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Celebrating Womanhood Through Motherhood in (Post)Slave Narratives: A Contemporary Reading of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Orientadora: Profª Drª Maria Aparecida Ferreira de Andrade Salgueiro

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To José and Conceição, my parents, Felipe, my brother,

Fernando, my husband, and João Victor, my son,

for their constant support and encouragement.

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Two years ago, my early interest in Maya Angelou was stimulated by Maria Aparecida Salgueiro, a friend and professor, whose work is a source of encouragement and inspiration. It was also her who presented the writings of Harriet Jacobs to me in one of her classes during the Master's Course. I am hugely indebted to this person for her never-failing support and orientation, which was crucial to the development of this research.

“Every persecuted individual and race should get much consolation out of the great human law, which is universal and eternal, that merit, no matter under what skin found, is, in the long run, recognized and rewarded.”

(WASHINGTON, 1995: p.20)

“The *ethical* precondition for democracy is to allow every voice of the citizenry to be heard in the basic decisions that shape the destiny of its people. The *political* prerequisite for democracy is to secure the rights and liberties for every citizen, especially the most vulnerable ones. And the *economic* requirement for democracy is fair opportunity to every citizen.”

(GATES, 2000: p.xvi)

SYNOPSIS

A study of motherhood as a recurrent theme in African American Literature in the last three centuries and this may be seen in the words of Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou. In their autobiographical works, respectively, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the authors place their marginalized black female self in the center of their own experience and revisit their past memories. By doing so, they narrate stories that transcend their own and voice the double jeopardized black women whose testimonies were excluded from official History and suffocated by the literary canon.

SINOPSE

Um estudo sobre a maternidade como um tema recorrente na Literatura Afro-Americana nos últimos três séculos e isso pode ser observado nas palavras de Harriet Jacobs e Maya Angelou. Em suas obras, respectivamente, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as autoras posicionam o eu negro feminino no centro de suas experiências e revêem suas memórias passadas. Fazendo isso, elas narram histórias que transcendem as suas próprias e dão voz as mulheres duplamente marginalizadas cujos testemunhos foram excluídos da História oficial e do cânone literário por serem negras e mulheres.

RESUMO

Maternidade tem sido um tema recorrente na Literatura Afro-Americana nos últimos três séculos como isso pode ser observado nas palavras de Harriet Jacobs e Maya Angelou. Em suas obras, respectivamente, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as autoras posicionam o eu negro feminino no centro de suas experiências e revêem suas memórias passadas. Fazendo isso, elas narram histórias que transcendem as suas próprias e dão voz as mulheres duplamente marginalizadas cujos testemunhos foram excluídos da História oficial e do cânone literário por serem negras e mulheres. O objetivo dessa dissertação é ressaltar as contribuições dessas escritoras para a literatura e para a História. Seus testemunhos apresentam uma versão não registrada da História, a do oprimido, que denuncia explorações sexuais como uma forma individual de controle social, além de exaltarem as tradições e culturas de seu povo passadas de geração para geração, de mãe para filho.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Afro-americana; Gênero; Memória.

ABSTRACT

Motherhood has been a recurrent theme in African American Literature in the last three centuries as seen in the words of Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou. In their autobiographical works, respectively, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the authors place their marginalized black female self in the center of their own experience and revisit their past memories. By doing so, they narrate stories that transcend their own and voice the double jeopardized black women whose testimonies were excluded from official History and suffocated by the literary canon for being both black and female. The aim of this dissertation is to enlighten the contributions of those writers to Literature and History. Their testimonies present an unregistered version of History, the one of the oppressed, which denounces sexual exploitation as an individual means of social control, besides exalting the traditions and culture of their people handed down from generation to generation, from mother to child.

Key words: African American Literature; Gender; Memory.

LIST OF CONTENTS

FIRST WORDS

The theme of this dissertation “Celebrating Womanhood through Motherhood in (Post) Slave Narratives” was chosen after the reading of Maya Angelou’s autobiography. That was the first of the two narratives (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) I had contact with. At that time, my son João Victor had just been born and every single comment made by Marguerite, the young narrator in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, concerning the adversities she had to face as a child was especially meaningful to me because as a mother I was touched by her urge for protection. Her semi-orphaned state made me feel responsible for protecting Marguerite from the social forces that confined her within her cage.

In fact, being semi-orphan, not fitting the standard beauty patterns of her society and being Black in the segregated South of the USA in the 1930’s were some of the facts that contributed to Marguerite’s lack of self-assertion and diminished self-esteem still as a child. As Marguerite grew up in the narrative, I wished she could find (self-) acceptance and as she became a mother I could perfectly understand why she gave birth to a new sense fulfillment because I had just felt the same after João Victor’s birth. Her quest was finishing and mine had just begun. When I read that, I knew I would develop my dissertation on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Maya’s quest for (self-) acceptance.

Then, in one of the classes of the Master’s course I was introduced to the writings of Harriet Jacobs. Amazingly, her narrative also dealt with her struggle to provide her children a home. I got puzzled when I noticed that because I discovered through Jacobs

that Marguerite's journey had started much before she was born. In fact, her journey was the journey of millions who "had come to stay" on that land before her.

As soon as I realized that, I thought it was time to have my hands on it because there were millions of Marguerites and Lindas who needed to be heard so as to be included in official / mainstream History and Literature. After all, have their words been heard yet?

This work is partly for those who couldn't hear the voices of African American women telling their stories. It aims at showing the Other side of History that is not officially recorded, but that contributed to write today's reality. Above all, this work aims at bringing to light the recognition of the literary excellence found in the testimonies of these two women – Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou – for their commitment to narrating the world around them and their daily efforts as well as their communities' to take part in this world.

Despite the uniqueness and individuality of Harriet Jacobs's and Maya Angelou's autobiographies, the events of their own lives have been greatly affected by discriminatory forces in different historical episodes in American society. Therefore, recurrent themes are found in these narratives because of the oppression exerted upon their narrators.

Reading both autobiographies it is possible to observe that telling one's story involves recovering the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion with the experiences lived and a release from the wounds and sorrows. That process led me to think theoretically about autobiographies and took me to several critics such as Joanne Braxton, Suzette Henke, Regina Blackburn, Sidonie Smith, bell hooks and

others. Actually, as hooks points out (hooks, 1998: p.431) the act of writing an autobiography “is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part one’s life but is a living memory shaping and forming the present”. Thus, analyzing the celebration of womanhood through motherhood in Harriet Jacobs’s and Maya Angelou’s autobiographies seems to be one of the most fruitful approaches for the authors’ richness in details regarding motherhood as well as the major role motherhood plays in their testimonies.

This dissertation is divided into four main parts. In the first chapter, it develops some reflections on the literary tradition of African American female autobiographies. In the second, it deals with the biographies of Harriet Jacobs and some of the issues raised by her, like education and colonization among others. In the third, it traces some of the events of Maya Angelou’s life from childhood to adolescence, highlighting some of the most relevant topics she brings to discussion, like self-acceptance and the value of the knowledge that comes from the community. Both second and third chapters are illuminated by the theoretical critics I have mentioned before. The fourth deals especially with the theme of motherhood, its representations in the texts and some personal conclusions from them.

I sincerely hope that these reflections on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, may contribute to the spreading of a multi faceted perspective of History and Literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century including the works of African American women. I also do hope you enjoy the reading…

CHAPTER I

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

> *For the Black woman in American autobiography, the literary act has been, more often than not an attempt to regain that sense of place, both physical and metaphysical*. (BRAXTON, 1989: p.2)

Autobiographies have been effective in identifying and revealing the construction of their author's subjectivity for portraying their relation with what they lived. Their memories reconstruct the lived experience aiming at another person's reading, bringing to light a multi-faceted reality through the different themes explored in which readers are led into a better understanding of the authors' reality.

Simultaneously, autobiographies help readers deconstruct their own individualistic concept of life. Differently from fiction that recreates it through mimesis, autobiographies are embedded in reality, which reinforces the tights between authors and readers besides contributing to a better reception of information. These tights make the reader give in to the narrative and become more receptive to the information addressed to him. This process gives more reliability and power to the narrator to unveil the readers' sense of unique existential reality.

Autobiographies may be considered as artistic expressions since they dislocate readers who are trapped into their own experience to prove that they are just part of a broaden universe, where Other perspectives enrich one's knowledge and life in community. Supporting this concept, the great contemporary author Alice Walker can be quoted:

> What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world. And yet, in our particular society it is the narrowed and narrowing view of life that often wins. (WALKER, 1984: p. 5)

To put the point another way, this genre provides readers with the opportunity to scrutinize life in society through multiple perspectives. Therefore, readers may go deep into the relations of power and see the realm of life, learning to accept and respect differences in individuals be them from the same ethnicity, gender and class or not. Through this genre, alterity may become reality to the reader since it may anchor the events in the narrative.

Altogether, although generalizations may often lead to mistakes, I would risk saying that concerning black women as a group, "their identities and conceptions of self are greatly shaped by their blackness and their womanhood" (BLACKBURN, In: Williams, 1997: p.59). For this reason, analyzing their autobiographies seems to be the most appropriate approach to find out how African American women construct their identities and how they are influenced by their blackness and womanhood in this process since both the view of the individual and of the community are presented in this form of writing.

Despite the uniqueness and individuality of each author's work, the events of their own lives in Black women autobiographies have been greatly affected by discriminatory forces in different historical episodes in American society. Although "racisms and sexisms need to be regarded as particular historical practices articulated with each other

and with other practices in a social formation" (CARBY, 1989: p.18), recurring themes may be found in these narratives because of the oppression exerted upon this segment of American society.

Firstly, there is the issue of identity, which is defining and understanding the black self. Among the most discussed themes concerning it are the true origins of their people, their cultural traditions, the influence/interference of "colonization" on them, the constitution of both the African and the American cultures in the construction of the black self and the consequences of this "twoness".

Secondly, there is the assignment of positive or negative value to the self. That could be a source of pride for its rich African tradition in culture and arts, but frequently the sense of blackness brings shame, self-hatred and self-depreciation for being different from the colonizers. There are times when the discriminatory forces are so high and separatist in History, such as the nineteenth century for the slavery system and the beginnings of the twentieth century for segregation that the white colonizer's influence leads the colonized to depreciate themselves in different ways, be it either physically, for their colored skin and characteristics, or intellectually, considering their lack of opportunities. Then, there comes the desire to look like the colonizer both in appearance and in manner, which could be interpreted as an instinctive desire to be white and/or have the benefits of whiteness.

Thirdly, there is the double jeopardy: being both black and female. In societies ruled by white patriarchal values, like those of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the fact of being black itself categorizes individuals below the human status for the sake of political and financial interests. However, that level of jeopardy can be

especially elevated if one is a woman for its expected submissiveness before men. In the particular case of black women, this double jeopardy means to owe submission before white men, white women and black men. Therefore, what can be observed is an individual who is deprived of any right or privilege and seen through the lens of prejudice by all the component members of society.

In order to examine the recurrent themes mentioned above, it is worth visiting *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to highlight them. Both works narrate the life of their authors in community, including not only their narrator's personal accounts, but also the traditions and cultural habits involved in either festivities or merely the celebration of life on a common day. All the data collected from them could well be used for instance as source of anthropological research for their historical and social details as well as the narration of the feelings and emotions involved.

In *Incidents*, for instance, among other themes, Jacobs refers to religion and its role after Nat Turner's insurrection. Jacobs narrates that it was common thought among slaveholders that it was the role of the church to provide slaves with enough religious instructions so that they would keep them from murdering their masters. Thus, they had their own church demolished and were only permitted to attend the white church, certainly for the sake of being better controlled. The Episcopal clergyman offered then to hold a separate service on Sunday for the benefit of the colored people at the house of a free colored man. This makes clear the disciplinary purpose of the church working as a mediator between masters and slaves in order to prevent insurrections and maintain the

system of slavery. That reminds us of Jacobs's reproduction of the clergyman's words in the sermon delivered:

> Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don't forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind you master's back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of you heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere (…) your masters may not find you out, but God sees you and will punish you. (…) If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 60-61)

In opposition to this imposed servitude, Jacobs registers the African American production of songs and hymns. Among the ones transcripted by Jacobs, the following one certainly seems to be the most coherent as a response to the sermon above, especially when it says "Ole Satan's church is here below" for there seems to be no justice preached in the previous sermon heard by colored people and delivered by a biased clergyman with corrupt soul. In fact, there really seems under such conditions that "God's free church" can only be true in heaven. In fact, this passage states clear the degradation of white men of governing "Satan's church (…) here below" and exalts the true Christian belief that God is on the side of the oppressed - the colored - guiding them to heaven.

> Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim;
> He missed my soul, and caught my sins.
> Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

> He took my sins upon his back;
> Went muttering and grumbling down to hell.
> Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!
>
> Ole Satan's church is here below.
> Up to God's free church I hope to go.
> Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!
> (JACOBS, 2001: p. 60-61)

Also, what can be seen in autobiographies is that much can be learned from life in community, particularly from the oral tradition very much present in them. Besides being learned from books, knowledge is firstly transmitted from generation to generation through the oral tradition. Learning begins in childhood with lullabies and games and continues through adolescence and mature life when older ones teach secret recipes and sayings, proving life to be a continuum cyclic movement passive to future generations.

The oral tradition was responsible for handing down a great part of what is known about the African American ancestors for their lack of opportunities to achieve literacy. Real proofs of that are the spirituals and prayers that represent a legacy transmitted from generation to generation.

Another example of the richness of cultural data inserted in autobiographies may be found in *Caged Bird*, when Angelou reports the prayer her grandmother would repeat every morning as soon as she woke up:

> Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn't allow the bed to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house, and everybody

> in it. Thank you, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.
> (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 60-61)

Besides reflecting the religiousness of her people and its representation as a source of power to resist the adversities of being born an African American woman, this passage portrays the purity and knowledge of her grandmother expressed through her simple words based on the lessons of living provided by the rural life in the South. Also, the attentive reader may have his attention especially drawn to the lexical choice employed in that prayer and the weight of those words. At the same time that it is a celebration of life found on a new day that is yet to come, carrier of an optimistic hope, it reflects the limitations of life imposed by social conditions because of the color of one's skin.

When Momma prays for having a brindle put on her tongue, she shows her awareness of the unequal distribution of rights affecting her. Also, it should be noticed the metaphor used in this construction. Just like a wild animal has its force and power controlled by man through the bridle, Momma shows she knows her strength and the power of language as a weapon of political activism against social domination. However, she still aims at following the "straight and narrow" way, which ennobles her character.

When it comes to social domination, Charles Darwin, in the XIX Century, signals the wrongs against African descendents in Brazil in his *The Voyage of the Beagle* and he also refers to the different values attributed to the deeds done by women from different ethnicities.

Darwin describes his visit to Rio de Janeiro, more specifically, to a place called Lagoa Marica. There he says to have been the residence of runaway slaves until they were discovered. He reports that a group of soldiers was sent to the place where the whole were seized but an old woman. He reports:

> [The old woman] sooner than be led into slavery dashed herself to pieces from the summit of the mountain. In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom, in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy. (www.bartleby.com/29/2.html)

Darwin writes in favor of the end of slavery because of its brutality and lack of humanity for the benefit of selfish values. However, the discrepancy in values seems to last until nowadays regarding different areas, being Literature one of them.

