CHAPTER II

RACIAL VOICES

We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonder, beautiful Negro race

Maya Angelou

Racism took privilege over sexual alliance in both the white world’s interaction with Native Americans and African Americans, just as racism overshadowed any bonding between black women and white women on the basis of sex. Albert Memmi emphasizes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* the impact of racism as a tool of imperialism:

Racism appears… not as an incidental detail, but as a con-substantial part of colonialism. It is the highest expression of the colonial system and one of the most significant features of the colonist. Not only does it establish a fundamental discrimination between colonizer and colonized, a sine qua non of colonial life, but it also says the foundation of the immutability of this life. (qtd in Hooks, *Woman* 122)

American society is one in which racial imperialism supersedes sexual imperialism. In America, the social status of black and white women has never been the same. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century America, few if any similarities could be found between the life experiences of the two
female groups. Although they were both subject to sexist victimization, as victims of racism black women were subjected to oppressions. In fact white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor – in relationship to black women and black men. From the onset of the contemporary move toward feminist revolution, white female organizers attempted to minimize their position in the racial caste hierarchy of American society. In their efforts to disassociate themselves from white men, white women involved in the move toward feminism have charged that racism is endemic to white male patriarchy and have argued that they cannot be held responsible for racist oppression.

Racism teaches an inflated sense of importance and value, especially when coupled with class privilege. Most poor working class women or even individual, bourgeois, non-white women, would not have assumed that they could launch a feminist movement without first having the support and participation of diverse groups of women. Elizabeth Spelman stresses this impact of racism in her essay “Theories of Race and Gender: Erasure of Black Women”: She observes,

This is the racist society, and part of what this mean is that, generally the self-esteem of white people is deeply influenced by their differences from and supposed superiority to black people. White people may not think of themselves as racists, because they
do not own slaves or hate blacks, but that does not mean much of what props up white people’s sense of self-esteem is not based on the racism which unfairly distributes benefits and burdens to whites and blacks. (qtd in Hooks, *Feminist Theory* 54)

The national images of white women, though sexist in nature, place an impenetrable barrier between them and their so called sisters in oppression. White women are fragrant, dainty, and feminine ladies whom white America has placed on a pedestal. In the media, their hair moves like softly blown silk, accentuating blue eyes and aquiline features. Even when they are pictured at work, they are immaculate in ruffled aprons and manicured nails. Black women, in contrast, are obese bandannaed women who are neither dainty nor feminine and certainly not pretty. White women are considered as valued sex objects and the driving force behind every man. Black women are devalued sex objects and, as sapphires and caledonias, castrating women who exacerbate the powerlessness of black men. It is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of their own oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures. One of the characters in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*, expressed this belief in the special vision of those who have experienced oppression:

Miss Le roy, out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers.

Authors belonging to the white race have written good books, for
which I am deeply grateful, but it seems to be almost impossible for
a white man to put himself completely in our place. No man can feel
the iron which enters another man’s soul. (qtd in Collins 33).

Since the history, present reality, and national images of black women
and white women diverge radically along racial and class lines, it is sometimes
necessary to speak of them as only stepsisters in one oppression and
antagonists in another. Indeed, claiming racism in a world of opportunity
makes the autobiographer suspect. Hooks, makes this point in “Representing
Whiteness in the Black Imagination”: She observes,

In the contemporary society, white and Black people alike believe
that racism no longer exists. This erasure, however mythic, diffuses
the representation of whiteness as terror in the Black imagination. It
allows for assimilation and forgetfulness. The eagerness with which
contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this
recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further
mask reality, is a response to the terror, but it has also become a way
to perpetuate the terror by providing a cover, a hiding place. Black
people still feel the terror, still associate it with whiteness, but are
rarely able to articulate the varied ways we are terrorized because it
is easy to silence by accusations of reverse racism or by suggesting
that Black folks who talk about the ways we are terrorized by whites
are merely evoking victimization to demand special treatment. (qtd in *Displacing* 176)

The tradition of African-American autobiography began as William L. Andrews’s says, the determination to tell a free story. The obsession with freedom betokened the indissoluble, if submerged, obsession with slavery. Race grounded the association, in a country in which only black people were enslaved, blackness and freedom merged in a shadowy negation of the virtues of freedom. Slavery grounded and guaranteed racism. Slavery confirmed the association between freedom and virtue, between freedom and whiteness and virtue. Slavery negated individualism of blacks as a community. And these very negations ineluctably of the bound free blacks to the history of their enslaved brothers and sisters. In disassociating themselves from the condition of their enslaved people, they risked disassociating themselves from their race.

In the records of human history, it is the African-American who suffered from a socio-economic, physical, cultural and sexual torment and agonies, with the exception of the sufferings of the ex-untouchables of India. Being black these women suffered from racism; being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks; and being former slaves the white establishments forced them to live on meagre resources and were to compelled to remain poor. In short, the black women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy: racism, sexism and classicism.
Back women are twice burdened in White America because they are black, they are denied the pedestals and petticoated privileges that racist and sexist society assumes to be appropriate gifts for women. Because they are women they are denied the power and influence men enjoy as the natural heads of families and leaders of nation. As Gloria Wade- Gayles says in No Crystal Stairs:

Black women are thus confined to both narrow space of race and dark enclosure of sex. This “double jeopardy” has created a complex, painful and dehumanizing reality in which they have struggled for both freedom and selfhood. (4)

The problem of understanding the anomalous position of black women in America is further complicated by the tendency to interpret their reality exclusively in racial terms. Images that are unmistakable sexual caricatures that clearly relate to the sexual roles of wife and mother are often presented as interpretations of blackness, not womanhood. The suggestion is a gross misinterpretation of American history and culture, for race and sex are the main axes on which power and responsibility have always turned in this country.

Angela Davies writes in Women, Race and Class from the very beginning the reality of black women in this country was shaped by the synergistic relationship of race, sex and class. During slavery, they were workers first, women second and always black, and the three identities locked them into positions of vulnerability. After the abolition of slavery they are
continued to be exploited as blacks and as women in the labor market and in home. Women and blacks have shared a collective experience of being assigned a set of attributes and responsibilities on the basis of physical characteristic and, as result, each has been denied fundamental rights of citizenship, including access to political, economic, and educational opportunity.

White women have never experienced the barbarity of slavery about cruelty of racism. As white women, they have identified with the master and the majority race holds power. As women, they have vicariously experienced power and influence through their husbands and fathers. Black women, on the other hand, have been imprisoned because they were female and black. White women have participated actively and without coercion, in the oppression of black men and women. They have been “ladies” who lived in leisure because black women have been “mammies”. They have been protected and pampered, while black women have been dehumanized, brutalized, and devalued as blacks and as females. Calvin Herton writes:

When any group of women has to submit to... atrocities, when they are denied the smallest privacy of body, when they have to stand in public before men and women naked on an auction block and fingered in the most intimate places, it is abused to ask them to esteem themselves ... The fiber of the human personality is not that
independent of the milieu in which it has to struggle for sanity. [qtd in Gayles 9]

It was in this way then that the Negro woman during slavery began to develop a depreciatory concept of herself not only as a female but as a human being as well. She did not have much of an alternative. Bell Hooks writes in her essay “Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability” edited in *Ain’t I A Woman?*

American women of all races are socialized to think of racism solely in the context of race hatred. Specifically in the case of black and white people the term racism is usually seen as synonymous with discrimination or prejudice against black people by white people. No history books used in public schools informed us about racial imperialism. Instead they were given romantic notions of the “new world”, the “American dream”, America has the great melting pot where all races came together as one. (119)

The majority of them understood racism as a social evil perpetuated by prejudiced white people that could be overcome through bonding between blacks and liberal whites through militant protest, changing of laws or racial integration. Higher educational did nothing to increase their limited understanding of racism and political ideology. Instead professors systematically denied them truth, teaching them to accept racial polarity in the
form of male dominance. As Gloria Wade-Gayles says about the oppressive system. She observes:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America. (5)

Within a given situation, identity is a product of a person's interpretations and reconstructions of her own history. The discourses available for understanding and interpreting experience, discourses that change with differing historical conditions, mediate identity. Teresa de Lauretis argues this position in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*:

Consciousness of self, like class consciousness or race consciousness (e.g., my consciousness of being white), is a particular configuration of subjectivity, or subjective limits, produced at the intersection of meaning with experience.... In other words, these different forms of consciousness are grounded, to be sure, in one's personal history; but that history- one's identity- is
interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle. Self and identity, in other words, are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations. Consciousness, therefore, is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions. (8)

