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INNER VOICE OF A BLACK AND DESPERATE MOTHER: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MAYA ANGELOU'S FOURTH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SERIES "THE HEART OF A WOMAN"

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Abstract:
In this fourth autobiographical series the African American writer, Maya Angelou brings the most political segment, set against the upsurge of the Afro-Americans and Africans between 1957 and 1962. From being peripheral to the political life of her people, Angelou etches herself more centrally into the rising Civil Rights Movement and the African liberation struggle. Through her participation in them, she becomes more of a person in the platonic sense. The book traces Angelou's growing consciousness as a woman. We feel in this Volume, the emergence of a new, self-confident Maya Angelou.

Keywords: Struggle, displacement, self-identity, and motherhood

When we imagine women inhabited by all those apparitions it becomes obvious that the women themselves did not hallucinate, but rather that they were national, racial and historical hallucinations. Those contradictions stump even the most fertile imagination, for they could not have existed despite the romantic racism which introduced them into the American psyche. Surprisingly, about all, many women did survive as themselves. (Maya Angelou, 1989:12)

Angelou in her first volume (Caged Bird) chose her childhood as the organizing principle. The story of Caged Bird begins when the three-year-old Angelou and her four-year-old brother, Bailey were turned over to the care of their paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, and it ends with the birth of her son when she was seventeen. The next two volumes, Gather Together(1974) and Singin' and Swingin' (1976), narrate Angelou's lifelong chronological lines for the most part, and one would expect that her fourth autobiographical sequence, The Heart of Woman (1981), would proceed with the account of her career as entertainer, writer and freedom fighter. In many ways, Angelou meets her reader's expectations as she follows her life forward chronologically in organizing the newest segment in the series. Yet it is interesting to note that at the beginning of The Heart of a Woman, as she continues the account of her son's youth, she returns to the story of her own childhood repeatedly, the reference to her childhood serves partly to create a textual link for readers who might be unfamiliar with the earlier volumes and partly to emphasize the suggestive similarities between her own childhood and that of her son. Maya Angelou's overwhelming sense of displacement and instability is, ironically, her son's burden too.

The Heart of a Woman, the fourth volume of Angelou's Autobiography, was published in 1981. The title was inspired by a poem written by Georgia Douglas Johnson. In this inspiring personal narrative, Angelou chronicles her experiences in New York City where she explored her literary and dramatic talents, her commitment to the civil rights struggle, and her often turbulent relationship with her teenage son Guy.

The Heart of a Woman follows Angelou through the late fifties and early sixties, transitional time between national eras, of Little Rock, of Black American first in sports, of spirited turmoil in the United States Congress over the passage of Civil Rights Commission's Voting Rights Bill. It is a period when Laurel Canyon was the official residential area of Hollywood – a time when, although the few blacks who lived there were rich, famous and fair-skinned enough, most Black Americans could not rent or buy the modest bungalows there without recourse to White go-betweens. It is time when Billy Holiday was still alive and, in a rare moment, sang "Strange Fruit" to Angelou's precocious son.

The Heart of a Woman, the most political segment of Angelou's autobiographical statement, is set against the upsurge of Afro-Americans and Africans(between 1957 and 1962) and the

ups and downs of Angelou's own life – changes that include her introduction to the society and the world of Black artists and writers; her career as actress, editor and activist; her involvement in the Harlem Writers Guild and publication of her first short story; her marriage to a South African freedom fighter and their life together in New York, London, and Cairo; and rearing of her teenage son. From being peripheral to the political life of her people, Angelou etched herself more centrally into the rising civil rights movement and the African liberation struggle. Through her participation in them, she became more of a person in the Platonic sense. As a result, the theme of this segment of her autobiography can be taken from the message that he heard from Martin Luther King, the great African freedom fighter;

*"*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 country. We, the most feared and apprehensive must take the fear and by love change into hope.

For a little over a one- third of the book, Angelou manages to capture convincingly these and other complexities of Black Americans living in Africa. She portrays with touching candor the Africa of shattered fantasies, the Africa that did not greet her homecoming with open arms. But finally, perhaps because of some restigal longing for "home", Angelou is seduced by those same fantasies, creating at the end of the book, an illusory befitting her imagination. The latter part of the book seems to wash over all the earlier convincingly rendered details of rejection, unrecognition, and displacement as it rushes to an unearned and unconvincing conclusion – an embrace, if you will, with African mother who had earlier closed her arms.

