

Single African American Motherhood Vis-A-Vis Black Feminist Standpoint: An Autoethnographic Study Of Maya Angelou's Experiences

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Abstract

The study contests the two narratives about single African American motherhood eternalized in U.S. society's doctrines of mothering of, first, either being a careless, unfit mother or second, superstrong self-sacrificing, devoted mother; and argues that the mothering experiences of African American women are testimony of unbecoming of romanticized versions of African American mothers. The argument is substantiated by Maya Angelou's autobiographical experiences from *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) and *Singin' & Swingin' & Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976) which do not conform to pre-existing notion of motherhood but rather engage and challenge them by reconstructing and reframing the discursivity of African American motherhood. The study explores the sociological significance of two distinctive issues in this narrative: the interlocking constitution of single African American mother's oppression, and their resilience and endurance. The stance of a single African American mother caught in the trilateral contretemps of race, class and gender create new consciousness about their lives, community and families, which ultimately leads to the development of proficient Black Feminist Standpoint. The study employs autoethnographic approach as methodology. Further, the study may help other marginalised communities by putting greater trust in the ingenious prospects of their autobiographies and cultural biographies.

Keywords: African American, autoethnography, Black Feminist Standpoint, gender, interlocking oppressions, motherhood.

I. INTRODUCTION

African American women in U.S. are a division comprising of three oppressed groups on account of their birth: “African American” (race and class) and “women” (gender). African American who are at the bottom of the hierarchy in all spheres: economic, social and political while Whites are at the top (Feagin, 2000), and women, “the second sex” (Beauvoir, 1989). The African American women literary movement, started primarily as a social movement, was created to bring out fundamental changes in the U.S. social order. African American women literature- a quest for social parity and identity primarily communicates the subjugated history of a community that is triply marginalized on the account of race, class and gender.

The autobiographical genre of writing has been an important integrant of African American literary tradition, starting with the publication of slave narratives by African American men such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oludah Equiano* (1789), followed by *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1845), *Twelve Years a Slave, Narrative of Soloman Northup* (1853) , Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) and many more. However, African American women found these narratives to be patriarchal which did not present their lived experiences adequately for they claim “as our Caucasian barristers are not to blame is they cannot quite put themselves in the dark man’s place, neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact voice of the Black Woman” ¹ (Cooper,1990). The autobiographies by African American women, narrating their lived reality established a new culture in African American literature with the introduction of their Standpoint. It started with the publication of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by herself* (1861) which introduced, for the first time, a woman’s account of lived reality among congested male viewpoints, followed by the publication of various women autobiographies namely, *The Journal of Charlotte Forten* (1953),

¹Cooper, Anne Julia. Quoted by Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. New York: A Meridian Book, Penguin Group, 1990. Page 1

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Ida B. Wells's *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (1970), *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) and many others. Such narratives introduced feminist writings as "distinctive approaches to subverting the established procedures of disciplinary practice tied to the agendas of the powerful"² (Smith, 1974).

The feminist standpoint theorists argues that women's unique social position and gendered division of labour present clues to an analysis of the different types of oppression that they experience. Alison Wylie (2003) explains, "The oppressed may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience."³ Sandra Harding (2004) suggests the need to develop "conceptual frameworks in which women as a group—or, rather, as groups located in different class, racial, ethnic, and sexual locations in local, national, and global social relations— became the subjects—the authors—of knowledge."⁴ Dorothy Smith (1987) highlights the marginalization of women's experiences and demands for "a way of seeing, from where we actually live, into the powers, processes, and relations that organize and determine the everyday context of seeing"⁵. Nancy Hartsock discusses about major differences in men and women's lives by emphasizing on their designated roles, where men are responsible for only producing goods whereas women are required to produce both goods and human life. She asserts that the women's lives "make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point that can ground a powerful critique of the phallographic institutions and ideology that constitute the

² Smith, Dorothy E. "The ideological practice of sociology". *Catalyst* No. 8:39-54. 1974

³ Wylie, Alison "Why Standpoint Matters" *Science and Other Cultures-Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, Ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding, (New York: Routledge,2003)

⁴ Harding, Sandra. Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate Pg 4, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader Intellectual and Political Controversies* Edited by Sandra Harding published in 2004. Routledge.

