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## A Deconstructive Reading of Maya Angelou's *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*

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### Abstract

The present paper offers an in-depth study of, the Black American author, Maya Angelou's, third autobiography *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*. Given the established societal norms of Afro-American life, through the present book, she deconstructs the traditional notion of race, identity, gender, and the narrative style, and re-establishes a more dynamic, powerful, and coming of age story pattern. Using Derridean deconstructive technique, this research paper investigates how Maya Angelou encapsulates and challenges the notion of societal binaries i.e., Black /White, freedom/constraint, public/private, self/other, and joy/sorrow etc., and destabilizes the set societal roles to a more fluid and evolving identity. Additionally, by examining the cross textual references, linguistic hybridity- a more deconstructive approach to language, and the dynamic narrative structure of the story, this paper encapsulates the deconstructive nature of Angelou's narrative style and identity formation with her continuously shifting personality representation.

**Keywords-** African-American, identity, self, black, binary oppositions, gender, race, intertextuality, freedom, protest.

### Introduction

The prominent Black American author, civil right activist, dancer, singer and acclaimed scholar, Marguerite Anne Johnson, famously known as Maya Angelou, along with her seven famous autobiographies, has contributed to the literary world several extraordinary poetic collections, essays, plays, screenplays, children's books, and other works. Third in the series of autobiographies, her book *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), incorporates Angelou's journey of her experiences as black into the world of show business of white society. Contrary to the conventional pattern of memoirs—portraying a unified, and coherent self—Angelou's book represents the fragmented self of the protagonist and her shifting identity in a predominantly racial and gender biased society. Narrating her complex life experiences from doing several kinds of jobs to becoming an accomplished stage performer in Europe, Angelou deconstructs the concept of a stable and singular

identity, and simultaneously offers a deconstructive study of traditional binaries present in the story to decipher the rootlessness of certain performative roles.

### Research Methodology

The present research uses deconstructive approach as propounded by French philosopher, Jacques Derrida to carry out a close reading of Maya Angelou's autobiography *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*. Through the deconstructive reading of Angelou's narrative, the present study attempts to reveal how the author, struggling with the internal conflicts and contradictory thought process, ultimately destabilizes the fixed meaning located at the core of society. One of the central focuses of this research is Derrida's concept of *différance*, which will be employed to analyze continuously shifting, fluid, and never fully complete or stabilized identity of the central character. Another key terms from Derrida's deconstructive theory, including as logocentrism, and binary oppositions, are also used in this study to explore the instability of meaning in Angelou's work. By acknowledging scenarios where the text subverts standard binary oppositions – such as black/white, male/female, and self/other – the study examines how Angelou subtly challenges established conceptions of identity and experience and typical logocentric norms by providing a spectrum of viewpoints that question absolute facts.

The qualitative research approach will be used, to identify the deeper, and more complex meanings embedded in the text, and to explore the socio-cultural expectations that shape one's identity in accordance with race and gender. This research helps to investigate how Angelou's narrative first constructs, then deconstructs, and finally reconstructs the self, offering insights into the shifting and dynamic nature of identity formation.

To maintain consistency throughout this research paper, the protagonist of *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* is referred to as "Maya," and the author as "Angelou."

### Literature Review

Deconstruction, as implied by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967), gives a framework for understanding how language and meaning can always be delayed, continually in flux, and never totally fixed. Smith's critique of binary oppositions – such as speech/writing, presence/absence, and self/other – suggests that meaning is constantly reliant upon context and is easily subject to ongoing change. In the context of autobiography, this means that the self being represented is always already divided, formed by the expectations and perceptions of others (Derrida). In this regard Smith and Watson write "the self is a fiction, an illusion constituted in discourse, a hypothetical place or space of storytelling. A true self can never be discovered, unmasked, or revealed..." (Smith and Watson 206).

The application of deconstruction to autobiographical texts has been a critical field of study since the 1970s. Paul de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-facement" (1979) is one of the basic texts in this subject, suggesting that autobiography is intrinsically fluctuating since the autobiographical self is always something that is mediated by language. De Man maintains that the self depicted in autobiography is constantly split between the narrator and the narrated context, establishing an essential inconsistency in any attempt to present a unified identity (de Man).

