LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

THE SEARCH FOR A HOMELAND AND CONTRADICTORY CONSCIOUSNESS IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELLING SHOES*

Leonard Obina Onwuegbuche
Department of English and Literary Studies
Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike,
Ebonyi State, Nigeria
Email:leonardonwuegbuche@yahoo.com;
leonard.onwuegbuche@funai.edu.ng
Phone: +2348033794033

Abstract

Blacks in the Diaspora have continued to exhibit an acute sense of alienation and loss as a result of their chequered history. This has engendered the need to return to their supposed homeland in Africa and assure themselves of appreciable existence devoid of the unending stigmatization and denial of their self-worth and fulfilment in the economic, social, political and psychological fronts. In the novels, Angelou arrives in Ghana with high hopes and expectations stemming from the positive political climate blowing across the continent with Ghana being among its first recipients. Particularly interesting is the feeling of being at a real home, where the populace is also black. This study, therefore, engages this avowed attempt to reconnect with the ancestral land and the attendant realization that the expected result from the enterprise may not be as handsomely rewarding against the backdrop of their anticipated homecoming. This study employs the theoretical framework of Black Feminism and E. E. B. Du Bois' double consciousness to confront the whole question of the fractured psyche of these individuals and the implications to their persona, which deserves a self-assured and fulfilled life.

Keywords: *homecoming, reconnection, double-consciousness, diaspora, self-worth and fulfilment*

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

Introduction

It is well documented that Blacks in the diaspora have at various times sought physical reconnection to their homeland. This is even more pronounced for them having been treated differently, maligned and denigrated in their new home and the new world. This desire to connect with the ancestral land continues to dominate literary works. Kamau Brathwaite epitomizes this phenomenon, not only in influencing the infusion of the Ghanian name, "Kamau" to his name but largely in his collection, *The Arrivants*. Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* captures her celebration of black womanhood and connection with her African roots as aptly demonstrated in the poem "Dahomey." Maya Angelou's fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* exemplifies an awareness of an even greater sense of connectedness with her African past. The novel chronicles her two-year stay in Ghana, and like the earlier autobiographies, the title is taken from a well-known spiritual, "All God's Children Got Wings". Angelou takes the reader to Ghana during the early 1960s, where she attempts to forge links with her historical past. Expectedly, therefore, she relates not only the personal journey of a Black American woman in search of a home, but she equally touches upon the personal journeys of other Black American expatriates searching for an African home as well. She dedicates this volume to two notable individuals, Julian Mayfield and Malcolm X who in particular were vigorously looking for their symbolic home as well.

After she visits Ghana, she is fascinated with the new environment she has come to regard as her homeland and is determined to make her own. She states:

> Our people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place not built 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

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

> jeweled crowns. There, at last, we would study war no more and, more importantly, no one would wage war against us again.
>
> The old Black deacons, ushers, mothers of the church and junior choirs only partially meant heaven as that desired destination. In the yearning, heaven and Africa were inextricably combined (19 –20)

It is pertinent to underscore here that in the late 1950's, Africa was for many Black Americans the first real opportunity to identify, and more importantly, in a positive way with what they believe is their ancestral home. With the independence drum sounding quite near in Ghana, instead of looking away from the continent, Black Americans began to focus more closely on it. Thus, the earlier and somewhat familiar feelings of indifference, rejection and repulsion about Africa were replaced by thoughts of unfettered interest, acceptance and pride in matters about the continent.

According to Stephen Butterfield, Angelou's autobiographical form is one in which the personal statement transcends the self so that the self becomes the representation of the people, and the people find a voice in the self (3). For many Black Americans, this change started to manifest with the emergence of Kwame Nkrumah as the first new African world leader, followed by other new African states with their new leaders. More also is the appearance of African Black men and women in places of power. Dolly McPherson acknowledges this development and suggests that what "Black Americans gleaned from these events was not only the spectacle of defeated White power but the more gloriously gratifying image of Blacks in positions of leadership, commanding attention and respect" (105). For the Black American, the development was scintillating, and a breath of fresh air to see their own "brothers" mounting the world stage and commanding respect.