By treating identity as an emergent property of a historicized experience de Lauretis can construe race consciousness, like gender consciousness, without essentialist assumptions about race. The identity of black women as “women” is less important than their identity as “blacks”, in contemporary feminists scholarship, for white feminists often compare their own oppression to that of “the negro”. The truth of Gerda Lerner’s statement is therefore undeniable:

belonging as they do to two groups which have been traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society –Blacks and women-[Black women] have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted. (qtd in Gayles 5)

As Jean Fagin Yellin demonstrates in relation to Harriet Jacobs, instead of the story of the lone male achieving literacy, freedom and manhood,
women’s slave narratives are about sexual abuse, motherhood, the search for freedom for children and supportive family especially female networks. Hardest of all to deal with was her sexual history; her history of the raced female discourses of conventional white images of femininity; they eschew victimhood. Post-slavery black women’s autobiographies have continued these complex negotiations in relation to lives that were different from black men’s not only in the home and black community but crucially at work and in the white public space. The autobiography is of course, by its very nature an unfinished story, but slave narratives are particularly painful in their lack of conclusion. The legal freedom from chattel slavery that the narratives ultimately record is hollowed out by the endemic racism that has come to live within. Their journey continues for Maya Angelou, this becomes a literal traveling crisscrossing the USA, touring in Europe and living in Africa yet aware that a white psychiatrist could never understood the American South.

In her sequence of the five autobiographical volumes written between 1970 and 1986 Angelou continues, adapts and possibly alters the narrative begun by fugitive slaves, and with this changes both how the past is memorialised, and herself as a subject-in-time. All the five volumes of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Singin’, Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas, Gather Together in My Name, Heart of the Woman* and *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* focus on this change. The first volume *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, describing her childhood
in Arkansas, seems to continue the story of female slaves, though crucially adapted. Although this volume makes little reference to slavery, for black American until the 1960s the deeply segregated South embodied the past that they had hoped to leave behind, the effects of which persisted everywhere. At some point in her development, Maya becomes racially aware. Growing up in a southern, segregated town during the 1930s and early 1940s influences Maya’s outlook on herself as a black person. Even though her parents’ divorce geographically displaces Maya from her parent’s home, the new stable home she finds with Momma cannot protect her from racial injustices encountered in Stamps. Even under the protective arm of Momma, Maya suffers from social reaction for her expectation as a black person. In this small Arkansas town where a distinct division existed between the two races, Maya encounters racial prejudice on daily basis. The white people in Stamps are so prejudiced that a “Negro couldn’t buy vanilla ice cream” (CB 40). It was as if “a light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things develop a fear-administration Contempt for white “things” (CB 40). In a recent interview with Jeffrey Elliot in *Conversations with Maya Angelou* explains why she refers to whites as things:

(It was because) they didn’t act like people in my little town in the South they were do mean… People laughed and people cried and people hugged each other and people got mad at each other and people rocked on the back porch or the front porch and sang and
people children and they’d say ‘come here girl’ and hug you all
time. Well they (white) didn’t do anything like that, so I thought
they weren’t people. (198)

The unreal ness of whites is reinforced in Maya’s description of them:

White folks couldn’t be people because their feet were too small,
their skin was too white and see-thoroughly, and they didn’t walk on
their balls of their feet the way people did—they walked on their
heels like horses… These others, the strange pale creatures
that lived in their alien unlife, weren’t considered folks.
(qtd in Elliot 21)

Maya’s statement also provides her with a way to see whites as
powerless-invisible. By referring to whites as “alien unifes”, she projects her
powerlessness onto them. And without power, they can no longer pose a threat
to her life. In contrast to this fantasy world, the racial prejudice in her real
world remains a continuing threat in Maya’s life, representing an obstacle she
is forced to confront in her real life. Maya sees, what a threat racial prejudice
can be when, one night they hide uncle Willie in the potato bin to save him
from the Klu Klux Khan. She realizes even though uncle Willie is incapable of
crime, he will always be suspected because he is black. The progression from
rage and indignation to subtle resistance to active protest gives Caged Bird a
thematic unity that stands in contrast to the otherwise episodic quality of the
narrative.
Maya Angelou chose childhood as an organizing principle in her first volume *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It recounts the life of Maya Angelou from the age of three to the age of sixteen: the first ten years of which were lived in Stamps, Arkansas and the last three in Los Angeles and San Francisco. In the opening pages of the book Maya suffered from a strong case of racial self-hatred, fantasizing that she was “really White” with “light-blue-eyes” and long and blond hair. At that point, Maya entirely separates her sense of self from her sense of race, and this is part of her identity crisis, since she refuses to accept being who she is and hankers after a foreign identity that is a compound of received ideas of white feminine beauty. In *Caged Bird* and in other autobiographies, Angelou does discover herself and her capabilities and effectively conveys her personality and opinions. Her real purpose is to illuminate and explain her race’s condition by protesting against white misconceptions and legitimizing the extremes sometimes required for survival. Much of the story of growing up as Marguerite Johnson is the story of learning to control natural responses. Not to laugh at funny incidents in church, not to express impatience when the guest preacher says too long a blessing and ruins the dinner, not to show felt fear, are part of preparation for life in a repressive society.

The scene with the ‘powhitetrash’ girls indicates how non-human white people can be. The scene with the ‘powhitetrash girls’ (CB 22) causes Maya to react with the same helpless anger and humiliation but through the response of
her grandmother Henderson to the girl’s rudeness and crudity, Maya learns there can be a better and more effective way to respond. When the girls ape her grandmother’s posture, Maya weeps, thinks of getting her uncle’s rifle, and wants to throw lye and pepper on them and to scream at them “that they were dirty, scummy peckerwoods”. When they leave and Momma politely calls good-bye to them, Maya’s rage peaks: “I burst, A fire crackers…How could Momma call them Miz? The mean nasty things…..And if they were dirty and mean and Impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz?” (CB26). But once the girls leave, young Maya realizes that her grandmother has achieved something: “Something had happened out these, which I couldn’t completely understand… Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew momma had won” (CB 26).

Angelou claims that her ten-year old self not fully understand what had happened though she did understand that there had been a contest of wills and her grandmother had won it. Maya and Momma demonstrate that, unlike the white trash girls they are neither dirty nor impudent. This is where the victory lies. Part of it consists of Momma’s resisting the white girl’s attempts to goad her into descending to their level of impudence. But another part of the victory lies in maintaining personal dignity through the symbolic importance of cleanliness and politeness. This allows them to be proud of themselves. On another occasion Angelou listens to the insulting words of an insensitive white speaker, during her graduation from elementary school perceives the terrifying
truth about her racial self about the desperation impotence, especially about the impotence of Black people in the South of the 1930’s: “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead” (CB 176).

The major crime of the dominant white society resides in its attempts to reduce all Negroes to a sense of impotence and nothingness. This is the internal ‘rust’ that threatens the development of the personal identity of all black people in America. For Angelou, such a milieu becomes the point of departure from which the struggles to a sense of dignity and personhood, the necessary prerequisite to express any sense of womanhood. Angelou understands that to be black and to be woman, is to be faced with a special quality of violence and violation.

Angelou’s first confrontation with a white person launches her into a clearer awareness of social reality and into a growing consciousness of self-worth. Mrs.Cullinan’s attempts to change Maya’s name for her own convenience echoes the larger tradition of American racism that attempts to prescribe the nature and limitations of a Black person’s identity. In refusing to address Maya by her proper name, the symbol of her individuality and uniqueness, Mrs.Cullinan refuses to acknowledge her humanity. A sensitive, reflective nature combined with an alert intelligence, enables Maya to comprehend the nature of this insult. She writes:
Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being “called out of his name”. It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely constructed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers jigs, dinges, blackbirds, cros, boots, and spooks. (CB 106)

Maya strikes back deliberately breaking several pieces of Mrs. Cullinan’s heirlooms chinas. Doing so, she affirms her individuality and value. Through this encounter, the young Maya learns that until the individual is willing to take a decisive step toward self-definition, refusing to compromise with insults, he or she remains in the cage.