⁵ Smith, Dorothy E. (1987) *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Open University Press, Milton Keynes. Pp-9

capitalist form of patriarchy”⁶ (Hartsock, 1985) Thus, the unique position of women in patriarchal and hegemonic society calls for a distinctive discourse designed broadly for them, by them.

Black feminists in U.S. asserts that there exist a powerful Black Feminist Standpoint which emanates from everyday realities and experiences of African American women and its most striking characteristic is that African American women are discouraged not only by men in general, but also by women of the ‘superior’ class and race who fail to realize their ignored stance in the world. Patricia Hill Collins (1989) states: “the unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationship they have with others suggest that African American women, as a group experience a different world than those who are not Black and female.”⁷ She emphasizes the importance upon “the experiences of oppressed groups” which “become an important source of critical insight” for “after all, knowledge is supposed to be based on experiences, and so different perceptions of ourselves and our environment.”⁸(Collins, 2004) It is important to trace Black Feminist Standpoint as all the realities are white and male centred. The voice of African American women is important for she is at the end of the social ladder, who bears the repercussions of sexist, racist and classist oppression for she is triply repressed by white men, white women and black men for “as a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group”⁹ (hooks, 1984) Audre Lorde (1984) points out “The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences... beyond sisterhood is still racism.”¹⁰ Therefore, such accumulated layers of oppression provide a clearer standpoint.

⁶ Hartsock, Nancy C.M. (1985) *Money, Sex and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical*

Materialism. Northeastern University Press, Boston: pp:231

⁷ Collins, Patricia Hill, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought”, *Signs* Vol. 14, No.4 (summer, 1989): 745-773

⁸ Collins, Patricia Hill *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004)

⁹ hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End Press,1984)

¹⁰ Lorde, Audre. *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press,1984),70

II. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY- COMPOSING BOTH PERSONAL AND CULTURAL

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method defined as “an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the culture” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 739). It is not just documenting personal experiences but also being critical about them as “doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience” (Ellis, 2007: 14). Though autoethnography consists of elements of autobiography, it transcends the writing of selves as “autoethnography invites writers to see themselves as and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones” (Brodkey,1996:29) The autoethnographic account of cultural and social factors by marginalised individuals or communities help expose the realities either not presented before or presented distortedly by the privileged class as “those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected to their agendas or relegated to the role of second class citizens” (Richards,2008: 1724). The autobiographers from marginalised groups recognize writing as a position of moral responsibility wherein they must acknowledge and present the real lived accounts which did not find a voice among the hegemonic and dominant systems.

A close examination of ethnographic studies of African American community ascertains that they depend on cultural and social characteristics to analyze African American women in patriarchal, classist and racist society. The literature is rather concerned about stereotyped model of the community rather than focusing on individual reality and subjective thought of African American women. African American women “in national statistics she is categorised as the unwed mother the welfare recipient, the maid; in national myth she is designated by multiple names all of which conceal her identity--- Aunt Jemima, Mammy, Matriarch, sometimes Sister, Black Bitch, Girl” ¹¹ (Schultz,1997). This prejudiced view of ethnographic study may be contested through African American women’s autobiographical writings that eventually do not conform to the ethnographic representation of

¹¹ Schultz, Elizabeth. *What Manner of Women*. Ed. Marlene Springer. New York University Press, 1997.p. 316

African American women. By employing textual examples from the autobiographies, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) and *Singin' & Swingin' & Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), the paper contends that two overlapping and intersecting selves are found in black women's autobiographies, that are, personal self and social self. She not only narrates a personal journey of a troubled African American single mother but rather provides an account of cultural, social and political factors that are instrumental in the formation of a standpoint, thereby linking her personal narrative to an ethnographic study.

III. AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S STANDPOINT ON MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood has been, historically speaking, an important defining marker for African American women but very few studies focus on their perspective and understanding of motherhood. The discourse and analyses of African American motherhood has principally been the domain of male viewpoint, both White and African American. African American mothers have often "been accused of failing to discipline their children, of emasculating their sons, of defeminizing their daughters, and of retarding their children's academic achievement."¹² (Wade-Gayles, 1980) High rates of divorce, out of wedlock births and female headed households in African American family structure are some of the reasons mentioned by White male scholars for weak and spoiled African American family structure who "claim that African-American mothers wield unnatural power in allegedly deteriorating family structures"¹³. On the contrary African American male scholars elevate African American motherhood by projecting them as superstrong Black mother who are blessed with attributes of self-sacrifice and unconditional love. But they refuse to acknowledge the issues faced by African American mothers who "came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families."¹⁴ (Collins, 2005) This veneration

¹² Gloria Wade-Gayles, "She Who is Black and Mother: In Sociology and Fiction, 1940-1970," in *The Black Woman*, ed. La Frances Rodgers-Rose (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980), 89-106.

¹³ Moynihan, Daniel Patrick, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965); Maxine Baca Zinn, "Family, Race, and Poverty in the Eighties," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 856-874.

¹⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill. (2005). *Black Women and Motherhood*. In: Hardy, S., Wiedmer, C. (eds) *Motherhood and Space*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

and idolizing of African American mothers reiterates "the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as the norm."¹⁵ (Christian, 1985) Many African American men who glorify their strong and independent mothers often fail to recognise the efforts of their wives and girlfriends. Despite of worsening social and economic assistance for African American mothers "large numbers of young men encourage their unmarried teenaged girlfriends to give birth to children whose futures are at risk"¹⁶ (Collins, 2005)

The discourse and arguments presented by White feminists on motherhood are automated in white, middle class women's standpoint which "has been profoundly affected by the limitations that this angle of vision has on race"¹⁷ (Collins, 2005) White mothers have firmly defied the White male criticism of their mothering experiences and roles but suitably failed to identify the labour and hardwork of African American mothers who are "still cleaning somebody else's house or...caring for somebody else's sick or elderly."¹⁸ (Collins, 2005) Therefore, the white feminist theories have had limited effectiveness for African American women and their issues.

African American women though have voiced critiques of both, White men and women analyses of African American motherhood but ignored African American men's views. It is mainly for two reasons, one, they are obligated to present the united image of African American society to the dominant class and second, for the good intentions of African American men who glorify them as "superstrong mothers" in an attempt to change their negative image aggrandized by hegemonic White community. However, even such kind portrayal by African American men has been politely discarded by African American women. Renita Weems (1984) remarks "We have simply sat and nodded while others talked about the magnificent women who bore and raised them and who, along with God, made a way out of no way...We paid to hear them lecture about the invincible strength and genius of the Black mother, knowing full well that the image can be as bogus as

¹⁵ Christian, Barbara., *Black Feminist Criticism: perspectives on Black women writers*. 1985. Pp- 234.

¹⁶ Collins, Patricia Hill. (2005). *Black Women and Motherhood*. In: Hardy, S., Wiedmer, C. (eds) *Motherhood and Space*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

¹⁷ Ibid:150

¹⁸ Ibid:150

the one of the happy slave"¹⁹. Thus, the publication of African American women's autobiographies, fiction and other literature enriched with the experiences of African American women's mothering experiences and labor presents an exclusive Black Feminist Standpoint on motherhood that needs to be explored and presented in the mainstream discourse to debunk the stereotyped image of African American mother as painted by White and African American male scholars so that an adequate Afrocentric feminist analysis of African American motherhood finds its suitable place. The institution of African American motherhood is contentious. There exists a continuous scuffle between attempts to shape it to exploit trilateral systems of gender, race and class oppressions and African American mother's endeavours to present their mothering experiences in a defined and valued manner. The standardize notion of the matriarch or the welfare mother and their practices are primarily intended to oppress. Therefore, mothering experiences, as Collins remarks can "serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves" (Collins, 2005:152). Also, there exists few contradictions in this concept as some women consider motherhood restrictive "that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression" (Collins, 2005:152) but for some it is healing and can provide a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism" (Collins, 2005:152)