In this particular instance of Maya Angelou's autobiographies, scholars pointed out the ways in which her narrative challenges conventional notions of autobiography as a genre. In her work *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* Dolly A. McPherson hints that Angelou's autobiographies reverse the notion of a singular, cohesive self, instead exhibiting a self that is continually evolving in response to social, cultural, and racial influences, thus emphasizing her resistance to conventional structures and coherent identity formation (McPherson). Similarly, critic Pierre A. Walker claims that Maya Angelou's autobiographies follow the course of African-American political protest writing, bringing out themes of racial injustice and resistance. Her autobiographies,

beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, chronicle her journey from feeling powerless against racism to developing forms of subtle and active protest, highlighting a cohesive growth in her resistance to injustice (Walker).

Bell Hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, contends that Black women go through particular forms of oppression due to multiple layered racial and gender stereotypes that define them through demeaning cliches, such as the “matriarch” and the “temptress”. She attacks these stereotypes as constraints on Black women’s identities imposed by societal expectations and historical oppression (Hooks). Maya Angelou’s autobiographies resonate with Hooks’s ideas by defying these prejudices and offering a broad, evolving depiction of Black womanhood. Through her narratives, Angelou resists singular categories, illustrating a self formed by cultural, social, and racial influences – demonstrating resilience and resistance against confining identities, much like Hooks emphasizes in her lectures on Black feminist philosophy.

The present study builds on these insightful findings by using a deconstructive framework to Angelou’s narrative, investigating how her exploration of identity, race, and performance exposes the underlying instability of these ideas. By focusing on the moments of ambiguity and contradiction in the book, this study tries to discover the ways in which Angelou’s narrative both develops and deconstructs her sense of self.

## Discussion

In Maya Angelou’s autobiography *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, deconstruction allows an in-depth knowledge of identity, revealing the cultural and personal inconsistencies Angelou navigates. By dissolving binary divisions such as public/private and freedom/constraints, we identify the multifaceted, shifting character of her self-expression. Through this perspective, Angelou’s narrative resists simplistic readings, exposing the richness of her multilayered identity as evolved through the interplay of cultural, racial, gender and linguistic factors. Nana Wilson-Tague also posits that the evaluation of African women writing should highlight “gender as a fundamental category in literary analysis enabling the critic to see representations in texts as mediated by sexual difference and the aesthetic and political assumptions that surrounded gender (Olorunleke 83). Deconstruction, therefore, gives a framework to investigate the dynamic and layered aspects of identity, allowing readers to comprehend the fluidity and complexity inherent in her autobiographical narrative.

## Analysis of Binary Oppositions in the work

One of the most notable binary oppositions that Angelou’s writing deconstructs is that between identity and alienation. She often exhibits a notion of the loss of her identity and demonstrates a sense of alienation. Swan and Sarabjit state, “In African-American women’s writing there is a recurrent pattern of concern with identity formation” (Swain and Sarabjit 90). Throughout the narrative, Angelou’s concept of self is repeatedly shifted by her experiences, subverting the notion of a fixed and stable identity. Her travels with the cast of “Porgy and Bess,” where she must navigate several cultural identities, are a prime example of this fluidity. Angelou adds, “I was different-not African, but nearly; not American, but nearly” (Angelou 181). The complexities of her situation are captured in her statement, which highlights her sense of estrangement from both African and American identities while yet reaffirming her ties to both. According to Geyer and Schweitzer, “the loss of identity is alienation... it leads to powerlessness, the lack of control over various aspects of existence” (Swain and Sarabjit 89). The idea of reciprocal identity – where each term contains its opposite – is structurally reinforced by Maya’s use of chiasmus in her sentence. Although she finds herself suffering from racial prejudice, she also represents her complex sense of self. Her perpetually evolving identity occasionally let her cry over her racial background, as she recounts, “decision had been made for me by the centuries of slavery, the violation of my people, the violence of whites. 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;" however on other occasions she accepts her Americanism, "whether I would take pride in the fact publicly or not, I was an American" (Angelou 28, 230).