Raped at the age of eight by her mother’s unwanted lover, Maya lives in perfect silence for nearly a year until she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers. The positive effect that the attention of the elegant Mrs. Flowers has on the insecurity and identity crisis of young Maya is obvious. By helping Maya to begin to have some self-confidence, Mrs. Flowers contributes to the young girl’s affirmation of her identity: “I was liked and what a difference it made. I was respected …for just being Marguerite Johnson” (CB 85). Such a respect and affection from an old person Maya admitted surely had an important positive effect on a young girl suffering from the guilt and self-loathing that resulted from being raped by her mother’s boy friend. It is no wonder Angelou feels that Mrs. Flowers “threw me my first life line” (CB 77).
The insult in the dentist chapter occurs when Stamp’s white and the only dentist- to whom Maya’s excruciating toothache takes her, tell Maya and Momma: “My policy is I’d rather stick my hand in dog’s moth than in a nigger’s” (CB 160). Momma leaves Maya in the alley behind the dentist’s office, and in a passage printed in italics enters the office transformed as a superwoman and threatens to run the now trembling dentist out of town. Maya as a child could only compensate for such painful impotence by fantasizing power and triumphant revenge. On the one hand the italicized passage does highlight the contrast between what Maya wishes her grandmother could do with racist with what little she can do, thus again demonstrating the limitations of subtle resistance as an overall strategy for responding to racist oppression. The fact and fantasy of the passage as an act of imagination in also significant since it hints that imagination and storytelling can be forms of resisting racism.

As a black woman, her growth to awareness in those circumstances is a very painful process. As Angelou notes: “Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant to being aware. And the worst part of my awareness was that I didn’t know what I was aware of” (CB 230). By making the community stronger, African-American women become empowered, and that same community can serve as source of support when Black women encounter race gender and class oppression. The product of a broken family raped at age eight Angelou suffers from an inferiority complex, an identity crisis, and humiliation of racist insults. By the end however she no longer feels inferior,
knows who she is, and knows that she can respond to racism in ways to preserve her dignity and her life, liberty and poverty. She knows and demonstrates in addition through the very existence of the book itself—that she can respond by using the power of words.

Maya sees in Willie, her uncle as a soul mate, for he knows what it is like to be trapped in a body— one that doesn’t represent the person within. Thus, Willie represents a mirror of what Maya fears she will become a deformed body remains his physical prison, whereas Maya’s battered psyche becomes her prison. Throughout his life uncle Willie has found ways to endure his deformity while struggling to live a productive life. Maya, too, must discover how to survive experiences that could ultimately cripple her psyche permanently rendering her life meaningless. During a white administrator’s speech Maya realizes,

The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madams Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys wuld try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises… we were maids and farmers, handy men and washer women, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous .(CB 151-152)

In *Gather Together in my Name* (1944-47) Maya realizes the significance of family. She comes from the family she has founded by becoming a wife and mother. In the prologue of *Gather Together in my Name*, Angelou provides a communal voice to the disillusionment of the black
community, when their hopes for economic and racial equality in America disintegrate in the first years following World War II. During the war Angelou observes, “Black people had often made money in a month than they had seen in their whole lives” (GT 2). Black men, securing decent jobs crossed the line that they would never be able to step back across again. After experiencing economic security during the war, they began to expect, rather than just to hope, for economic opportunity.

Like Angelou, the majority of American Blacks during this period believed that with the end of world war II, race prejudice would be dead. “A young country, something to be forgiven as an unpleasant act committed by an intoxicated friend” (GT 2). Angelou soon discovers, however that her dream for the “good times coming” would not be realized. Against this background of community and individual disillusionment over racial inequality the inward journey of a young mother’s passage into adulthood is written. Despite the appearance of openness her story has its silence; it is not safe to be too open. She quotes a black American saying, “If you ask a Negro where he’s been, he’ll tell you where he’s going” Angelou (CB 164). Its an odd motto for an autobiographer, but in drawing attention to such a strong strategy she signals the existence of a black world that still cannot be shared. Maya incessantly drives herself to achieve economic success when, as a single black woman realistically her chances for success were severely limited because of race and gender. She is young and naïve, however and determined to succeed. The
narrative in *Gather Together* eloquently portrays the life of a proud young woman who fights for independence against impossible odds in a society that has predetermined a marginal status for her son. When her position as a madam of two-prostitute house in San Diego becomes too dangerous for her to continue, Angelou returns with her son Guy to introduce him to her childhood home in Stamps, Arkansas. Hoping to find the stability and protection she had known as a child, Angelou seeks the comfort and reassurances of her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. Shortly after her return, however she is confronted with the unchanged traditions of racial oppression: “The town was halved by railroad tracks the swift Red River and racial prejudice” (GT 61).

The years Maya spent in California have broadened her expectations and convinced her of her right to be accepted on the basis of character and intelligence alone. But the suffocating racial atmosphere of Stamps, Arkansas, she discovers, remains unchanged. In *Caged Bird* Maya learned that cultural negatives were the social inheritance of her people. In *Gather Together*, she learns that although they had escaped its everyday presence while living in California the community of Blacks who had remained in Stamps had never escaped the bonds of their racial displacement. It is these negatives that her own life disapproves, but for Angelou the memories of her community’s pain will always remain.

After her arrival in Stamps, Angelou again experiences the extreme levels of racial discrimination. She had witnessed as a child, yet her reactions
to her present oppressors reflect her changing self. Her reactions also reflect an anger over her victimization of racial discrimination. One confrontation with racial prejudice that is depicted in *Gather Together* is similar to an incident previously described in her first autobiography, *Caged Bird*. Together these two episodes demonstrate the thematic unity of racial displacement that ties the first volume of autobiography to the second.

In *Gather Together*, Angelou struggles in coping with racial prejudice. The incident is again confrontational, like the event described in *Caged Bird* as Angelou has an unpleasant encounter with a sales clerk in Stamps who owned a general merchandise store. Later, she attempts to explain why she refused to accept the sales clerk’s humiliating insults, her grandmother repeatedly slaps her. Momma Henderson’s negative reactions to Angelou’s stand against bigotry only adds injury to the insults Angelou received from the bigoted salesclerk. As when she was ten years old Angelou is once again painfully confused by her grandmother’s reactions to racial oppression. Annie Henderson then commits the final defeat in her verbal reprimand of Angelou:

You think ‘cause you’ve been to California these crazy people won’t kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won’t try to catch you in the road and Violate you? You think because of your all-fired principles some of the men won’t feel like putting their white sheets on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you’re wrong. Ain’t nothing to protect you and us expect the good
Lord and some miles. I packed you and the baby’s things, and Brother Wilson is coming to drive you to Louisville. (GT 78-79).

What Maya has not yet come to realize is her grandmother’s love for her is so great that she is ready to separate herself from her grand daughter in order to protect her. In Stamps there are no great surprises for Angelou, the new sensations and the old ones, and young mother’s reactions to the white salesclerk remind the reader that the black community of Angelou’s childhood remains unchanged – even if she has not. That same day, Angelou and her son Guy are sent back to California by Momma Henderson. It is the last time that Angelou will see her grandmother alive, and it will be thirty years before Angelou returns to Stamps, and then her stay is brief.

Singin’ and swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas [1976]

Angelou’s third volume of autobiography traces her years as a professional dancer and singer, her related experience with racial prejudice, and her guilt over the self-imposed separation from her son Guy during the 1950s. Singin’ and Swingin’ explores Angelou’s twenties, as she moves into adulthood and identifies herself more closely with the mainstream of Black experience. The widening horizons resulting from European travel as a singer and dancer, sharpen her political awareness and also cause her to suffer the agonies of guilt experienced by all women who have to combine career with mothering. In this volume, she is assaulted by the constant conflicts of choices as she struggles to be both a good mother and an economic provider.
In *Singin’ and Swingin’* her experiences, as she encounters the white world on more intimate terms, are vastly different than those depicted in her first two volumes, *Caged Bird* and *Gather Together*. However Angelou continues to pose the most important question for her as an individual and for every member of her race that what it means to be Black in America. In order to facilitate her quest in *Singin and Swingin* Angelou writes her narrative from two perspectives. In the first she examines the relationship between Black and White people in America from the perspective of a young single Black woman, and in the second, she examines the life of an individual from the perspective of a woman who has achieved success as a mother and as an entertainer.

*Singin’ and swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas* is a much different book from *Caged Bird* and *Gather Together*. It is different because the experiences on which it is based are much different from those in her earlier volumes. In them, Angelou called forth from memory a period marked by disappointments and humiliations and by emotional growth. However the third volume marks years of joy in Angelou’s life and the title tells the story of Angelou’s *Singin’ and swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas*. Her title is symbolic of the beginnings of Angelou’s success and fulfillment as an entertainer, singing and dancing in California clubs and as an adult *Singin’ and swingin* takes the reader on a sunny tour of Angelou’s twenties and depicts the birth of a performer. Marguerite Annie Johnson of stamps, Arkansas and Rite;
Sugar and Rita – assumed names during Angelou’s development as an individual – fall away as comfortably as she inhabits her new name, Maya Angelou.