Those reports bring to light the existence of the African American culture, which was hidden for so long, giving visibility to it and praising the importance of cultivating the knowledge of those who were priory considered to be incapable of performing tasks that demanded intellectual effort. Those people contributed to the development of the American nation and are part of its History despite the fact that their memories and registers were suffocated or misinterpreted for years, decades and at times, centuries.

All in all, as it could be observed in the aforementioned passages, those three great recurrent themes of identity, assignment of value and double jeopardy generally overlap and evolve from one another in African American female autobiographies, which can be categorized into other subgenres as critic Joanne Braxton classifies in her rich *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (BRAXTON, 1989: p. 9): slave narrative, travelogue, reminiscence, historical memoir and modern

autobiography. Being the main focus of this dissertation the works of Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou, both the slave narrative and the modern autobiography are going to guide this study.

As far as autobiographies are concerned, critic Blackburn claims that:

> African American women have chosen to use the autobiographical genre as their resource for self-analysis. They have taken an established, historical art form as a means of self-expression and suited it to their needs for self-evaluation. In light of the common characteristics of these selves - black and female - the American autobiographical tradition has been given a new dimension. (BLACKBURN, 1997: 65)

Indeed, new dimensions were given to autobiographies by African American women, especially for establishing an antagonistic paradigm from mainstream literature of social, political and philosophical aspects of their society, which composed their testimony. Another element that makes this genre appropriate to the spread of equalitarian values is that not only does it narrate life in community, but it also shows the narrator's most intimate and deepest feeling on how he feels about his life. In this sense, it is possible to compare the act of writing a diary to the act of writing an autobiography. While some women write diaries to share their experiences with their own, others write autobiographies to declare their non-conformism with their era and share their views with others in order to gather forces, even if it has to be done anonymously since the African American writer also had the difficult task of winning the respect and reliability of an audience corrupted by racial, sexist and classicist differences.

However, perhaps shortsightedly, one could say they used this genre as their resource for self-analysis. Actually, that may be interpreted as a symbol of resistance and political activism before the white patriarchal hegemony and the values it imposes.

Their work may be read as an invitation to a quest for the recognition of the African American equality and visibility both in arts and life, in contrast to the oppressive vision imposed by canonical literature that sees them through the inaccurate filters of white and male perspectives.

Maya Angelou, in her book of essays, leaves a message that seems to summarize one of the roles of African American female autobiographies. She emphasizes the necessity of teaching younger generations to live in harmony with diversities. She highlights:

> It's time for the preachers, the rabbis, the priests and pundits, and the professors to believe in the awesome wonder of diversity so that they can teach those who follow them. It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. We should all know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter their color; equal in importance no matter their texture. (ANGELOU, 1994: 124)

Considering that in the nineteenth century teaching slaves to read and write was an illicit act, few were able to narrate their own testimonies. The opportunity to gain voice and find a place in society links the quest for literacy with the quest for freedom. Only when freedom was achieved, ex slaves were able to tell their life experiences and to develop a public voice. "(...) To assert a literary self represented [a] significant aspect of freedom" (BRAXTON, 1989: p.15). In the antebellum era, before the War of Secession - the conflict from 1861 to 1865 between the Northern states (the Union) and the Southern states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederacy - *Aunt*

Sally; or the Cross the Way to Freedom (1858) and *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon. A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1863) were works which were not written by people who have been through the experiences they narrate on the flesh. Certainly, that interferes in the process of delivering information as well as in its reception, since the power of discourse is not under the control of the oppressed.

Through Jacobs's testimony, one could say that slave women were as challenged by literacy as men were, but in addition to it, women were subject to sexual exploitation. Their stories differ as a result of men's and women's experiences.

Black women's autobiographies also provide new and clear understanding of how their lives have been marginalized in contemporary American culture. Suzette A. Henke in her article "Autobiography as Revolutionary Writing *in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*", for instance, suggests that the autobiography is a revolutionary form of writing (HENKE. In: WILLIAMS, 1997: p. 99) due to the fact that by writing them, women writers of color can create narratives that differ from the canonical writings in literature and go against the formation and existence of stereotypes, especially those of gender, class and ethnicity.

For Alice Walker, her African American women ancestors ought to be considered as "Saints", for being "creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused in pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope" (WALKER, 1984: p.232). Also, they could be considered "Artists" for her because they were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release"(WALKER, 1984: p.233). Indeed, considering the difficulty a black woman would have to be literate, achieve freedom and have a work of her own published, those

are plausible adjectives. Simultaneously, those difficulties increase the admiration for the ones who managed, like Harriet Jacobs, a person who did it all, especially because she left the spark that burst the flame of African American female slave narrative, the earliest form of autobiography in African American Literature.

In the earliest studies of slave narratives, women were again left aside the focus of study. Against this exclusion, one of the first critics to defend the study, research and recognition of African American female slave narratives, Braxton argues that “focusing almost exclusively on the narratives of male slaves, critics have left out half the picture” (BRAXTON, 1989:p.18).

Actually, one of the reasons that triggered this remote exclusion was the uncertainty concerning the authenticity of their authorship. This is the case of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, whose authorship had been doubtful until 1981, when Jean Yellin published evidence that established the author’s identity, proven by written registers such as letters and official documents discovered after extensive research.

Indeed, this literary archeological work on African-descendant literature has been a fruitful soil that must be cultivated so as to provide more findings to our generation as well as to generations to come.

Considering some of the differences between male and female slave narratives, on one hand, in male slave narratives, there is a recreation of the enslavement environment from which the black seeks to escape. Constituted of or arising from the narratives of escaped or redeemed slaves, the role of the hero is that of the example to be followed. Generally, those narratives trace the flight of the slave from slavery into

freedom. Basically, that is what can be seen for instance in *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*, one of the most acclaimed slave narratives.

On the other hand, in female slave narratives, one of the characteristics of the female ones is the figure of the "outraged mother" (BRAXTON, 1989:p.19). *Incidents* is a vivid example of that. What we can see in it is the flight from literal enslavement of a mother who seeks freedom and a home for her children. This reflects one of the differences between male and female approaches in early African American autobiographies: the constant female concern with family life.

Exemplifying that, Jacobs relates her seven-year-self-imposed imprisonment in a hole in order to struggle for the dream to share a home in freedom with her children come true.

> I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul. (…) Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the white to say, "your mother is here". Sometimes it appeared to me as if ages had rolled away since I entered upon that gloomy, monotonous existence. (JACOBS, 2001: 122)

The African American woman takes to herself the responsibility to protect and defend not only her children, but her people, as a mother does. She sacrifices herself for the benefit of all. Critic Joanne Braxton defends the figure of the "outraged mother" as being the most frequent image in African American female autobiographies. She defines:

> (…) the outraged mother "sacrifices and improvises for the survival of flash and spirit, and as mother of the race, she is muse to black

> poets, male and female alike. She is known by many names, the most exalted being "momma". Implied in all her actions and fueling her heroic ones is outrage at the abuse of her people and her person. (BRAXTON, 1989: p.1)

Another example of the outraged mother may be found in *Caged Bird* when the narrator tells an episode of her life in which she had a toothache and her grandmother would look for the help of a dentist to treat her. Since there were no Negro dentists in Stamps, it would be Dr. Lincoln whom, in Mrs. Henderson's expectations, would take care of Marguerite. He was a white dentist who owed her favors for having borrowed money from her at the time of the Great Depression. Nonetheless, Dr. Lincoln refuses to treat her Marguerite for he "would rather stick [his] hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (ANGELOU, 1993: p.189).

For a woman who would even avoid talking to whites because that would mean visibility and, consequently, danger of life, Mrs. Henderson does not dare going against the common social order for herself, but she does it for her granddaughter. That was her response according to Maya:

> I wouldn't press on you like this for myself but I can't take No. Not for my grandbaby. When you come to borrow my money you didn't have to beg. You asked me, and I lent it. Now, it wasn't my policy. I ain't no moneylender, but you stood to lose this building and I tried to help you out. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 189)

Amazingly in this very episode of Marguerite going to the dentist's, her grandmother asks Marguerite to wait at the door while she goes into the building to talk to the dentist alone and try to help Marguerite. At this point, Maya personalizes the myth of the outraged mother. She fantasizes happenings and one could say that the image of the outraged mother is unconsciously in her mind, for she imagines the dialogue her grandmother would have with the dentist and her

greatness before him. She imagines Mrs. Henderson "ten feet tall with eight-foot arms", a giant who is powerful enough to make him tremble. Mrs. Henderson represents the African American woman as a powerful protector of her home and responsible for the survival of her people:

> Sorry is as sorry does, and you're about the sorriest dentist I ever laid my eyes on. (She could afford to slip into the vernacular because she had such eloquent command of English.)
> "I didn't ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don't want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown."
> "Mrs. Henderson, I can't get my equipment…" He was shaking terribly now.
> "Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! (…) Is that clear?" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 190)

It's important to point out that this fantasized image seems at first contrary to the commitment of autobiographies to register real facts and tell the truth above all to the reader. That passage may lead the reader to think of how the author could, after so many years, remember that fantasy or simply question the authenticity of that creative act. Nonetheless, this passage is an example of how African American female autobiography gets free from the traditions in literature and makes vivid its resistance in content as well as in form. It plays with the Aristotelian concept that

> It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen - what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity
>
> (In:http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Aristotle/Poetics.html)

Being more specific, in the dentist episode, for instance, not only does Angelou relate what happened interrupting the commonplace that literary texts are by definition fictional, but she also relates what might have happened, going against the "laws of probability" left by Aristotle when she describes her grandmother "ten feet tall with eight-foot arms", defending her ideals before the white dentist.

> In fact, due to this characteristic of breaking up with rules, controversial issues emerge from the analysis of these works. In an interview with Claudia Tate, for instance, when Angelou is asked whether she considers her quartet to be autobiographical novels or autobiographies, she answers that they are autobiographies because she was not thinking of her own life or identity when she wrote them. Instead, she thought of particular times she lived and the influences of that time on a number of people (In: BRAXTON, 1999: p.153).

Nevertheless, according to Susan Gilbert in her article "Paths to Escape", the literary traditions that support *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are those of Western tradition of *bildungsroman* (GILBERT.In: BRAXTON, 1999: p.104). It is also important to state that she also points out that "[those] traditions are diametrically opposite in the ways the hero or heroine is portrayed" (GILBERT. In: BRAXTON, 1999: p.104).

On one hand, from Gilbert's point of view, in the *bildungsroman*, loneliness is expected from the hero, youth is self-conscious and, above all, the hero feels that the values of his family and culture are oppressive to him. Consequently, he must escape. As I see it, this is not what happens in *Caged Bird*. In Angelou's work, the oppression suffered by Marguerite, Angelou's *persona* as a child, is caused by the dominant group,

not by her own community. As a contrast, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, for example, the oppression comes from the characters' own community. Still, *Caged Bird* follows the *bildungsroman* pattern for narrating the story of a "young person's growing up and finding her way among the traditions and values of the family and culture in which he or she is reared" (In: BRAXTON, 1999: p.104).

> On the other hand, the role of the hero in African-American autobiographies is different. The narrator is the example for managing to break free. The pattern followed is that of the slave that rebels against the system and finds his way to freedom. The fact is that both traditions are present in this book according to Gilbert, and, for this reason, some critics have even referred to them interchangeably as novel or autobiography.

As far as time is concerned in the narratives studied, one may see that events are not often portrayed in accordance to the chronological order. Instead, themes prevail, constructing vignettes that are preceded by a title in the case of *Incidents* or merely separated by a number in *Caged Bird*. Also, it is relevant to notice that the vignettes make sense in isolation, composing the work as pieces of cloth in a colorful warm quilt.

Another narrative element that should be mentioned is time and the unusual relation between time and motherhood. *Incidents* covers the period of Jacobs's life from childhood, when she is found in relative freedom under the protection of her mother to the moment her children are with her in freedom, the moment she can call her children her own. *In Caged Bird*, Angelou deals with the specific period of her life narrating it from her earliest memories, from being displaced from her home to live with her grandmother

to the moment she becomes a mother herself. The modern concept of time as linear gives places to the cyclic idea of life due to the main characters' changes represented in the narrative by their roles as daughters, granddaughters and mothers. This sense of continuity and tradition nurtures the narratives and also induces readers to look forward to the continuity of this heritage.

In *Incidents*, however, it can be curiously noticed that there is a change in the narrative pace when Linda becomes a mother. Up to this moment, her story is narrated with apparent details and more reflections. Slavery obviously affects her, but her quest for freedom is only her own. But from her motherhood on, her agony for seeing her children under slavery drives her into a series of desperate actions that make her quest for her children's freedom leads the narrative. The repetition of words and the formulation of short sentences transmit her anxiety when narrating the plans of her escape and her desire to free her children.

> Again and again I had traversed those dreary twelve miles, to and from the town; and all the way, I was mediating upon some means of escape for myself and my children. […] I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh to courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms. (JACOBS, 2001: 76)

Contrasting a slave narrative and a modern autobiography, what can be seen is that both the earliest and the last form take elements from the novel in order to dramatize themes, as that of virtue in *Incidents* and of beauty in *Caged Bird*. Obviously,

their authors receive influences from different authors and literary trends too, but curiously, they have more similarities than differences.

In an interview, when Maya Angelou is asked what are the strengths to be found in contemporary African American literature, she answers:

> we're still where we've been - that is, we're still telling the slave narrative. And until we finish telling it, we shall be looking at it from all aspects - that is, the slave and post-slavery narratives - what it's like to be black, what hurts, what helps, what makes us laugh. I like what's happening with the new novelists, telling the contemporary story and using the single mother and the Claude Brown "manchild" - continuing not only to confirm, but to affirm, the right to be, and to be black in America today. That's really what the writers are about. And I say the writers, because she or he starts the ball rolling, and then it gets on the stage or in film or in song and in lyrics.
>
> (In:http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/blackhis/angel.htm)

From this declaration, one can understand the importance of slave narratives and "post slave narratives" as Angelou calls them for the constitution of the literary canon and the understanding of African American art in the post colonial and postmodern realities.

Actually, in their autobiographies, Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou cross from the private sphere into a public arena to take a political position as spokespeople for millions of African Americans in their generations.

> The autobiographical form is one of the ways that black Americans have asserted their right to live and grow. It is a bid of freedom, a beak of hope cracking the shell of slavery and exploitation. It is also an attempt to communicate to the white world what whites have done to them. (BLACKBURN. In: WILLIAMS, 1997: p. 60)

Besides, as critic Simon points out in “Revising the boundaries of culture and translation”, translation may be seen as “a tangible representation of a secondary or mediated relationship to reality” (SIMON, 1996: p.134). From this perspective, it may be said that both Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou work as translators on multiple levels of their experiences as minorities. On one level, they decrease the problem of communication when they make visible their realities to the white readers. On another, they transform their experiences into source of strength to black women who may find in these readings inspiration to overcome difficulties.

Concluding, Harriet Jacobs in her slave narrative and Maya Angelou in her modern autobiography write their own stories as examples to influence their generations giving them strength to transcend their limits in spite of the obstacles they may face in life. Also, together, those works are part of a great tradition in Literature silenced by History, which is that of Black women writing autobiography.

