his mother. However, if Maya leaves him, he reverts back to his anxiety. His desire to feel his mother’s unwavering love stems from his fear of her abandonment. Maya’s parallel pursuit of love culminates in her sexual assault by her mother’s partner, Mr. Freeman.

The title of Angelou’s work *The Heart of a Woman* emphasizes encapsulating her portrayal of motherhood. Only her child represents the essence of a woman. Maya Angelou, as a mother of a thirteen-year-old boy, confronts racial and societal issues. In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou delineates black motherhood and addresses the challenges encountered by all black moms. The black mother observes devastation at every entrance and desolation at each window, and even she is not exempt from her own doubts. She wonders if her affection for her children is sufficient more distressingly, whether she is too attached to them or her appearances induce embarrassment. She is so alluring that her boys develop desires for her while her girls harbor animosity against her. If she remains single, the challenges increase. Her single status indicates that

a partner has either rejected her or rejected her. Nevertheless, she is nurturing offspring who will eventually become partners. Outside her door, all power resides with individuals who neither resemble nor think or behave like her and her children. Educators, medical professionals, retail associates, librarians, law enforcement officers, and social workers, who are predominantly Caucasian, exert influence over her family's emotions, circumstances, and character. However, within her household, she must exhibit an authority that can be illusory at any moment due to a knock on the door or a phone call. Amidst these paradoxes, she must provide a stabilizing influence that comforts without constraining, and she must convey to her children the reality of white power's influence while implying that it is not insurmountable.

Maya Angelou characterizes black moms as wary and apprehensive ladies who are only preoccupied with their children. In her concept of black motherhood, she asserts that if "the black mother" is unmarried, it signifies that her spouse has abandoned her. She asserts that in the external world, all power resides with whites who do not share her perspective. Every professional domain includes individuals of Caucasian descent. Angelou asserts that a black mother lives in constant anxiety at home, fearing that a police call reporting her child's lynching or a knock at the door announcing her daughter's murder could disrupt her tranquility. Through these comments, Angelou cautions black moms to recognize the white power that might disrupt their tranquil households. In articulating her personal experiences as a black mother, she simultaneously serves as a representative voice for other black women. Angelou shares her experience as a black mother, detailing an incident where a group responsible for a child's death threatens Guy. It is noteworthy that threats to a black youngster may originate not only from white individuals but also from members of his own race.

Angelou asserts that nurturing a black child in this environment has significant challenges. She states that throughout childhood, one only prays to God for their sustenance. As they mature, Mom Willie expresses that the mother begins to dread lynching, and as they age further, the black mother prays to God for her children's safety from the conflict with whites. Consequently, the alternative designation for the black mother is "fear." In Angelou's first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Momma experiences a similar horror when the police arrive at her store to announce a lynching hunt for a black man. Uncle Willie's lynching horrifies her. Consequently, although Maya's narrative is very personal, it reflects the concerns of black women who have perpetually feared for their children's safety due to racism.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Guy experiences separation from his mother for the first time in his life. They will continue to live their solitary existence. The individual seeks to distance himself from his mother and articulates his feelings by stating, "Mom, I understand that I am your sole offspring and that you care for me." However, it's important for you to remember one crucial point. It concerns my neck and my very existence. "I will live it entirely or not at all" (271). He seeks to demonstrate to his mother that he can live independently without her support. He wants to live independently, free from his mother's influence. He adds, "I love you, Mom." "Perhaps now you will have the opportunity to mature" (271). The individual wants his mother to mature and discover her own personality. *The Heart of a Woman* deconstructs the notion of motherhood at its conclusion.

The character emerges as a formidable individual, striving to redefine her identity and embark on a new life. Maya begins a new life without her child and declares, "I closed the door and held my breath. I was ready for the surge of emotions to overwhelm me, render me helpless, and leave me speechless. No events occurred. I did not feel abandoned and forlorn. I did not experience feelings of loneliness or abandonment" (272). Ultimately, the conclusion reveals that the separation of Maya and Guy facilitates the rebirth of both individuals. Neither Maya feels lonely after Guy's departure, nor does Guy feel discontent. Maya's concluding statement, "The initial thought that occurred to me, fully developed and hopeful, was, 'At last, I'll be able to consume the entire breast of a roast chicken independently'" (272).

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Africa serves as another alternate maternal figure. *The Heart of a Woman* depicts Africa as a maternal figure, acting as a conduit among the characters. Vus Make, Maya's spouse, is associated with Africa as a South African independence warrior who primarily utilized the concept of "Mother Africa." He serves as the representation of Africa and embodies the position of a son of "Mother Africa." "Make then systematically explained how slavery ravaged Africa, with her strongest sons and daughters forcibly taken to construct the nation of the enslaved," states Make (105). He attempts to elucidate Africa's destruction by Europeans via enslavement. He asserts that white people appropriate and subject the "sons and daughters" of Mother Africa to enslavement. Vus incorporates African characters and the concept of Mother Africa throughout the text.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya Angelou critiques the institution of marriage by examining the dynamics between men and women. This section will briefly examine the influence of marriage and the mother's role in the household, concentrating on Angelou's union with Vus Make, an African liberation activist. Robert Staples articulates the dynamics between a black man and a woman by stating, "The black woman enters marriage with the anticipation that her husband will serve as the primary provider for the family." In a culture characterized by monopoly, capitalism, and systemic racism, the black guy has significant challenges in securing work.