_Singin and Swingin_ opens with a scene of personal displacement in which Angelou struggles with isolation as the family and community bonds her life. She begins to fade from her life. She begins the volume: “Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the spaces between the notes and curl my back to loneliness” (SS 1). Under these new circumstances, Angelou examines her feelings and her relationship with the larger white community as she encounters white people on an intimate level for the first time. As the readers of her first two autobiographies will recall, the separation between Blacks and Whites in Angelou’s life up until this point was complete, and there was no reason for this shared relations. Before Angelou felt free enough to enter into any relationship with the white person; she had to examine and dispense with her own stereotypical views about them; “It wasn’t wise to reveal one’s real feelings to strangers. And nothing on earth was stranger to me than a friendly white woman” (SS 3).

Before she achieves full maturity, Angelou must live through the experiences depicted in _Singin and Swingin_ which will test her ability to resolve difficult issues as an adult without prejudice. As the autobiography develops, Angelou realizes that most of her fears about whites are the result of her personal experiences with racial oppression. She is also aware that many
Blacks hold similar views, and that they use their fears as a means of survival just as Angelou uses her fears to protect her self from harmful situations. Overcoming these fears of the white society will take a major leap of faith on Angelou’s part.

The first test of faith comes when Angelou is unexpectedly offered a job as a salesclerk in a Melrose record shop. It is co-owned by a white woman who befriends Angelou and offers her a sales position. The second leap in relating to the white community for Angelou occurs when she meets Tosh Angelous, a white man of greek descent, who courts Angelou through her son. Part of the difficulty Angelou must face concerning her relationship with Tosh arises from her awareness that whites had violated her people for centuries: “Anger and guilt decided before my birth that Black was Black and white was white and although the two might share sex, they must never exchange love” (SS 23). For Angelou, trusting that it is now safe to cross previously barred racial boundaries in work was one thing while crossing into intimacy was quite another.

In an important passage that illustrates Angelou’s struggles to reconcile her feelings for Tosh against her own racial prejudice, she first concludes that any romantic relationship with Tosh was not possible:

I would never forget the slavery tales, or my southern past, where all whites, including the poor and ignorant, had the right to speak rudely to and even physically abuse any Negro they met. I know the
ugliness of white prejudice. Obviously there was no common ground on which Tosh and I might meet. (SS 28)

Her initial hesitations however are not sustained. Finally, she concludes that a common ground is possible, and Tosh and Angelou marry, “in the courthouse on a clear Monday and morning” (SS 26). Angelou’s mother, Vivian to show her displeasure with Angelou’s decision to marry a white, says: “There is a world of difference between laughing together and loving together”(SS 27). and moves to Los Angles three days before the ceremony is to take place. Once again, Angelou is denied of her mother’s presence and like the child in Stamps, St. Louis and earlier in San Francisco, she is left to cope with physical separation from her family.

Although Tosh proves to be a good husband and father, Angelou is forced to surrender her independence for the security she has idealized in her perception of marriage. This not only means that she must cater to her husband’s every desire and demand, even limiting her friendships and those of her son to persons approved by him, but that she must also accept, without challenge, his attempts to control and her son’s beliefs about God and religion. Compounding this conflict is society’s reaction to their inter-racial marriage. During their first year of marriage, Maya hardly noticed this, for she was far too busy being the perfect wife and mother. Yet gradually:

It grew in my mind that people stared, nudged each other and frowned when we three walked in parks or went to the movies. The
distaste of their faces called back to a history of discrimination and murders of every Tosh, I told myself, was Greek, not white American, therefore I needn’t feel I had betrayed my race by marrying one of the enemy, Nor could white Americans believe that I had so forgiven them the past that I was ready to love a member of their tribe.” (SS 35)

Feeling this guilt, Maya can look into the eyes of whites on the street, but breaks eye contact with any blacks she counters. As Maya depends on Tosh’s protection, she resents, the implied subordination which surfaces in her reaction to his relationship with Guy. Because Guy wishes to have “good hair like Dad’s,” Maya realizes her son thinks white’s hair is superior to that of the blacks. As a result, Maya begins to dislike Tosh’s hair that Guy so envies (SS 36).

By acquiescing to Tosh’s demands, internalizing racial conflicts inside and outside of her marriage and by channeling her efforts towards establishing the ideal home, Maya has isolated herself from family friends and society. For Angelou as for many in her race not having a shared cultural memory is the worst punishment of all. The void of a transmitted chronicle of the black experience has resulted in both the individual and cultural lack of identity. And absent of an identity, both she and every person in her race lack a cultural tradition. In writing her autobiographies, Angelou creates a bridge to the cultural tradition provided by her artistic foremothers. By writing of the Black
experience in America, Angelou creates a meaning to their lives as Black Americans. Yet, in *Singin and Swingin* Angelou’s need for security, as a result of her displacement was powerful enough that she temporarily relinquished the one thing her people had succeeded in giving her – the longing to understand the meaning and history of her people as what they truly are, Black Americans.

Some two years later, when Tosh and Angelou’s marriage finally ends, she romanticizes the relationship as she has always done when her intimate relationships end. But the maturity Angelou gains from this marriage and her new – friend hedging acceptance of whites ultimately teaches her invaluable lessons in tolerance. Her relationship with Tosh, then, is significant in that it represents an important stage of her evolution toward adulthood. That Angelou examines her quest for meaning by writing about her intimate relationship with a white American male is only part of what she accomplishes in this book. Much of *Singin and Swingin* is Angelou’s recreated experiences in her rise as an entertainer. Her travels as a dancer with the musical, *Porgy and Bess* (1954 – 55), expand her education beyond the familiar circle of community and family. Angelou’s experiences during these two years throw her into contact with people of many nationalities and classes, some of where have never before seen a Black person and expand and complicate her understanding of the complexities of race relations. Some of the most revealing aspects of this work are Angelou’s recreated experiences as a Black American woman entertainer who finds herself as she travels the world. Much of *Singin’ and Swingin’* is
devoted to her travel experiences as a member of the cast of *Porgy and Bess*. While Montreal for example, Angelou recalls the stories of escaping by underground railroad, to Canada, and she feels the kinship with the people she sees in the streets. And, in Italy, crowds push in around Angelou and in their broken English speaks the name of Joe Louis, and she communicates beyond the language barriers to the hearts of the Italian people. Angelou travels and experiences with *Porgy and Bess* which do much to enhance her maturity and her feelings of self-worth. This period of Angelou’s self-development is one of the focuses in Selwyn Cudjoe’s essay: “Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement”. In this essay Cudjoe notes that Angelou’s Southern origins became necessary basis on which she was to begin to evaluate major transformations which have occurred in her life thus far. Cudjoe illustrates his point by referencing a passage from *Singin’ and Swingin’* where Angelou reveals a dimension of her new awareness:

> I excused myself from the table and went to stand on the deck. The small, exclusive town of Tiburon glistened across the green blue water and I thought about my personal history Of Stamps, Arkansas and its one paved sheet, of the segregated Negro school and the bitter poverty that causes children to become solitude of unwed motherhood and the humiliation of prostitution. Waves slapped at the brightly painted catamaran tied up below me and I pursued my past to a tardy marriage which was hastily broken. And the inviting
doors to a newer and richer worlds, where the sounds of happiness drifted through closed panels and the door knobs came off in my hands. (SS 124).

Angelou’s developing self-consciousness and the acknowledgement of her people’s suffering by ordinary Europeans, like the Italians who crowded around her in Venice, led to some of the most revealing moments of her self-esteem and defines her place as a Black American. According to Cudjoe, Angelou’s transformation is the triumph of this work: “The pride which she takes in her company’s professionalism, their discipline onstage and the well spring of spirituality that the opera emoted, all seem to conduce toward an organic harmony of her personal history as it intertwined with the social history of her people” (24)

Meshed between her moving and often disconnecting experiences are the joy, frustration, and the tension of growing into adulthood for Angelou while in Europe she observes the double standards of white people who readily accept Black American in Europe. They are fascinated by her physical differences, but who are equally quick to discriminate against other peoples of color. She also attains success as a talented young Black artist who finally has a secure future in show business ahead of her. Angelou realizes in Singin’ and Swingin’ a hard-fought margin of success – the dramatic success of a talented young Black woman into an adult self and into a fully liberated person.
In the *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou sets herself, like her people, firmly on a spiritual quest for racial equality. Angelou’s stylistic approach to *The Heart of a Woman* similar to her writing process in *Singin’ and Swingin’*, illustrates the recreation of her life from two separate perspectives” the first, Angelou’s involvement with the civil Rights Movement, later the South African freedom movement. In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou examines the social and cultural history of Black Americans during the turbulent sixties and also her personal account of that history. Together these two reactions make the autobiography significant.