CHAPTER II

HARRIET JACOBS:

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A SLAVE AND *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL*

> *My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each*. (JACOBS, 2001: p.73)

Harriet Jacobs was the first woman to author a slave narrative in the United States. *Incidents* was published in 1861, the year when the Civil War started. Her quest for freedom, both for herself and her children, reveals the power of the African American woman and her indomitable spirit in her social struggles. Under the pseudonym of Linda Brendt and having names changed to preserve her identity and that of the ones somehow involved with her story, Harriet Jacobs, as an activist, addresses Northerners, and especially, white females to make visible the exploitation of her own body in slavery. The author questions the supposed difference between white and black bodies as well as the distinguished Northerners' ideology regarding slavery in relation to their Southern neighbors, establishing a true voice of reform, which invite whites to change if they do concern about moral salvation.

Jacobs wrote her testimony about the system of slavery in which the process of dehumanization reduces human beings to properties. As a woman, she focuses especially on the sexual and moral degradations suffered by the female slaves.

> In her narrative, Jacobs "re-educates" her readers, teaching them to see what is invisible. Conducted by a first person narrator, her work moves from the domestic to the public sphere, she speaks in the name of the ones who are never heard. She draws readers beyond their limited apprehension of reality to go into a realm of uncertainties, where she becomes their representative. Consequently, her quest becomes theirs too.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. Daughter of the slaves Delilah and Elijah, the girl followed their condition. In spite of being a slave, Hatty, that was her nickname, lived with her parents, brother and relatives "in a comfortable home" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8). Differently from most slave children who were soon separated from their parents, she was brought up "so fondly shielded" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8) that she did not know she was a slave.

When she was six, her mother died. It was on that occasion that she found out she was a "a piece of merchandise, trusted to [her parents] for safe keeping" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8). Those six years of her life she spent with her family in “freedom”, in other words, unaware of her condition as a slave, served as a model for her entire life. In fact, Hatty would try to replicate that model later, when raising her own children.

Very little did Jacobs, as an adult narrator, mention about her mother. However, she did mention her color and her manners. Both her parents were "a light shade of brownish yellow" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8) and her mother was "a slave merely on name, but in nature noble and womanly" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 10).

Elijah, her father, still lived six years after her mother's death. Jacobs wrote more of him due to their longer contact. Her memories of him are especially remarkable for his intelligence and skills as a carpenter (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8). He was known in the community because of his talent in carpentry. Indeed, his mistress permitted him to hire his time on the condition of paying her two hundred dollars a year and supporting himself. In this way, he could manage his own affairs, which contributed to a freer life when compared to other slaves. There were times when he traveled to nearby cities to work, but still, he was not a free man. What he wanted most, as Jacobs mentions, was

to purchase his children to spare them from slavery and make them free (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8). Elijah had taught Hatty and her brother to love freedom.

> My father taught me to hate slavery but forgot to teach me how to conceal my hatred. I could frequently perceive the pent-up agony of his soul, although he tried hard to conceal it in his own breast. The knowledge that he was a slave himself, and that his children were also slaves, embittered his life, but made him love us more. (JACOBS, John. In: YELLIN, 2004: p.7)

One of the few episodes Jacobs narrates about her father was the one regarding the role of black men. She narrates an occasion when both her father and her mistress call her brother at the same time. Not knowing which one he was supposed to obey first, he answers the mistress and his father reproves him for it as an effort to make his son understand the importance of one's family, and consequently, the obedience he is supposed to have for his father.

His words would echo in the future of both Hatty and her brother John. Not only did they fight for their freedom and manage to achieve it, but they also worked in favor of abolitionist causes in order to help those still in slavery and the ones who escaped from it.

As it was mentioned before, one of the issues raised by Jacobs is that of the role black men played in the nineteenth century American patriarchal society. Under the system of slavery, African American men had no rights to assure security and well being to their beloved ones, what certainly “embittered their life” as they were powerless before their masters. Jacobs comments on that in the passage below:

> Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give

> their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would *you* be, if you had been born and brought up as a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 39-40)

Jacobs addresses the audience and leads them to a reflective practice upon their beliefs and actions by asking them to put themselves on the Other's position in order to arouse sympathy to their cause. This uncomfortable situation of being displaced, even for a short time, leads the reader to a better understanding that at any moment, atrocities could be made to please the slaveholder and guarantee both his economical and social position in spite of the violence made against slaves to achieve such goal.

Death, as a result of extreme forms of violence, could separate family members since the life of those under slavery was constantly under threat. No laws protected them. Jacobs denounces violence against slaves in her testimony and reports scenes she either saw or heard of. About the cruelties against them, for instance, she tells the story of a planter whom she calls Mr. Litch. This man punishes his slaves in whatever ways he wishes.

> There was a jail and a whipping post on his grounds; and whatever cruelties were perpetrated there, they passed without comment. He was so effectually screened by his great wealth that he was called to no account for his crimes, not even murder [...] Murder was so common on his plantation that he feared to be alone after nightfall. He might have believed in ghosts. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 41)

Anything could be done in the name of profit. For that reason, death, which may be seen as the worst punishment one can have, was at times even desired, when in desperation by those under torture, be it psychological or physical.

The separation of a family, for example, caused by their sale to different slaveholders led mothers to madness and left traumas on their children. Jacobs mentions that January first was the day when the slaves who would not work another season for the same master were sold. Jacobs points out how slave mothers feel on this day due to their eminent separation of their children and invites free women to contrast it to their New Year's Day, when besides receiving the friendly wishes and gifts, they know their children are their own and that “no hand but that of death can take them” from their mothers. (JACOBS, 2001; p.16)

> To the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood, but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 17)

The images created by the author have a strong emotional appeal to the reader for their domesticity and motherhood involvement. The reader embodies the feelings of despair and impotence before the scene of children being taken away from their parents. In addition, the reproduction of monologues and dialogues along the text intensifies the mimesis and directly speaks to the reader, who feels revolted for the injustices made.

Still regarding the separation of slave mothers and children, Jacobs narrates an episode of a mother who sees all her seven children being led to the auction-block and being sold on the same day. The narrator comments:

> I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, “Gone! All Gone! Why *don’t* God kill me?” I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 17)

It is worth mentioning that not only in the USA there are literary works which deal with themes like the separation of slave mothers from their children. Also in the nineteenth century, in Brazil, Maria Firmina dos Reis, another African descendant author, writes about the agonies of slavery. Among her works dedicated to the abolitionist cause, her short story *A escrava* (2004), for instance, discusses how devastating the separation of the slave mother and her children can be and its effects on their lives. In this work, a slave woman is led to madness after her separation from two of her sons. Powerless, the slave spends her lifetime thinking and talking about Carlos and Urbano, her twin children, who at the age of eight are taken from their home by force to be sold. At her deathbed, she keeps recalling the details of the night they were taken from her (REIS, 2004: p. 256). It is important to observe that Maria Firmina’s works also came to visibility just two years ago, due to the research work of Brazilian professors dedicated to literary archeology at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, mainly Professor Eduardo de Assis Duarte, who signs the *Pósfacio* in the publication.

Jacobs also refers to her own suffering for not being able to exert her role as a mother because of the barriers created by the slavery system. During the years she

spends self-imprisoned in her grandmother's attic, for example, she can only see the street and the inside part of the house through her loophole. Her children are unaware of her staying there in the house, otherwise the whole family can be in danger in case the children say anything incriminating among strangers. In fact, her children think she has gone to a distant place to escape from slavery and left them. Although Jacobs can see them, her condition does not allow her to provide them the love and care her presence might do. Therefore, she suffers for the impossibility to exert her role as a mother.

> (...) Christmas might be a happy season for the poor slaves. Even slave mothers try to gladden the heart of their little ones on that occasion. Benny and Ellen had their Christmas stockings filled. Their imprisoned mother could not have the privilege of witnessing their surprise and joy. But I had the pleasure of peeping at them as they went into the street with their new suits on. I heard Benny ask a little playmate whether Santa Claus brought him any thing. "Yes," replied the boy; "but Santa Claus ain't a real man. It's the children's mothers that put things into the stockings." " No, that can't be," replied Benny, "for Santa Claus brought Ellen and me these new clothes, and my mother has been gone this long time."(JACOBS, 2001: p. 99)

Delilah, Jacobs's mother, was the daughter of slave Molly Horniblow. According to Jacobs, her grandmother was "a remarkable woman in many respects". (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8) After Delilah's death, she cared for Hatty's upbringing as if she were her own daughter, trying to fill in the emotional gap left in the girl's life with the rupture of her home.

> My grandmother, as much as possible, had been a mother to her orphan grandchildren. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 17)

It can be observed not only through Harriet's narrative, but from social and historical studies as critic Yellin's, that within the slave community there were ranks of status. Molly had certain prestige for being a “skilled house servant owned by people of substance” (YELLIN, 2004: p. 12). Moreover, out of the Black community, in the white one, Molly was known as a faithful servant and praised for her cooking.

Molly conquered her freedom and economical independence through her own work. Actually, after doing the housework, she used to cook crackers, cakes and preserves (JACOBS, 2001: p. 9) under the permission of her mistress and sell her production to earn some money. On one occasion, she even lent money to her mistress. Subverting stereotypes, Jacobs questions white people's integrity, reliability and supposed "superiority", based on the fact that they do not keep promises and take advantage of laws in their benefit. On the passage mentioned, Jacobs relates that her grandmother does not receive back the money she lent to her mistress. Molly is deceived by her.

The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for according to Southern laws, a slave, being property, can hold no property. When my grandmother lent her hard earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave! (JACOBS, 2001: p. 17)

> Molly exerted a major influence in the construction of Jacobs’s subjectivity as the matriarch of the family and a symbol of her black heritage. Her faith in God and, consequently, divine salvation gave her the power of resistance.

Although being victim of color prejudice and social injustice as a slave, she managed to subvert the social order following the laws. She bought her independence and that of her son. Her strength inspired Jacobs who eventually endured adversities and did the most she could to mirror her grandmother's attitudes.

> Most earnestly did she strive to make us feel that it was the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment. It was beautiful faith, coming from a mother who could not call her children her own. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 17-18)

When describing her grandmother as “a remarkable woman in many respects" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 8) and exemplifying it to the reader through her actions, she explores an unprecedented imagery in literature. She goes beyond the rare and shallow representations of black women in canonical literature. She portrays the obstacles black women need to overcome and fears they have to face in their daily life. Besides, she also shows their power to resist and build their subjectivity.

In her testimony, Jacobs deconstructs the sensuous stereotype of black women created by whites when narrating episodes from the domestic sphere related to the importance of family relations and black women's difficulty to raise a family under slavery. Using a domestic language and setting, Jacobs unveils black women's reality under this system, which leads women to the reproductive destiny as means of capital accumulation to their master. She denounces that black women give birth to property, therefore, to capital itself in the form of slaves since all the children inherited their status from their mother.

The black female body is represented in her narrative out of its common stereotype created by white authors in canonical literature. The strong, sensuous, female savage representation is deconstructed. In fact, Jacobs questions the supposed differences between the white and black female bodies in spite of the capitalist belief that Black women's physical features match the ideal profile of a servant exclusively for profitable reasons. Fragility, for instance, which is a valued feature as the ideal state of white women, is not often attributed to the black. To them, strong physical features are attributed to perform heavy labors instead. Thus, strength that is considered to be a distasteful attribute to the white woman in the XIX Century becomes a positive one when a black female field slave is sold at an auction.

Aware of the hypocrisy embedded in disguising roles for black and white women, Jacobs uses "sass" – term used by Joanne Braxton (1989:20) - to ridicule the aristocratic conventional behaviors for women.

Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 14)

> Booker T. Washington also comments on the paradigm of the slaveholders' nobility and breaks it when revealing the reality on the plantation, in which all the work was left in the hands of slaves for manual work classified one's inferiority. Thus, despite white men and women's learning from books, little was put into practice. Although there was food in the house for all, they lacked the delicacy and refinement of touch when taking care of the house and mastering when administrating the plantation

The whole machinery of slavery was so constructed as to cause labour, as a rule, to be looked upon as a badge of degradation, of inferiority. Hence labour was something

that both races on the plantation sought to escape. The slavery system on our place, in a large measure, took the spirit of self-reliance and self-help out of the white people. My old master had many boys and girls, but not one, so far as I know, ever mastered a single trade or special line of productive industry. (WASHINGTON, 1995: , 2001: p. 14)

> Quoting Carby (1989: p.225), "A delicate constitution was an indicator of class as well as racial position". Jacobs highlights women's antagonic representations in society depending on ethnicity and class. It becomes clear in Jacobs's work the distinctive roles of black and white women. While the blacks are the reproductor, the one who generate slaves, the basis of the slavery system, the work force and the responsible for the accumulation of wealth, white women are the ones who would be responsible for raising their heirs, the ones who maintain the system for further generations.

Under this social perspective, Jacobs's autobiographical work becomes one source of collective memory data registered not only to appeal to her target audience for the antislavery cause, but also to be the subject of study in future generations.

> As a woman ahead of her time, creating the model of the heroine woman as a mother in a black body, she confronts their political subjugation. She defines a discourse of black womanhood, which Hazel Carby (1989: p.32) argues, "addresses their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood and rescues their bodies frequently associated with sexuality".
>
> Still bearing in mind the importance of deconstructing stereotypes, Carby argues that

The object of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations (1989: p.22)

> Indeed, Jacobs reveals the disguise of social and family relations in her society and her work is a fruitful source of study for its symbolism of rebellion and resistance against the "supremacy" imposed by white patriarchy. Besides, it must be emphasized that Jacobs writes herself her narrative, which was uncommonly seen among (ex-)slaves for their lack of opportunities to become literate.

It was under the care of Elizabeth Horniblow that Jacobs learns how to read and write. She was Hatty's mistress when her mother died. She promised Delilah, her foster

sister, to spare Hatty from the sufferings of slavery in her deathbed (JACOBS, 2001: p. 10). In order to teach Hatty the precepts of God's words, Elizabeth gives her the instrument which would later make of Harriet Jacobs the most important black woman activist at her time for the most complete testimony ever left by an African-American slave woman. As Appiah and Gates emphasize, "she is the only African-American woman slave to leave a long and detailed record of her particular ways in which slavery affected women, from sexual abuse to constraints on motherhood". (2003: p.463)

In the nineteenth century, very few blacks were literate. There used to be the belief that Negroes were not humans. In a scale of development of the species, they would come lower than white man would. Therefore, they would not have sufficient intelligence to learn how to read and write. That was the "scientific" explanation for not granting them with rights, and among them, the one of education. As an illustration, Gates quotes Morgan Godwyn:

> (...) the Negro's though in their Figure they carry some resemblances of manhood, yet are indeed no men (...) How should they otherwise be capable of (...) Reading and Writing? (GATES, 1997: p. xxix)

This theory unfortunately prevailed in the biased minds that profited from slavery and assured the centrality of knowledge and power in the hands of few. However, a less capitalist and more realistic version for that would be facing the fact that had slaves been given education, it could have meant accepting them as human beings, who had rights. Therefore, once aware of their rights, literacy and education could have put in danger the whole system of slavery since they would not accommodate and that would mean stimulating resistance.

Also, she portrays the paradox of colonialism because if that means bringing knowledge and civilization to savages despite their being in distant continents, why can't the black born in the US have it? She proposes readers a reflection on why slaves are forbidden the right to have access to knowledge since many slaves desired to learn, but few had the chance.

> There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 63-64)

In the passage above, the author inverts the white notions of colonialism and place slaveholders at the level of savages because they do cruelties to other men in the name of “progress” and deprive slaves from literacy in all possible ways. Jacobs denounces that slaves are even whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read (JACOBS, 2001: P.63). She establishes a revolutionary perspective, pointing out the incoherence between Christian beliefs and actions preached by whites.

