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***CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN MAYA ANGELOU'S  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION  
– ABUSE AND DISPLACEMENT –***

**Keywords:** *autobiography; trauma; abuse; displacement; resilience.*

**Abstract:** *The article discusses how trauma is represented in Maya Angelou's autobiographical fiction, one of the most important themes in all her seven autobiographical novels and an African American feminist marginalized experience that speaks about the intensity and effects of women's oppression. It explores how the novelist locates traumatic affects in the protagonist, and suggests that Frantz Fanon's model of racial trauma in Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth remains essential for the interpretation of postcolonial texts. My purpose is to explore the different juxtapositions that the story offers between individual and collective experiences of trauma and, in its explorations of memory and the collective histories of suffering.*

Trauma, be it individual or collective, has been a constant topic in criticism and literature for the last decades whose most defining characteristic was an 'intense concern with the demands of otherness' (Zapata 523-4). Trauma studies were indeed believed to be able to provide a link between cultures which may facilitate the understanding of other people's hardships.

Maya Angelou invites to a comparison to Simone de Beauvoir who had a great influence on feminist theory by drawing attention to a broader perspective behind trauma: redefinitions of family, workplace, sexuality, legal inequalities, racial and gender oppression. Angelou chose to break the obstacles of society, but along her journey through life she faced racial prejudice, a sense of worthlessness, sexual abuse and displacement.

Throughout her autobiography, Maya changes from a victim of abuse and racism to a complex self-aware individual. She is an emblematic representation of every black girl growing up in America in the 1930s. The research focuses on analyzing and interpreting the traumatic experiences that Angelou recounts with an adult voice looking back to childhood and her youth years when she became the victim of a segregated society and a divided family.

Trauma theory and the fragmented self are again both central to Angelou's first novel, *Caged Bird*, in which one perceives, I would argue, a more conscious criticism of trauma theory. At the beginning of the first chapter, the narrator describes how little Marguerite and her brother Bailey Johnson, one of the protagonists and a third generation post-slavery subject, are sent on the train with tags on their wrists with the

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message: "To whom it may concern". Furthermore, the narrator emphasizes that Marguerite and Bailey become best friends bonded for life by a dramatic event. Although the children were sent to their grandmother unsupervised on a train may be traumatic, the narrator is careful to remark that the significance lies, not in the event itself, but rather in the socio-economic context as portrayed in the 1930s American South, where the novel takes place. This in turn draws attention to the micro-aggressions and insidiousness of some attitudes found in Western societies, which may be more traumatizing than any particular event:

When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed- 'To Whom It May Concern'- that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach, California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson. [...] passengers, who always traveled with loaded lunch boxes, felt sorry for 'the poor little motherless darlings' and plied us with cold fried chicken and potato salad. Years later I discovered that the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children travelling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities, or back to grandmothers in Southern towns when the urban North renegaded on its economic promises. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 10)

In addition, I would argue that the high concentration of trauma vocabulary on these pages, together with the fact that the narrator uses trauma as the foreshadowing of Marguerite's life may indicate that, in recent years, trauma theory has been one of the most common frameworks used to analyze the lives of post-slavery subjects of different generations, which applies to Angelou's autobiographical fiction. I would argue that the novel sets a frame which applies to the characters, especially Marguerite, who looks for wholeness in her identity but cannot find it and develops a new personality as Maya once she is immersed in a more liberal, upper-class environment. The novel cunningly employs fragmentation, split personality, and a unique use of the autobiographical genre, among other techniques which have been recurrent in trauma narratives.

Autobiography became for Angelou a process of catharsis, in which she spoke about the profound effects that childhood sexual trauma had upon her and the displacement from her family when they separated and the two children, young Maya and her brother Bailey, were sent to their paternal grandmother unsupervised on the train with tags on their hands.

There is also a link between trauma in Maya Angelou's autobiographical fiction and the situation of black Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century society, as most of the negative events in the life of young Maya are rooted in the circumstances in which African Americans lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of a segregated society. The period between 1930s and 1940s was dominated by depression, prohibition, civil rights movements and racial discrimination. At the mid-century, although the racial discrimination was broadly diminished, historical racism remained reflected in socio-economic inequality (education, housing, lending and government), therefore

professional opportunities were difficult to get and African Americans continued to live in poverty and bad conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Under these circumstances, African American writers depicted sensitive subjects and themes, expressing their sufferings and dreams. The 19<sup>th</sup> century in America was a time of radical transformation in the political and legal status of African Americans who began to enjoy greater rights as citizens, but despite these developments, many economic and demographic characteristics of African Americans were not different from the earlier ones not even during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Black women's desire to write their stories was a struggle for racial and gender equality. Maya Angelou's autobiographical fiction, written between 1969 and 2013, constituted an important step in African American literature. As Dori Laub states (in Caruth, *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, 63), the survivors of a traumatic experience not only survive to tell the story, but it is imperative to tell the story in order to survive. Language became essential in the recovery process along with memory and thought. However, speaking about difficult events was not an easy task, silence as a recurrent motif in African American narratives hides "the unspeakable things unspoken"<sup>2</sup> which are veiled through signifiers and pauses. Much research and analysis has recently recovered lost knowledge about American slave narratives and ceased to silence the witnesses' valuable accounts.