Her reaction of the Civil Rights Movement helps the reader to understand the chaos of the movement’s organization, yet it also reveals the courage displaced by the Black activists during an important period in American history. Throughout the autobiography her narrative connects the story of her childhood with that of her son. In addition, the many references to childhood serve to create textual line for those readers who might be unfamiliar with the earlier volumes. These references to her past also emphasize the similarity between the racial and gender displacement she experienced by her son.

The overwhelming sense of insecurity and instability she has faced has ironically become his fate as well although Guy’s perceptions of his life’s experiences are one generation removed from those of his mother. Like Angelou’s hesitancy with Mamma Henderson’s traditional and controlled
attitude towards whites Guy’s attitudes will be shaped and he will benefit from the knowledge he gains, from the experiences of his mother.

As in her previous three autobiographies, Angelou begins the fourth with a reference to her racial heritage an important element in her writing style. She prefices *Heart of the Women* with the lines “The ole ark’s a-moverin’, a-moverin’; the ole rk’s moverin’ along” (HW 3). For Angelou the old ark is certainly “a-moverin along: She notes that the ancient spiritual could have been the theme song of the United States in 1957, for America was in a “maze of contradictions”, where “Black and white Americans danced a fancy and often dangerous do-si-do” (HW 3) struggles over civil rights in places like Little Rock, Arkansas, and the turmoil in the United States congress over the passage of civil Rights commission’s voting Rights Bill demanded the country’s attention. The Black experience in America during the late fifties and sixties was a definite time of transition. She writes: “We were indeed traveling, but no one knew our destination nor our arrival date.”( HW 3)

In *Heart of the Woman* Angelou recreates her travels along that path as she is influenced by the same events strongly affecting her people. Her personal history of that journey creates a continuum of the cultural memory depicted in her earlier volumes that is so important to the thematic concept of her autobiography Angelou once again returns to the larger emphasis of her writing to depict life as a Black American in contemporary society. In so doing,
Angelou illustrates the reality of self, family and community displacement from the dominant white society.

In New York, Angelou now 31 finds assistance from friends such as John and Grace Killens, Abbey Lincoln and Mex Poach, Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin and other Blacks who are doing important ground work for the civil Rights Movement. While living in New York Angelou begins to develop her political consciousness. During these years she begins to assume a sense of white dignity and to become more politically active in the movement and she is aware that Black people in New York, as through out the country, are changing “that the echo of African drums was less distant in 1959 that it had been over century.” (HW 46) Angelou realizes that the changes she witnesses in Harlem, New York city’s predominantly Black community, are symbolic of the changes Blacks are making everywhere:

One hundred and twenty fifth street was to Harlem what the Mississippi was to south, along traveling river always going somewhere, carrying Something --- Black men and women had begun to wear multicolored African Prints --- They moved through Harlem like bright sails on the dark sea. (HW 46)

Angelou, who had spent her life, “on city front steps, in country backyards, kitchens… joining in and listening to the conversations of Black people, had never heard so much attention given to the subject of whites” (HW 32) The times for Blacks in America was radically changing as they were
beginning to look and speak about themselves as equal members of the American society. And Angelou was in the center of the political storm that was on America’s horizon. Continuing her singing and dancing career in small clubs on the tower East side of New direction her career, especially in light of the Civil Rights work being done by other Blacks around her, Angelou decides to quit show business

Give up the skintight dresses and manicured smiles. The false over sentimental lyrics. I would never again work to make people smile inanely and would take time on the responsibility of making them think. Now was the time to demonstrate my own seriousness. (HW44).

Although not year directly involved in politics Angelou goes to hear the influential Dr. King, the symbolic voice of the Civil Rights Movement during the late 1950’s and 1960s, Dr. King who has been recently released from a Brimmingham jail after one Civil Rights demonstration was in New York to raise money for the Southern christen leadership conference [SCLC] Angelou is moved by King’s speech that she commits her time and energy to co-producing, with the successful Black comedian Godfrey Cambridge, a fund raiser at the village Gate to raise money for the SCLC cause. So successful is the production that Angelou is offered a position as Northern co-ordinator for the SCLC by Dr.King himself. She holds this position in 1960 and 1961.
Continuing her work with the Civil Rights Movement during 1961 and 1962, Angelou transforms her self-identity from that of victim to activist.

Angelou’s participation in politics heavily influences her last two autobiographical volumes. Her association with Martin Luther King introduces Angelou to complexity of politics. She learns that the struggle for civil rights had different faces. One was that the Black Muslims offered a solution of Black identity through separatism. Later, Angelou is down to the causes of the Black militants and is involved in founding a political activist group for Black American Women: the cultural Association for Women of African Heritage[CAWAH]

Angelou’s direct involvement in social protest does not, as autobiographer, enlarge her own image as a pivotal element of the movement. She always describes her participation in civil rights demonstrations as only one member of the larger Black Community. For example, in describing her participation in the demonstrations in a interview with Rosa Guy in 1988, she down plays her individual contributions and focuses on the movement’s message as a singular voice. She states in an interview with Rosa Guy Angelou in Conversations with Maya Angelou:

I’d rather for us to get up and try to lead demonstrations against the horrors that were taking place in Africa, and were taking place in the US … We became the radii which came in finally to touch that circle which was our oneness and our responsibility to everybody.
We reached the point where we thought we were one with all oppressed people. (qtd in Elliot 226).

Angelou’s honesty about her impact as an individual in the Civil Rights Movement in no way undermines the seriousness of her commitments to its causes. It does, however, help the reader to develop in sight into the reasons that activists were preoccupied with its success. When it comes to the participation of young white students Angelou and her assistant chuckled:

the white youngsters who were scrubbing the steps and sweeping the floor and doing the jobs for us which were being done in their homes and in their streets by black women and men. We knew that what we were seeing was a one-time phenomenon, so were determined to enjoy it.”(HW 90).

Angelou’s recreations of the sixties enhances the understanding of such notables as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X. and Patrice Lumumba, only Angelou’s recreations of herself within the context of their movement can give the autobiography its real strength.

All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes [1986], the fifth volume in Angelou’s series, departs from the traditional focus of Black American Autobiography, which according to Selwyn Cudjoe is to illustrate the reality of Black experience within the society that oppresses it, to a central theme concerning the African-America’s search symbolic home in Africa. This fifth volume gives the reader much more public Angelou, one who is fully
politicized and whose self definition had been changed by life in Ghana, where she confronts the reality of Black Americanness. Significantly her son, whose growth into manhood had been described alongside his mother’s growth into self-recognition, stays in Africa, while she returns to the United States with a fully realized identity as a Black American Woman, who despite her African ancestry is fully American.

Angelou’s quest for home, carried forward through each of the narrative series, continues, as Angelou moves from Cairo, Egypt to Ghana, West Africa. There Angelou as the metaphorical child of Africa, mother to Guy and sister to the African American community-finally attains a conscious confusion of self, family, and community identities. By returning to her ancestral birthplace, Angelou is able to recognize the cultural continuity between the past and the present. The absence of cultural memory that all African American suffered as a result of slavery is remedied when they return to Africa. As a result, *Travelling Shoes* represents the point in Angelou’s life when she reaches full comprehension of self, family and community identity. Angelou dedicates the book to “Julian and Malcom and all the fallen ones who were passionately and earnestly looking for a home” (AGC ii) The epigraph is taken from the African American spiritual “ Swing how Sweet chariot” (AGC iii) Symbolically Angelou’s quest is the quest of Jewain Mayfield, Malcom X and all African American people. Her homecoming thus becomes symbolic of the home – coming for all African people born on American soil:
Our people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place with hands where the streets were paved with gold, and were washed with honey and milk. There the saints would march around wearing white robes and jeweled crowns. There we would study war no more important no one would wage war against us again… So I had finally come home. The prodigal child having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers, having squandered her’s gifts and having laid down in cruel gutters had at last arisen and directed herself back to the overwhelming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment and seated at the overwhelming table. (AGC 19-21).

In her early volumes, Angelou recreated the realities of racial displacement so prevalent in American society, while at the same time portrayed the extraordinary life of a Black woman who survives and learns to overcome the oppression forced upon her. But in *Travelling Shoes*, Angelou moves beyond confrontation as she focuses primarily on the story of her and many other Black Americans’ attempts to return to their ancestral home of Africa. By resolving her own sense of displacement, she now examines the difficulties in creating a home for oneself, one’s family and one’s people. In returning to Africa, Angelou comes to realize that “home” is not so much a physical location, but rather a self conscious frame of mind. Angelou is unable to recognize this distinction, however until the racism first created by
slavery [w]hich continued to the present has been negated. That is, racial prejudice must be absent for Angelou to realize that her coming “home” is not physical, but emotional and spiritual.