Jacobs narrates the experience she had when teaching a fifty-three-year-old man how to read and his joy for being able to understand what was written in the Bible. According to her, slaves think they “should know how to serve God better” and this encouraged them to struggle for literacy.

Later, in 1901, Booker T. Washington reinforces Jacobs’s testimony referring to his people’s struggle for literacy and education in post civil war era, when slaves were freed.

> His experience of a whole race beginning to go to school for the first time, presents one of the most interesting studies that has ever occurred in connection with the development any race. Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. (...) Few were too young, and none too old, to attempt to learn. (...) The great ambition of

> the older people was to try to read the Bible before they died. (WASHINGTON, 1995: p. 14-15)

Jacobs wisely questions the formal education and scientific findings whites boast to achieve when she reports northerners' behavior when going south. She mentions that when compared to masters from the south, "they prove very apt scholars" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 40) and they soon harden their feelings.

> They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who "made of one blood all nations of men!" And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of Americans slaves? (JACOBS, 2001: p. 40)

It seems clear that the author exposes immorality and injustice hoping to inspire in her audience a renewal of moral character, leading to reformative actions. In addition, it may be said that the author brings to light the fact that Christian "precepts" are especially taken into consideration for the purpose of intellectual and spiritual colonization, but not in order to achieve the divine salvation if that's what is really sought in Christian life.

Exemplifying the aspect mentioned above, Elizabeth teaches God's words to Hatty. However, paradoxically, it seems that she is blind by the values of the society she lives in because she does not see Hatty as her neighbor. Jacobs points out the incoherence between her mistress's words and acts in the passage below:

> My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto

> you, do ye evenso unto them."But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong(...)
> She possessed but few slaves; and at her death those were my grandmother's children, and had shared the same milk that nourished her mother's children. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 10-11).

When Hatty's mistress dies many friends and relatives believe she will be freed, but instead, she is willed to her mistress's three-year-old niece Louisa Matilda. She is twelve at the time she is sent to the nearby Dr. Norcom's home, Louisa Matilda's father, where in her adolescence she constantly fights off his sexual advances.

There, she fights against the destiny of many female slaves of accepting the ideology that "[a slave woman] [is] made for [her master's] use, made to obey his command in every thing", which could perfectly have made her the sexual object of her master Dr. James Norcom - Dr. Flint in *Incidents*.

> And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. I will not try to screen myself behind the plea ignorance or thoughtlessness. For it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness. For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and

> to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 47)

When exposing her life to that extent, Jacobs certainly creates a revolution in African American literature. In the slave narratives written by men, women are seen simply as mothers, sisters, or any dull female coadjuvant character among others. They are seen through the eyes of the narrator. In Jacobs's narrative, they leave their marginal position to become the center of their own experience, so their stories are not filtered by somebody else's interpretation and labeled. Instead, they speak for themselves. Thus, problems like those of sexual violence against women that are never mentioned in male narratives are brought into light. Be it either for their inability to deal with the subject due to their powerless condition or their indifference in relation to it, black men do not denounce it in their narratives.

Jacobs is the spokesperson of black women in the nineteenth century for revealing their degradation under slavery in order to contest their subhuman condition. To represent them, she narrates the common suffering destined to young slave girls:

> No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. She may have had religious principles

> inculcated by some pious mother or grandmother, or some good mistress; she may have a lover, whose good opinion and peace of mind are dear to her heart; or the profligate men who have power over her may be exceedingly odious to her. But resistance is hopeless. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 45-46)

Jacobs denounces to her audience how slavery can corrupt the moral values of society when she points out the inter marriage relationships kept with slave girls against their own will for the sake of satisfying the master's desire and increasing the number of slaves through procreation.

> The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the others slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 32)

As Braxton points out, “Flint himself realizes a measurable financial profit through his sexual misconduct” (BRAXTON, 1989: p. 29). That may be explained because according to the laws, the children followed the condition of their mother, even if the father was white and, at times, the woman's own master. The family ties expected to be held among father and children do not exist in this context since any emotional tie can go against the system.

> I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain

> long in sight of himself and his wife. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 49)

Something that must not be forgotten is the role the mistresses play. They acknowledged the fact that some slave children were their own husband's. Thus, feeling bad for the uncomfortable situation of being betrayed, mistresses extravasate their hatred on both the slave mother and the innocent children, instead of blaming the husband for the sexual misconduct.

Jacobs's version of collective memory questions the white mystification of the black woman related to evil forces in the imagination of white women. The slave woman is commonly seen among white women as a hunter, a promiscuous woman, who catches their husbands like prey even though the latter is the master, and the first, slave.

> I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed. I could not blame her. Slaveholders' wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 31)

Slave girls were denied what Hazel Carby (1989: p.23) refers to as the "Cult of True Womanhood", which is the dominating ideology that defined "the boundaries of acceptable female behavior" from the 1820's until the Civil War. She claims that the "four cardinal virtues" - piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity were the attributes by which a woman judged herself and was judged by society. Nonetheless, these attributes establish the boundaries of female behavior and create parameters that declare one to be considered or not a woman. Obviously, for their conditions under

slavery, they were not seen under these cardinal virtues. Thus, black women were often victim of sexual violence since they were not considered to be women.

> In order to escape from Dr. Norcom's advances and his jealous wife, she finds that having a lover might put an end to her persecution. Samuel Treadwell Sawyer, a white neighbor becomes her lover. Eventually, he also becomes the father of her two children Louisa Matilda and Joseph.

Not only does Jacobs speak through the stories she tells, but also does it through the untold stories. When explaining her decision to transgress the moral code to escape from Dr. Norcom's advances, Jacobs says readers cannot understand her motives. Her voice resembles both that of a feminist and that of a heroine of a novel:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice (JACOBS, 2001: p. 49).

That appeal for understanding speaks directly to those women who have either known about someone who has experienced being their powerlessness before a "hated tyrant" or those who have felt the consequences of being unprotected by law, customs and subject to the will of the other. From this perspective, the questions of ethnicity and gender may be examined separated. Similarly, either black or white women may be enslaved to men, through marriage or not. Caught in the contractions of the system, ladies try to act according to their beliefs, and try to inculcate those dictated by society by word although in a lesser degree, they are also enslaved to the patriarchal system

Ironically, Flint's attacks fortify rather than affect the slave girl's mind. They encourage her to rebel against the system:

> When he told me that I was made to his use, made to obey him in *every* thing*;* that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong.(JACOBS, 2001: p. 18).

Throughout her testimony, it may be said that Jacobs uses her own body as a symbol of the repression she suffers. Slavery is referred to as a disease responsible for her bodily contamination, which is caused by snakes – in other words, the image of slaveholders as snakes. When referring to Dr. Norcom, for instance, she calls him "the venomous old reprobate" (JACOBS, 2001: 65). The slaveholder is the one who supposedly controls the bodies of female slaves through the system. She compares:

Hot weather brings out snakes and slaveholders, and I like the one class of venomous creatures as little as I do the other. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 143)

Also, when she confesses her pregnancy to her grandmother, Jacobs describes all "the things that had poisoned [her] life" (JACOBS, 2001: p. 51). Her references to her bodily contamination are generally related to pregnancy, and as a result of what slavery causes her. After her child's birth, she says:

I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! slavery held me in its poisonous grasp. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 65)

Still, referring to her first child, she confesses, she could never forget he was a slave (JACOBS, 2001: 54), describing his condition following that of his mother, as an illness that can be transmitted from a mother to her children. She concludes her thought

lamenting "O, the serpent of Slavery has many and poisonous fangs" (JACOBS, 2001:p. 55).

In order to achieve her freedom as well as her children's, Jacobs relates about her being hidden for seven years in her grandmother's attic - a place slightly bigger than a coffin where she sew and read most of the time in a self imposed imprisonment to escape the system of slavery.

As Braxton (BRAXTON, 1989: p.1) points out, one of the contributions of African-American women in literature is their true portrait, highlighting their characteristics as "the outraged mother".

In fact, Jacobs then assumes the gigantic image of the heroine when she undergoes this adventure of being hidden for seven years in a place to escape from slavery and at the same time to have her children next to her. She proves she is capable of doing anything to protect them.

Jacobs used her lifetime to fight against the slavery system and in favor of those who were persecuted like her. After escaping to the north where she is united to her children, Jacobs initiated a career as an anti-slavery activist. She also worked among Black refugees, giving them support with medical as well as relief supplies. Finally, she established "Jacobs School".

In 1849, Jacobs worked in the "Anti Slavery Reading Room", Rochester, New York, where she had the chance of reading abolitionist literature. Also in Rochester, Jacobs meets Amy Post, who gives her emotional encouragement to write her story. Amy Post, at the time, was involved in the beginning of the women's movement and attended the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Another woman who contributed to the

publication of *Incidents* was Lydia Maria Child, a writer and editor at the time. Child edited Jacobs's book and contributed to the work with the Introduction. At the time, it used to be necessary to include one or more documents written by prominent white people to authenticate slave narratives and make them credible to the white readership.

Indeed, both the introduction written by editor Lydia Maria Child and the Appendix by Amy Post, a friend, play a major role as they mediate the reader's reception of the text and lead the audience to a non-biased reading of this slave-narrative. As white female Northerners, Child and Post teach the audience how to understand Jacobs's testimonial without placing judgmental criticism on her sexual behavior and deviance of the female code of conduct in Slavery. They unmask the white atrocities made in the name of Slavery and present Jacobs as the victim of the northern condescendence towards slavery.

> This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do this with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery. (CHILD In: JACOBS, 2001: p. 5)

Both passages address the audience in an attempt to provoke sympathy with the anti-slavery cause and instigate their interest concerning what really happens in slavery. They show Jacobs's virtues as a human being regardless of her color and social class

and persuade the audience to take off the lens of prejudice to better understand the suffering of an Other woman.

> The author of this book is my highly esteemed friend. If its readers knew her as I know her, they could not fail to be deeply interested in her story. She was a beloved inmate of our family in 1849. (…) I immediately became much interested in Linda; for her appearance was prepossessing, and her deportment indicated remarkable delicacy of feeling and purity of thought. (POST In: JACOBS, 2001: p. 165)

In those passages, Child and Post give examples of support Northern white women are expected to give when they emphasize the credibility of the author as an ex-slave black woman instead of labeling her as an "immoral" black body and accusing her of complicity in sexual relation with a white man (as probably most middle-class women would do at the time). In other words, although Jacobs defined herself as a mother who led her children out of slavery and who sought to create a subjective role as an abolitionist writer and social critic, those are the strategic mediators that initiate and end the bonds Jacobs keeps with her white audience, keeping them tight. They prevent her from being seen merely as the sinful product of slavery's moral decadence and a female slave who should be judged for her violation of female moral codes of conduct. Those passages instruct readers to respect her as an authoritative commentator on slavery. The testimonials of Child and Post give her credit when she says that "[t]he condition of slave confines all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible." (JACOBS, 2001: p.46).

Jacobs's patterns of representation for blackness lead readers beyond mere stereotyping of its victimization or culpability. Linda's progression in the narrative is that from slave girl to concubine to slave mother to fugitive slave to free Black. Although white mothers and daughter

cannot identify with the character, Jacobs's target audience learns that they must do so if they intend to achieve their own moral ideals. What Jacobs does is to challenge readers to change the way they look at and learn from the African American. Also, she leaves to African American descents registers of their culture, history and an example of resistance against the prevailing of colonialist patriarchal power.

CHAPTER III

MAYA ANGELOU:

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A SLAVE DESCENDENT AND *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS.*

> *All my work, my life, everything is about survival. All my work is meant to say, "You may encounter many defeats, but you must no be defeated." In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure*. (ANGELOU In: BRAXTON, 1999: p.154)

Maya Angelou is the most visible black woman autobiographer in the United States. Her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1970 became a best seller and was nominated for the National Book Award in the same year of its publication. The narrative tells the story of a black girl's growing up that transcends its author's and has been influencing generations.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first of six autobiographical volumes Maya Angelou wrote. It is a retelling of the events of her childhood, during which she lives in rural Stamps, Arkansas, in St. Louis, Missouri, and in San Francisco, California. She also the narrates her relationships with family and community. During these years, she struggled against the odds of being black at a time when prejudice, especially in the South of the United States, was at its height.

Angelou wrote her testimony about what it means to be black and woman in the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States. She relates the adversities she went through and teaches her audience that it is always possible to get positive lessons from them.

In her narrative, Angelou declares her abilities to a color-coded society that insists on imposing its forces against her. She selectively explores the relations of her origins and memory to the construction of her subjectivity. Capturing emblematic memories and weaving them together, the adult narrator anchors the story as a whole. Lynn Z Bloom describes her work as a poetic adventure, an “odyssey”, which encompasses psychological, spiritual, literary, and geographical movement (IN: WILLIAMS, 1997: p.88).

A writer, poet, director, composer, lyricist, dancer, singer, journalist, teacher, lecturer and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928 in St Louis, Missouri, the youngest daughter of Vivian Baxter and Bailey Johnson. She became known as Maya because of her brother Bailey Johnson Jr., who as a child used to address her as “Mya Sister”. Due to the need for brevity, that was shortened to “My”. And, eventually, “My” was extended to “Maya”, the word she remains as her first name. The word “Angelou” was incorporated after her marriage to Tosh Angelos. Since “Angelos” sounded “too Spanish” she was suggested to change it to “Angelou” when she worked as a dancer.

As far as *Caged Bird* is concerned, it is possible to identify that the end of slavery legally freed individuals, but still left blacks caged in invisible and unbreakable bars. More subtle forms of economic, historical and psychological imprisonment replaced the former literal enslavement. Black communities were closed in upon themselves and no access to the surrounding white world was allowed, which reminds us clearly of Fanon’s own words about rejection: “The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all

participation" (FANON, 1967: p.114). The black community described in the book is notoriously dislocated and imprisoned, being possessor of a supposed feeling of inferiority.

Foucault's observations on the mechanisms of power may be useful when analyzing *Caged Bird* because what becomes visible for readers is that after more than half a century after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, black communities which were previously confined to slavery were still oppressed by the reluctant "system of powers" embedded in society. Black people still struggled to get rid of them. According to Foucault, power arises through the multitudinous rules that govern social interactions and mold bodies and minds of people. In fact, power is not only exerted by the State on the individual, society exerts it as well in its social interactions. A proof of it is the fact that even more than fifty years after the end of slavery, in the 1930's, when Maya was still a little girl, social powers limited the black population, establishing racial prejudice and segregation.

In that cage, the individuals that composed the black community learned how to develop their own lives within those limits. The analysis of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* must begin from its title, which was inspired by a poem written by Paul Laurence Dunbar called "Sympathy". Angelou contrasts her life to that of the bleeding caged bird that struggles to be free from the bars that are represented in the autobiography by the constraints and limitations imposed by a racist society. The poem may be seen below:

> I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
> When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
> When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
> And the river flows like a stream of glass;
> When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals--
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
  Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
  And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting--
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
  When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,--
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
  But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings--
I know why the caged bird sings!

(From: http://www.web-books.com/Classics/Poetry/Anthology/Dunbar_PL/Sympathy.htm**)**

Moreover, in this way, black women raised black girls challenging their imprisonment and resisting in the face of danger when transmitting to them elements from their cultural heritage - through beliefs, sayings and recipes, for instance. Together, they celebrate their Lord and testify to a better future. Critic Fox-Genovese affirms that

> The cages constrained, but did not stifle them. The songs of confinement grounded the vitality of their tradition [and] launched the occasional fledging to freedom (IN: WILLIAMS, 1997: p. 53).