Therefore, this period heralded the coming into the limelight of African dignitaries, who were appreciated by ordinary

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

African Americans. Africa, as symbolized by these distinguished visitors who dominated the newspapers, radios and televisions, invariably achieving national and international visibility and prominence, presented Black Americans with a new place in history. Elaborating further, in *The New World of Negro Americans*, Harold Issacs discloses that this development offered Black Americans a new link to their past and a new awareness of their historical continuity (288). Thus, in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* recapturing this mood is a mixture of Angelou's recollection and a historical documentation of the time in which it is set. Barbara Christian shares the above perspective arguing that "it is an important document drawing on more much-needed attention to the hidden history of a people both Africa and America" (23).

It is evident that mainstream feminism unashamedly accommodates the concerns and rights of white women without commensurate empathy about the condition of black women. Thus, in its realization, feminism fails to specify, as it were, any rights for women of colour. This development only encourages further the continued oppression and subjugation of coloured women in a society that preaches equality. For African American women they have always suffered ignoble oppression by their sex, race and class. This prompts Beverly Guy Sheftall to opine that, "the argument that African American women confront both a woman question and a race problem captures the essence of black feminist thought" (1). This accounts for the reason why contemporary black female writers are involved in the black feminist movement, to reclaim black women's maligned identity and suppressed existence as full-fledged beings deserving better treatment in the scheme of things. With globalization fully in place and integrated as an ideology in the world, white society employs its single economic and political structure to maintain its hegemony. As Patricia Hill Collins avers in *From Black Power*, "people of African descent and those of who are socially constructed as "Blac with their societies are routinely disadvantaged in this global economy" (7),

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

which of course helps them to keep a stranglehold on their dominance over the smaller communities. Thus, Black Feminism confronts these issues that affect and impact the lives of African American people including their identity, oppression, activism, black womanhood and motherhood. Right from the slavery era with its ignoble manifestations to the modern period, Black women's intellectual activism has been on an upward climb and realised through various forms like poetry, religious principles and beliefs, oral songs and traditions, which particularly capture the deep sufferings and oppression of the Black community. Therefore, it is proper to recognize that these traditions, for African American women, function as a theory of survival, which incentivises these women to become self-assured individuals and empower them to resist racist, sexiest and even class oppression.

Angelou's novel exemplifies the struggle of a black woman to assert her identity and become self-actualized amid the inhibition to achieving a self-fulfilling existence. Her trip to Ghana opens the age-long hostility toward black individuals in an environment that ought to be welcoming. This realization finds vent in W.E.B DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he advances the concept of double consciousness: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others… One feels his two-ness – an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, the unreconciled strivings… in one dark body (7). Thus, double consciousness creates a sense of internal conflict in the individual but also hinders his ability to realize his full potential, and most importantly thrive under that potential. Angelou's trip to Ghana and the realization that she was not welcome in the environment brings to the fore the feeling of double consciousness which captures the thrust of this study.

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

The Heightened Search for Homeland to Steady the Warring Soul

One distinct difference between *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* and other volumes in Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre is that in it, there is no confrontation of the Black self with a society that threatens to destroy it. This is evident in the fact that other autobiographies emanated in White dominated society, and even in *The Heart of a Woman* which was partly set in Egypt, the skin colour was glaring. This realization dawns on Angelou who gladly remarks that "we were Black Americans in West Africa, where for the first time in our lives the colour of our skin was accepted as correct and normal" (3). Therefore the admiration and attraction to Ghana is both symbolic and cultural for, like many Blacks, Angelou sees it more as a lost homeland. She writes:

> So I had finally come home. The prodigal child, having strayed, been stolen or sold from the land of her fathers, having squandered her mother's gifts and having laid down in cruel gutters, had at last arisen and directed herself back to the welcoming arms of the family where she would be bathed, clothed with fine raiment and seated at the welcoming table (21).