Maya found herself at the center of three men in *The Heart of a Woman*: her son Guy, her fiancé Thomas, and her prospective spouse Vus. Her son Guy anticipated "warmth, nourishment, housing, clothing, and stability," but Maya believes he should not assume their circumstances would remain unchanged. She understands that she cannot render their reality immutable. Thomas desired a "nice wife" proficient in culinary skills, while Vus sought an African lady as a symbol of "the endurance of a people who had survived three hundred and fifty years of slavery" (123). The institution of marriage confines women to the home sphere. Her restrictions were established by her husband Vus, leading her to engage in

domestic tasks rather than participating in the fight for racial equality. Consequently, the marriage obstructs her pursuit of identity.

Academics such as Mary Jane Lupton, Carol Neubaur, and Stephen Butterfield have identified the significance of motherhood as a cohesive theme throughout Angelou's five volumes. The conclusion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* marks the beginning of Maya's journey as a mother and highlights the maternal influences in her life. In both autobiographies, Maya emerges as a sacrificial mother who is willing to sell her body to provide a better future for her son. *The Heart of a Woman* depicts Maya's motherhood as that of a more mature and sagacious lady. The novel *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* also explores the relationship between mother and child. Consequently, the idea of motherhood intertwines with Maya's autobiographical heritage.

Angelou's, *The Heart of a Woman*, elucidates the duties of mothers and delineates cultural integration. It examined the importance of Angelou's maternal politics in advancing the battle for equality among black women. Through the narration of her own experiences, she emerged as a voice for women of color, illustrating the severe reality they faced in the 20th century. Initially seeing her blackness as a source of disgrace due to her identity as a black woman and mother, Angelou ultimately transformed this perception, embracing her color as a source of pride and dignity as she grew. In embracing her blackness, Angelou had the chance for self-reflection.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou reflects on her youth from the perspective of an adult. This autobiography illustrates the evolution of an individual from childhood to a self-aware, mature lady. *The Heart of a Woman* chronicles a phase of Angelou's political engagement while elucidating the bewilderment experienced by Black activists in America throughout the 1960s. Undoubtedly, Angelou chronicled the 1960s in her autobiography, particularly highlighting prominent figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Meanwhile, *The Heart of a Woman* chronicles Angelou's struggles, broadening the viewpoint of a woman's existence in this swiftly evolving century. Siphokazi Z. Koyana asserts in her dissertation, "By infusing the maternal role with themes of racial protest and the pursuit of personal fulfillment, Angelou synthesizes the best of her predecessors and redefines the Black American autobiographical narrative" (249).

In the conclusion of *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou redefines motherhood and discloses the separation between herself and Guy. Guy's decision to live in the dormitory and attend university is the primary reason for his separation from Maya. While her first autobiography concludes with a synthesis of mother and child, her subsequent autobiography culminates in a redefinition of motherhood and an affirmation of self. Consequently, the conclusion of *The Heart of a Woman* signifies not just a new beginning for Guy but also a renewed opportunity for Maya. Maya will allocate time to reflect more on herself. No one, not even Guy, will become the focal point of her existence. She reflects on her separation from her child, leading her to redefine motherhood. While her only objective in life was formerly Guy's happiness, she has now become the fulcrum of her own existence. She restores her self-confidence and remains joyful even in the absence of her son.

The black woman must navigate family obligations while engaging in household responsibilities or political activities. Consequently, the black woman must navigate responsibilities both inside and outside the house, which challenges the conventional domestic duties associated with traditional maternal figures. Black moms emerge as strong, resilient, and self-sufficient individuals. Maya Angelou's autobiographical books, *The Heart of a Woman*, delineate portrayals of black maternal characters from the twentieth century. The author demonstrates how the emergence of a redefined black maternal identity undermines the conventional characteristics of black motherhood. Angelou's depiction of formidable maternal figures adeptly demonstrates their battle against the hierarchies of race, gender, and class. Maya Angelou's autobiographical writings reconstruct and reinterpret black motherhood to honor the individual.

## Conclusion

This analysis of Angelou's *The Heart of Women* examines of self-identity and cultural assimilation. It highlights the interplay between autobiography, racial politics, and gender roles in her work. This research analyzes the importance of women's roles as mothers in selected autobiographies by Maya Angelou to highlight the tradition of self identity in African American women's literature. Her autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, facilitated the exploration of the intricacies of black motherhood and assisted in its definition. Moreover, these autobiographies allowed Angelou to express her emotions, conflicts, and hardships that contribute to her self-actualization.

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