In this sense, motherhood may be seen as a rite of passage as Braxton (BRAXTON, 1989: p.3) points out, transmitting the black heritage to future generations. Actually, overcoming all difficulties, black women writers also transmit this heritage when they achieve self-awareness and place themselves at the center of their own experiences. They analyze themselves and their community in contrast to the dominant groups, transforming the awareness of their marginality into a source for writing and testifying for future generations.

An example of this awareness of marginality is present in the prologue of *Caged Bird*. The novel begins with a brief prologue where Angelou establishes two different perspectives: one of Maya, the adult narrator, survivor of the memories she is writing, and another of Marguerite, the child she recollects herself of having been. Taken together, both voices might be seen as representing the interplay of history and memory. Maya emerges through neglect, violence and abuse to construct Marguerite, the young narrator of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, and evokes awareness through her memory. In the prologue, the unrecognized and fantasized whiteness of the child gives way to the proud blackness of the woman she becomes.

By placing this prologue before the body of her narrative, Maya establishes the importance of this episode in her life. Her experience on that symbolical Easter morning represents an “epiphanic moment” in the character’s life, when she awakens to reality and becomes aware of her blackness and displacement.

The characteristics of being timeless and having the symbolic setting of Easter morning at a church may suggest readers that the experience related in the prologue may be interpreted as a personal myth unconsciously created by Maya.

From the very beginning, Marguerite exposes to readers her own diminished self-image. Her physical appearance brings her lack of self-esteem and self-hatred for being different from those “sweet little white girls, who were everybody’s dream of what was right in the world” (ANGELOU, 1993: p.2). For that reason, at a very early age, she creates an imaginary self-image to escape from the cage of ugliness because she learns with racism that blackness is to be abhorred whereas whiteness to be honored. Marguerite’s perspective of her black ugly dream is mentioned below:

> Wouldn't they be surprised if one day I woke up 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? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must have been a Chinaman" (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes are so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white. (ANGELOU, 1993: p.2)

As it may be seen in the passage above, Marguerite's fantasy about being blond and blue-eyed allows her to escape from her displacement in reality. She believes as a child that she is not worthy the affection from her community because she does not fit the normative beauty conventions imposed by the colonizer's patriarchal white society. Marguerite states her beauty patterns clearly as being the same of the colonizers' when she affirms her desire to look like a "movie star" (ANGELOU, 1993: p.2).

In fact, Henke mentions that in the 1930's and 1940's, "the social ideal of blond feminine beauty was touted in newspapers and in ladies' magazines and, most powerfully, in romantic cinematic representations" (IN: WILLIAMS, 1997: p.100), which reinforces the idea that having the colonizer's physical appearance is a requisite to acceptance and happiness in society.

As critic Blackburn claims, bearing in mind that black women are always judged by white standards - with blond hair, blue eyes and white skin - self-hatred and self-doubt are consequences of low self-esteem among African-American women. In addition, according to her, "[African-American women are] depreciated by [their] own kind, [and] judged grotesque by [their] society" (IN: WILLIAMS, 1997:, p.62).

Understandably, these women question their worth because of color prejudice of both blacks and whites, which promotes lack of self-assertion.

In Tony Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, that facet of reality is represented when Pecola, the main character, who is still a girl, dreams of having blue eyes as if they were her passport to acceptance in community. Her dream emerges from her neglect in the domestic and social life leading her to the edge of madness. The Breedlove family, contrary to what the name suggests, fails to support Pecola.

> If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (…)
>
> Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.
>
> Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people. (MORRISON, 1994: p. 49)

Maya's fantastic belief that "[she] was really white" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 2-3) and that "a cruel fairy stepmother who was understandably jealous of [her] beauty" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 3) had tricked her of her white birthright gives the story the imagery of a fairytale created by the imagination of the girl in which her own subjectivity depends on the benevolence of others. In this case, the girl attributes it to the benevolence of a fairy stepmother, who may transform her back into a white pretty girl or

simply do not remove the spell over her, which would keep her in a black ugly dream. That image reinforces the idea that Marguerite acknowledges the existence of an arbitrary and malevolent power out of her control that dictates her personal and racial identity in society.

In other words, Marguerite absorbs the racist values of the society beyond Stamps' black community, where Marguerite lives, and soon grows to hate her self-image of

> a too big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.(ANGELOU, 1993: p. 3)

Evidences lead readers to the conclusion that she is induced to develop self-hatred as a child due to the dominant truth portrayed by the media of communications at the time.

The establishment of the second perspective in the narrative, that of the adult, may be also noticed in the opening prologue when Maya comments on her childhood and the feeling of displacement she had at very early age as well as the awareness of this ostracism she suffered. In *Caged Bird*, she seems to appropriate her Southern past to undo her displacement:

> 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. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 4)

Another fact that contributes to Marguerite's lack of self-acceptance is when her parents divorce and Maya and her brother, who are 3 and 4 years old respectively, are sent to their grandmother's house. They travel alone from Long Beach, California, to

Stamps, Arkansas only with a tag “To Whom It May Concern” on their wrists instructing who they are and where they are going (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 5).

By the way, studying African-American History, one notices that it is a common scene to see children finding themselves without parents or sometimes without anybody but themselves traveling in search for a home, some place where they can escape from displacement and marginality. Indeed, Maya traces this parallel in the first chapter.

> Years later I discovered that the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children traveling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities, or back to grandmothers in Southern towns when the urban North reneged on its economic promises. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 5)

One example of what is mentioned above may be found in the work of Harriet Jacobs when her own children are sent to the North. Their destination is not a home of their own; instead, their journey is an attempt to be reunited with their mother, it is a quest for a home.

Although Bailey and Marguerite, “the poor little motherless darlings” (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 5), are traveling to Mrs. Henderson’s house, their paternal grandmother, it is important to emphasize that they are away from home and their parents. They are going to live with somebody that despite being their grandmother is someone who is out of their daily contact. In fact, children often internalize and translate their parents’ divorce and, as a result, the separation of the family as a rejection of the self. For children, the loss of their home usually causes devaluation of self-worth because they usually think they are sent away because their parents do not love them anymore. The quest for home therefore represents the quest for acceptance, love and self-worth in *Caged Bird*.

In Stamps, Bailey and Marguerite's destination, they are raised by Mrs. Annie Henderson and William Johnson – their paternal grandmother and uncle, whom they tenderly call Momma and Uncle Willie.

Uncle Willie is crippled and lame. According to Maya, he is "the whipping boy and butt of jokes of the underemployed and underpaid. Fate not only disabled him but laid a double-tiered barrier in his path" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 11). Being crippled means being the victim of both blacks and whites to Willie due to the fact that he is negatively labeled as black by whites and crippled by blacks. As an illustration of what those characteristics mean in his society, it is worth quoting a passage by Fanon about the experience of one's being black and crippled:

> The crippled veteran of the Pacific saido my brother, "Resign yourself to your color the way I got to my stump; we're both victims." (FANON, 1967: p. 140)

Momma is the owner of a local grocery and sundries store called the "William Johnson General Merchandise Store" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 6), which Maya simply refers to as "The Store". Her grandmother is the one who gives her the nurturing that will later support her in the outside world. Together, Uncle Willie, Momma, Bailey and Marguerite live in a house located in the rear of The Store, which is a kind of center of activities in the town for their Black community where workers, neighbors and friends tell stories and talk about the local news. The Store is a kind of laboratory for Marguerite, a place where she observes her community and learns from their experience. From her testimony, readers may understand that just like Marguerite, the whole community of Stamps is displaced. Segregation was so complete in Stamps that "most Black children

didn't really absolutely know what whites looked like" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 25). They are caged in racial subordination and impotence. Marguerite describes her community:

> The resignation of its inhabitants encouraged me to relax. They showed me contentment based on the belief that nothing more was coming to them, although a great deal more was due. Their decision to be satisfied with life inequities was a lesson for me. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 89)

Actually, people from Stamps even avoid talking to white people due to the fact that it means risking their lives. That is one of the lessons black children in Stamps learn. Maya refers to it: "[Momma] didn't cotton the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 47). Momma and her community believe this path of life to be the safest one. According to Maya, if Mrs. Henderson had been asked whether she was cowardly or not, she would have said she was realist (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 47). High physical visibility means consciousness in the white community. What may be understood from that is: in order not to risk their own survival, blacks try not to be looked at, and so, they become invisible. Therefore, this invisibility certainly contributes to lead them to self-depreciation. Marguerite's diminished sense of self reflects in fact the black community's diminished sense. Once more, Fanon's words fit perfectly to that:

> A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence. Sin is Negro as virtue is white. All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong, I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good. (FANON, 1967: p. 139)

The social displacement of Maya's family is evidenced, for example, when "poor white trash" girls humiliate Momma as she stands erect before them singing a hymn. Maya recalls this painfull incident in an early scene that occurs when she is ten years

old. Three “powhitetrash” girls ape Momma’s posture and mannerism, and insolently address her by her first name.

> I supposed my lifelong paranoia was born in those cold, molasses-slow minutes. [The white girls] came finally to stand on the ground in front of Momma. At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hum. I realized she was aping my grandmother. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 30)

Throughout the scene Momma stands on her porch, as a pillar of strength, smiling and humming a hymn. When the girls notice that their actions produce no results, they turn to other means of mockery, making faces at Mrs. Henderson. The young Marguerite, who is inside The Store observing the scene, suffers humiliation for her grandmother and wants to confront the girls, but she realizes that she is “as clearly imprisoned behind the scenes as the actors outside [are] confined to their roles” (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 31).

The paradox in representation is in the fact that the matriarch of the family, respected for her character and dignity in her community, was not recognized as such by the white world represented in the scene by children - who themselves could be regarded as inferior in a rank of white status in society for not possessing power. For those children, Mrs. Henderson was of no value; they could only read her as an ape. In fact, Mrs. Henderson still shows respect before them for calling them “Miz” even though she does not receive the same address. When the girls leave, they yell “Bye, Annie.” and in response she says “ Bye, Miz Helen, ‘ bye Miz Ruth, ‘ bye Miz Eloise” (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 32).

Enraged by her grandmother seeming powerlessness, Marguerite cries bitterly as an unconscious demonstration of her impotence. However, Marguerite manages to find out in that happening something to be proud of: the nobility of her grandmother's attitude. She deconstructs the figure the children make of her grandmother by describing the woman's apparent indifference towards those actions while presenting the notorious animosity in the white girls' behaviors. Recapturing the image of "sweet little white girls, who were everybody's dream of what was right in the world" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 2), it is possible to understand that the stereotype is destroyed in the passage below when describing one of the girl's attitudes:

> Her dirty bare feet and long legs went straight for the sky. Her dress fell down around her shoulders, and she had on no drawers. The slick pubic hair made a brown triangle where her legs came together. She hung in the vacuum of that lifeless morning for only a few seconds, then wavered and tumbled. The other girls clapped her on the back and slapped their hands. (ANGELOU, p.32)

After that scene, however, Maya describes Mrs. Henderson as victorious; she emerges from degradation to calm the enraged Marguerite and show her strength. She proves to be strong enough in order to have the power of resistance. She is capable of sing/hum in face of being ridiculed.

> She stood another whole song through and then opened the screen door to look down on me crying in rage. She looked until I looked up. Her face was a brown moon that shone on me. She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand, but I could see that she was happy. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 32-33)

On the one hand, three white girls, try to use their race as an instrument of power and treat a black woman like another child, reducing her to their level. On the other

hand, a black woman chooses the dignified silent endurance. Mrs. Henderson knows that she must address the girls with some respect, but she also recognizes them simply as white children and she does not seem to register their offense. Trying to preserve her integrity and transcend their actions, Momma wins a psychological battle transcending the limitations of her social world.

According to Dolly A. McPerson this scene is a dramatic, symbolic, recreation of the kind of spiritual death and regeneration Angelou experienced during the shaping of her development, besides being a vividly recapturing of the Black and White tensions in the South of the 1930's. Actually, Angelou reports on community and the individual contribute to the construction of collective memory. Therefore, to a more equalitarian version of official history which recognizes the testimonial of different groups to compose the whole.

Annie Henderson is a strict, religious woman. In the same way that The Store "lay center of the activities in town", Annie represents the moral center of the family. From Lupton' s view, Annie is "the traditional preserver of the family, the source of folk wisdom, and the instiller of values within the Black community" (IN: WILLIAMS, 1997: p. 74). And it is in Stamps under her tutelage that Marguerite spends most of her childhood, being raised under a very strict and religious upbringing, absorbing the cultural aspects presented in her community and her family. The image of Mrs. Henderson strongly influences the woman Marguerite becomes. That may be also observed through the other autobiographies she writes.

When Marguerite is seven years old, her father visits her; and that is the first time she sees her father in her memory. That is a passage that should be highlighted for exemplifying how Angelou uses the richness of imageries and sounds, generally employed in verse to convey her memories in prose. The details provided by her description pull readers into the narrative through the possibility of creating with images and sound a whole scene, resulting a movie like effect. It is as if the reader could mentally see the characters in action. The description of her father may be used as an example:

> His voice rang like a metal dipper hitting a bucket and he spoke English. Proper English, like the school principal, and even better. Our father sprinkled *ers* and even *errers* in his sentences as liberally as he gave out his twisted-mouth smiles. His lips pulled not down, like Uncle Willie's, but to the side, and his head lay on one side or the other, but never straight on the end of his neck. He had the air of a man who did not believe what he heard or what he himself was saying. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 54)

After his visit, Stamps is left behind since the real objective of his coming to visit her is to deliver her brother and her to her mother in St. Louis. Years later she would find out that it was her grandmother's request in order to protect them from the common violence against blacks, and especially black men. With the trip, there comes the promise of a new home after meeting her mother.

Maya's mother, Vivian Baxter, has also a great influence on the construction of the woman Marguerite would become. Completely different for Momma Henderson in manners and behavior for living in a less oppressive atmosphere, readers are led to the conclusion that she complements Marguerite's upbringing with lessons on self-worth and determination. From the very beginning, that is the image Maya projects of her mother to

readers. Maya describes the moment when she and Bailey meet their mother and their astonishment because of her beauty:

> My mother's beauty literally assailed me. Her red lips (Momma said it was a sin to wear lipstick) split to show even white teeth and her fresh butter color looked see-through clean. Her smile widened her mouth beyond her cheeks beyond her ears and seemingly through the walls to the street outside. I was struck dumb. I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 59-60)

Vivian has total control of her fate as well as Momma Henderson. They are the personifications of power and strength. Both breake with the conventional role of women in the patriarchal society of being submissive to male figures and being economically and socially dependent on them. Instead, they are the matriarchs of the family who impose their rules upon others. In particular, there is one central characteristic that delineates both characters as diametrically opposed: while Momma's actions are guided by reason, Vivian's are by emotion. Vivian is a beautiful representative of her color who resembles the actresses her children see on the movies, her beauty signals both to her children and, consequently, to her readers that domestic affairs do not attract her. She is the opposite of Momma Henderson, who embodies the figure of the housewife who lives exclusively to raise her children, do the housework and work. Vivian is depicted as a flexible woman who does not succumb to a conventional life style of working during the day and taking care of her children at night. She joins fun and work. She is a bohemian.

Despite the fact of knowing her mother in St. Louis, her former hopes that a new reality would come with her uncles, aunts and grandparents are soon extinguished because she realizes this place is not going to be her home. ”St. Louis was a foreign country” (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 70).