Since memory is not infallible, fictionalization comes into play whenever the auto biographer reconstructs or, perhaps more correctly, recreates the illusion of an infallible memory that records exactly the feel of a place and the words spoken there. Thus, when Angelou narrates visits with Billie Holiday (in the very beginning of the text) in Laurel Canyon, she takes care to imitate her rather flamboyant verbal style:

"People love the islands, the islands. So the sun shines all the time. I'd rather be in New York. Everybody in New York City is a son of a bitch, at least they don't pretend they're something else" (9).

Holiday and Guy soon develop a balanced rapport and thoroughly enjoy the little time they spend together. Guy exuberantly tells her about his adventures and the books he had read, while she, in turn, sings her sorrowful song to him as she relaxes and finds solace in the company of the child.

The most significant similarity between Guy and Angelou's childhood is the condition of displacement, familial as well as geographical. Both Angelou and Guy, her son, were placed in the care of relatives or family friends and they had to move from neighborhood to neighborhood and from one state to another. Angelou here reminds us of the displacement which characterizes her youth and links this aspect of her past with her son's present attitude. When Guy is fourteen, Angelou decides to move to New York she does not bring Guy to NewYork until she has found a place for them to live, and when he arrives after a one-month separation, he initially resists her attempts to make a new home for them:

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

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

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

From this and similar encounter with Guy, Angelou learns that the continual displacement of her own childhood is something she cannot prevent from recurring in her son's life.

Rather than a unique cycle perpetuated only within her family, Angelou's individual story presents a clear pattern commonly shared and passed along a new generation continually. Providing stability for the children as the family disintegrates is a virtually impossible task, not only for Angelou but also for the mothers of similar situations. And for Angelou, the burden is all the more taxing, because she has been solely responsible for her son from the beginning of his life.

She vocals anecdotes galore from Guy's youth which mirrors problems she has also faced. These compelling accounts suggest the recurring pattern of displacement and rejection in the relationship between mother and child. Many times Angelou feels that she and her son are skating dangerously "on thin ice". As a child, Guy expects his mother to offer him constant attention and affection as well as the basic requirements of food and shelter, for which Angelou must often work long hours at more than one job. Her babysitting expenses alone often consume a substantial part of her meager income. Angelou continues her singing career at Apollo Theatre in Harlem; she takes a major step towards assuring her own personal liberation and freedom:

"I made the decision to quit the show business. Give up the skin-tight dresses and manicured smiles, the false concern over sentimental lyrics. I would never again work to make people smile.... [But] would take on the responsibility of making them think. Now was the time to demonstrate my own seriousness (45).

That decision is her passport to irrevocable freedom to which the definitiveness of the autobiography attests. At the most time, she is reminded of the valor shown by her mother, Vivian Baxter when she took on the merchant marine "because they told me Negro women couldn't get in the union.. I told them you want to bet?" I'll put my foot in that door up to my hip until women of every color can walk over my foot, get in that union, get abroad a ship and go to sea"(28). This is the essence of Angelou's composite: Black progress has been attained in this country not only because of the leadership of the Black men but because of the unsung spirit of non-compliant Black Women. This is the revelation she intends to focus – the careful portrayal of major women who strengthened her in her life wished to celebrate.

Guy's needs, however, are not simple, and in addition to love, companionship, and the basic necessities, he frequently intimates that his mother should be responsible for order and security on a higher plane as well. Angelou's sense of personal failure in caring adequately for Guy lingers for many years. Similarly, his sense of disappointment and rejection is reinforced every time his mother brings a new man into their already tenuous relationship.

Angelou begins to acquire a new sense of Black dignity and to become more politicized, growing more aware than ever before. While her decision to end her show business is partly political, Angelou is not yet involved in organized politics. This involvement comes later when, for the first time, she goes to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. The king who had been recently released from Birmingham jail is in New York to raise money for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and to make Northerners aware of the fight being waged in the South. So moved is Angelou by the power of King's commitment that she co-produced with Godfrey Cambridge the successful Cabaret for Freedom at the Village Gate to raise money for the SCLC. Her ability to getting the show on the boards so impresses the SCLC leadership that King appoints Angelou his Northern Coordinator.