She prides herself as "one of the nearly two-hundred Black Americans" (21), from all over the United States who have all thronged into Ghana, "in the hope of living out the Biblical story" (21). Ghana is the place they see as the fountainhead of Pan Africanism, where Black people all over the world will converge, in a continent from where they also started. Accordingly, Christian sees Angelou's story as "a thoughtful yet spirited account of one Afro-American woman's journey into the land of her ancestors" (23). She went on to say that such a sojourn in Africa invariably strengthens her bond to her ancestral home even as she concretely experiences her distinctiveness as an African American.

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

In the study, "American Autobiography: The Changing Critical Canon," Bloom and Yu observe that American autobiography is undergoing a radical transformation from the usual elitist group of works, mainly by educated White men to literature much more encompassing and representative of the American society, in gender, race, and class (183). This could aptly describe *Travelling Shoes*, whose focal point remains a middle-class Black woman in Ghana, West Africa, engulfed with an unquenching desire to find her roots and, most importantly, not feel threatened by the racial hate experienced in America.

Instead, Angelou is not only fascinated by the sights and sounds of Ghana but more deeply by the Ghanaian people who remind her of Arkansas and California pasts. Angelou describes:

> Their skins were the colours of my childhood cravings: peanut butter, liquorice, chocolate, caramel. Theirs was the laughter of home quick and without artifice. The erect and graceful walk of the women reminded me of my Arkansas Grandmother, Sunday-hatted, on her way to church. I listened to men talk, and whether or not I understood their meaning, there was a melody as familiar as sweet potato pie, reminding me of my Uncle Tommy Baxter in Santa Monica, California (20-21).

The admiration for Ghana was enhanced, as she included stories of both ordinary people and important African dignitaries. As Christian underscores, the reader gets a sense of Ghanaian society and of the autobiographer's perception as a Black American woman who is linked to Africans by race and culture (35). She felt the warmth of the people and society different from what she had felt elsewhere in her travels.

Buttressing this further, Lyman Hagen states that "Angelou revels in the vitality of the native and expatriate people she meets… bonds with the landscape and the history of the country"

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

(110). The scene in which Kojo her house boy's family travelled from Akwapin to Accra to "bring thanks" to Angelou, lends credence to the cultural bonds between Africans and Black Americans. And most importantly, this very act symbolizes the family's love for and pride in the young Kojo. Angelou describes them "by their bearing, clothes, and jewelry, it was evident that Kojo's family was high-born and well-to-do. If they had travelled from Akwapin by lorry to thank me, it was also clear that they treasured the boy" (73).

This obvious demonstration of love for, and pride in Kojo by his family shows cultural similarities between Africans and Black Americans. The ordinary people are thankful for the kind of influence she is wielding and the opportunity available to the young man. As the family elder points out" "without payment and without knowing his family, your Auntie and your sisters are teaching our Kojo the Brioni (White) ways of thinking…" (74). This situation is earlier seen in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the aristocrat of Stamps, Arkansas without payment brings the young Angelou out of her cocoon after the rape incident, and teaches her the ways of life.

It is important also to point out the behaviour of the people as they thronged into Angelou's living room. After the family had gathered in a formal circle in the living room, "the older people sat", while "the younger visitors remained standing", and the family elder spoke on their behalf. This cultural order regularly seen in African literature, is echoed in Gwen Patton's study, "Black People and the Victorian Ethos". She states:

> True Black people must go back to the roots of African culture, and they will find that the African family acted as a unit with each member contributing positively, while the warrior went hunting for food, the mother and the children would fight off invaders and enemies and while the mother tilled the earth, the father would tend the children (147).

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

Angelou, in *Travelling Shoes* also confronts the issue of the slave trade and the involvement of Africans. Unlike many Black writers who do not attempt to write about such acts, Angelou instead exemplifies the determination and courage she brings to bear on issues concerning her existence, to also speak out on such matters, lending credence to the feministic ideals this current study propagates. Her journey to the village of Dunkwa offers the opportunity to reflect on this betrayal. Even though many people on arriving in Ghana rushed to Cape Coast to see the two castles: Cape Coast and Elmina, used for captured slaves before being shipped off, Angelou had cleverly avoided it.

