

Representation of Abandonment and Reconciliation in Maya Angelou's *Mom and Me and Mom*

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Abstract

African American literature, in its broadest sense, refers to works written by Americans of African origin. It has a wide range. African American literature has typically concentrated on African Americans' place in American culture as a whole and what it means to be an American. Some well-known African American female writers who rose to fame through their writings include Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, Dana L. Davis, Roxane Gay, Ibi Zoboi, Angie Thomas, Tomi Adeyemi and Maya Angelou. Famous African American author, poet and social activist Maya Angelou is credited with being the first to write autofictions in a chronological order. She came to represent the silent African American women who face prejudice on the basis of their gender, class, race and nationality. Maya Angelou has recorded the highlights of her exceptional life in several of her best-selling autobiographies. But in her last autofiction *Mom and Me and Mom*, the renowned novelist opens up about her connection with her mother, which is the most intimate personal story she has ever told. For the first time, Angelou discusses her experiences growing up as the daughter of Vivian Baxter, a strong woman whose diminutive stature belied her larger-than-life presence and who was largely absent from Maya Angelou's early life. Marguerite, three and her elder brother were taken from their California home and forced to live with their grandmother Annie Henderson in Stamps, Arkansas, as Vivian's marriage started to fall apart. Although Marguerite struggled for years with the accompanying sentiments of abandonment, their reconnection ten years later marked the start of an untold tale.

Key Words: African American, chronological order, autofiction, abandonment, reconcile and sentiment.

African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. African American literature tends to focus on themes of particular interest to Black people, for example, the role of African Americans within the larger American society and issues such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom, and equality. Many African American female writers like Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, Dana L. Davis, Roxane Gay, Ibi Zoboi, Angie Thomas, Tomi Adeyemi and Maya Angelou have emerged as with their writings. Marguerite Johnson, better known as Maya Angelou, was a celebrated American poet, storyteller, activist, and author. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri. She had a varied career encompassing work as a singer, dancer, actress, composer and the first black woman to direct in Hollywood, but she is best known for her work as a writer, editor, essayist, playwright and poet. She served as a civil rights activist for Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As the Reynolds professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University, she was also a teacher. President Bill Clinton awarded her with the *National Medal of Arts* in 2000. President Barack Obama honoured her with the *Presidential Medal of Freedom* in 2010, the nation's highest civilian honour. Before she passed away, Maya Angelou received more than 50 honorary degrees. She has published three collections of poems and seven autofictions in the chronological sequence like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singing and Swinging and Getting 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 and Me and Mom* (2013)

Mom and Me and Mom, Maya Angelou's final autofiction, explores her bond with her mother Vivian Baxter. The book has been divided into two parts the first part "Mom and Me" deals with the relationship between mother and daughter. The second "Me and Mom" sections deals with the bond between daughter and mother. The major themes of the book are family, motherhood, abandonment, pregnancy and reconciliation. In her autofiction, she describes her mother as a strong, loving woman who encouraged her through her hardships as a single mother, a broken marriage and a profession. According to Maya Angelou, it was her mother who shaped her into the person she is today. Reconciliation is an end to a disagreement or conflict with somebody and the start of a good relationship again. In her autofiction *Mom and Me and Mom*, Maya Angelou dramatizes her years of reconciliation with her mother and describes the pivotal moments that changed their relationship's dynamic of respect and love. *Mom and Me and Mom* delves into one of Maya Angelou's most complexes, fulfilling and challenging relationships and examines how their love for one another helped her rise from the darkest points in her life to the highest. Though the first part of the story already has been narrated in her first autofiction, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author finds it necessary to re-narrate the same incident in her final autofiction *Mom and Me and Mom*. Because in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya Angelou portrays the children who got separated from their parents but only in the final autofiction does she let the readers know about the reason for the kids' abandonment.

When Maya was just one-year old, she and her five-year-old brother were sent away by their parents to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. As Marguerite matured, she had no memory of her mother. Initially she curious about her mother but was happy to being cared for by her kind-hearted grandmother. Her brother, Bailey, Jr., was five when he was sent away. He did remember his mother and suffered the hurt of abandonment. He felt he had been cheated out of a normal life with his mother and father.

Bailey's anger and resentment over his unfortunate circumstance eventually transferred over to Marguerite although she never felt the same depth of hurt that Bailey suffered. But Bailey was able to enlighten Marguerite as to how their life was not normal without their parents. When her mother sent Christmas or birthday gifts, they would often tear them up.