IV. THE INTERLOCKING NATURE OF OPPRESSION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERHOOD: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF MAYA ANGELOU'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES

The analysis of Maya Angelou's autoethnographical experiences from *Gather Together in My Name* and *Singin' & Swingin' & Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* exposes how patriarchy, class consciousness and race operate in the life of a single African American mother in the United States and plays an important role in the social construction of the concept of motherhood. African American women perceive gender in different ways as they experience many forms of oppressions concurrently as a multifaceted contact of class, race and gender which is more than total of its parts (Paulette M. Caldwell, 1991: 365). The singular focus on gender as

¹⁹ Weems, Renita "Hush. Mama's Gotta Go Bye Bye': A Personal Narrative," *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 1, no. 2 (1984), 27

the main site of oppression often leads African American mothers to present their experiences in a fragmented manner that does not reflect the multilayered reality of their lived experiences; therefore it becomes crucial to focus on racist and classist systems operating in the society as well.

Angelou celebrates being a single unwed mother and also challenges the patriarchal bashing of single motherhood. She sets out to be a mother who sees nothing less in being a single mother and rather takes pride for she views her motherhood as a source of self actualization. Dorothy E. Roberts remarks “an unwed Black teenager, for example, may experience motherhood as a rare source of self affirmation, while society deems her motherhood to be illegitimate and deviant” (1993:4). Single mothers are often condemned and labelled inadequate to raise children singlehandedly for “institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (Rich, 1976:42) From dominant community to their own male counterparts, liberals and conservatives, for years everyone has given the verdict that being a single mother is somehow terrible. In 2008, on father’s day, Barack Obama reminded about the importance of having a father in home: “So many of these women are doing a heroic job, but they need support. They need another parent. Their children need another parent. That’s what keep their foundation strong. It’s what keeps the foundation of our country strong”²⁰ Martha L. Fineman views motherhood as “a colonized concept...an event physically practiced and experienced by women, but occupied and defined, given content and value, by the core concepts of patriarchal ideology” (1991, p 289-290). Adrienne Rich attacks the underlying features of motherhood as a political organization that believes “motherhood is ‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’- that is, as long as a child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother” (Rich, 1976: 42) Angelou very vehemently had questioned this viewpoint many years before this statement was even made, she remarks “My son had no father- so what did that make me? Bastards were not to be allowed in the congregation of the righteous.” (*Gather Together in My Name*, 2008: 6). The White community is more often than not insensitive towards the pain of a mother raising a Black child in a racist society

²⁰ “Obama’s Father’s Day Remarks,” New York Times, June 15, 2008

that “regards her child as just another unwanted Black charge” (Roberts, 1993: 4)

Angelou rejects the socially credited White concepts of domesticated motherhood and the compulsion of marriage that forms the “cult of true womanhood” - an elite Eurocentric concept that has also influenced the White society in United States (Teresa E. Snorton, 1995:57). As an unwed teenage mother, Angelou has the singular responsibility of looking after her son from the very beginning. And being an African American woman, her racial and class background makes the motherhood inseparably linked with work. In a household devoid of male income provider, she was raised by her paternal grandmother, an independent businesswoman, a widow and her biological mother, an entrepreneur who is divorced. Angelou battles throughout her life to provide for her son’s daily needs and to balance her motherly duties and work. She refuses her mother’s offer to take care of her son as she believes if her mother didn’t take her responsibility until she turned thirteen, why would she take care of her daughter’s son. Maya’s refusal for any kind of assistance portrays the picture of a mother who must embark on a journey of self actualization while exploring her motherly instinct when she remarks “I would get a job, and a room of my own, and take my beautiful son out into the world. The thought I might even move to another town and change our names” (*Gather Together in My Name*, 2008: 6). The dominant White class defines the mothers who leave their children unattended as careless for ideal mothering is usually coupled with domestication and reproductive labour. However for a single African American mother, motherhood is both productive and reproductive (Jennifer Harris, 2008). Angelou don’t have choice other than to find equilibrium between both kind of labor, she remarks “ I knew it would be hard to leave him...If we were to have a decent life, a small but neat house, good neighbourhood and schools ...I’d have to get some kind of training and I needed help” (ibid:113-114)