Throughout her life, she strives to balance the responsibilities of motherhood and the demands of her career as a professional entertainer and writer. She cannot spend as much time with her son as she would like to hold a full-time job at the same time. Thus she is often caught in a situation, for which no solution is satisfactory, and she cannot help but she cannot help but suffer from the paradox of being both a victim and a perpetrator of the cycle of displacement.

Although Angelou has vowed to give up the life of an entertainer permanently, she cannot resist an invitation to perform at the opening of the Gate of Horn in Chicago. She naturally

has second thoughts about leaving Guy on his own, but cannot turn down the opportunity to earn enough money in two weeks to pay two months' rent. She also hires an older black woman to stay at her home and cook for Guy who is already quite independent. One night Killen sends a telephone message from Brooklyn and informs her that "there's been some trouble"(75). In a moment of panic that recalls her fear at the Paris train station (Gather Together 151-152) Angelou again imagines that Guy has been injured, stolen.

While she was in Chicago, Guy had gotten in trouble with a Brooklyn street gang. Jerry's response is an ironic comment on the motherhood theme of autobiographies: "O.K., I understand, But for a mother, I must say you're a mean mother fucker" (84).

The social and cultural history of Black Americans is richly revealed in this volume and it also documents the sixties when Angelou engaged herself actively in political protest with Martin Luther King's organization in New York City. However in the 1960s when so much was evolving on the political front, Angelou, disenchanted with the mildness of King's philosophy, becomes more and more attracted to the cause of the Black militants – Black American and African, and more committed to activities. Of this she writes:

> Redemptive suffering had always been the part of Martin's argument that I found difficult to accept. It had seen distress fester souls and bend people's bodies out of shape, but I had yet to see anyone redeemed by pain (93)

Angelou and her activist women friends, charged by their new political zeal organize a group which they name CAWAH, the acronym for the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage. The organization includes dancers, teachers, singers, writers, and musicians; and its intention is to support all Black civil rights causes. Lumumba's assassination in Congo sends CAWAH off on a protest demonstration at the United Nations with much of Harlem joining in the demonstration as well as two other pro-African groups: The Liberation Committee for Africa and the On Guard. Particularly moving is Angelou's alternately frightening and comic account of the demonstration that turns into a near riot. In an angry response to what would become the most memorable interruption of the General Assembly, Adlai Stevenson, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, apologizes to the international body. And surely whites are the enemies of blacks; otherwise, hoe did we get to this country in the first place (170)

Angelou is not only an observer in this area of protest and hope, but she works with CAWAH, with Pro-African groups, and with Martin Luther King, Jr. in SCLC; she comes to believe that, when the final history of the sixties is written, King will be known as one of the great minds of the 20th century.

While The Heart of a Woman documents a period when Angelou, for the first time, becomes an active political protestor, Angelou does not, in retrospect enlarge her own image as a

protestor. In describing one particular staged, she recalls, in an interview that, "I had been silly, irresponsible and unprepared" (1981:24). Such honesty in no way undermines the seriousness of Angelou's commitment to the movement, but it does help readers to understand both the confusion and encouragement felt by Black activists in a passage in American life which has turned out to be historic. While the recounting of the sixties is of interest because it enhances the reader's understanding of such men like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Patrice Lumumba, only Angelou's occupation with herself can give the readers the kind of personal history that the autobiography makes so formidable in The Heart of a Woman.

In addition to using fictional techniques in the reconstruction of dialogue, Angelou turns to fictionalization to create a sense of history larger than the story of her own life. In her meeting with Malcolm X, for example, Angelou combines the re-creation of credible dialogue with the historical references that go beyond her individual life. In one scene, Angelou and her close friend Rosa Guy, both representative of CAWAH, decide to call on Malcolm X to ask for his help to raise funds for their organization. Face to face with Malcolm X, Angelou and Rosa Guy, both extremely articulate women, are reduced to a stammering "vaudeville duo". This Stichomythic rhythm in the reconstructed conversation suggests the degree of intimidation that women experienced in the presence of Malcolm X. The power of his personality causes their initial uneasiness, which soon turns to disappointment as Malcolm X coolly refuses to involve his Muslim followers in public demonstration.