Mary Vermillion compares Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in her article *Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Vermillion explores the consciousness of the rape victim and introduces the term somatophobia as a condition defined by fragmentation of identity as a result of the traumatic event. She argues that while Jacobs posits somatophobia outside herself and critiques it as part of the culture of slaveholding, Angelou presents it as internalizing and challenging racist conceptions of the African American female body. Both of them contest somatophobia by questioning religious ideologies, rewriting white literary traditions and celebrating their motherhood as symbols for their political struggle.<sup>3</sup> Rape becomes a metaphor for the suffering of the whole community, Angelou further making the connection between her rape and the situation of the poor in a class society. Primarily, rape in Angelou's autobiographical fiction represents the black girl's difficulties in controlling, understanding and respecting white definitions of beauty and her own body. Both the extremely traumatic incident of rape and the dominant white culture's definitions of "what was right with the world" disempower the black woman's body and self-expression:

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<sup>1</sup> Khaled Nouria, *Recovery from Trauma in Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Thesis, Tlemcen, 2016, <http://dSPACE.univ-tlemcen.dz/bitstream/112/8960/1/khaled-nouria.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*, in The Tanner Lectures On Human Values delivered at The University of Michigan, October 7, 1988.

[https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Mary Vermillion, *Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? [...] If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 8-9)

Although all Angelou's autobiographical novels contain essential themes that challenge the reader, *Caged Bird* caught the attention of literary critics the most for its profound moral stance and resistance to racism, sexism and poverty through language, imagery, truth-telling perspective and meaning of the text. Depicting a dual oppression from the white and the male hegemony, Angelou discloses other relevant issues: the importance of family and nurturing one's children, the quest for self-sufficiency, personal dignity and self-definition.

The second novel, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), was described by Angelou herself as not simply an autobiography but one "that is trying to do something else" and "is carrying a fictional character along- the woman who didn't escape", it depicts the chaos of adolescence and the rediscovery of a young woman's identity. In her study from 1997, *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer and Soul of a Poet, A critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou*, Lyman B. Hagen traces the evolution of Angelou's development and search for roots and heritage<sup>4</sup>; she identifies the interplay between mother and child figures as the element of continuity between all seven autobiographical novels, motherhood and creative work link all the novels which are interspersed with humor, a unique use of metaphor, hyperbole, wit and African American folklore.

Although the second novel may appear as a narrative sprinkled with profanity, crime, drug consumption and rape, beyond this thin surface there is an iceberg of concepts such as self-empowerment, faith, struggle, the nobility of intellectual inquiry, survival, the nature of moral choice. A pedagogical sense results from Angelou's second novel which traces her pursuit for economic stability starting at the age of seventeen as a single mother and continuing with several irresponsible acts, culminating with her retreat in the 'womblike familiarity' which is her mother's house after being shown by a friend the consequences of drug addiction:

No one had ever cared for me so much. He had exposed himself to me to teach me a lesson and I learned it as I sat in the dark car inhaling the odors of the wharf. The life of the underworld was truly a rat race, and most of its inhabitants scurried like rodents in the sewers and gutters of the world. I had walked the precipice and seen it all; and at the critical moment, one man's generosity pushed me safely away from the edge. (*Gather Together in My Name* 384)

Displacement is another important theme in the series which is structured through the use of a journey from Stamps to St. Louis and to San Francisco, or a more extensive one from America to Europe and Africa (as depicted in the fourth novel), or

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<sup>4</sup> Lyman B. Hagen, *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer and Soul of a Poet, A critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou*, University Press of America, Lanham, New York, London, 1997.

as small episodes which have been compared to bus stops by Mary Jane Lupton (*Maya Angelou: the iconic self* 103) from one work experience to another or from one romantic partner to another. This journey weaves a musical structure with fast and slow rhythms to the novels; however not always resulting in harmony, *Gather Together* in particular carries several discordant chords which may give the impression of a chaotic and fragmented account of a troubled youth.