Beyond physical and cultural borders, Angelou's personal relationships and sense of community are influenced by this intricate identity struggle. When she marries Tosh Angelos, a Greek-American guy, her mother warns her of the rejection she would face from both black and white communities, her mother adds "Think ahead. What the hell is he bringing you? The disdain of his people and the suspicion of your own. That's a hell of a wedding gift" (30). Talking on "public reactions" to her marriage to Tosh, Angelou constantly lives in self-doubt that maybe she is betraying her own race while marrying a man of different race. She swindles herself by telling herself "Tosh, I told myself, was Greek, not white American; therefore, I needn't feel I had betrayed my race by marrying one of the enemies" further she reveals, "But I dropped my eyes when we met Negroes. I couldn't explain to all of them that my spouse had not been part of our degradation (35). The idea that identification and community belonging are always synonymous is undermined by this sentiment, which shows how the quest for personal identity can result in a feeling of estrangement from one's cultural heritage. The contrast between individual choice and communal expectations becomes a recurring element in Angelou's tale, showing the varied aspect of identity development. That feeling of alienation is also rooted in the course of her experience as a famous singer from Black race, when meeting with White people her racial identity never let her go, in a meeting a White woman calls her, "'How now, brown cow?' I knew or should have known it would be a matter of time before some racial remark would be made. Here this chit was calling me a brown cow" (79).

The idea of double consciousness, as proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois, can be used to interpret Angelou's examination of race in the book. Du Bois defines double consciousness as a feeling of "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others," in particular for African Americans who must reconcile their own self-perception with how they are perceived by a predominantly white society (Bois). Angelou's narrative revolves around this idea of double consciousness, as she must constantly balance her internal sense of self with the expectations that are placed on her by others given her race as a Black woman in a white-dominated entertainment industry.

Maya contemplate, for instance, her encounters with Louise, a white woman who offers her a position at a record store. Confused by Louise's generosity, Maya wonders why she did it: "What did I have that she wanted? Why did she allow me to walk away with her property? She didn't know me" (Angelou 6). The above passage illustrates the inner turmoil Maya goes through while attempting to comprehend her position in a society where her identity as a Black woman is constantly viewed via a white perspective. Maya's confusion as she negotiates connections with white people is reflected in her worry that Louise's acts could be driven by sympathy or a sense of racial superiority. Maya's sense of doubt towards Ms. Louise, a white woman's behaviour is comprehensible with the help of Paul Freire's argument, "the behavioral pattern of the oppressed makes unquestioned acceptance of the guidelines of the oppressor. The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor, remain fearful of their own freedom. Freire argues:

The malady of internalization results out of self-hatred and inferiority that the oppressed feels towards him. The personality of the Black Americans is a product of and a response to all of the historical forces of American Society. Racism and white supremacy leave devastating effects on the whole extant of the psychic universe of black persons they even shape attitudes towards themselves." (Kulkarni 21)

The instability of racial categories is revealed in this moment from a deconstructive perspective. By raising doubts about Louise's intentions, Maya Angelou raises question on the Black-white binary and implies that race is a category that is continually negotiated in social relations rather than being a

fixed or obligatory one. Demonstrating Derrida's theory of *différance*, it can be said that racial identity, like all identities, is always postponed, never totally settled, and always altered by the interaction of personal experiences and societal expectations.

Closely associated with this investigation of identity is the struggle between freedom and limitation, another essential binary opposition in Angelou's narrative. Her ambition for performing arts and her travels abroad represent a type of liberty as she explains "My life was arranging itself as neatly as marble staircase and I was climbing stars (Angelou 108)," yet she is confined by societal expectations and her own internal conflicts. She deliberately let her husband confine her, Angelou writes, "I came to love Tosh because he wrapped us in a cocoon of safety, and I made no protest at the bonds that were closing around my existence" (32). In another remark she confesses, "I clung to Tosh, surrendering more of my territory, my independence.... I would be an obedient, dutiful wife, restricting our arguments to semantic differences, never contradicting the substance of his views" (Angelou 35). This remark deconstructs the notion of freedom, presenting it as a negotiated and often compromised reality as expected by society. The contrast of "wrapped" and "surrendering" further highlights the fluid nature of liberation in Angelou's perspective, implying that personal autonomy is always intertwined in a web of social and emotional commitments.

