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## **OTHERMOTHERING AS A SITE OF POWER IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *IKNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS***

The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse the theme of othermothering as a site of power crucial for the proper care, upbringing, and guidance of children (particularly girls) in the absence of a biological mother. In African American culture, there is the practice of othermothering as a strategy of survival in that it ensured that all children regardless of whether the biological mother was present or available, would receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical well-being and makes children's empowerment possible. The paper also deals with the research of the role and significance of "othermothering" in the African American family and community. The method of working on the text through the lens of Black feminist studies along with analytical-interpretative method, generalization and induction are used in the analysis of Maya Angelou's fictionalized autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In this paper, special attention is paid to emphasizing the importance of the role of othermother in raising children and guiding them to grow into strong persons of African American identity, prepared to resist various types of violence, discrimination and pressure. The discussion demonstrates that the main preoccupation of othermothering, along with caring for the children's well-being, is their (children's) empowerment, and with it, also that of the Black community as a whole.

**Key words:** Maya Angelou; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Black narratives; othermothering; care; upbringing; empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

Mothers and motherhood are not just highly valued but central to African American culture. It is recognized that these two concepts are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people. In both, practice and thought, the focus of Black motherhood was how to preserve, protect and, more generally, empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that sought to harm them. At the same time, as Karen Craddock reminds us, “[t]he contours, contexts and considerations of Black motherhoods are fluid in depth and breadth” (Craddock 2015: 18), thus calling for an inclusive, critical reading of all forms of mothering, including othermothering.

The practice of othermothering remains central to the African American tradition of motherhood and is regarded as essential for the survival of Black people. Othermothers are women who, as Collins explains, “assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (1993: 47). In other words, othermothering aims to equip the child with the psychological and social skills they need to survive the oppressive racism and sexism. In addition, it includes skills such as a sense of stability, connections of kinship, and feelings of self-worth. As a form of nurturing othermothering can also include being nurtured by others on an individual or community level and an acceptance of responsibility for a child in an arrangement that “may or may not be formal” (Baxter and Satz 2017: 11). By demonstrating the traditional centrality of othermothers in Black motherhood, Maya Angelou highlights the importance of sharing one’s children with other women in the community. Similarly, African and African American communities have long realized that “vesting one person with the full responsibility of mothering may not be wise, hence the necessity of the role of othermothers” (Koyana, cited in Bloom 2009: 72).

Ultimately, the concept of othermothering offers an alternative form of mothering and also provides an opportunity to expand critical conversations of the institution of motherhood and experience of mothering itself. The institution of motherhood is complex in itself, but the perspective of othermothering shatters the ideology surrounding motherhood as a social construct. Indeed, biological mothers are not alone in this role. A child can have a community around itself in the form of othermothers. For a comprehensive understanding of othermothering, it is necessary to consider it in the framework of Black motherhood and gendered social circumstances as “Black women live through a complex array of realities that intersect and amplify the human experience in distinct and unique ways”, according to Karen Craddock (2015: 10).

In the experience of Maya Angelou, growing up in the segregated South of the 1930s and 1940s exposed her to the debilitating designations on the society that she captured in her writing, working through the multiple challenges that defined her self-awareness.

## MAYAANGELOU<sup>1</sup> – THE POWER OF VOICE

When she stood before the nation to recite her poem “On the Pulse of Morning” during President Bill Clinton’s inauguration on January 20, 1993, she became one of America’s most recognized poets. As Joanne M. Braxton points out, Angelou’s autobiographical writing, initiated with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, “is at least partially the answer to the phenomenon of Angelou’s unprecedented ascent to the podium” upon this occasion, “the first black and the first woman ever honoured to be commissioned to write a public poem for such an occasion” (Braxton 1999: 15). The poem highlighted a theme that runs through Angelou’s published works: that people are more alike than different and that the message of hope and inclusion is a most inspirational goal and ideal. She wrote about the victory of the human spirit over adversity, and her voice seems to add a healing and unifying quality to it, while also becoming “[w]ithout a doubt, [...] America’s most visible black woman autobiographer” (Ibid. 4).