Coming from a family tradition wherein self-reliance and motherhood are deeply rooted within the system, she also denies government assistance for education that leads her to work in situations that depicts the reality of racist-capitalist society which pushes African American women in the web of financial and moral poverty. As an under qualified African American woman to whom only the slavish jobs like waitress, bar dancer or cook are available. It is in this environment that she has to support herself and her kid;

and being only a teenager, Angelou is at an age where she is vulnerable and easily deceived. At one point poverty forces her to indulge in prostitution as she takes up the job of a manager of a whorehouse after being tricked by her lover who is a pimp, the man she thinks of very highly and believes will ultimately give her and her child a comfortable home after marriage. This incident depicts the sad reality of patriarchal setup mired with racist patriarchy where even African American men exploit their own women's ability to work. Such work experience reveals that the racist practice of exclusion of African Americans from meaningful jobs is the real cause for drug abuse and prostitution. An obvious instance of segregation of African American mother from productive economic engagement is seen when she is failed in an easy test of trainee operator by White supervisor and instead end up being a bus conductor. Her life is a testimony that the difficult circumstances that are purportedly due to being a working mother improve when they are provided decent jobs. For example when she gets a chance to appear in the esteemed band "Porgy and Bess", she is able to earn better, feed her son better and thus, also adds to society in general.

Defying the infamous opinion of Whites about single African American mothers being irresponsible and raising criminals because of their careless mothering, Angelou presents a completely opposite picture of a single mother who is sensible, well informed and would not let her child stray away on the path of violence and crime. She teaches her son to stay away from violence and bloodshed when "He wanted a machine gun or a tank or a pistol that shot the real plastic bullets or a BB gun. I took him to the local S.P.C.A. pound and told him he could have an animal" (*Singin' & Swingin' & Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* exposes, 2008:116). She often creates a fun and healthy environment for him by taking him along to her events and performances, by motivating him to write and channelize his thoughts about politics, crime, racism and capitalism in a sensible manner rather than reacting upon it violently.

Angelou is often caught between her guilt to not been able to tend to her son and her desire of being a successful working woman who wishes to make her place in a patriarchal and racist society. She must work and thus has no option other than to leave the kid at home in custody of a caretaker. She even cries "Just let me hold him a second. I couldn't bear his loneliness" (*Gather Together in My Name*, 2008: 41). The poor economic conditions pushes her to