Amazingly, one of the few times she truly believes she is at home is when Mr. Freeman, Vivian's live-in boyfriend holds her. Nonetheless, his gesture happens after he harasses her on one of the days she slept with her mother and him in bed. Her mother is not aware of his practices. Marguerite is still too immature to understand what he is doing to her. She explains:

> He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. But then he rolled me over, leaving me in a wet place and stood up. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 74)

Maya mentions two other times he sexually harasses her. Also, it should be emphasized the fact that this is one of the few times in the narrative in which a man seems to interfere in Maya's world. In fact, Marguerite's is surrounded by examples of matriarchs who are in control of their lives and the family's course. Mr. Freeman embodies in the narrative the figure of the male oppressor, the one who believes to have power enough to control others and to exert his authority in whatever ways it pleases him. However, unable to exert it on her girlfriend Vivian, before the evidence of her not spending the night at home, he unconsciously revenges raping Marguerite, her daughter at the age of eight.

Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon scene in the African-American reality in the beginning of the twentieth century. Consequently, it is not uncommon in African-American literature written by women either. That is one of their denouncement.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* for instance, the stepfather also rapes the main character Celie. Similarly to Mr. Freeman, he also revenges Celie's mother for her impossibility to satisfy him sexually.

> He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that burnt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and hit used to it. (WALKER, 1985: p.1-2)

However, it should be considered that few were the women capable of writing that as the result of a personal experience. Maya Angelou is one of those few.

Maya portraits Marguerite's naiveté when describing the rape because the girl is not mature enough to know what is going on. She describes the rape:

> His legs were squeezing my waist. "Pull down your drawers." I hesitated for two reasons: he was holding me too tight to move, and I was sure that any minute my mother or Bailey or the Green Hornet would burst in the door and save me.
> "We was just playing before. "He released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning the radio up loud, too loud, he said, "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey." I couldn't understand why he wanted to kill my brother. Neither of us had done anything to him. And then
> Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. (ANGELOU, 1993: p.78)

She becomes a child-woman after the rape. She does not seem to fit in neither world, what increases her displacement. Accusing herself of complicity and afraid of betraying her mother's trust, in court, frightened, Marguerite denies being harassed by him before being raped and since he is found dead after the trial, she believes it is all her fault. Traumatized, the child retreats into silence and a self-imposed exile. She stops talking and spends years in silence.

Sent back to Stamps as a reprimand for her behavior, she hardly speaks for more than four years. She lives in a private cage until she is released by Bertha Flowers, who becomes her tutor. This is turning point of her childhood: when her sense of self-worth grows. Mrs. Flowers breaks Marguerite's silence joining the world of literature to the world of Stamps. According to Maya, Mrs. Flowers "was one of the few gentlewomen [she] ha[s] ever known, and has remained throughout [her] life the measure of what a human being can be" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 93-94). From the very beginning, Mrs. Flowers appealed to her because she was like "women in English novels that walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance." Above all, "she made [her] proud of being a Negro, just by being herself" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 95). As it may be seen from that, she also contributes to the formation of Marguerite's subjectivity as a tutor.

Marguerite feels for the first time she is accepted as an individual when she meets Mrs. Flowers. "I was liked and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Anderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 101).

With Mrs. Flowers, Marguerite also learns the value of her community. Her tutor encourages her to listen carefully to the stories and folkways of country people saying, "in [their] homely sayings [is] couched the collective wisdom of generations" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 100).

Certainly, Marguerite manages to develop and achieve inner strength and dignity due to the kind of upbringing provided to her by Vivian, Momma and her observations of

her black community in Stamps. But mainly, she finds in literature the courage she needs to overcome the obstacles she faces.

> During [those] years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare (...) Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Buttler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Laurence Dunbar[1], Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois (…) But it was Shakespeare who said "when in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes". It was a state with which I found myself most familiar. (ANGELOU, 1993: p.13-14)

During her silent years, poetry was her most trusted childhood friend and enchanted by literature, she breaks her silence in order to speak those writer's beautiful words. Also, through literature, she begins to discover her black heritage.

The following episode foreshadows Maya's eventual inability to "accommodate", as people from Stamps would, and represents her growing acceptance of self-worth. For some time, she works in Mrs. Viola Cullinan's house and it does not last long because Mrs. Cullinan follows instinctively a long tradition in her wealthy family, as a descendant of slaveholders, assaulting her ego when calling her Mary rather than her real name on purpose. Showing the girl's invisibility in failing to call her by her real name, which is a symbol of identity and individuality, Mrs. Cullinan does not respect her. As a result, Maya rebels. She breaks the dish Mrs. Cullinan likes most. By doing this, the girl assumes rebellion as necessary for preserving her own individuality and affirming her self-worth.

In 1941, Maya and Bailey go to San Francisco to live with their mother. When Marguerite is fifteen, she spends a summer with her father who lives in a trailer in Los Angeles with his live-in girlfriend. The most significant event at this time is certainly her trip to Mexico with her father. Indeed, Maya, narrating her past experience, points out that this moment is essential to her process of growth. Marguerite goes to a small

Mexican town with her father where he gets completely drunk, leaving her with the responsibility of getting them back to Los Angeles in spite of the fact that she has never driven a car before. This is the first time Maya finds herself completely in control of her fate. She rescues her inebriate father and manages to drive the car. Such total control contrasts vividly with her earlier recognition in Stamps that she as a Negro had no control over her life. Here she is alone with that fate. And although the driving culminates in an accident, she succeeds for her determination and courage.

> As I twisted the steering wheel and forced the accelerator to the floor I was controlling Mexico, and might and aloneness and inexperienced youth and Bailey Johnson, Sr., and death and insecurity, and even gravity. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 238)

That adventure is succeeded by a month spent in a wrecked car lot. Unable to get along with her father and his girlfriend, she runs away and lives for a month in the slums in Los Angeles. She lives in a community of homeless, vagabond children. There, the self-sufficient non-judgmental group of youngsters impresses Marguerite, and she feels that her experience with them serves as lesson for her entire life. Besides, her independence grows with this episode because she proves to herself to be able to take care of her own far from her family. Maya recalls this moment in the passage below:

> After a month my thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself. The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of war frenzy, could initiate me into the brotherhood of man (…). The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 254)

Together these experiences provide her with knowledge, self-determination and confirmation of her self-worth. With the assumption of this affirmative knowledge and

power, Marguerite is ready to challenge the unwritten, restrictive social codes of San Francisco when she applies for her first job. It is the time of the World War II and women replace men in their jobs, when Marguerite announces to her mother her decision to work as a streetcar conductor and her mother answers that they do not accept colored people in the company. Her first reaction is of disappointment, but it soon grows into indignation and then to stubbornness as she says, supported by her strong-willed mother. Through persistence and stubbornness, she becomes the first black ticket-conductor on the San Francisco streetcars.

The last bar Marguerite breaks is that of sexuality. She feels insecure about her sexual identity. She is concerned with her body, which to her seems unfeminine and underdeveloped. The lack of femininity in her small-breasts and the heaviness of her voice become symptomatic of lesbian tendencies in her imagination. She fears to be physically abnormal, especially after being moved by her classmate's breasts. Then, in order to assure herself of her sexual identity, Angelou invites a male classmate to have sex with her, what results in pregnancy. In July 1945, about a month after her high school graduation, she gives birth to Guy Johnson.

At this point, one could say that Marguerite Johnson stops serving white masters, and she becomes mistress of herself. When she gives birth to her son, she also becomes aware of a revitalized sense of her own competence. She collaborates in the creation of a child whose presence reinforces something she has always unconsciously known: black is beautiful, and she is worthy of a dignified place in society. She becomes a self-empowered black woman triumphing over the obstacles imposed by the values of a post-colonial patriarchic society.

Motherhood may be seen in this work as the confirmation of Marguerite's consciousness of the value of her black heritage. Also, it represents a traditional cyclic movement in the narrative because Marguerite's role changes from that of a granddaughter, to daughter, to mother.

In each stage, it is clear that the "Mother figure" is responsible for instilling values, as that of self-worth, self-acceptance and determination. Womanhood is thus celebrated as motherhood creates alliances that bond women from all generations together, increasing their complicity.

In her article "Initiation and Self-discovery", critic Dolly A. McPherson comments that before the end of 1970, the year of *Caged Bird* publication, critics were heralding *Caged Bird* as marking the beginning of a new era in the consciousness of Black men and women and creating a distinctive place in Black autobiographical tradition. (In: BRAXTON, 1999: p. 22)

Indeed, what is visible in the end of her first autobiography is that Marguerite's struggle is for recognition and a place in society for her African-American subjectivity, what goes hand in hand with the beliefs of Black Consciousness in the United States.

In fact, Angelou's work influenced a series of African-American women writers in the 1970's. Nonetheless, it is also true what critic Opal Moore points out in her article "Learning to Live". She indicates *Caged Bird* as "the ninth most frequently challenged book in American schools" (In: BRAXTON, 1999: p.50). According to her, *Caged Bird* attracts criticism for its depiction of rape, its exploration of racism in America and telling the circumstances of Angelou's unwed teen pregnancy.

Despite this kind of criticism, it is important to emphasize that in the same way that literature was important to Marguerite's construction of subjectivity and quest for self-acceptance in her childhood and adolescence, young readers nowadays may also benefit from reading *Caged Bird*. The youth does not seem innocent of sex and murder these days due to their daily presence in the media, but lacks of concepts of self-empowerment, faith, struggle and intellectual inquiry, which are the pillars of Maya Angelou's work. If one cannot erase sex and murder from life, can it be erased from literature?

Concluding, it is relevant to say that Maya Angelou's inspiration in the works of African American writers, like in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy", to find the power to endure is renewed when we see a new generation being inspired by Maya Angelou as well. For instance, Alicia Keys, an African American singer, composed a very famous song entitled "Caged Bird", which was inspired in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Therefore, the legacy left by the first African-American autobiographers of denouncing injustices is continued through Angelou's works and it simultaneously meets Angelou's objective as a writer to transmit "vitality and power to endure" to other generations. Thus, it becomes visible that younger generations may only profit from having access to her work and its lessons on living, for the richness of their references to History, culture and equalitarian values.

CHAPTER IV

MOTHERHOOD IN HARRIET JACOBS'S AND MAYA ANGELOU'S NARRATIVES

> "She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy (...) She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations."(ANGELOU, 1993: p. 99-100)

Now it is time to put both our authors together in their recurrent themes or contrasting reflections. As Gates and McKay point out, "works of Literature created by African Americans often extend, or signify upon, other works in the black tradition, structurally and thematically" (GATES & MCKAY: 1997, p. xxxvi). Indeed, the concept of motherhood has been a recurrent theme in African American Literature in the three last centuries and this may be seen in the words of Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou. In their autobiographical works, respectively, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, their authors place their marginalized black female self in the center of their own experience and revisit their past memories. By doing so, they narrate stories that transcend their own and voice the double jeopardized black women whose testimonies were excluded from official History and suffocated by the literary canon for being both black and female.

Acknowledging motherhood as an intrinsic subject of the female universe, both writers do not leave it aside in their works. Since the existence of totally different cultural backgrounds can make communication difficult, especially in relationships between black and white women (hooks, 1997, p. 400), they use motherhood as a strategic theme so as to deconstruct the stereotypes of sensuality and immorality attributed to the black female body and establish bonds of true womanhood with the white female audience in the development of the narrative on the grounds of its major influence on the construction of the female self.

Although both stories have mainly the south of the USA as their settings, there is a chronological difference of nearly a hundred years between their publications. The first takes places in the nineteenth century, before the American Civil War, and the second, in the first half of the twentieth century. Certainly, those years of difference project their reflections on those works in terms of historical context and social behavior. Nonetheless, much may be seen in common, especially if we regard the role of women in society and their clear concern with registering the African American culture and tradition.

In both narratives, womanhood is celebrated through motherhood. The narratives unveil the influence of motherhood on the construction of the African American female subjectivity and introduce their narrators as muses/mothers of their people who narrate the richness of African American culture and values which were suffocated by the dominant voices in History and Literature. Both works aim to join forces with readers against the oppression lived by black women in their times.

In her slave narrative, Jacobs develops an approach to motherhood that works as a counterpoint to the female stereotyped sensuality found in their black bodies. Linda's mother-daughter relations in the narrative portrait her deep involvement with domestic life and discourse, and are strategically used to create empathy between the narrator and readers, persuading then the latter to become more receptive to her words and ideology. Her appeal to motherhood manages to prove that despite the differences in ethnicity and social class, individual principles like those of goodness and valuing family ties are present in all human beings and, more specifically, in women in spite of their color.

> (...) Jacobs confronts an American cultural setting that defined black femininity as everything white womanhood was not: publicly exposed, sexualized, unable or unwilling to create a domestic space of its own. (Gunning, 1996, p. 134)

Jacobs testifies and relates it clearly through Linda that the difference between whites and blacks is not that of superior and inferior beings, but that of people who are free to act according to their wills and those who are constrained to imprisonment in order to work for the economical and social well being of others.

Firstly, Jacobs works on deconstructing the stereotyped image of sensuality and promiscuity when Linda describes her life as a child with the constant support she receives from her family. Her representation of her grandmother's concern with virtue added to Linda' awareness of the adversities she has to face in order to stick to that shows readers the importance of family values on Jacob's life. In the passage below, she longs for not having anyone to confide in her master's sexual advances. It is possible to notice through the passage that a respectful atmosphere surrounds her upbringing while she is under her family's care. Also, there is the strong reference to motherhood and family ties being ruptured by Slavery.

> I longed for some one to confide in. I would have given the world to have laid my head on my grandmother's faithful bosom, and told her all my troubles. But Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as a grave. Then, although my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared her as well as loved her. I had been accustomed to look up to her with respect bordering upon awe. I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things, especially as I knew her to be very strict in such subjects. (JACOBS: 2001, p. 46)

Grounded on that, when Linda herself narrates Dr. Flint's advances, readers take position on the narrator's side due to the persuasion of her discourse that positions herself as a caged bird:

a peaceful, docile, fragile animal under the control of a white male figure. The metaphor of the caged bird contributes to the understanding that through her discourse she builds her image as a victim/prey, whose destiny is not under her own control, but under her owner's.

As Appiah and Gates emphasize, "[Jacobs] is the only African-American woman slave to leave a long and detailed record of her particular ways in which slavery affected women, from sexual abuse to constraints on motherhood"(2003: p.463). Jacobs exposes the sexual conduct of her time publicly, which is not common for the time, especially among works written by women for their obedience to the unwritten code of conduct established by life in community. However, her comments are wise strategically embedded within the discourse of domesticity based on Christian beliefs concerning the family as a sacred institution, what gives her reliability and molds her image as a respectable woman. Her testimony gives sensible arguments to her target readers – white Northern females – to fight for the same ideals she does:

> You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious, it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation. (JACOBS: 2001, p. 46)

Even her decision of having a white lover becomes justifiable within her discourse. Despite her attitude being morally questionable, Jacobs shows her effort in adhering as much as possible to the established female roles in white society. Then, she also shows the obstacles that impede her from doing it because of her social status. She confesses her desire to follow her mother's footsteps as a woman who does not violate her vows of chastity before marriage. But she indicates the difference between them: her

mother did not have a master. The white male figure did not represent a threat to her mother:

> Her master had died when she was a child; and she remained with her mistress till she married. She was never in the power of any master; and thus she escaped one class of the evils that generally fall upon slaves. (JACOBS: 2001, p. 67)

Linda takes a white lover in order to escape from Dr. Flint's pursuit as well as from being the mother of her "old tyrant's children". Nonetheless, she has to go against her own principles to do it. The construction of her discourse points to her decision as being the only possible one before her condition. Moreover, her critique of Slavery indicates that the culpability may be attributed to those who maintain the system and not to her since all she can do is try to live with dignity within her social limitations. In chapter ten, Linda explains her decision and tells her story with great pain and shame. The passage may be seen below:

> It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of slave confines all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible. (JACOBS, 1861: p.46)

She justifies her action using once more the notions of family principles so as to make her argument on why she took a white lover reasonable to her readers. More specifically, she mentions the fact of her lover being single. As far as she is concerned, her choice seems less sinful than to submit to a married master. At least, if the Christian

marriage vows are considered, within her conditions as a slave, her action does not seem to be so wrong according to her.