During an interview with Judith Paterson in 1982, in the September issue of *Vogue*, Maya Angelou said: “I will not allow anybody to minimize my life, not a living soul – nobody, no lover, no mother, no son, no boss, no President, nobody.”<sup>2</sup> Such passion resulted in her six-volume autobiographies that spanned during her 40 years of life, from the day she boarded the train to Stamps, Arkansas, to the day she wrote the first line of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She has turned the modern autobiography into an art form (William-Page 2011) according to the broad consensus among “[c]rit-

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<sup>1</sup> Born Marguerite Annie Johnson (April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014), Maya Angelou was the daughter of Vivian Baxter and Bailey Johnson. She was a poet, autobiographer, civil rights activist, film director, actress, dancer and professor. Angelou had a rich and varied life, as can be seen through her autobiographical fictions, which includes: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013). Maya Angelou was awarded more than thirty honorary degrees in her lifetime. President Clinton awarded Angelou the National Medal of Arts in 2000, and to honor her legacy, the US Postal Service issued a stamp with her likeness on it in 2015. (Williams-Page 2011; Cox 2006; Gillespie 2008), and <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maya-Angelou> accessed on March 15, 2025

<sup>2</sup> <https://archive.vogue.com/article/1982/9/interview-maya-angelou-a-passionate-writer-living-fiercely-with-brains-guts-and-joy> ; accessed December 20, 2024

ics, reviewers, and readers [who] all agreed that Angelou had written an autobiography as literature” (Cox 2006: 8).

A prevailing theme in her autobiographical fictions is the struggle to maintain a healthy sense of individuality amid the unrelenting social terrors faced by Black Americans. As a result of this, her suffering was balanced by her spiritual journey for self-actualization and determination. She proved that through intelligence, perseverance, and acquired skills, the fulfilment of seemingly impossible goals is possible and is imperative for survival and ultimate growth. Even when faced with indignities such as racism, abusive relationships, job stress, depression, personal loss, her actions have exemplified how inner resources can be revived through a mixture of common sense, initiative, and creative thinking.

According to Francoise Lionnet, Angelou “is a humanist and a protean personality who has, against all odds, made her own life into the great American success story,” with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* incorporating “her individual experiences with the collective social history of African Americans” (Lionnet 1997: 19). Drawing on her personal observations and impressions, she framed her individual growth with that of the collective fate, as noted by Vicky Cox (2006: 2): “She described the people she lived with and the events that happened in their lives. She put faces and places to life as an African American know it in the Deep South, the Midwest, and California in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s”. She left a testimony of human resource, intelligence, endurance and love in the face of tyranny as one who did not submit tamely to “the cage” but acted on her initiative to save herself and thereby learned the strength of self-confidence.

## THEORETICAL FRAME

To fulfil the task of raising as well as empowering children, mothers must hold power in African American culture. As mothering must be valued and supported, African American culture gives power to mothers understanding the importance of mothering for individual and cultural well-being. This approach applies to othermothers as well, who also care for children. The practice of othermothering as a cultural sustaining mechanism and as a mode of empowerment for black children has been documented in numerous studies, such as that of Priscilla Gibson (2000: 33) where she argues that “increasingly grandmothers, especially African American grandmothers, are becoming kinship providers for grandchildren with absent parents”.

Similarly, Njoki Nathani Wane in her research study of women in Kenya explores how precolonial African customs and beliefs gave rise to a communal practice of childrearing. Wane explains that: “Most of precolonial Africa was founded upon and sustained by collectivism. [...] Mothering practices were organized as a collective activity” (Wane 2000: 108). Today, as she notes, the practice of othermothering “serves to relieve some of the stresses that can develop between children and parent and provides multiple role models for children” (Ibid. 113). Wane concludes that othermothering “can be understood as a form of cultural work or as one way communities organize to nurture both themselves and future generations” (Ibid.). At the same time, othermothering opposes mainstream societal infringements as it assumes family and community engagement connected to “caretaking tasks that reflect traditions passed down across the African diaspora or parenting practices that are deliberately aimed to incorporate cultural pride and knowledge, as well as the necessary survival skills to counter and buffer against race-based biases and threats” (Craddock 2015: 12). The cultural memory and legacy of Black motherhood in Africa that incorporated othermothering played a vital role in framing Black women’s self-awareness and support networks.

As Patricia Hill Collins observed, “...mothering [in West Africa] was not a privatized nurturing ‘occupation’ reserved for biological mothers” (1993: 45). Indeed, complementary dimensions of mothering and othermothering gave women great influence and status in West African societies. The truth is that othermothering was a cultural practice retained by enslaved African Americans. In distinct African American tradition, the custom of othermothering was emphasized and elaborated. According to Black feminist scholar Arlene Edwards (2000: 80):

“The experience of slavery saw the translation of othermothering to new settings, since the care of children was an expected task of enslaved Black women... [T]he familial instability of slavery engendered the adaptation of communality in the form of fostering children whose parents, particularly mothers, has been sold. This tradition of communality gave rise to the practice of othermothering.”