make adjustments for her dreams and desires, when she compromises her dream of becoming a writer for she has important things to cater and as she cannot afford to waste her days doing experiments. She remarks “And I hadn’t time to be a poet, I had to find a job... and take care of my son. So much for show biz, I was off to live real life” (ibid: 45). She is dismayed and frustrated for not getting job in Army and her dance career getting spoiled as she is not able to give proper time and dedication to both. Her frustration of not being able to fulfil her dreams and balance motherhood and work is clearly reflected in the way she cries “the Army and now my dance career, the one thing I wanted beyond all others for my son but mostly for myself, had been plucked right out of my fingers”(ibid: 144). Here Angelou disregards the typical controlling image portrayed by the African American men of a “superstrong Black mother” who believes in the ideals of sacrificing and who will keep her personal ambitions aside to fulfil daily duties at work and home. But instead being a stubborn and strong headed woman that she is, she is not ready to give up on both. She is adamant to balance out her life, her role as a single teenage mother and a woman who is on the path of self discovery without compromising any of her roles. Even while having little money and no proper accommodation to stay she would not back down and think of leaving her child in childcare orphanage. She pronounces “I would rent a large Manhattan apartment and hire a governess for my son. And when I travelled I would take him along with the governess and possibly a tutor” (*Singin’ & Swingin’ & Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* exposes, 2008:123) On one hand she is ready to go all out to make her career and would not let the opportunities slip away but on the other, she is not ready to compromise on her role of a mother. While on tour to Paris for her work commitments, she feels guilty for leaving Clyde behind and misses him “I got up and excused myself. The longing for my own son threatened to engulf me” (ibid: 246). While struggling to make her own life at the age of nineteen she also tries to maintain a personal connect with her kid even while he stayed away from her in a boarding school. She assures her son that she will always be by his side whenever he needs her “Since our brief period of estrangement, I had worked very hard impressing Clyde that I was reliable, that in any conflict I was on his side” (ibid: 126) She is guilt ridden when she is away on work and could not spend time with her son but she only thinks about his well being “I could stay where I was—and send more money home.

Mom could buy something wonderful for Clyde every other week and tell him I'd sent it. Then perhaps he would forgive my absence" (ibid: 201) thereby refuting the biased notion that African American mothers are "apathetic, loveless, unfeeling individuals who only think of themselves and are thus undeserving of respect or concern"²¹ (Henderson, 2009)

Thus, Angelou's lived experiences redefines the concept of single mother and presents her standpoint on motherhood "which is free to choose", a mother who is neither a careless licentious jeezebel, drug abuser, and overbearing matriarch, nor a righteous and self sacrificing superwoman but a very humane mother who makes mistakes, who also works to support her family, who is ambitious and yet does not neglect her mothering work and duties.

V. ENDURANCE AND RESILIENCE: MOTHERHOOD AS A SOURCE OF HEALING

Amidst all the pain and suffering African American women goes through, motherhood is a blessing and a motivation to persevere. African American women's life writings discuss the mechanisms adopted by them to fight multiple oppressions through motherhood. It is a process that inevitably helps African American woman to find an anchor in life, to feel happy and assured when they come back tired from their menial jobs. In the world, where African American woman is subjugated by all possible oppressive structures in the society, motherhood acts as an anecdote or a source of relief. Angelou remarks "He amused me. I could not and did not consider him a person. He was my baby, rather like a pretty living doll that belonged to me... I loved him. He laughed a lot and gurgled and he was mine" (*Gather Together in My Name*, 2008: 45). When there is dearth of money and life is directionless, simple things like tending to baby, make the baby sleep or eat helps in gaining some satisfaction in difficult situations. Angelou exclaims "When my baby cried I rushed to change him, feed him, cuddle him, to in fact shut him up" (ibid: 7) Also, in between, the help by African American community is a great support system. Angelou remarks "There were no sly looks over my fatherless child. No cutting insinuations kept me shut away from the community" (ibid: 83). Other reinforcing component in African American mothers'

²¹ Henderson, Mae C., *Pathways to Fracture: African American Mothers and the Complexities of Maternal Absence, Black Women, Gender + Families*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 32 Published by: University of Illinois Press

lives can be seen in their internal bonding which formulates a sense of cooperation and community. Angelou recalls "I was seen in the sad light which had been shared and was to be shared by black girls in every state in the country. I was young, yes, unmarried, yes- but I was a mother, and that placed me nearer to the people" (ibid: 83) Female bonding and support helps them to manage difficult lives and find strength to survive.

The race bias is imprinted deeply in her psyche cause of all the harsh racist experiences in childhood, she often felt undesirable and ugly because of her curly hair, big teeth and black skin in comparison to white shining skin of other women. But motherhood helps to heal a lot of complexes. She rejoices "And then I examined his hairline. It followed mine in every detail. And that would not grow away or change, and it proved that he was undeniably mine" (ibid: 19). The fact that her son looks exactly like her acts as a source of solace and reaffirmation in own self.