For the first time in her life Angelou is to live in a world of racial equity, and the effects of such dramatic change are substantial. For Angelou, as with all African Americans living in Ghana, experiencing racial equality is intoxicating. As a result, *Travelling Shoes* is important to Angelou’s autobiographical series because its ability to reflect her conclusions about living both within and out side of an oppressive society. The autobiographical theme of displacement that has been central to the series thus shifts in *Travelling Shoes* to climax in an autobiographical voice that embodies Angelou’s maturation of self. The evidence of self identity that is apparent in the narrative of *Travelling Shoes* is one of the continuity of autobiographical series. To find political wisdom, Angelou had to listen to and judge many voices. Politically naïve herself, her education was completed by her native husband, Vus. He taught her a valuable lesson, and that was that Blacks, like whites, are simply human. He told her that: “Black people are human. No more, no less. Our backgrounds, our history make us act differently” (HW 175) Vus taught her Black activists were not seeking a society where power did not exist, but one where the power could be exchanged and rest in their hands; that world politics is about who possesses and exercises power. This is the ultimate knowledge that she acquires in *Travelling Shoes* with this knowledge, Angelou
is emotionally free to return her rightful in the United States - which she decides to do. Before leaving, however, she makes one last personal journey to a village in Ghana to complete her quest for her family heritage.

When Angelou completes this last stop in Ghana, the narrative reaches a climax as Angelou describes the seaside village of Keta, which had been “hit very hard by the slave trade” (AGC 206). In a psychic experience Angelou is convinced that in the people of Keta, she finds her tribal origins startled by her recognition of this place she has never visited before, the six foot. Angelou is addressed with recognition by an “unusually tall” woman with whom she feels kinship.

In Keta, Angelou is approached by a woman who seems to know her and will not believe that she cannot speak Ewe. The woman’s resemblances to Angelou’s grandmother, Momma Henderson, is startling:

“When she raised her head, I nearly fell back down the steps: she had a wide face and slanted eyes of my grandmother. Her lips were large and beautifully shaped like my grandmother’s, and her cheekbones were high as those of my grandmother” (AGC 203).

The woman, finally persuaded that Angelou is “an American Negro” lifted both arms and lacing her fingers together put them on top of her head and moaned, a gesture of mourning. Angelou is introduced to others from the village; who react in similar fashion. She is told that the people mourn because
that they are very sure that she is descended from mothers and fathers stolen long ago.

Here are my last days in Africa, descendants of a pillaged past saw their history in my face and heard their ancestors speak through my voice...The second leave taking would not be so onerous, for now I knew my people had never completely left Africa. We sung in the blues, shouted it in our gospel and danced the continent in our breakdowns... It was Africa which rode in the bulges of our high calves, shook in our protruding behinds and crackled in our wide open laughter. (AGC 206-7)

She had found the source of her racial identity. Toward the end of her personal narrative, Angelou sums up her conclusion about the struggle to find a home:

If the heart of Africa still remained elusive, my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings. The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned (AGC 195).

Angelou’s five autobiographical narratives describe the evolution of personal consciousness where in Angelou raises to become a voice of universal consciousness for African-American people.

Racial Voices are echoed again in Lessings’ autobiographies Under My Skin and Walking in the Shade. In the face of the glaring injustices of racial
domination in Southen Rhodesia, it is moral achievement to keep such complexities in mind: and to do so requires a clear –eyed attention to the everyday details of human life. Lessing’s circumstances were extraordinary enough, as the child of white settlers, her very presence in the bush is result of colonial conquest, as Lessing – at least as an adult – well knows. Imagining the bush as the space of self-conception, Lessing crosses the fences and displays male settlers attitude toward the land. Just as Lessing’s identification with the house is maternal, her identification with the bush formed through her brother, who figures largely in all her tales of the bush. Harry and she share boredom with things English as compared to her parents: They day dreamed aloud, about Home, and Harry and I smiled and escaped into the bush.”(UMS129). If their parents are rooted by the house and its connections to England, the children are free to roam in the adopted country, freedom created by the colonizer’s sense of entitlement and mastery.

Though she was born in Iran, in 1919 to British parents, Lessing was raised in Souther Rhodesia . Her father, Alfred Cook Tayler, invalided in the First world war, married an English woman who had nursed him back to health. After his war time experiences, Tayler could not work as a bank clerk in England, and so he took a job with the Imperial Bank of Persia. On leave in England in 1925 he saw a Southern Rhodesian display at once of the empire exhibitions, discovered that he could buy 3000 acres at 10 shillings an acre and
emigrated “on impulse” with his wife and two children. Doris and younger brother, Harry, to Rhodesia.

In a 1980 interview Doris Lessing speculated about “the effect the proportions of buildings have on the people who live in them” insisting, “This is not metaphorical thought at all. This is a practical thought, which I think about more and more” (qtd in *Tulsa Studies* 59). The building most crucial of Lessing’s own self-construction was the rickety old settler’s farm house her family built and lived in for years in the Lomagundi district of Southern Rhodesia. Lessing feels the intimate charm to this house than any other place. Since living there she never settled down for long; as she notes in the memoir *Going Home* “I don’t live anywhere; I never have since I left that first house on the Kopje” (*Tulsa Studies*, 59) As the child of settler’s Lessing’s claim that the house in the Southern Rhodesian bush is a her true home reveals a complex set of affiliations with a land the English occupied by force, a land that, in more than just a nominal sense, no longer exists.

The transitory nature of Lessing’s childhood home should not be taken as a measure of its influence or importance. Rather it is emblematic of Southern Rhodesian settler culture and for the imperialist mentality that built it. Specifically the house illuminates how boundary markers were deployed to police the doctrine of racial hierarchy and how notions of femininity and domesticity, seemingly marginal to colonization, actually undergirded the project of empire. Figuring her adolescence rebellion as an “emigration” a
journey out of the mother country to parts unknown, Lessing illustrates the unexpected reciprocity of maternity and colonialism, a relationship most clearly played out in border skirmishes fought by mother and daughter across the house/bush boundary.

Lessing’s insistence on the buildings in shaping their occupants reflects her own experience of how the reproduction of seemingly natural gender roles occurs in relation to maternal forces. She traces the history of her family from British empire Exhibition of 1924 that inspired their colonialist venture, and out to the homestead, tracing the ways in which their attitudes toward the adopted country were shaped by the propaganda of empire. Lessing’s detailed writings about herself, her home and her parents offer an excellent opportunity to glimpse the gendered dynamics that shaped settler society, as well as the ideologies of domesticity and race that helped fuel the imperialist project.

The trip to Southern Rhodesia most has taken a great leap of faith. In 1924, on home leave in England from the Imperial Bank Persia, Alfred Taylor and his wife Maude Lessing’s parents, went to the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. There host the Southern and Rhodesia exhibit, they saw giant maize cobs and posters and pamphlets proclaiming that for a man, with a bit if capital, that were fortunes to be made in farming in the empire. Alfred Taylor had one thousand pounds and pension because of the leg lost in the war. He was still suffering from shell shock and needed to feel some space around him. At his urging Maude packed up their two children and within three weeks the
family had shifted to Cape Town. It is hard what Alfred Taylor was thinking – that somehow a man with little farming experience and only one leg would make a success of homesteading in Southern Rhodesia. It is almost impossible to imagine what Maude, caring for two children under five years old, thought how she would raise her children in unfamiliar African farm. As Lessing relates “The Empire Exhibition of 1924, which lured my father out of Africa … changed my parents’ lives and set the course mine and my brother’s. Like wars and famines and earthquakes, Exhibitions shape futures” (UMS 46) The paces and places Lessing’s family would find in southern Rhodesia had already been explained to them back in England. In addition to the “leaflets and information” that Lessing remembers seeing her parents pore over in preparation for departure, the exhibition’s own buildings and interiors implicitly communicate and specify ideas about the proper role of prospective colonizers. These buildings, as self conscious architectural facts, called attention to British adaptability and ingenuity, to the ability of the British colonizer to use technological know-how to bring the world to heel. There in lay the challenge for the prospective colonizer. As the guidebook stated “One speaks of the romance of Empire in term of engineering… our imperial adventures in the world’s waste places, the redemption of these waste places that they might come into line and aid the growth of civilization, are all the work of the engineer.”(52) Implicit in the idea of the world’s waste places was the understanding that nothing man made of value was to be found in colonizes
that prospective colonizer would find a wealth of raw material with which they could construct a replica of English civilization. John Mackenize writes the empire exhibitions-of which Wembley was the largest-that they were celebration of the white man’s successful transplantation to the farthest reaches of the globe, and his creation there of societies modeled on European lines. Lessing recalls how this sentiment was echoed by her parents: “Civilization was being brought to savages, was here they saw it, because the British Empire as a boon and a benefit to the whole world (UMS 50)