Angelou's unsuccessful interview with the Harlem leader provides a clear contrast with her first meeting with Martin Luther King. The large historical content of their exchange expands the personal parameter of her life-story. At the time of her first conversation with King, Angelou has been working as Northern Coordinator for SCLC in New York. She had devoted the previous month to raising funds, boosting membership and organizing volunteer labor, both in office and in the neighborhood. When Dr. King pays his first visit to the office, during her tenure, she does not have advance notice of his presence and rushes into her office one day after lunch to find him sitting at her desk. They begin to talk about her background and eventually focus their comments on her brother, Bailey:

"Come on, take your seat and tell me about yourself"..... when I mentioned my brother Bailey, he asked what he was doing now.

"The question stopped me. He dropped his head and looked at his hands ... I understand disappointment drives our young men to some desperate lengths." Sympathy and sadness kept his voice low. "That's why we must fight and win. We must save the Baileys of the world. And Maya never stops loving him. Never give up on him. Never deny him. And remember he is freer than those who hold him behind the bar" (172-173).

Angelou appreciates King's sympathy, and of course, shares his hope that their work will make the world more fair and free. She recognizes the undeniable effects of displacement on Bailey's life and fervently hopes that her son who has not escaped the pain of displacement will be spared by the further intimidation and rejection.

At the time sit-ins and freedom rides and Africa's astonishing birth of nations, it was an almost inevitable comment on the race issue. The play is Jean Gent's The Blacks and despite her work in SCLC, Angelou finds time to act in the lead role at the St Marks's Theatre, Off-Broadway, as the White Queen. At first, opposed to acting in a play that portrays Blacks assuming the roles of their former masters, Angelou soon begins to enjoy the catharsis that the plays' politics affords her. She comments:

"the play was delicious to our taste. We were only acting, but we were black actors in the 1960s. On that small New York stage, we reflected the real-life. Whites did live above us, hating and fearing and threatening our existence. Blacks did sneer behind their masks at the rules they both loathed and envied. We would throw off the white yoke which gagged us down into an eternal genuflection.

I started enjoying my role. I used the White queen to ridicule mean white women and brutal white men who had too often injured me and mine" (179-180)

But when Angelou insists that she and Miss Ayler must be paid something for composing the music, Bernstein making no attempt to dilute his scorn, bellows, "Get off my back will you? You didn't compose anything I saw you. You just sat down at the piano and made up something" (184). Bernstein's incredulous statement initially paralyzes the movement of Angelou's brain, but she recovers quickly, concluding she is not locked into The Blacks or St. Mark's Playhouse and, therefore, must resist any exploitation of herself or talent. Recalling this incident, Angelou explains:

It was ironic that the producer of a play which exposed whit greed so eloquently could himself be such a glutton. Whether we were in the mines of South Africa, or the liberal New York theatre, nothing changed. Whites wanted everything. They thought they deserve everything ... that they also wanted to control the souls and the pride of people was inexplicable (197)

Thus each of Angelou's books, while recounting the story of one individual's fight for survival, extends the perspective of a woman's life in contemporary social, political and cultural history.

In this autobiography, Angelou stresses the irony in her present perspective by juxtaposing her fantasized notion of marriage with the way two relationships actually develop. She

carefully exposes her illusory hopes and underscores her naiveté with her actual disappointment she experienced. While working in New York, Angelou meets Thomas Allen, a bail bondsman, whom she plans to marry in order to bring stability into her life and a father into Guy's. She privately imagines the assumed advantages of marrying Thomas Allen until she has convinced herself of her dream:

I was getting used to the idea and even liking it. We'd buy a nice house out on Long Island, where he had relatives. I would join a church and some local women's volunteer organizations Guy wouldn't mind another move if he was assured that it was definitely the last one. I would let my hair grow out and get it straightened and wear pretty hats with flowers and gloves and look like a nice colored woman from San Francisco. (202)

But even before the fantasy becomes an illusion, Angelou begins to distrust her dream-like wishes. Her friends and his family caution them not to marry, and she even feels a "twinge which tried to warn me that I should stop and do some serious thinking" (203). In spite of her premonitions Angelou does not take the decision to take her engagement with Thomas, until she meets Vus Make, who convinces her that she would be in a better position to offer her gift of humanism to others if she were to be married to a South African political figure rather than to a bail bondsman.