However, on this particular trip, a bitter taste was left in her mouth as she reminisced about this ignoble trade:

> I allowed the shapes to come to my imagination: children passed tied together by ropes and chains, tears abashed, stumbling in dull exhaustion, then women, hair uncombed, bodies gritted with sand, and sagging in defeat. Men, muscles without memory, minds dimmed, prodding, leaving bloodied footprints in the dirt. The quiet was awful. None of them cried, or yelled, or bellowed. No moans came from them. They lived in a mute territory, dead to feeling and protest. These were the legions, sold by sisters, stolen by brothers, bought by strangers, enslaved by the greedy and betrayed by history (98).

There is no doubt that the question of the slave trade remains a blight in human history and existence. Paula Marshall revisits this subject in her account of FESTAC '77 in *Triangular Road* (2009) when the *Omawalies* (the returnees) marched in the stadium: "Because hadn't their forebears been complicit, some of them, in the nefarious trade that reduced ours – the forebears of the present day *Omawalies* – to mere articles of trade, commodities, merchandise, goods, cargo, chattel cargo…And hadn't that commerce, continuing for five centuries, left us, their descendants,

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

today's *Omowalies*, feeling at times like permanently displaced persons?" (159-160). Therefore any contact with the remainder of such an ugly past would elicit a horrendous feeling of regrettable past. According to Hagen, Angelou "reacts with great sadness and revulsion upon realizing the insidious involvement of brother tribesmen in the evil slave trade" (108). She is particularly quipped by the unbridled activities of the participants, especially in relishing this kind of trade in humans. It is held widely in many circles that the extent of this ignoble adventure continues to dominate and perpetuate literary works.

Challenges of Change in the Struggle to Situate Oneself Amid Identity Turbulence

Angelou's resilience could be seen in her ability to face the challenges of existence squarely, and most importantly, to make the right decisions. The trip to Ghana was mainly to enroll Guy into the University of Ghana, and then continue on her way to Liberia. Incidentally, Guy was injured in an automobile accident, just days after arriving in Ghana. Angelou was constantly by his side, worried stiff about his condition, and tending to him. As she recalls:

> I had lived with my family until my son was born in my sixteenth year. When he was two months old and perched on my left hip, we left my mother's house and together, save for one year when I was touring, we had been each other's home and centre for seventeen years (5).

This protection comes to the fore also, when she realizes that Guy was dating a woman older than himself. A frightening thought of life without her son dawns on her, as she asks; "How could his life be separate from my life? I had been a mother of a child so long I had no preparation for life on any other level" (149). This internal questioning of self finds vent in Paula Giddings's appraisal of

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

Black American women's literature as compared to Black men's literature, arguing that, "the Black woman tended to look within, while her male peers concentrated on the external forces that shaped their lives" (46).

It is, therefore, no surprise to discover Angelou's sense of loss at her son, whose "existence had defined her own" (150), apparently pulling away from her. As Robert Staples discloses, in the African-American community, "motherhood represents maturity and the fulfilment of one's function as a woman" (153), a function that she has been able to carry up till now as a single parent, and a burden that Guy constantly made light of with his acute "sense of humour, attraction for puns and affection for Angelou" (150). Thus, she feels that at long last they have each other to themselves. And now that they could live for each other in Ghana, a place devoid of the racial hate they always encounter. Instead, he is spirited away by a "cradle robber". As Carol Boyce Davies submits in *Ngambika*, “motherhood is crucial to the happiness of the woman and her ability to control her life” (245). It exemplifies Angelou’s thoughts and dreams. Guy is the centre of her world and she was ready to go to any length for him.

Even though she had a job waiting for her in Liberia, her trip to Ghana was to enrol Guy at the University of Ghana, a reputable institution in West Africa. McPherson points out that:

> Underneath the articulated reasons are, however, other impulses which have brought Angelou to this place: the need to leave Egypt, following her broken marriage to Vusumzi Make, and her decision to bring up her son in a country of Blacks governed by Blacks (105).