Angelou's sense of freedom is further complicated by the limitations of motherhood, which adds another level of complexity to her identity quest. While her profession offers liberation and joy, it also necessitates separation from her loving son, hence sorrow. As a single mother, Angelou faces the issue of reconciling her dream job with her responsibilities to her son, Clyde. Angelou's reflections on the challenge of leaving Clyde with a babysitter while working several jobs are among the text's most moving passages: "For two years we had spun like water spiders in a relentless eddy. I had to be free to work for our support, but the baby-sitters were so expensive I had to have two jobs to pay their fees and my own rent" (12). The conflict between Angelou's desire to support her child and the financial constraints that compel her to put her work first is encapsulated in this passage. Her identity as a mother is thus shattered, as she is continually tugged between the responsibilities of her career and personal life.

Given how social, cultural, and economic factors influence one's identity, Maya's own identity as a mother is unstable, which is a reflection of identity instability in general. She, perpetually, was living in a state of anxiety, she notes, "I knew I shouldn't have left my son. There was a telegram waiting for me to say he had been hurt somehow" (169). Additionally, she often threatened herself with the notion "How would he perceive a mother who, in a desperate thrust for freedom, left her own child" (Angelou 260). This ongoing conflict challenges the notion of freedom as the mere absence of restrictions by highlighting the close relationships between personal freedom and emotional ties and responsibility. Furthermore, it emphasizes how gendered freedom is, as Angelou struggles with maternal responsibilities while pursuing her dream.

Angelou's narrative repeatedly challenges the binary opposition between joy and sorrow, which is implied by the book's title, which emphasizes "singin'," "swingin'," and "getting" merry." The text illustrates how these emotional states are inseparable by contrasting happy experiences with deep sadness and self-doubt. Angelou describes how she grows personally and professionally while on her European tour, writing, "Popularity was an intoxicant and I swayed drunkenly for months" (Angelou 99). Yet her conflictual identity never let her live devoid of self doubt and anxiety, during her tour when Maya comes to know that she was not going to perform, her swift reply was, "My fears that I had been forgotten turned out to be baseless" (Angelou 147). Her European vacation was also filled with wonderful experiences, but they are diminished with feelings of guilt and longing for her kid. For her, seeing her kid was more exciting than the beauty of traveling the world, the benefits of having a stable income, or the thrill of meeting new people. The assertion challenges the idea that joy and sorrow are mutually exclusive and illustrates the depth of emotional experience in Angelou's life.

Throughout the story, Angelou struggles with the conflict between her private identity as a Black woman, mother, and artist; and her public identity as a performer. Her choice to alter her name from Marguerite Johnson to Maya Angelou is among the most important instances in the book, where her identity is influenced by the demands of her profession and the expectations of others. As she writes, "Drop the 's' and add a 'u'. Maya Angelou" (Angelou 96). The need to establish a marketable persona that meets the demands of her audience and co-workers is reflected in the act of renaming.

The name "Maya Angelou" becomes a symbol of the gap between her inner existence and the public character she must present. In Derrida's terminology, the name reflects *différance* – the distance between the signifier (the name) and the signified (the self it is expected to represent). The name "Maya Angelou" is not a true reflection of Marguerite Johnson, but rather an artificial label placed upon her by expectations of society. This demonstrates how identity is constantly formed and reshaped by outside circumstances and is not fixed.

In another scenario, she considers the difficulties of performing in front of a white audience in Europe: "I had to elicit if not the quality, then the same quantity of response" (Angelou 68). The conflict between Angelou's wish to be true to herself and her audience's expectations is made clear in this instance. Her presentation is not merely an expression of who she really is; rather, it is a balancing act between her inner self and the demands of the outside world.

By using binary opposition to analyze these categories, one may also uncover the power dynamics and social constructions that are connected to them. For example, some societies may value the public, which is frequently perceived as being ruled by men, above the private, which is typically linked with the home or femininity.

### Linguistic Analysis

The way that Angelou blends more formal, standard English with African American colloquial English throughout the book is another example of a deconstructive technique. This linguistic hybridity challenges the notion of the binary opposition. In the following passage: "Black people rarely forgave whites for being ragged, unkempt and uncaring. There was a proverb which explained the disapproval: 'You been white all your life. Ain't got no further along than this? What ails you?'" (Angelou 104) In this instance, Angelou uses colloquial English and normal English grammar and vocabulary while maintaining culturally unique phrases such as "Black" and "White," which are capitalized to indicate racial identification. This linguistic code-switching mirrors the cultural code-switching that Angelou uses throughout the narrative, emphasizing the fluidity of language and identity.