Othermothering also emerged in response to Black mother’s needs and served to empower Black children and enrich their lives (and their mothers’ lives). A professor and Black feminist scholar, Erica Lawson (2000: 26) explains that othermothering “was and is a central experience in the lives of many Black women and participation in mothering is a form of emotional and spiritual expression”. Moreover, building upon traditions of cultural bearing, social activism, providing a home place, Maya

Angelou defined othermothering as a site of power for African American not just children but women as well.

## **OTHERMOTHER FIGURE(S) IN *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS***

Othermothering referred to the practice in African American community, (and broader communities of colour) where women outside of a child's biological family took on nurturing, guiding, and protective roles. These women offered a form of care, wisdom, and love that contributed to a child's growth, often filling in gaps left by child's(his/her) biological parents.

In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the concept of othermothering plays a significant role in the protagonist's development and understanding of love, community, and identity. What is also significant is Maya's relationship with othermother(s). In this fictionalized autobiography there are women who act as maternal figures for Maya, showing that the concept of mothering goes beyond biological ties. One such moment where Maya reflects on the community care provided by women highlights the significance of othermothering in her upbringing: "...we [the women] were the strongest people in the world" (Angelou 1997: 103).

Notwithstanding Maya's perpetual struggle throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is for acceptance, valorisation, recognition, caring, and love. As a young Black girl she desperately struggles towards something more and different. She longs for the return to the welcoming arms of a phantasmatic (m)other figure, the sanctuary from which she feels exiled. She even nostalgically recalls: "...my mother had left me when I was three and I saw her only once between the ages of three and thirteen" (Elliot 1989: 39). However, young Maya idealized the figure of her mother, Vivian Baxter, light-skinned, lovely and simply too gorgeous to function in the role of maternal caregiver. Trying to describe her mother and explain her actions, Maya declares: "To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. [...] My mother's beauty literally assailed me. [...] I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children" (Angelou 1997: 50). At this point Maya Angelou discusses about Vivian Baxter's maternal (non)presence to show the tensions within mothering and othermothering. As a child, Maya was strongly impressed by her mother's physical attributes and talent. She emulated her mother, who (in many ways) presented her with an index of cultural assumptions about motherhood. Later on, Maya and her brother Bailey occasionally met with their mother.

On one occasion, after meeting Vivian, Maya described her in the following way: “With all her jollity, Vivian Baxter had no mercy. [...] Her temper had not diminished with the passing of time, and when a passionate nature is not eased with moments of compassion, melodrama is likely to take the stage” (Angelou 1997: 156). Although Maya often found Vivian’s beauty and blues lifestyle oppressively competitive (Maya felt ugly and inferior in comparison to Vivian) it was also her ticket to success, one that led to her writing career. What is important to add is that Maya rejected some of Vivian’s maternal practices. Unlike her mother who neglected her two children, Maya was very protective of her son. Ultimately, through her own experience of motherhood, Maya Angelou was able to challenge the prevailing notions of maternity. She even demonstrated how she has always striven towards a self-empowering identity, one that could be seen as an inspiration for women (black or white).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* the theme of othermothering is embodied through several characters that step in to support and guide Maya throughout her tumultuous childhood. According to writer and journalist Marcia Ann Gillespie, a long-time friend of Maya Angelou’s, she “never forgets the people who gave her life, the bloodline she shares, the spiritual legacy she carries” (Gillespie 2008: 12). And yet the central figure is Maya’s grandmother, Annie Henderson or “Momma”, who provided a strong, loving and stable foundation for Maya during much of her youth. She is one of the clearest examples of an othermother in Maya’s life who provided a stable and loving environment when Maya was sent to live with her in Stamps.

Momma’s role as a guiding figure is seen in her strictness and deep care for Maya: “People spoke of Momma as a good-looking woman...I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so.” (Angelou 1997: 33)

This description of Momma conveys her strength and the way she commands attention, not just physically but emotionally as well, as someone who cares for the children around her with wisdom and authority. Momma’s maternal instinct to protect Maya and teach her resilience was an important part of her role as an othermother. This is clearly seen in Momma’s effort to arrange transportation to the white dentist for herself and for Maya:

“Our transportation was Momma’s major concern for some weeks. She had arranged with a railroad employee to provide her with a pass in exchange for groceries. The pass allowed a reduction in her fare only, and even that had to be approved, so we were made to abide in a kind



of limbo until white people we would never see, in offices we would never visit, signed and stamped and mailed the pass back to Momma". (1997: 150)

Here, in this passage, Maya reflects on the generational and experiential gap between herself and Momma. Even though there was a divide, Momma's strength and wisdom provided the care, protection and discipline that Maya needed to navigate her (future) life.