Her cantankerous marriage to the freedom fighter, Vus Make left a big scar on her mind and psyche, so that when the opportunity to leave Egypt and come to Ghana emerged, it was a welcome relief. But the feeling of having found a home was not to last forever. It was just a matter of months for Angelou to realize that her delight

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

in her ancestral homeland was not reciprocated, that Ghana was not the glory land she had expected eventually. McPherson observes that she, "is forced to admit that the familiar race discrimination of America is replaced by African bias and hostility against American outsiders" (112). This is the crux of the matter, as her expectations of a more settled and secure environment that addresses her fears and concerns as blacks were thrown into jeopardy.

An incident at the Ghana Broadcasting Company where she had gone for employment lends credence to the above awakening. The unexpected confrontation with the receptionist at the *Ghanaian Times* elicits this comment:

> Was it possible that I and all American Blacks had been wrong on other occasions? Could the cutting treatment we often experienced have been stimulated by something other than our features, our hair and colour? Was the odour of old slavery so obvious that people were offended and lashed out at us automatically? Had what we judged as racial prejudice less to do with race and more to do with our particular ancestors' bad luck at having been caught, sold and driven like beasts? (35).

Angelou continues to ask herself what she and other Blacks have gone to merit such treatment. She goes ahead to configure that:

> The receptionist and I could have been sisters, or in fact, might be cousins far removed. Yet her scorn was no different from the supercilious rejections of Whites in the United States…. The questions temporarily sobered my intoxication with Africa. For a few days, I examined whether in looking for a home, I and all the emigres were running from a bitter truth that rode lightly but forever at home on our shoulders (35).

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

The rude awakening to the realisation of how she is perceived was overwhelming. It is important to state here that through this particular experience, Angelou discovers that being Black in a Black country has its frustrations and limitations. McPherson points out too, that "whether she likes it or not, she begins to discover that she is a Black American, and that in Africa, she is a Black American in exile" (113).

This scenario throws up a challenge to her, as she attempts to define herself and most importantly her aspirations against her preconceptions of Africa as a motherland. Therefore, she is forced to confront her expectations, as well as those of others, invariably gaining appreciable insight into herself and her compatriots, a process, that gradually transpires and makes her aware of the naivety of their expectations, thereby realizing that Africa provides escape but not redemption to their warring soul. She and other Blacks may have thought they had found a home in Africa, but it eventually turned out not so.

Angelou therefore espouses the theme of Africa being a place, not a home, and so captures succinctly, the inherent contradiction of being Black yet American. This dichotomy comes to the fore after the attempt on the life of Ghanaian President, Kwame Nkrumah, as the Black American expatriates are suspected of masterminding the crime. This incident speaks volumes and lays bare the strong perception of Black Americans in their return journey to Africa. Angelou recollects that accusing fingers went flying: “America can use its Black citizens to infiltrate Africa and sabotage our struggle because the Negro’s complexion is a perfect disguise. Be wary, Africa, of the Peace Corps Blacks, the AID Blacks, and the Foreign Service Blacks" (80), which had gained traction among the populace and served to heighten the suspicion of Black Americans and fulfilled Angelou's classification of herself as a political emigre. This ugly development put Blacks on a difficult pedestal. Even though none of the Black expatriates are directly accused, the experience alters them in small ways, making them somewhat less giddy and even less certain of their "place" in

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

Ghana. Again, Angelou recalls "We saw ourselves as frail rafts on an ocean of political turbulence. If we were not welcome in Ghana, the most progressively Black nation in Africa, where would we find harbour?" (80).

Double Consciousness and Contradictory Self in the Black Woman's Journey

Quite significantly, another concern espoused in *Travelling Shoes*, is one of Angelou's growing confrontations with her double consciousness, one that captures both her American and African selves. As she revels in her love for Ghana, especially in certain connections between her traditions and those of her African ancestors, she and other Blacks are torn within themselves in their feelings towards America. Angelou recalls this split feeling in an event by the Black American community to support the Washington March with a demonstration at the U.S. Embassy in Accra, when two guards came to raise the American flag:

> As the flag ascended, our jeering increased. A careful listener could have heard new vehemence in our shouts. We were scorning the symbol of hypocrisy and hope. Many of us had begun to realize in Africa that the stars and stripes were "our flag and our only flag, and that knowledge was almost too painful to bear. We could physically return to Africa, find jobs, learn languages, and even marry and remain on African soil all our lives, but we were born in the United States, and it was the United States which had rejected, enslaved, exploited, then denied us (127).