As the narrator changes from the first novel where a child tells the experiences of growing up in the rural America to the second novel where the narrator is represented by a survivor, a young black woman who tells the story of endurance in the peripheral area of society, we can identify two representations of trauma: as a personal experience and as a cultural phenomenon, what Ron Eyerman calls cultural trauma, or what Dominick LaCapra calls historical trauma:

Trauma and its causes may indeed be a prominent feature of history, notably modern history, which should not be airbrushed or denied. But simply to conflate history with trauma is to obscure dimensions of history that may help to avert the incidence of trauma or to mitigate and at least counteract its effects. These dimensions include efforts to diminish or even eliminate the causes of historical traumas often stemming from extreme differences of wealth, status, and power that facilitate oppression, abuse, and scapegoating with respect to class, gender, race, or species. (LaCapra XI)

As a personal experience, Maya recreates her child-self in the persona of Marguerite Johnson, reclaiming the horror of childhood sexual abuse through a moving autobiographical account of the traumatic impact. Separated from her parents at the age of three, young Maya develops feelings of abandonment, internalized inferiority, self-rejection, displacement.

Maya/Ritie harbors Eurocentric fantasies of Shirley Temple beauty, dissociating her personality from what was considered dark, colored skin and constructs a false system of personal identity. To be young, Black and woman in the South in the 1930s meant to be at the crossfire of masculine prejudice, white domination and Black lack of power.<sup>5</sup> Angelou's infantile version of Freud's family romance gave startling proof of the subaltern syndrome of "internalized inferiority" diagnosed by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). Interviewed by the journalist Bill Moyers, the adult Angelou explains:

I thought [ . . . ] maybe I'm really a white girl. And what's going to happen is I am going to wake up. I am going to have long blond hair and everybody is going to just go around loving me. [ . . . ] It's tragic" (Conversations 26).

As a cultural process, trauma is connected to the reformation of collective identity and refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning. It is rooted in a series of events, but not necessarily in their direct experience. Developing what W. E. B. Du Bois described as double consciousness, both African and American representations of the past are central in resolving the identity dilemma. Collective memory plays a

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<sup>5</sup> Suzette Henke, *Maya Angelou's Caged Bird as Trauma Narrative*, in *Bloom's Modern Critical Reviews*, 2008.

crucial role in shaping the collective past, Maya Angelou recounts her quest for ancestors in a trip to Ghana, in her fourth autobiographical novel, which made her realize the existence of a conflict or rather a mix between her American and African identity:

The lyrics and melody had the power to transport us back into a womblike familiarity. Admittedly, Africa was our place of genesis, long, long ago, but more recently, and more dearly known were the sounds of black America. (*The Heart of a Woman* 829)

Angelou surveys the difficulties and personal triumphs with a keen understanding of the power of language to change and the role of image-making in the self-representation of groups that have historically been oppressed.

Brutally traumatized by rape and emotional betrayal, young Maya responds by constructing a wall of protective silence around her imperiled ego. She exhibits the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, delineated in the fourth edition of the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as "recurrent and intrusive recollections of the [traumatic] event or recurrent distressing dreams"; "[d]iminished responsiveness to the external world, referred to as 'psychic numbing' or 'emotional anesthesia'"; and a "markedly reduced ability to feel emotions especially those associated with intimacy, tenderness, and sexuality". The definition of the PTSD and its symptoms are described in detail by the narrator in the first novel:

I had to stop talking. I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. [...] In the first weeks my family accepted my behavior as a post-rape, post-hospital affliction. Neither the term nor the experience was mentioned in Grandmother's house, where Bailey and I were again staying. They understood that I could talk to Bailey, but to no one else. Then came the last visit from the visiting nurse, and the doctor said I was healed. That meant that I should be back on the sidewalks playing handball or enjoying the games I had been given when I was sick. When I refused to be the child they knew and accepted me to be, I was called impudent and my muteness sullenness. (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 70)

Trauma is one of the most widespread and provocative terms in contemporary postcolonial literature. Maya Angelou's account is an articulation of a haunting trauma that allows her to read meaning into her own life-story and to reconstruct a communal testimony from the shards of childhood tragedy.

The child living in a prejudiced society develops what Franz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) as 'internalized inferiority', a false identity based on what society defined as standards of beauty. This creates the dilemma of personal identity; being black and woman were two contradictory states which created feelings of unfitness and powerlessness. From early childhood Angelou feels the confining societal role of object-of-gaze which describes the anxious state of mind that comes with being aware of the world's critical attitude towards her. However, Angelou doesn't focus on the body representation, but on the workings of the mind and how the subject perceives the body which is nothing more but a wrapping of something essential: the thoughts and the personality which are unique.

The beginning of the first novel starts with two hesitating lines which prefigure the anxiety of being watched and judged by others: “What you lookin at me for?/ I didn’t come to stay...”. The second line illustrates continuity and survival, African Americans have been brought from Africa, faced prejudice and had to justify their existence on the American continent. Little Marguerite explains that she didn’t come to stay, her existence is criticized and she feels the need to justify her presence in the church, on the street, at school. She becomes aware of the culturally defined self, while at the same time tries to negate her identity.