Another example of othermothering comes from Momma's teachings on how to survive and maintain dignity in a racist world. After white dentist refused to help Maya according to policy that prevented him "to treat coloured people" (Angelou 1997: 142), Momma decided to take her granddaughter to another, this time Black dentist: "'Come on sister...I'm taking you to Dentist Baker in Texarkana' [...] He said that I was quite brave, and that was my cue to reveal our confrontation with the peckerwood dentist and Momma's incredible powers" (Angelou 1997: 144-145). In this way Momma taught Maya about self-respect and the importance of standing tall, offering her both, moral and practical guidance. Indeed, this teaching shows Momma's deep commitment to Maya's growth and her desire to ensure that Maya holds onto her dignity and self-worth, no matter the challenges she faces.

It could be said that the othermothering role is seen in Momma's quiet but firm resistance to racism. She taught Maya that despite the prejudice they face, they must carry themselves with pride and never allowed hatred to break their spirit: "My toothache had quieted to solemn pain, Momma had obliterated the evil white man, and we were going on a trip to Texarkana, just the two of us. [...] I was so proud of being her granddaughter and sure that some of her magic must have come down to me" (1997: 152). This moment illustrates how Momma provided a safe and protective space for Maya, showing how othermothering encompasses both emotional security and the transmission of coping mechanisms in the face of social injustice.

Additionally, Mrs. Flowers also acted as an othermother to Maya, helping her regain confidence in herself:

"Mrs. Berta Flowers was the aristocrat of Black Stamps. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. [...] She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town... It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself". (1997: 69-70)



This description shows elevated status that Mrs. Flowers held in the community, as well as her nurturing qualities that went beyond formal authority offering a softer but no less significant influence on Maya (after being raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman). Her care and guidance helped Maya find her way back to language and self-expression, highlighting the vital importance of mentorship and maternal-like figures who provided wisdom, emotional care and strength: "Now no one is going to make you talk – possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals" (1997: 72). Mrs. Flowers' role as an othermother was deeply impactful when she helped Maya find her voice again. Her tender yet firm approach helped Maya rediscover her strength and reminded her that she is worth speaking for, demonstrating the profound influence that an othermother can have on a child's emotional recovery.

Along with important women in her life (her grandmother Momma and Mrs. Flowers), Maya's older brother Bailey's affection and guidance also falls under the concept of othermothering: "Bailey was the greatest person in my world. And the fact that he was my brother, my only brother, and I had no sisters to share him with, was such good fortune..." (Angelou 1997: 14).

Despite the fact that he was only slightly older, Bailey became Maya's confidant and protector:

"This is my sister. I have to teach her to walk." [...] After Bailey learned definitely that I was his sister, he refused to call me Marguerite, but rather addressed me each time as "Mya Sister", and in later more articulate years, after the need for brevity had shortened the appellation to "My", it was elaborated into "Maya". (1997: 49)

Even though Maya's brother was not an older woman, his nurturing role in this context (he offered his help in teaching Maya how to walk) resembles aspects of othermothering, where care and emotional support are offered despite the lack of a formal maternal figure. Maya describes her older brother as a source of safety and affection. This is an early evidence of emotional caregiving, even though he was only slightly older:

"His hair fell down in black curls, and my head was covered with black steel wool. And yet he loved me. When our elders said unkind things about my features (my family was handsome to a point of pain for me), Bailey would wink at me from across the room, and I knew that it was a matter of time before he would take revenge". (1997: 14)

Bailey acted like an emotional caregiver, offering stability, understanding, and identity affirmation when Maya felt invisible. Though a sibling rather than a traditional maternal figure, Bailey helped guide and comfort Maya through difficult moments offering care and protection:

“In the hospital, Bailey told me that I had to tell who did that to me, or the man would hurt another little girl. When I explained that I couldn’t tell because the man would kill him, Bailey said knowingly, “He can’t kill me. I won’t let him.” And of course I believed him. Bailey didn’t lie to me. So I told him”. (1997: 61)

After Maya was raped by Mr Freeman, Bailey communicated his support through presence and empathy. He provided Maya with psychological safety, crucial for a child recovering from trauma.