Indeed English women had scarcely any defined part to play in the dominant narrative empire, as Sara Mills has noted: “Social conventions for conceptualizing imperialism… seem to be as much about constructing a masculine British identity as constructing national identity per se. For this reason women as individuals and as writers are marginalized to the process of colonialism” (qtd in Tulsa Studies 72). Their seeming marginality was both expressed and enforced in past through a spatial restriction; settler women were advised or ordered to remain inside or close to the house, fulfilling their role as signifiers of home and of whiteness, “white values”. Clearly within the colonial project to civilize the colonies entailed domesticating them; in this sense, women were only spatially marginal, not ideologically so. Wives of English settlers were confined to the house both for the performance of domestic duties and because of a pervasive sense that the bush represented a special threat of women. As one 1924 guidebook stated “occupation of land, either in the
country or near town, by protected women in distinctly undesirable” (qtd in Tulsa Studies 72) Lessing indicates that a relatively groundless fear of rape was the basis for most of these precautions. Known as “black peril” black male rape of white women was highly legislated and punishable to death. Clearly as John Pape assert: the “peril” severed chiefly to unify whites and perpetuate their racist stereotyping while staying with the family friends Lessing explores the surrounding bush and stumble across a spring. When she shares her discovery with the hostess, Lessing remembers

she sighed and said : Are you sure you ought to be… ?This meant, as it did when my mother remembered to say it. “Are you sure a white girl should be risking rape by a Kaffir by running around through the bush by herself? I took no notice. No one was ever raped, I believe” (UMS 143)

Lessing suggests that fear of rape kept the girls and women close or inside the house. The fear of rape whether or not rape was likely –had its own ends. As Pape writes: “The creation of a sexually uncontrollable black male inhibited their walking e development of intimacy between African men and white women who often spent their vast majority of their walking hours together.” (qtd in Tulsa Studies 72). Further he explains that white women were kept within domestic boundaries in the service of the doctrine of a white racial superiority, yet the black male Africans were seen necessary to maintain the domestic environment. The threat of African contact between African male and
English settler women could be minimized by both housewife and servant: paradoxically the threat was simultaneously down played through the emasculation of the servant, commonly called the “house boy” Whatever his age” (UMS 43). Just as the settler women was not to venture outdoors for the fear of being claimed, raped deflowered by the bush, so the non servant African man was forbidden to penetrate the house, coextensive as it was with the settler women’s skin. The compromise of calling a servant “the house boy” reflects an attempt both to domesticate and infantilize the African male before admitting him to the settler’s house.

In some ways Lessing’s claim that she belongs in the bush is a willfully blind one. The land on which they lived had been alienated, like most of Rhodesia, by the colonial government which had crowded Africans and were called as native reserves. Her father grazed cattle. The nearest white neighbors were several miles off, and Rhodesian racial etiquette kept the Tayler children from real friendship with black children. Her brother was away at boarding school. So Lessing grew up with books and African landscape. Though she was sent to convent school in Salisbury she was allowed to stop her formal education at staying on in the city to work for a couple of years as a nanny, before going to the family farm, convinced of her calling as a writer. At home and after school she educated herself reading the best classics of European and American Literature” Two years later, having written and destroyed some “bad novels” she returned to Salisbury to work. Then on the brink of the Second
World War, she married a Rhodesian civil servant with whom she had two children.

In 1942, the early 20s after the failure of her first marriage, she joined the local Communist Party and became revolutionary, interested in the possibilities of black resistance. She learned as she grew up, that she did not want to belong to the master race in a society of white masters and black servants. Though Lessing learned that she did not want to live as a white settler, she also discovered that white Rhodesia— for all the middle-class British snobbisms, its provincialism and tedium and even more its apparent blindness to the black lives that made possible its standard of living—was not without virtues. This sense for the intricate has made Lessing impatient with politics and parties. Faced with considerably less pure British Communist Party, with its deference to Stalin and its odious political correctness Lessing labelled, leaving the party in 1956 and not simply, she insisted, out of disgust with the Russians invasion of Hungary. Her entrance into the Rhodesian Communist Party reflected the seriousness of her moral engagement with the evils of racial domination, and her departure from the British Communist Party reflected the same moral seriousness.

And readers owe Lessing even more substantial debt for her interior portrait of the white community in its transition out of trauma of losing the war. On the first of her visits, soon after the war’s end, Lessing goes to visit her brother Harry, who is a staunch supporter of the white minority rule who
fought in war in the bush. On their first evening together, they begun by avoiding the subject that divides them, his sister’s amusing ideas about black equality.

Throughout her career Lessing has been able to enter sympathetically into the lives of the ordinary, moral fallible people, living in circumstances that make nobility impossible. The capacity of her unloveliest characters to engage the human in each other- even when they have inherited a racism that blinds and separates, even when the physical burdens of old age have made their lives tedious to them-is one of the finest achievements of Lessing’s autobiographies. Nothing could be further in spirit from the mechanics of social realism.

Racism associated with the British domination in India and its consequences for a sensitive being like Kamala Das coupled with the oppressive climate of Nalapat House gave a sense of loneliness and helplessness. The world she was living in was a hostile world but it exposes the role of human praxis and human mediation in the process of liberation. Man is undoubtedly, helpless so far as his contingence is concerned. Here in lies the dialectics between synchrony and diachronic, between past and future. Kamala Das’s interaction with her culture shows how an existential being reacts against the syntagmatic relations and signifies the role of individual action in breaking seriality.

Born during the British regime to the Indian parents, who, besides being dark, were neither warm nor caring and brought up in a culture which treated
women as innately weak and dependant on men, the hypersensitive and ego-centric child Kamala, realized rather early in life that it was not easy to resolve the wide gap between her insignificant reality and her exaggerated expectations, to strike an equilibrium between the micro-universe, and macro-universe. She was an ambitious child who had a subjective desire for importance. But she felt profoundly inadequate, unloved and without the hope of winning recognition in the world as she confronted it. Hence, she made in her projects to defy the existing reality, to falsify it; the traditions and conventions being an integral part of the socio-cultural reality and got to be challenged and rejected.

With the advent of the British and the gradual filtration of western patriarchal paradigms, these traditional and indigenous patterns of acceptability came to be viewed as out minded. The Nair youths grew ashamed of their time honored women-centered society and rushed to pay homage to the patriarchal institutions of their colonial masters. Colonization was largely responsible for depriving Kerala of its matriarchal positions. In the 1810s the British disarmed the Nair’s all over Kerala, and the matrilineal joint family was forced to cope up with peace. The breakdown of matrilineal institution was an indirect consequence of colonial depredation. One can perceive how it was not merely the economic compulsions, but also the changing social mores that led to the breaking up of matrilineal institutions.
Kamala Das *My Story* [1976] provides a succinct account of changing social conditions within the narrow purview of her own tharvard, the Nalapat House. In the process of writing, the self in this work, the poet herself a victim of colonial depredation repeatedly resorts to a sort of idealized representation of her tharvard. Not withstanding the fact that there is a certain degree blurring of vision due to the confusion between actual social reality and the past, this text provides valuable information about the position of the woman in the Nair tharvard. When Kamala was just ‘a little child growing up in Calcutta’ ([MS 1])

She came to realize that the “British who still ruled India” denied her self-expression, freedom, recognition of talents, social acceptance and right to exist as an independent being. This gave her a morbid sense of insecurity and rejection which led to a several inhibitions, complexes and fears in her.