Although Vus Make's goals are quite different from Thomas Allen's Angelou experiences the same belief in a perfect fantasy future with her prospective husband – and its dissolution, part of her imagined future, would provide her with the same domestic security she had hoped would develop from other relationships, "I was getting a husband and part of that gift was having some to share responsibilities and guilt" (215). They marry.

From here, Angelou relates her definitions as self as she tries to be the proper wife of a respected African but at the same time realizes that she cannot be the subservient woman her husband wants to be. She is discomfited by his of times patronizing tone in speaking to her "as if [she] were the little shepherd girl and he the Old Man of Kilimanjaro" (218) and by his expectation that she be not only the perfect African wife and the perfect cook but also the perfect housekeeper. Angelou and Guy move to Cairo with Make so that he can be closer to his fellow expatriates as he carries on the struggle for Black liberation in South Africa. However, by now a recurring pattern has emerged; make is not only an energetic womanizer, but he is also irresponsible, failing to pay the rent and other bills. With her will to survive, her independence, and her American gumption, Angelou does the unheard of in Egypt: she goes to work. With the help of her friend David Du Bois, Angelou secures a position as associate editor of English-language journal called Arab observer and teaches herself to be a 'reporter in process. Here in Egypt Angelou as a black American woman working with a male staff in a country deeply influenced by the Islamic faith, Angelou has to prove herself on more than one level.

Angelou's awakening observations in Egypt, coupled with the knowledge she gains from her African and Egyptian friends, show her that, while all Blacks are not the same because of cultural differences, all our brothers and sisters united in the flesh. Before the end of The Heart of a Woman, Angelou leaves Make, because she realizes that she can no longer live with him:

Vus was African; his values were different from mine. Among the people I knew, my family and friends, promiscuity was the ultimate blow in marriage. It struck down the pillar of trust which held the relationship aloft. (247).

Angelou and Guy travel to a new life in Ghana. Angelou visits Eastern Ghana and is given a tour of Keta, a town whose population was nearly decimated by the slave trade. Angelou summarizes her experiences here:I had not consciously come to Ghana to find the roots of my beginnings, but I had continued and accidentally tripped over them or fallen upon them in my everyday life ... And here is my last day in Africa (253).

Just a few days after their arrival in Ghana, friend invites Angelou and Guy to a picnic. Although his mother declines, Guy immediately accepts the invitation, as, a show of independence. Guy meets with an accident as he is a novice in driving, Guy is seriously injured. I had taken him away from my mother's house when he was two years old, and except for a year I spent in Europe with him, and a monthGuy gradually recovers, moving, during the process of physical healing, towards a position of greater independence from his mother.

The complex nature of her relationship with her son is at the heart of this most recent of Angelou's autobiographical volumes. In the end, Guy is seventeen and has just passed the matriculation exams at the University of Ghana. The last scene pictures Guy driving off to a new dormitory room with several fellow university students:

I closed the door and held my breath. Waiting for the wave of emotion to surge over me, knock me down, and take my breath away. Nothing happened. I didn't feel bereft or desolate. I didn't feel lonely or abandoned.

I sat down still waiting. The first thought that came to me perfectly performed and promising me. (272)

Angelou's reaction to having "closed the door" on her son is like many of her feelings in their ambivalent relationship. The son she had loved through all of her life is gone, Angelou sits waiting for something dreadful to happen to herself as she had earlier imagined Guy being stolen or hit by a bus.

Conclusion:

The of The Heart of a Woman announces a new beginning for Angelou and hope for her future relationship with Guy. In this sense, the next volume in the series follows the pattern established by the conclusions of earlier volumes. Caged bird ends with the birth of Guy, Gather Together with the return of her mother's home in San Francisco after regaining her innocence through the lessons of a drug addict, and Singin' and Swingin' with the reunion of mother and son in a paradisical setting of a Hawaiian resort. The final scene in The Heart of a Woman suggests that the future will bring more balance between dependence and independence in their relationship and that both will have significant personal successes as their lives begin to take different courses. Although Guy has assumed that he has been fully "grown up" for years, they have at last reached a point where they can treat each other as adults and allow on another the chance to live independently. Hence Angelou shares Guy's fresh sense of liberation and it is from this security that Maya Angelou looks back to record her life story and to compensate for the years of distance and displacement through the autobiographical act.

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