Similar to Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, T. Morrison’s *Home* explores non-traditional caregiving (othermothering) through deeply personal, often gender-subversive relationships rooted in trauma. Both texts challenge norms around gender, care, and survival. In Morrison’s *Home*, Frank Money, like Bailey Johnson Jr., is a male caregiver who evolves into a protector, nurturer, and healer: “I hugged her shoulders tight and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because, as a brother four years older, I thought I could handle it” (Morrison 2012: 4). His journey is not just to save physically his younger sister Cee, but to emotionally grow into someone who can provide her the care she never received. This reversal of traditional gender roles shows a Black man taking on maternal, empowering functions, paralleling Bailey’s care for Maya.

## CONCLUSION

African American maternal practice (of mothering and/or othermothering), apart from nurturing and care taught children how to protect themselves so they may be empowered to survive in the racist and patriarchal society and to develop a strong and authentic identity as Black persons. In other words, they may survive and resist racism and sexism through the creation of a strong self-defined identity. However, those adults who never received protection, nurturance and cultural bearing [through the practice of (other)mothering] as children, grew to be adults psychologically wounded by the hurts of racism and/or sexism. Building upon the African American maternal practices through the tasks of preservation, nurturance, and healing, othermothering was something that made survival and resistance possible for African American people.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya Angelou subtly portrays the concept of othermothering through various characters, particularly through the actions and presence of women who step into nurturing and guiding roles. Above mentioned examples from the novel speak to the collective role these women played in shaping her understanding of herself and her place in the world. It reflects the way othermothers did not simply provide care but also acted as moral and emotional guides. The women in Maya's life, especially Momma and Mrs. Flowers, played critical roles in nurturing her through different phases of her life, and their actions exemplify the importance of communal care within African American culture.

Maya's Grandmother Momma served as a strong guiding figure in Maya's life, offering protection and care when she needed it most. Momma's home became a safe place where Maya experienced emotional support and nurturing, especially in the face of the instability in her personal life and the hardships of racism and trauma. Moreover, Mrs. Flowers encouraged her to read, to speak and to develop her voice after Maya became mute for several years following the trauma of being raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. These women acted as not just moral guides but as sources of emotional and psychological strength, helping Maya to survive and thrive despite many challenges she faced.

Through the lens of othermothering, Angelou explored how communal care and the involvement of women in each other's lives provided an alternative, resilient form of mothering that transcended traditional nuclear family structures. The idea of othermothering in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* involves women (and, in a way, other family members) stepping up to offer love, discipline, and protection when needed most, contributing to Maya's resilience, growth and empowerment.

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## DRUGOMAJČINSTVO KAO IZVOR SNAGE U *ZNAM ZAŠTO PTICA U KAVEZU PJEVA* MAYE ANGELOU

### Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada je istražiti temu drugomajčinstva kao izvora snage ključne za pravilnu brigu, odgoj i usmjeravanje djece (posebno djevojčica) u odsutnosti biološke majke. U afroameričkoj kulturi postoji praksa drugomajčinstva kao strategije preživljavanja koja osigurava da će sva djeca, bez obzira na to je li biološka majka prisutna ili dostupna, dobiti majčinstvo koje pruža psihičko i fizičko blagostanje i omogućava osnaživanje djece. Rad se također bavi istraživanjem uloge i značaja drugomajčinstva u afroameričkoj porodici i zajednici. U analizi fikcionalizirane autobiografije Maye Angelou *Znam zašto ptica u kavezu pjeva* korištena je metoda rada na tekstu kroz prizmu crnačkih feminističkih studija, zajedno s analitičko-interpretativnom metodom, generalizacijom i indukcijom. U ovom radu posebna pažnja posvećena je isticanju važnosti uloge druge majke u odgajanju djece i njihovom usmjeravanju ka tome da izrastu u snažne osobe sa afroameričkom identitetom, spremne da se odupru različitim vrstama nasilja, diskriminacije i pritiska. Diskusija pokazuje da je glavna preokupacija majčinstva, uz brigu za dobrobit djece, i njihovo osnaživanje, a samim tim i crnačke zajednice u cjelini.

**Ključne riječi:** Maya Angelou; *Znam zašto ptica u kavezu pjeva*; crnački narativi; drugomajčinstvo; briga; odgoj; osnaživanje

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