In this regard, the title itself – *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* – deserves careful examination. The use of the vernacular terms "singin'," "swingin'," and "gettin'" conveys a feeling of oral tradition and cultural distinctiveness, while the parallel to Christmas indicates a more universal sense of excitement. The text's larger thematic issues, especially the balancing act between cultural particularity and universal human experiences, can be captured in this linguistic tension.

### Narrative Structure

Maya Angelou's narrative structure continues to contribute to a deconstructive approach. The book often uses flashbacks to break linear temporality, even though it generally follows a chronological pattern. In addition to challenging conventional ideas of autobiographical storytelling, this non-linear technique captures the intricate, non-linear process of identity creation and personal development. When Angelou describes her experiences in Europe, for instance, she frequently shares memories of her early years or thoughts on racial relations in America, resulting in a complex story that challenges basic chronological arrangement. She adds, "At three years old I had been sent by train from California to Arkansas, accompanied only by my four year-old brother; raped at seven and returned to California at thirteen. My son was born when I was sixteen, and determined to raise him, I had..." (Angelou 29).

The narrative's episodic form and frequent changes in tone and focus give it a fragmented quality, yet recurrent themes and motifs give it coherence. For example, the text's recurring theme of performance functions as a symbol for Angelou's negotiation of diverse social and cultural settings. Her early reference to performance foreshadows her subsequent career as a singer and actress, while also emphasizing the performative nature of her identity. The binary opposition between coherence and incoherence is thus deconstructed by the conflict between fragmentation and unity in the narrative form, implying that a life story, like identity, can be both discontinuous and cohesive.

### Intertextuality

The other important component of deconstruction is intertextuality. It enhances the understanding of the text with more detailed meaning the author intends to convey. With reference to his novel, *The Name of the Rose*, 1983, Umberto Eco had observed, "I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" (Kundu 51). The intertextual richness of Angelou's story too further complicates any easy understanding of her autobiography. From biblical allusions ("Our home life was an Eden of constant spring") to several literary work ("London to me was as Dickens saw it") and historical references ("The dislodged Palestinians in the desert were as remote in my thoughts as the native Americans whose lives had been stifled by the whites trek across the plains of America"), these intertextual elements act for establishing Angelou's personal narrative within a broader cultural and historical context, deconstructing the boundary between individual and collective experience (Angelou 32, 132, 241). In particular, her account of her performance in "Porgy and Bess" is full with intertextual meaning. In addition to referencing intertextuality, these allusions invoke biblical concepts and the intrinsic value of marginalized people. Angelou breaks the boundaries between performance and reality, art and life, by using these intertextual references to frame her personal experiences.

Further, Angelou links her own experience to a larger history of African American resiliency and artistic expression by referencing spirituals and blues music frequently throughout the narrative. She draws on a collective cultural memory that goes beyond her personal experience when she sings, "If I were as good as God's angels and as pure as the Mother of Christ," during a period of homesickness at the passing of her grandmother (Angelou 48). This intertextual approach challenges the idea that autobiography is solely an individual's expression by implying that personal identity is always already entangled in a complex web of cultural significations.

### Conclusion

To sum up, a critical interpretation of *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* exposes the intricate web of meaning that Angelou exhibits through her work. By challenging binary oppositions, using language hybridity, and unfollowing standard narrative frameworks, Angelou produces a complex investigation of identity, culture, and personal growth. Her autobiography offers a fluid, complex representation of selfhood that defies conventional description. In addition to being descriptive, the literature actively contributes to the dismantling of essentialist ideas of identity through its discussion of race, gender, and cultural belonging.

Additionally, Angelou's story blurs the lines between individual and collective memory by placing her personal experiences inside a larger cultural and historical framework. By emphasizing the connection between cultural and personal identity, this intertextual approach implies that self-discovery is always a process of figuring out where one fits into broader social and historical narratives.

In the end, a critical analysis of Angelou's writing demonstrates its deep interest in the intricacies of life as a whole. "*Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*" presents a powerful reflection on the nature of identity, the difficulties of self-discovery, and the timeless power of artistic expression by rejecting binary thinking and embracing ambiguity and contradiction. Thus, Angelou's writing

serves as evidence of how autobiographical writing may both question and broaden our perceptions of who we are, where we belong, and what it is to be human.

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