Even as the news of the death of Dr W. E. B. DuBois reaches the demonstrators, their response, though sad at the turn of events, engendered a renewed sense of commitment as they marched and sang, honouring the man who said in 1904, that the

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the colour line. But as Angelou reveals:

> I shuddered to think that while we wanted that flag dragged into the mud and sullied beyond repair, we also wanted it pristine, its White strips, summer cloud White. Watching its waves in the breeze of a distance made us nearly choke with emotion. It lifted us with its promise and broke our hearts with denial (127).

Therefore, despite the vocal invectives hurled at the United States, it remains obvious that the sneers, however, did not hide their longing for full citizenship under that "undulating flag," embracing, double consciousness, one of the planks on which this study hinges. Thus, the flag of America, Madan avers, "was a poignant reminder that the Black American identity is derived from this very flag and not from Africa. America never ceases to be the central point of reference in the consciousness of the self-exiled subjects" (256). While one acknowledges racism as one of the focal points of her autobiographies, in *Travelling Shoes* Angelou is exposed to the prejudices that are inherent in various Black groups. This realization only goes to show that racism is not peculiar to whites alone. Just like Martin Luther King Jr. in *The Heart of a Woman*, Malcolm X in *Travelling Shoes* is expansive and open, a man who is learning, and not tied to a particular position but instead is in love with truth. Malcolm X's transformation came on his trip to Mecca, accounting for his new philosophical stance and approach to the race issue: "On this journey to Mecca, I met a White man with blue eyes, whom I can call brother with conviction. That means that I am forced to reconsider statements I have made in the past and I must have the courage to speak up and out about these reconsiderations" (130).

This new awareness, he was convinced was exactly what Black Americans who were in dire need of truth deserved. This

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

was manifest before the end of his visit to Ghana when Angelou lashes out angrily about Shirley DuBois' lack of identity with the Black American struggle and isolation from the people, Malcolm X admonishes her:

> Don't be in a hurry to condemn a person because he doesn't do what You do, or think as you think or as fast. There was a time when you didn't know what you know today… When you hear that the Urban League or NAACP is giving a formal at the Waldorf-Astoria, I know that you won't go, but don't knock them. They give scholarships to poor Black children. One of those recipients might become Julian Mayfield, or, a Maya Angelou, or a Malcolm X (145).

It is important therefore to posit that the above awareness sums up the quiet reflection and introspection that characterise *Travelling Shoes*. Mary Jane Lupton sheds more light on this, arguing that the "perfectly formed" thought at the end of *The Heart of a Woman* is Angelou's realization of a new "myself," of a woman no longer primarily defined as granddaughter or daughter or mother – a woman free to choose herself" (272).

Travelling Shoes depicts Angelou, moving away from her son, Guy and forming new relationships. Delighting in her experiences with other women, her boy Kojo, and his family, she basks in her contacts with the Black American writers and artists living in Ghana, and her love affair with Africa. However, she records and experiences the pain and disappointment a mother undergoes when her boy becomes a "big confident strange man, who in turn refuses to be his "mother's appendage"; "he's gone. My lovely little boy is gone and will never return. That big confident strange man has done away with my little boy, and he has the gall to say he loves me. How can he love? He doesn't know me, and I sure as hell don't know him" (186). But despite this apparent loss, Guy has become a link even through his

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

interaction and bonding with the Ghanaians, “a young lord” of Africa handed back to the continent, different from many other children in slavery. Angelou reasons within herself, believing that “someone like me and certainly related to me” will inevitably encourage new bonds too, between himself and Africa (208).