As it may be seen, on the one hand, before her children are born, motherhood is present in the narrative through her mother's and grandmother's guidance and influences on her subjectivity, leading her towards to right way – the one away from Dr. Flint's sexual advances. On the other hand, after her children are born, the narrative focuses on various situations in which Linda is forbidden her right of motherhood. Motherhood is what Linda struggles to have the right to exert. Also, being a mother empowers her to seek for liberty, not only for her, but mostly for her children. In slavery, she sees her children as products of a market being deprived from their right as human beings. However, she is aware that they are children who deserve as much as white ones to be raised in a home, under the protection and love of their own parents.

As a mother, Linda makes her children's freedom as well as her own the objective of her life so as to provide them better conditions of life than she has for herself. Her efforts to do that certainly have strong impact on those readers who have children or who are sensitive enough to think of the emotional consequences of the rupture of family ties between mother and children caused by slavery. Her approach contributes to make her points acceptable to her Northern female audience. As Yellin suggests:

> it is not surprising that Jacobs presents Linda Brent in terms of motherhood, the most valued 'feminine' role of the antebellum period, given the need to enlist white sympathy for a story which many might find outrageous. (In: Gunning, 1996: p.134)

Certainly, Linda's victimization creates an expectation on the part of the reader to change the course of the narrative and, following bell hooks' beliefs concerning sisterhood, this may be the basis of women's commitment for woman-bonding aiming to end racial and sexist oppression. Jacobs seems to put into practice what one century later hook's claims for. Both Jacobs and hook seem to believe that political solidarity may be found among women, for the benefit of all:

> Women do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shares, interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity. (hooks, 1997, p. 411)

An example of a scene that shows Linda's impossibility to perform her role as a mother and certainly has an impact on readers is when the physical distance from her children psychologically tortures Linda. On one episode, when she escapes, Mr. Flint puts her children in jail as a response to her action looking forward to her return. That's when Linda's aunt (Betty) visits them in jail and in spite of reporting that the children say they want to see their mother, she asks Linda not to be "chick'n hearted" and not to give in. In the passage below, Linda reflects on the importance of motherhood in one's life and, especially, on that of her children in her own, portraying her anguish for her impotence before her aunt's comment and the situation itself:

> She had gone through the world childless. She had never had little ones to clasp their arms round her neck; she had never seen their soft eyes looking

> into hers; no sweet little voices had called her mother; she had never pressed her own infants to her heart, with the feeling that even in fetters there was something to live for. How could she realize my feelings? (JACOBS, 2001, p. 86)

On another passage, still showing her impossibility of raising her children, Linda describes one of her days at the den at her grandmother's house. Her staying there is the only way she finds to be close to them – although they are unaware of her presence in the house – and, at the same time, away from Dr. Flint's persecution.

> The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; (…) Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. (JACOBS, 2001, p. 96)

The description of the place and her staying there softens reader's hearts as they become aware of what a mother is capable of going through for her children. The image projected on the reader's imagination resembles very much that of a woman who lies in a coffin buried alive, but still finds comfort in that situation for being near her children.

After seven years in that place, in a self-imposed prison, Linda finally manages to escape to New York, where she is eventually reunited with her children who are sent North. There she finds work and friends. Mrs. Bruce, her friend and employer buys her freedom although Jacobs shows to be against that act. She explains:

> The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like

> taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph. (JACOBS, 2001, p. 162)

Nonetheless, Mrs. Bruce does it is spite of Linda's principles in fear of seeing her and her children under slavery again. In fact, the solidarity of this woman towards Linda could be read as the message the narrative leaves: women should struggle together for their objectives respecting individuals equally in their differences. Mrs. Bruce embodies the expected behavior readers should have when going against slavery and fighting for moral values.

As Linda states, because her situation does not allow her to hope for a marriage up and out of her social class, her story does not end with the common marriage found in novels. Instead, in her case it ends with redemption that equals literal freedom. "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. My children and I are now free" (JACOBS, 1861: p.164).

Still, the last memory of the narrative is that of her grandmother reinforcing the representation of the importance of the mother figure in one's life, and the influence women have on future generations.

In fact, besides contributing to the achievement of a white traditional symbol of respectability, Jacobs's presentation of the black woman as mother builds a platform from which she can claim social justice although the text's political aims are kept disguised in the frame of a domestic novel, including the issues of sexual exploitation and miscegenation.

Taking advantage of the established bonds with readers, Jacobs also conveys her abolitionist ideology by pointing out the greatness and nobility of her people's souls

when compared to those of slaveholders. By doing do, Jacobs shows she is proud of her origins. She exalts her people's goodness, subverting the notions of superiority generally employed to the figure of the white man - the colonizer - for their knowledge and nobility. With her Christian discourse, she proves her superiority and nobility of soul by not wishing anything bad to her malefactor.

> With all my detestation of Dr. Flint, I could hardly wish him a worse punishment, either in this world or that which is to come, than to suffer what I suffered in one single summer. Yet the laws allowed him to be out in free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up here, as the only means of avoiding the cruelties the law allowed him to inflict upon me. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 101)

Linda states clear that all she wants is freedom not only to herself and her children, but also to those under slavery. Jacobs employs the image of the "outraged mother", as Linda takes for herself the responsibility of defending women who suffer what she experienced in slavery:

> O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me! Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 28)

Actually, her sense of social responsibility as a spokesperson of slaves seems to grow in the text according to its development because she describes what men have to go through besides denouncing the acts committed against women regarding motherhood and sexual violence as a means of individual/social domination.

> There are some [men] who strive to protect wives and daughters from the insults of their master; but those who have such sentiments have had advantages above the general mass of slaves. They have been partially civilized and Christianized by favorable circumstances. Some are bold enough to *utter* such sentiments to their masters. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 39)

As it may be seen, the domestic sphere leads the narrative to discuss wider issues of society. Reading Jacobs's slave-narrative is like looking through the lens of a microscope because the narrator enhances readers' view of society scrutinizing the power relations at her time, unveiling what lies underneath the manipulated History written by the dominant culture.

Indeed, once more ahead of her time, Jacobs foresees and raises the issue of identity hybridism so much present in the postcolonial identity and so much studied until nowadays. In her case, she encompasses and validates through Linda both the African and the American culture. Linda questions:

> And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves? (JACOBS, 2001: p. 40)

As it was mentioned, such theme is broadly studied nowadays, in the postmodern era, especially under cultural studies for the consequences of post colonialism on individuals. Homi Bhabha defends this process of "becoming" in which "the margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite history." (BHABHA, 1995: p.4)

Actually, this is what Jacobs does in the nineteenth century. She rewrites history. Also, Jacobs's narrator works as a translator of the experiences lived in Slavery to her

readers. In fact, she uses her testimony to transmit her people's nobility of values and true Christian beliefs when portraying them. In the following passage, Jacobs emphasizes their capacity to forgive even those who look down on them:

> Truly, the colored race is the most cheerful and forgiving people on the face of the earth. That their masters sleep in safety is owing to their superabundance of heart; and yet they look upon their sufferings with less pity than they would bestow on those of a horse or a dog. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 78)

Similarly, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou approaches motherhood in order to arouse sympathy on her readers, although this time the subjects are not targeted exclusively to the white female Northern one.

Even though her first autobiography was written after nearly a hundred years after *Incidents*, as it was mentioned, Angelou herself acknowledged on an interview to Michael J Bandler that the African American contemporary literary production is still exploring the different aspects of slave and post-slavery narratives, such as "what is to be black, what hurts, what helps, what makes [them] laugh". Therefore, much may be seen in common in those works in spite of their chronological difference.

In her book of essays *Even Stars Look Lonesome*, Angelou exalts the black female figure. She narrates the burdens they went through and their search for safety and sanctity inside themselves in order to be able to tolerate the torture of oppression. She also comments on their necessity to be self-forgiving, for often their exterior actions were not in harmony with their interior beliefs.

Unconsciously, describing the story of her ancestors – including Jacobs's – she describes her own when referring to her search for sanctity inside herself so as to bear

the psychological consequences of sexual violence. In both autobiographies, psychological and physical sexual violence are present and they surprisingly mark their turning points. In spite of being negative experiences in women's life, Jacobs and Angelou manage to extract positive lessons on self-worth and strength to overcome different types of oppression in life.

Psychological sexual violence influences Linda's decision to silently rebel against Dr. Flint and let herself be seduced by Mr. Sands. Therefore, by deciding to take a white lover and getting pregnant, she provokes a series of events that culminate in her freedom as well as her children's.

In contrast, in *Caged Bird*, it is after Marguerite's rape, during her silent years, that she devotes herself completely to literature. Then, the healing power of literature added to the lessons of life from Bertha Flowers develop Marguerite's inner strength and social self-acceptance.

In the article "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in *Incidents in the Life of a Young Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*", Mary Vermillion, traces a parallel between the Shakespeare's poem "The Rape of Lucrece" and the works of these two African-American women who have suffered rape or its threat. She states that Shakespeare describes the raped Lucrece privileging her innocent mind over her violated body :

> Though my gross blood be stain'd with this abuse,
> Immaculate and spotless is my mind;
> That was not forced; that never was inclined
> To accessary yieldings, but still pure
> Doth in her poison'd closet yet endure. (In: http://www.knowledgerush.com/paginated_txt/3ws0810/3ws0810_s1_p50_pages.html)

Indeed, with this separation, the woman whose body is violated tends to fear or disdain her own body according to Vermillion, what is called “somatophobia” (In: BRAXTON, Joanne M. 1999: p.59). Thus, she quotes “The Rape of Lucrece”, in which Lucrece puts an end to her suffering with death in order to reclaim her honor.

Different from Lucrece’s tragic end, when a woman records her own rape, she closes the distance between her body and whatever her society posits as a woman’s integral self as Vermillion affirms (In: BRAXTON, Joanne M. 1999: p.59). Therefore, through self-affirmation opposing the hegemonic white patriarchal society, Jacobs and Angelou indirectly critique somatophobia and this is what ends up reducing their suffering and displacement. Despite the difficulty for any woman to write about this painful experience, for black women it can be harder due to the stereotypes constructed by the institutions of slavery of the Black woman as the breeder, wet nurse, field laborer and sexually exploited victim.

Thus, when a Black woman records her own rape, she must construct a new image of her social power and “reaffirm her sexual autonomy without perpetuating the racist myths that associate her with illicit sexuality” (Vermillion. In: BRAXTON, Joanne M. 1999: p.153). The transformation in Jacob’s and Angelou’s text is of their body from a source of oppression to a source of freedom.

Besides, it is also interesting to analyze how Jacobs and Angelou obscure their own suffering in their texts by transforming the suffering connected with rape into a metaphor for the suffering of the race.

In Jacobs’s text, rape is a metaphor for the severed body and will of the slave. It is when she is desperate, after Dr. Flint’s sexual advances that she surrenders to Mr. Sand in order to have control at least over her own body. She appeals to white female readers by contrasting their realities in order to justify her conduct. She is aware that her behavior does not seem to be coherent to that of a virtuous woman, but by exposing her condition, she expects not to be judged by the same standards a white free woman would be:

> But, O, ye, happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married a man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spares the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery, I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated, and I become reckless in my despair. (JACOBS, 2001: p. 48)

Angelou connects rape with the suffering of the poor. She links her rapist with the wealthy man whom Jesus warned would have difficulty getting into heaven. The image of the camel and the needle makes Marguerite's rape a symbol of the oppression that afflicts the race in *Caged Bird*:

> The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 78)

The denouncement of sexual violence against African-American women cannot be excluded from the analysis of motherhood due to the emotional ties, memories and social image of mother being exactly what brings to readers the awareness of the integrity of these individuals, and consequently, the seriousness of such crime. The notions of motherhood so much explored in both autobiographies and the values attributed to motherhood prove the stereotypical objectification of African American women as breeders, wet nurses, field laborers and sexual objects to be wrong.

Still on the question of motherhood in *Caged Bird, i*n the same way that Linda's mother and grandmother's roles are those of instillers of values, Marguerite conveys the idea that her mother and grandmother – Vivian Baxter and Mrs. Henderson – are the ones who give her the guidance she needs to construct her subjectivity. Actually, what may be noticed from *Caged Bird* is that Marguerite's struggle is not for literal freedom as for Jacobs, but for her own empowerment and subjectivity before the oppressive situations she is exposed to. The literal enslavement lived by Jacobs is replaced by more subtle forms of imprisonment from which the black self seeks to escape.

Angelou's autobiography could be divided into two moments of learning: one which is passive – when she learns the lessons from her nurturing figures played by her mother and grandmother through observations – and another one which is active, when she externalizes the lessons absorbed.

On this passive, or better saying, receptive phase because she receives all that information, Marguerite learns what her color and gender mean in her society by observing the world and the reaction of Momma Henderson and Vivian to it. The way Marguerite presents her mother and grandmother to readers is relevant because they reflect how she reads them. Concerning Momma, Marguerite describes her:

> People spoke of Momma as a good-looking woman and some, who remembered her youth, said she used to be right pretty. I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any person in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could spam my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 46)

As it can be seen, Angelou discards the importance of her grandmother's beauty, which is a feature generally valued in isolation in women in the patriarchal world.

Instead, she values power and strength. Marguerite could well have had an approach of victimizing her grandmother for all she has been through, but she does not contribute to this stereotype, she builds through the figure of her grandmother the image of black women being powerful and strong in society even though their marginalization. Also, Marguerite shows she is proud of being this woman's granddaughter:

> I was so proud of being her granddaughter and sure that some of her magic must have come down to me. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 191)

These comments, among others, show how Marguerite is influenced by the figure of Momma when constructing her subjectivity, besides indicating on another level of the reading that she is proud of her heritage since Momma transmits it to her, through her "magic".