Geographical displacement becomes essential for the formation of identity. Moving from one home to another and from one geographical region to another cultivates Maya’s flexibility and adaptability. Maya’s worlds are separate and consist of the comfortable eternal home of Momma Henderson filled with religious adherence; mother Vivian’s extravagant world of dancing and loving; the library as a safe refuge filled with books by Dunbar, Poe, Shakespeare, Du Bois; the music which becomes another refuge in the third novel and an opportunity for self-discovery and improvement. All these retreats are spaces which satisfy young Maya’s need for safety and protection. The third novel *Singin and Swingin*, begins with a blues songs that speaks about lonely moon on the night’s sky and the recognition of music not only as a piece of art but also as a space filled with emotion and protection: “Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness”. (*Singin and Swingin and Getting Merry Like Christmas* 391)

From the perspective of the main character’s development, *Caged Bird* can be categorized as a *bildungsroman* which follows the growth of a young person who confronts obstacles and culminates with the understanding and assimilation of the traditions and values of the community to which he/she belongs. Angelou finds ways to survive within the tradition of her mother and grandmother, not in opposition to it. She emphasizes the leadership skills of strong black women in her community such as her mother Vivian and her entrepreneur grandmother Henderson and has been criticized for the scarcity of male figures in her autobiographical series. However, she wrote the story of a courageous woman who becomes the first African American woman conductor in San Francisco and starts a prolific career in the entertainment industry; she defies the odds and the stereotypes and dedicates the novel to “all strong Black birds of promise who defy the odds and gods”.

Angelou’s autobiography has the pedagogical task to show the young all the facets of childhood experience which also include despair, a diminished sense of self and aloneness brought by abuse and trauma. Shoshana Felman questions whether pedagogy can shed light on trauma and whether literature can interact with the process of testimony. Felman observes the increasing interest in testimony and mentions Ellie Wiesel’s observation regarding the predominance of testimony in our era: “If the Greeks invented tragedy; the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet; our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.” (*Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 17)

Angelou’s novels are an honest testimony about the life of a girl living in the South in the 1930’s, her aim is to record a strip of time, which proves that the essence of testimony is historical and the author plays the role of the historian. In an interview with Joanne Braxton, Angelou confirms the process which enables her testimony to

come to life by engaging all her memories from a certain moment and recreating the feelings which trigger the memories to paint the picture:

So what happens when I write autobiography is that I try to suspend myself from the present, I get myself into a time, into a particular day and I'm there. Each time I do that, I am also aware that I might not come out, that I might be trapped in that time-it's frightening. (Braxton 7)

In Caruth's study on trauma, it is postulated the idea that the incomprehensibility of the trauma is the condition of creation, by breaking the traditional modes of understanding new insights into the nature of trauma can be created. In coping with childhood trauma, Maya Angelou herself appeals to the healing power of literature cultivated early in her youth by Mrs. Flowers, "the aristocrat of Black Stamps." An entire chapter in the first novel is dedicated to Mrs. Bertha Flowers, one of the biggest influences in little Marguerite's life and a role model for all the children in the little Southern town. Mrs. Flowers would become for Angelou "the measure of what a human being can be".

Her wise method to heal Maya's selective muteness, which was a symptom of a traumatic experience, is original and can be categorized into what today we call bibliotherapy. The idea that literature can help heal PTSD appeared in the World War I and the term was coined in 1914 by author Samuel McChord Crothers, libraries were affiliated to the Red Cross and provided those in need with a means to cure the mind, not only the wounded body.

Mrs. Flowers brilliantly employs poetry to capture young Marguerite's imagination and curiosity and to create for her a new type of refuge, a protecting space where the child could crawl anytime and feel safe to speak again. Poetry was Marguerite's new retreat and reading became one of her favorite and defining activities. The mother figure represented by Mrs. Flowers cultivated the child's resilience and encouraged her to enter the universe of Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, Shakespeare, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and many more, but it was also the pronunciation and the theatrical pauses that surprised Angelou's ears when hearing for the first time Mrs. Flowers reciting the introductory lines:

Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same I had read? Or were there notes, music, cascading gently. I knew from listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn't really heard, heard to understand, a single word. "How do you like that?" It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor was still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder to my ears. I had to speak. I said "Yes, ma'am."

Maya Angelou surveys the difficulties and personal triumphs with a keen understanding of the power of language to change and the role of image-making in the self-representation of groups that have historically been oppressed.

In a world which witnesses rapid polarizations, the theory of trauma functions as an instrument to diagnose contemporary difficulties in human interaction. Maya Angelou's autobiography is particularly important from this point of view because it



invites not only to understand the history of African American people in the United States but invites readers to active participation, to react and to take a stand against injustice and inequalities on account of race, gender or class differences.

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