Kamala Das’s autobiography entitled *My Story* which at one level of analysis is a creative expression of colonial anguish begins with the nauseating memories of the British rule in India. The very first sentence of autobiography “when I was a little child growing up in Calcutta the British still ruled India” (MS 1) makes the reader feel that the writer he is confronting is a writer obsessed with colonial consciousness, a writer who is revolting against the European domination in pre-Independence India. So, as soon as the text opens, the reader comes to sense Kamala Das’s unease with the foreign rulers and gets mentally prepared to perceive the disastrous effects of foreign domination on the psyche of a sensitive child like Kamala. The word “still” in the sentence
quoted above signifies her restlessness with and silent revolt against the British rule in India. It also indicates the anxiety of the colonized Indians to root out from their mother country the foreign rulers who oppressed them. The next sentence “But in good society they behaved like equals” (MS 1) has a reference to the pre-independence Indo-British encounter, to the socio-racial discriminations that Indians had to suffer in the Pre-independence days. It presupposes that the Europeans suffered from the racist bias. An acute awareness of the fact that Indians were hated and ridiculed by the British people was intolerable for her. She narrates:

My brother was plump and dark: His eyes were bright and circular. although he was the cleverest in his class, the white boys made fun of him by pushing a pointed pencil up his nostril. One day his shirt-front was covered with blood. He was stunned by the cruelty but even the tears seemed inhibited, staying suspended on his lashes while William the bully exclaimed, “Blackie, your blood is red.” (MS 2)

Her brother, in spite of being “plump” and the “cleverest in his class” (MS 2) could not fight back. He lacked courage to shed tears even when he was “tortured” by the white boys. But, Kamala unable to control herself scratched William the bully’s face in “mad rage”(MS 2). The reader cannot miss the violence in Kamala nor can he miss Kamala’s rage to fight back. She is not “stunned” but agitated, infuriated and provoked to violence by the cruel,
inhuman act of William, “the bully” (MS 2). Though most of the Indians were reconciled to the tortures they had to undergo just for being dark, Kamala who could perceive, no logical connection between the “tortures” and ‘a nut-brown skin’ felt terribly uneasy with the hostile attitude of the British people to the Indians who were treated as a human in the prevailing atmosphere of racism. The feeling of uneasiness was often mixed with the feeling of helplessness but with the kind of psychic make up Kamala had, the more helpless she felt, the more she wanted to defy, to challenge, to reject and to come out of her feelings of helplessness and insignificance.

The political scenario during the British rule in India, made her experience a kind of unconscious hostility towards her parents too for having brought her into the world as a dark child, Kamala cherished an unconscious wish that she were born to “white couple” she says, “I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of white couple” (MS 9) She was obviously frustrated with her heritage. Darkness of complexion, was associated with inferiority and Kamala a highly sensitive being, was not the one to reconcile with anything that made her feel, inferior. Being inferior to the white race meant being doomed to subjection which was the fate of the Indians those days. Hence, she is seen as carrying the burden of a swarthy “skin” complaining against her being the outcome of a dreary union between her mother and her father. She was thoroughly dissatisfied with her contingence which she decided
to transcend but was overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness which was compounded by the attitude of her parents.

    They took us [the children] for granted and considered us mere puppets moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalization that were developing independently like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortress” (MS 74).

As Edward Said states in Orientalism, “There are Westerners and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another western power” (36).

    The discourse of colonial power is felt in the description of a ceremony that takes place at Kamala Das’s school everyday:

        In the morning while Madam sat at the grand piano on which stood the tinted photograph of the British royal family and we raised our voice in song, singing “Britons never never shall be slaves”, even the post man showed his walk to listen. King George the sixth used to wink at us from the gilt frame, as though he knew the British were singing in India their swan song…” (MS 3)

        So overwhelming was the impact of the British rule in India that anything associated with the colonized was supposed to be lacking in
sophistication and anything associated with the Europeans was considered superior. So, “When we once went to Malabar for a month’s stay with my grandmother; we lent our cook to Mrs. Press so that she might teach him rudiments of European cookery. With every vacation we took, our cook advanced even more in the culinary arts until our eating habits had to be ahead to suit his sophistication. (MS 1)

Kamala Das who had a desperate need for freedom was overwhelmed by the feeling that everything foreign was being forced upon the Indians, the foreign rulers, the foreign foods, foreign ways of eating etc. There was nothing she could do about the “western meals”, the western way. While her father “ate with fork and knife”, (MS 1) i.e he reconciled not only to the European food but the European ways of eating too. She and her brother had the courage to eat “with little brown fingers, licking their hands”(MS 1) though the cook was hypnotized by the European culture as he was “stood by frowning” (MS 1) and thought them “savages.” One can mark her acute consciousness of the brownness of her fingers. Her protest against colonialism is evident and so are the different responses of the Indian white supremacy. While for people like the cook, the reality of the colonizer is the only reality, for people like Kamala Das, their own socio-cultural reality of the colonizer. One can notice that Kamala Das even as a child was not prepared to accept the oppressor’s culture.

The Colonel rule of the British troubled this sensitive soul. She was pained to realize that Indians were the oppressed natives and were treated not
as a different race but as an inferior race by the British people who were proud
of their whiteness and looked down upon Indians for their blackness. It is for
this reason that Kamala Das and her family felt thrilled to their when her
father’s superior called him “my good friend Nair” (MS 1). This positive
remark coming from the Whiteman helped them to overcome the feelings of
helplessness and powerlessness and gave this neglected lot some reassurances,
some hope. So deep was the British impact on Indians those days that many
Indians themselves came to associate inferiority with their own culture. As
Meenakshi Mukerjee has pointed out in “Caliban’s Growth : Impact of
Colonialism on Commonwealth Fiction” “Acceptance of the Indian values
and standards set up by the ruling culture, have in most cases become so
absolute that recipient culture, sometimes unaware of its hold.” (qtd in
Dhawan, 159) It is evident from the attitudes of KamalaDas’s cook to his own
culture. He thought that eating with one’s fingers was a “savage” act. He was
also biased against the vernacular teacher and gave him “only a glass tumbler
of the tea and a few sardonic remarks” (MS 9) while to the Anglo-Indian
teacher he served “tea on a tray with tiny sandwiches laid out on a quarter
plate” (MS 9) Her father too was quite impressed by the European. That was the
reason why “Nambar, in our house moved about with inferiority complex and
would hide behind the side-board when my father passed through the dining
room where we had our Malayalam lessons” (MS 9).
This shows that the people of India were reconciled to the British domination as Meenakshi Mukerjee says “as if ordained by providence and the people looked at their own blackness as an unpleasant remainder of their natural inferiority” (qtd in Dhawan 159). The British were the the greatest colonizers. They enjoyed making the Indians realize that they were black and therefore inferior to the white. Often they enjoyed subjecting the Indians to terrible atrocities. As Jean Paul Sartre tells in Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon: “Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved met at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize them.” (qtd in Dhawan 159)

This color prejudice inflicted Kamala Das’s mind to such an extent that the black /white oppression assumed a tremendous significance in her life. This is the reason why color imagery is so predominant in her autobiography. She makes a frequent and consistent use of color adjectives especially, of the adjectives “white” and “dark” and hardly ever misses the description of the fair-complexion. Even in her moments of mystic ecstasy, she does not fail to notice the color of her God’s skin. She speaks of “his dark limbs” and “the dusk of his skin” and calls him “the dark God of girlhood dreams” (MS 180). It is as if in rejecting the white Kamala Das has come to reject even the white Gods.

The Indians were being terrorized and oppressed because of their dark complexion. The British people wanted to make beasts of burden of them. They wanted to totally dehumanize them. Self –degradation was the only way for
them to gain social acceptance. She tells: “If we are hated by the white children, poor Louis was hated more but he followed them about, clowning to put them in good humour, barking like a dog and braying like ass” (MS 3).

Kamala Das’s revolt against the white-skinned people signifies the “general revolt on the part of the coloured men against colonists”. She detested not just the foreign rulers, the white school mates, “the European school” “the European cookery” “Western meals”, “fork and knife”, (MS 1) the harsh British people and, the westernized and hypocritical Indians but anything associated with the white, like the foreign firm and the white folks. The British rule did not allow her self-expression, freedom, recognition in short a right to exist as an independent being. Nothing could give her a greater satisfaction and a sense of security than a feeling that there was someone to weep with her to share her gloom and misery. She tells her readers that no one else but her readers have “wept” with her. The social-political reality, she felt was stifling her. It was only through her creative writing that she could transform the social reality.

Maya Angelou and Kamala Das have posited in their life experience the racial injustices that black people and Indian women have to endure and brought to light the impact of these oppressive forces on woman. These women has been conditioned by their race and gender, having suffered from the racism and sexism of American society and colonial India. The autobiographies of Lessing shows an attempt to define a personal life journey
through the evocation of their most intimate consciousness. Lessing provides an exploration of the abuse and mistreatment of black African people and subjugation of women in pre-democratic societies, as evident in her autobiographies. Lessing presents the point of view of a troubled white woman residing in Rhodesia, Whereas, Angelou presents an image of herself as an individual person.