Interestingly, towards the end of *Travelling Shoes*, the struggle, to go home becomes more and more intense for Angelou. As McPherson reveals, "Angelou examines her ambiguous feeling about "going home" and faces painful truths about slavery and Black betrayal, and about the joys and disappointments of living in Ghana" (117). However, despite her determination to fit into the Ghanaian way of life, she is homesick and inevitably decides to return home: "If the heart of Africa 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" (196). Instructively, her desire to be part of the Ghanaian community at the beginning gives way to the realization later that she will always be seen as a foreigner. As Alice Godfrey points out, "her stay in Ghana helps her to come to term with her African roots, a necessary step to fulfilling her identity quest before returning to her home in the United States" (36). In this volume, the quest seems complete. McPherson argues that while all of Angelou's work reflects an "awareness of her own personal journey from ignorance to enlightenment, *Travelling Shoes* represents the autobiographer’s very conscious awareness of that transition” (117).

In presenting the above experiences, Angelou gives us an insight into valuable and life-determining truths about the world. Therefore her concerns with family and community as well as her conceptions of herself are palpable throughout her work. The way she faces these concerns offers instruction into the range of survival strategies available particularly to Black women in America, and at the same time, offers equally important insights into Black traditions and culture.

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

These insights cannot be underestimated especially for Blacks whose belief in the strong family as a mitigating influence is aptly captured in the themes of motherhood, marriage and love. Angelou's conquest in the harsh world is largely traceable to the foundation Momma Henderson laid for her, as well as that of her mother, and Stamps aristocrat, Bertha Flowers in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The segregated Black community also had life and warmth, and so provided some measure of comfort for the young girl despite racism. The community that made her understand the ways and wisdom of her people eventually helped shape her as she was thrust into the outside world. Therefore the basic concerns of overcoming difficulties and most importantly finding self-worth are continuously advanced in the novel.

The Artist Shapes Her Art

Maya Angelou's autobiographies have on various occasions been extolled in the Black autobiographical tradition. In *Travelling Shoes* her honed technique is an exemplification of earlier volumes of her autobiography, in that, her tale is centrally episodic and has rich descriptive details. She intersperses her tale with anecdotes. In the words of McPherson, "Angelou tells many stories within the larger story while focusing on her major theme of a Black American's search for home" (108). Similarly, Hagen submits that "the structure of *Travelling Shoes* follows Angelou's pattern as an "anthology of anecdotes" (111). It is safe to suggest that coming from the background of earlier autobiographies, Angelou has attained an appreciable level of competency that readily distinguishes *Travelling Shoes.* Her penchant for inventive metaphors, and imbuing human qualities on inanimate objects remains dominant. For instance, in reaction to Shirley DuBois' attitude during Malcolm X's visit to Ghana, she reveals that: "for me sleep was difficult that night. My bed was lumpy with anger and pillow a rock of intemperate umbrage" (142). Angelou also points out Malcolm X's use of metaphors in discussing racism, comparing it with a mountain: "Picture American racism as a

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

mountain. Now slice that mountain from the top to the bottom and open it like a door. Do you see all the lines, the strata...? "Those are the strata of American life and we are being attacked on each one" (145).

Again, Angelou's descriptive power is on high display in *Travelling Shoes*, which not only enhances the mental picture but also presents passages that are emotional and at the same time, fascinating. About the horror of the slave trade and the involvement of Africans in the horrific enterprise, she describes: "These were the legions, sold by sisters, stolen by brothers, bought by strangers, enslaved by the greedy and betrayed by history" (98). Angelou also skillfully describes the differences as well as similarities, between the Black Americans and their African brothers through an apt portrayal of ordinary people as "small boys," and equally the portrayal of important personalities. It is important to point out here that Angelou favours stories of both the ordinary and high and mighty in Africa, particularly Ghanaian society and her perceptions, fundamentally as a black American woman whose lineage to Africa is occasioned by race and culture. This could be gleaned from the scene in which Angelou writes movingly about the culture between Black Americans and Africans when she describes the family of Kojo, who had come on a visit to her in appreciation of her role in Kojo's life.