Vivian Baxter was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in the first decade of the 20th century as the first of the six Baxter kids. Her father described himself as a proud American who had eluded immigration officials to get to Florida from Trinidad. While her mother was of Irish ancestry and was brought up by German adoptive parents. Vivian Baxter was raised in an aggressive environment. The Baxter family was known as the 'Bad Baxters' because her father instilled in his kids the need to settle disputes brutally. Baxters would find the person who had insulted them and beat him. Even though she was a female, Vivian participated in these disputes. According to Maya Angelou, she used to hit criminals fearlessly as well. In 1924, Maya Angelou's parents got married to her father. The newlyweds relocated to California, where Marguerite and her younger brother Bailey, were born. They moved away from her family as they disapproved of the marriage. Unfortunately, it turned out that the parents did not get along, which was bad for the kids, they immediately got divorced and left Maya and Bailey to live with their father's mother Annie Henderson in Arkansas because neither of them wanted to care for two young children.

When Bailey became 14, Annie Henderson came to the conclusion that they could no longer stay with her. According to Maya Angelou black boys of his age who simply noticed white ladies faced the risk of being attacked, bruised, or lynched by the Ku Klux Klan. Maya and her brother decided to return to living with their mother for this reason, thus they moved to California. Maya Angelou claims that she did not wish to get back together with Vivian. I felt extremely comfortable with Grandmother Henderson, she remembers. Under the protection of her love, I "loved her and I liked her and I felt safe" (20). On the other hand, her brother yearned to see their mother once more.

Marguerite was unable to forgive their mother for abandoning them when they were so young, in contrast to her brother who felt comfortable with her as soon as they were reunited. She had no interest in

even calling her mother, instead, she called her 'Lady'. When Vivian noticed her daughter was upset, she said she had to leave them for their good. She told her: "I missed you but I knew you were in the best place for you. I would have been a terrible mother ... It didn't mean I didn't love you; it just meant I wasn't ready to be a mother" (23). Bailey and Marguerite went to San Diego to meet their father not long after they saw their mother once more. First, Bailey went to their father's house and Maya followed. Sadly, she had a negative experience with the visit. One evening, her father took Marguerite out to supper, where he became so inebriated that he passed out in the car. She opted to drive them home even though she had never driven before and was just 14 years old at the time. She and her stepmother got into a quarrel when they got there because the latter accused Marguerite of getting her father drunk. To punish her, she even used sewing scissors to cut Marguerite.

Marguerite left their home after this happened. She made the decision to postpone going back home until her wound healed. She felt that out of concern Vivian would exact revenge on her father and stepmother for hurting her. She spent some time living on the streets as she has nowhere else to go. The street life, though, was surprisingly kind to her. She made friends with three Spanish kids who lived in a car and did errands for people to get money for food while also collecting empty bottles. Marguerite recalls, "I thought it was a wonderful way to live" (45). When she healed, Marguerite ended "that awful and peculiar summer" (46) and headed back to her mother in San Francisco. She fell in love with a Boy, who was nineteen years old, in her senior year of high school. She caught his attention and he frequently gave her compliments as she went by his block. Maya discovered she was expecting two months after she first met the boy. She first told Bailey and he cautioned her from telling their mother. Bailey warned her against her mother: "She'll take you out of school. You must finish high school now. If you don't, you might never go back. You get that diploma" (64). As Vivian was often absent for work, Marguerite managed to graduate from high school, hiding her pregnancy until the ninth month. When she finally confessed to Vivian, she took care of her well. The support Vivian showed made Maya realize how amazing her mother was - she never made her feel bad for getting pregnant so young. She did not think of her pregnancy as a scandal or something to be ashamed of. Maya Angelou writes as "To Vivian Baxter that was life being life" (68). This event brought the two women closer. After giving birth to her son Guy, Marguerite finally stopped calling Vivian 'Lady', but addressed her as 'mother'. When her son was two months old, she found a job and moved away from her mother's house. As she understood Marguerite's need for self-reliance, Vivian approved her decision. "Remember this", she reiterates her when Marguerite was leaving their house, "you can always come home" (71).

Thus, the themes of abandonment and reconciliation make one learn about the depth of the love between the mother and daughter. A mother and daughter have a unique relationship. There are no words to adequately express a mother's unwavering love for her daughter. Love, warmth, affection and care are the defining characteristics of a partnership. Individual mother-daughter relationships may differ, yet each bond is special and precious. Although Marguerite struggled for years with the accompanying sentiments of abandonment, their reconnection after ten years marked the start of an untold tale.

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