Once in her life Angelou is trapped in a compromising situation being the manager of a whore house, at that point it is the will to survive and protect her son that encourages her to come out of the situation. She cradles her son in her arms and tries to seek strength from him when she remarks "It's all right baby' could have been unheard whispers. He felt my panic and seemed to want the world to know that he was just as afraid as his mother" (*Gather Together in My Name*, 2008: 76) Motherhood is not only healing for her but also a powerful source to endure difficult situations in life from which she gathers the courage to keep going. Thus, through her life narratives, African American mother creates feminist discursive interventions where marginalized voice of a single mother is recognised over the authoritative and hegemonic voices. The standpoint of African American mother is seen as liberating as the matter of its understanding is incarnated and discernible, the notion begins from the lives of African American women and these lives are present and visible in the notion.

VI. CONCLUSION

The special position of a single African American mother in racist and classist society of U.S. confers on Maya Angelou an epistemic advantage of "double vision" gained by overlapping lived experience of all sides of a trifurcated (race, class, gender) social divide. The exploration of autoethnographical narrations of Angelou's motherhood experiences divulges different writing, which examines their distinctively different agony,

elucidates the constituents that bring this “difference” into theorizing, and therefore confronts the dominant discourse of the mainstream that is responsible for marginalisation of these voices. Angelou’s standpoint also challenges the social and cultural construct by presenting a picture of single African American motherhood that is unique and dynamic than the already pre-existing image of African American mother, a mother who seeks the need of self-definition, the importance of valuing her self-worth, acknowledgment as an individual and to be considered as a “normal” mother by presenting motherhood as a site for self-actualization. African American mothers tolerate two fold oppression of patriarchy because of the intertwined nature of race, class and gender. One is inherent patriarchy in social order that continue to exist unconsciously and silently and the other is extended patriarchy by the men belonging to their own race. They are judged by both White and Black males. White feminists also neglect their issues and consider own mothering process more superior than that of African American mothers. Also, Angelou’s experiences as a single, working class Black mother challenge the socially accepted White notions of mothering and motherhood by debunking the stereotyped rules of mothering which are- first, mothers are chiefly responsible for raising children and second, working outside of the home conflicts with being a responsible mother. The realization of shared mothering experience among African American mothers and their autoethnographic writings enable them to exercise their own choice and self define their motherhood “which is free to choose” by revealing the role of multiple oppressions in their lives rather than conforming to the viewpoint of dominant White class and Black male counterparts is a step towards the construction of a Black feminist standpoint. Therefore, African American motherhood perspectives posit a Black Feminist Standpoint, that is primarily a discourse of discontentment and difference, and allows insights into African American mother’s unique life conditions, begins an oppositional consciousness, and constructs new epistemology. First hand references are produced that are absent in mainstream feminist discourse and African American literature. The standpoint of single African American mothers empowers the feminist voice to disassemble the dominant ideology in patriarchal, racist and classist discourse.

The study opens up the scope for a space of resistance between the individual (auto) and the collective (ethno) through the

personal writings of a mother belonging to a marginalised group in the society. The autoethnographical mothering experiences of a racially relegated woman helps in necessitating a privileged speaker who “sometimes seems to want to study everybody’s social and cultural construction but their own” (Alcoff, 1991: 21) and to move over, cross-examine and “deconstruct their own discourse” (Alcoff,1991:3) thereby questioning their privilege. Otherwise when only dominant and privileged groups’ perspectives circulate in print, they are naturalised as normal and marginalised communities voices remain silent thereby contributing in their own oppression by not presenting their lived experiences. The study may also profit other marginalised individuals and groups, sociologists and biographers, by putting greater faith in the creative prospects of their lived narratives, and cultural biographies.

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