As seen in earlier autobiographies, Angelou continues to include Biblical quotations and mother-wit depicting her background and roots in Stamps, Arkansas. Quoting from grandmother, Momma Henderson's renowned perception: "If you want to know how important you are to the world, stick your finger in a pond and pull it out. Will the hole remain?" (135). Angelou continues to sprinkle her stories with such, even as she embarks on her search for home. The same goes for flashback which traditionally is part and parcel of autobiographical writings. Mention must be made that true to the level of competence she has attained in her autobiography, Angelou alters the form in this volume by abandoning the poem an old spiritual song she starts

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

with, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Heart of a Woman* respectively. Instructively, this level of confidence could also account for her abandoning the practice of numbering each segment in the earlier volumes but instead choosing to leave a blank space that separates, perhaps one chapter from the other. This technique, however, means that each section of this volume can be looked at separately on its merit, and possibly stand on its own. This clearly shows a writer who is in absolute control of her art, as this autonomy does not impede the coherence of the entire novel. Writing in *Masterpieces of African-American Literature*, Majorie Smelstar acquiesces that, "the thematic unity of this autobiography, its weaving of many threads into one fabric about home, is its greatest strength" (4).

Conclusion

The return to root phenomenon has continued to plague Blacks wherever they are found. It is this, that makes them seize any opportunity to assure their existence, and gladly embrace with wide open arms any linkage to their ancestral homeland in Africa. But despite the ensuing excitement from this venture, it has become somewhat a stillborn. As evinced in *Travelling Shoes*, Ghana, with all the promises and expectations, Angelou came away with the feeling that their true home invariably is the United States, and not Ghana, obviously casting huge doubt on the return to root phenomenon They are not accepted wholly in the environment they had yearned for and travelled long to belong. Thus, the journey motif is at the forefront of the American experience, be it, Black or White American. This quest for, and recognition of individual identity remains a dominant focus of Black American autobiography as it borders on the meaning of one's existence. It is also worth noting that the whole question of identity, is not viewed in isolation but rather connected with the race issue.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* New York: Random House, 1970.

_____*The Heart of a Woman*. New York: Random House, 1981.

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

_____. *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. New York: Random House, 1986.

Brathwaite, Kamau. *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Butterfield, Stephen. *Black Autobiography in America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974.

Bloom, Lynn Z and Ning Yu. "American Autobiography: The Changing Critical Canon." *Autobiography Studies,* Vol 9, no. 2, 1994, pp. 167 – 180.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

Davies, Carol Boyce. "Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa and Nzekwu." *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature,* edited by Carol Boyce Davies and Anne Adam Graves.
Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990, pp. 241 -250.

DuBois, Williams. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Giddings, Paula. "A Special Vision, A Common Goal." *Encore,* no.23, 1975, pp. 44–48.

Godfrey, Alice. "When I Think About Myself: Identity Building Processes in Maya Angelou's Autobiographical Sequel." *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction*, edited by Kersten W. Shands, et al. Stockholm: Elanders, 2015,
pp. 29-37.

Hagen, Lyman B. *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou.* New York: University Press of America, 1997.

Issacs, Harold A. *The New World of Negro Americans*. New York: Viking Compass Edition, 1969.

Lorde, Audrey. *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.

Lupton, Mary Jane. "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical

LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2025, 22(1): 343-364
www.universalacademicservices.org

LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©March 2025
RESEARCH

Continuity." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol 24, no. 2, 1990, pp. 257 -276

Madan, Disha. "A Journey Within the Journey Explored in Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes." IJCRT: International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol 9, no. 5, May 2021, pp.253 - 258

McPherson, Dolly A. *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou.* New York: Peter Lang, 1990.

Marshall, Paula. *Triangular Road: A Memoir*. New York: Basic*Civitas* Books, 2009.

Patton, Gwen. "Black People and the Victorian Ethos." *The Black Woman*, edited by Toni Cade. New York: A Mentor Book, 1970, pp. 25 – 37.

Smelstar, Majorie. "All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes." *Masterpieces of African American Literature,* edited by Frank Magill. New York: Harper Collins, 1992, pp. 1- 4.

Staples, Robert. *The Black Women in America*. Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1973.