The representations of Momma and tradition are mixed sometimes. The fusion of Momma's representation and tradition may be seen on the passage below, for instance, when Momma's image is constructed as that of the representative of African Americans "secretiveness and suspiciousness":

> Knowing Momma, I knew I never knew Momma. Her African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness had been compounded by slavery and confirmed by centuries of promises made and promises broken. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 191)

Momma's attachment to tradition may be contrasted with Vivian's indifference to it. Vivian Baxter is described as a flexible woman, who belongs to a different generation from that of Momma Henderson. While Momma's concern is described as exclusively with the family, Vivian seems to divide it with entertainment and leisure. Also, while Mrs. Henderson base her decisions on rationality, Vivian bases them on emotion. She is a

beautiful representative of her color and sex, who resembles the actress her children see on the movies. And although her children admire her beauty, they well know neither the common responsibilities of motherhood nor affairs of domestic life attract her. Instead, she is a bohemian. Marguerite seems to learn self-worth and self-assurance from her:

> While we sat on the stiff wooden booths, Mother would dance alone in front of us to music from the Seeburg. I loved her most at those times. She was like a pretty kite that floated just above my head. (…) The Syrian brothers vied for her attention as she sang the heavy blues that Bailey and I almost understood. They watched her, even when directing her conversation to other customers, and I knew they too were hypnotized by this beautiful lady who talked with her whole body and snapped her fingers louder than anyone in the whole world. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 65)

Marguerite's attitudes mixture those of her grandmother and mother, together with that of Mrs. Flowers, the girl's mentor, whose importance should not be underestimated for her role as an example for Marguerite to follow. Marguerite describes her:

> She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 93-4)

Mrs. Flowers encourages Marguerite to explore her black heritage besides reading. Her "lessons on living" show Marguerite that "some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 99). She encouraged Marguerite to listen carefully to "**mother wit**", which was the "collective wisdom of generations" (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 99).

Angelou works mainly with young Marguerite's process of maturation. If in *Incidents*, readers are moved by Linda's quest for a home, which encompasses from her

orphanhood to her struggle to exert her right of maternity, in *Caged Bird*, they are moved by Marguerite's quest for a home, a semi orphan three year old girl trying to find acceptance and understand the world around her.

Angelou's narrator's discourse resembles that of a young naive girl. Also, It may be said to remind that of Jacobs's for both inspire the reader's urge for protection. Marguerite deals with complex issues in a plain mode. She narrates the story in an almost didactical way, just like a child's mental process seems to develop. However, Angelou also embeds political discourse in the narrative. She does it disguising it in the narrative within lyrical elements including images, sounds, smells and other sensorial details.

Another element that contributes to the similarity in the voices of both works is Marguerite's surroundings in childhood. As an inhabitant of a small rural segregated community in the South of the US, her life in the community portrays the African American traditions inherited by her ancestors as well the social constraints they have to overcome.

As it can be observed, like Jacobs's, Angelou makes use of domestic discourse to sympathize the reader with values instilled in her community life as well as her individual ideology indicated by her first person naive narrator.

Marguerite also builds the platform from which Maya, the adult narrator, claims social equality. Although this text's political aims are kept disguised in the frame of a domestic novel too, the issues of sexual exploitation and racial prejudice alert the reader against the injustice suffered by African Americans in a less victimized way.

> Let the white folks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books and mostly – mostly – let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell. (ANGELOU, 1993: p.131)

Like Jacobs, Angelou also exalts her people and comments on the nobility of her their souls. By describing the working day of some members of her community, Marguerite praises their tirelessly effort to live "happily" in face of the poor conditions.

> [Cotton-pickers] would face another day of trying to earn enough for the whole year with the heavy knowledge that they were going to end the season as they started it. Without the money or credit necessary to sustain a family for three months. In cotton-picking time the late afternoons revealed the harshness of Black Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by nature's blessing of grogginess, forgetfulness and the soft lamplight. (ANGELOU, 1993:p. 9)

The lessons Marguerite learns from Momma Henderson's South are harsh, but when including Momma's faith, the courage of her ancestors and the knowledge of Mrs. Flowers, they construct a legacy for her.

Eventually, her persona as an adult achieves her full self-acceptance in relation to her social life, sexual orientation and ethnicity after her child's birth, when she becomes a mother herself. Marguerite's story could not end differently, but in motherhood.

> And after a short labor, and without too much pain (I decided that the pain of delivery was overrated), my son was born. Just as gratefulness was confused in my mind with love, so possession became mixed up with motherhood. I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. (ANGELOU, 1993: p. 288)

In his article “Motherhood Beyond the Gate”, critic John Ernest suggests that motherhood is the essential condition of what he calls “reified womanhood”, by which he means the “culturally determined attributes by which women could know themselves as Woman” (ERNEST, 1996: p. 182). According to him, these attributes are the “four cardinal virtues of “True Womanhood”: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity”. Thus, employing those virtues in the content of *Incidents and Caged Bird* through the domestic discourse of a mother embedded in claims for social justice, Jacobs and Angelou appropriate the ideological concepts of motherhood in the prevailing social order and national identity in the nineteenth century and twentieth century to subvert the order. They construct bonds with the female readers, teaching them to unveil the subject of racism and instructing them how prevent it.

In conclusion, although Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou belong to different centuries and, consequently, historical and social contexts, they use similar strategies in the act of weaving their narratives both in their content and form. Motherhood, a resonant theme in African American literature, is analyzed in its diversity of relations and used as a persuasive emotional strategy to arouse sympathy and bonds with the audience, which is mostly composed by women. The effect of this bond is a rising celebration of womanhood that aims the alliance to fight for common ideals.

While in the slave narrative the black slave narrator is denied her rights of motherhood and her journey has the objective of creating a home for her own and her children; in the “still” post-slavery narrative of the twentieth century, as Maya Angelou calls it, the black woman’s quest is for more than a concrete home, but for (self-)worth, (self-)assurance and (self-)acceptance. In both autobiographies, narrators personify the

extreme form of maternity that is of being mothers of their own people as spokespeople of their oppression. Thus, the celebration of womanhood is found when Linda and Marguerite persuade their female audience to share their experiences concerning motherhood in its diversity of relations so as to join forces to claim for the recognition and acceptance of negritude and its beauty in both works. The celebration of womanhood through motherhood is one of the elements that make *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* literary masterpieces.

FINAL WORDS

Maybe one of the most important lessons I have learned from the Masters Course was to appreciate that the beauty of literature is its variety of literary genres and styles. The more I read works written by authors that are not considered to be part of mainstream literature, the more I asked myself how could that exclusion be allowed to happen and understood the relations of power involved in such a point. Works like those of Phillis Wheatley and Zora Neale Hurston deserved to be among the ones that represent American Literature, not only for their quality in style and aesthetic effects, but for their true portrait of the American society. But, as we know, this may hurt the powerful…

Consequently, as I discovered that literary archeology and research on those writings have been done since the 1970's in the United States, I felt I would like to be part of a movement that aims, among other points, at giving visibility to those literary treasures and giving more people the chance to learn from them. However, I could not avoid comparing American and Brazilian Literature sceneries.

While reading, rereading, doing research and writing this dissertation an inner voice kept asking me about the works written by Black Brazilian women. Where are they? Were there testimonies left too? I did not intend to answer this question in this dissertation, of course, but this is certainly going to nurture my future studies. Anyway, if there are any previous and literary relevant Black Brazilian women writers (and for all I have already read, I know there are), it is high time to let them be heard.

By now, it is time to conclude the present dissertation and have this cycle concluded. And, I think the present research presented enough insight for a near

Doctorate course in Compared Literature. Literary archeology and research on the African Brazilian culture and artistic expressions should be encouraged and stimulated. It is, I repeat, high time to unveil our literary past left by African-Brazilian representatives of national culture, and check possible parallels and differences with the African Americans, for instance. In a country where slavery lasted longer than in any other country in the New World and whose population includes the second largest number of people of African descent in the Western Hemisphere (APPIAH & GATES, 2003: p.93), this should be immediately encouraged. And, to sum up, I feel very gratified at the conclusion of the present dissertation, for all I learnt and for all it opened my eyes towards so much that may be studied in future works.

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http://www.hsu.edu/content.aspx?id=2368

Maya Angelou's picture

http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/blackhis/angel.htm

an interview with Maya Angelou

http://www.swisseduc.ch/english/maps/usa/arkansas.html

THE MAP OF STAMPS

This map has information about Angelou, Maya: Stamps, where Maya Angelou grew up and where most of the action in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* takes place.

http://teachers.ithsnyc.org/swu/keys.html

Site where the lyrics of *Caged Bird* can be found

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1541.html

Harriet Jacobs' runaway notice

http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JACOBS/hj-flint.htm

Dr. Norcom's picture

http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JACOBS/images/jacobs.jpg

Harriet Jacobs' picture

http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAslavery.htm

Information on Slavery in the USA

http://www.bartleby.com/29/2.html

The Voyage of the Beagle – Chapter 2.

http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DouNarr.html
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave
Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library

http://www.mayaangelou.com/
Her official website, containing biography and bibliography information.

http://www.historicstagvillefoundation.org/Harriet_Jacobs.jpg
Cover of Incidents

http://images-eu.amazon.com/images/P/0553279378.03.LZZZZZZZ.jpg
Cover of Caged Bird

http://www.drizzle.com/~tmercer/Child/index.html
Lydia Maria Child's picture

http://webpage.pace.edu/kculkin/files/amypost.jpg
Amy Post's picture

http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/
Jean Yellin's book on Harriet Jacobs

http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/01.htm
Joshua Coffin to Lydia Maria Child. June 25, 1842
Coffin, a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, writes to author and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child about Harriet Jacobs. "I hope you will call & see, if she is now in the city, one of the most interesting cases of escape from slavery that you have ever seen

http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Aristotle/Poetics.html

Poetics by Aristotle

http://www.web-books.com/Classics/Poetry/Anthology/Dunbar_PL/Sympathy.htm
Dunbar's poem Symphathy

http://www.lyrics007.com/Alicia%20Keys%20Lyrics/Caged%20Bird%20Lyrics.html
Lyrics of Caged Bird by Alicia Keys

http://www.knowledgerush.com/paginated_txt/3ws0810/3ws0810_s1_p50_pages.html
Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece

Appendice 1. Harriet Jacobs’s picture

Appendice 2. Maya Angelou’s picture

Appendice 3. Cover of *Incidents*

Appendice 4. Cover of *Caged Bird*

Appendice 5. Dr. Norcom’s picture

Appendice 6. Harriet Jacobs's runaway notice

$100 REWARD

WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl HARRIET. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

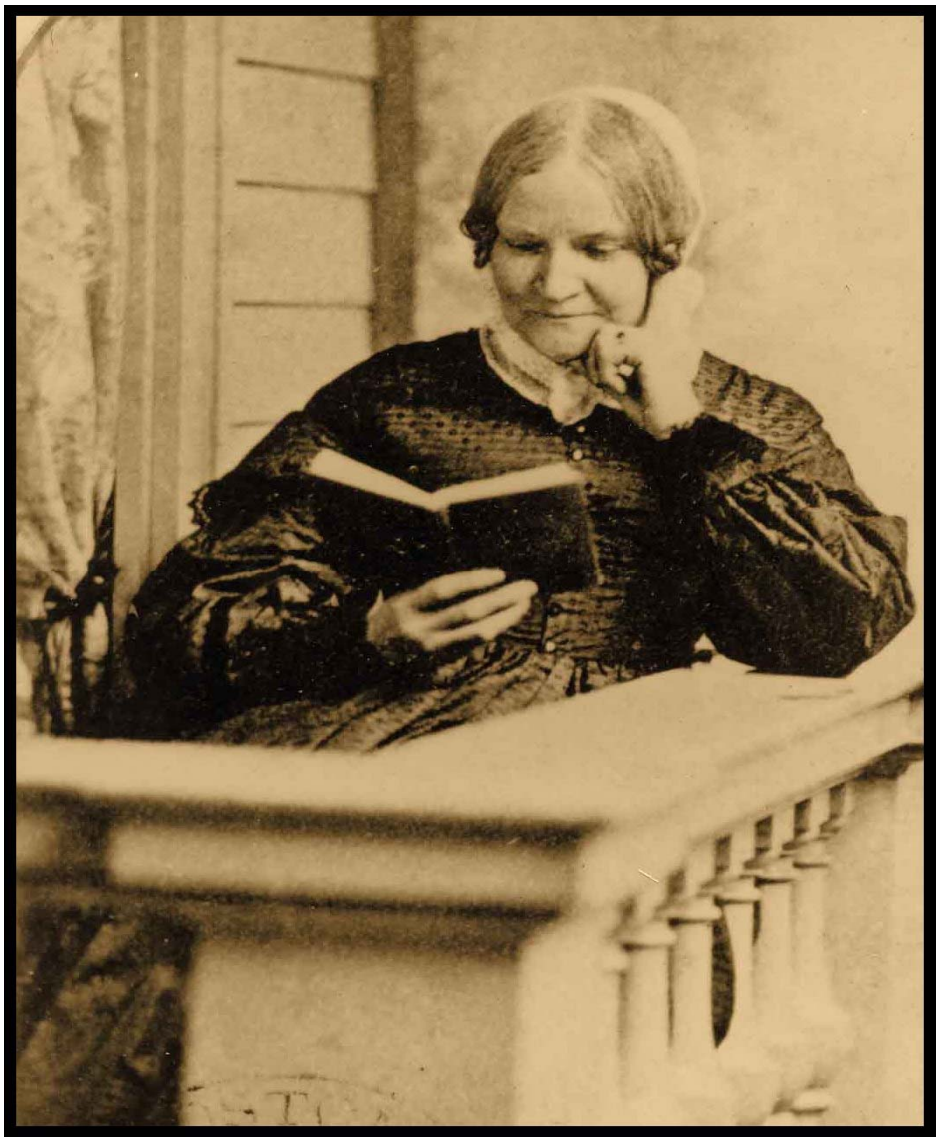
The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

JAMES NORCOM.

Edenton, N. C. June 30 3TS2w

Appendice 7. Lydia Child’s picture



Appendice 8. Amy Post’s picture

Appendice 9. A letter from Joshua Coffin to Lydia Maria Child. June 25, 1842

Coffin, a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, writes to author and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child about Harriet Jacobs.

Phila. 25 June 1842

Esteemed Friend,

... I hope you will call & see, if she is now in the city, one of the most interesting cases of escape from slavery that you have ever seen. She was sent from this city yesterday morning & consigned to Mr. Johnston. She is from N.C. was brought away by a sea captain. She was sold by her master to the speculators & to avoid being sent away she was hidden for 7 years! in a small upper room of a house occupied by colored people & within a hundred yards of her master's house, who did not know she was there. She had not seen her boy, for 7 years till within 3 days of her coming away. She has been shut up so long that she can hardly walk. Another woman was brought away from Delaware, who was found tied to a tree. If Mr. Johnston was the man he ought to be, he would invite you occasionally to see some of these remarkable cases, which are continually passing from Phil. to N.Y. ~~The Vagrant~~ what a queer mistake. The Vigilance Committee of this city are doing a fine business in weakening & delapidating the edifice of slavery. Success to them...

Joshua Coffin

Appendice 10. A picture of Harriet Jacobs's School and students

This picture is also the cover of Jean Yellin's book on Harriet Jacobs

Appendice 11. Map of Stamps

This map has information about Angelou, Maya: Stamps, where Maya Angelou grew up and where most of the action in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" takes place.

Appendice 12. Lyrics of Caged Bird, by Alicia Keys

Caged Bird

Caged Bird
Right now I feel like a bird
Caged without a key
Everyone comes to stare at me
So much joy and revelry
They don’t know how I feel inside
Through my smile I cry
They don't know what they're doing to me
Keeping me from flying
That’s why I say that I know why the caged bird sings
Only joy comes from song
She’s so rare and beautiful to others
But I just set her free so she can fly, fly, fly
Spreading her wings and her song
Let her fly, fly, fly, the whole world to see
Hmmm hey ooh she’s like a caged bird
Fly, fly, ooh, just let her fly, just let her fly, just let her fly
Spread wings
Spread beauty

[i] The sites were visited between September/2004 and February/2006.