A NEW HISTORICIST APPRAISAL OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF JAMES MCBRIDE'S *THE COLOR OF WATER* AND MAYA ANGELOU'S *MOM & ME & MOM*

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF POST GRADUATE STUDIES, AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES,

AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY,

ZARIA, NIGERIA

NOVEMBER, 2017

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation was written by me, and that it is a product of my own research. It has not been presented in any form of application for a degree programme in any institution of learning. All quotations are clearly indicated, and all sources of information have been duly acknowledged by means of references.

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CERTIFICATION

This dissertation entitled "A New Historicist Appraisal of Single-Motherhood in African American Literature: A Study of James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Maya Angelou's *Mom & Me & Mom"* by Ubah Ogechukwu Rachael, meets the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Arts (M.A) in English Literature of the Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, and is approved for its contribution to knowledge.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty for His divine inspiration and wisdom, and to my exceptional husband Engr. Chidi Innocent Eze, who saw the need for me to grow academically and otherwise.

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ABSTRACT

Hardly can there be a discussion on literature without a reference to historical issues. The close relationship between literature and history makes it easier for literary writers to use historical events as raw material for their literary production. African American literary history is a rich history that writers from within and outside America have benefited from in terms of literary production. The history of slavery, migration, racism, emancipation, civil and Vietnam wars, among others have to a large extent enriched most African American literary works. These historical phases have equally given rise to issues that form the subject matters of literary production. One of such issues is that of the prevalence and alarming rate of single motherhood in African American literature which a number of writers have commented on as a negative trait. But, in line with the new historicists' belief that history is dynamic and subjective, this work, uses James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Maya Angelou's *Mom & Me & Mom* to portray that out of an unpleasant situation can emerge great ideologies that bring about positive societal change. Hence, single motherhood rather than being a societal vice, can be one of the tools for positive societal change. Appraising and acknowledging the positive contributions of such mothers equally stands as an encouragement to the single mothers out there who are faced with parental challenges. Again, since the new historicists argue that there is no total version of history, writers and critics can make a square out of a diameter in order to project an ideology to their readers. History is thus, a subjective view of life.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

The relationship between history and literature in every society, is a complementary one. In the light of this, the history of African Americans cannot be separated from their literature for it serves as the raw material for the writers even till present time. The term "African American Literature" cannot be discussed without bringing to mind the circumstances that first ushered in the presence of Africans in the land of America. Thus, to look at African American literature one cannot avoid touching the old wound of slavery. As a trade route, the Middle passage saw millions of Africans being shipped into the "New World" via the Atlantic slave trade. According to Carson, Warner and Nash (2007:43), "Millions of Africans were transported across the trans-Atlantic in chains to labor in coffee, cotton and sugar plantations in the Americas, in what has been described as the greatest forced migration in human history."

Though these African slaves came from diverse socio-cultural groups and ethnicity, spoke different languages and had different religious beliefs, the common bond of slavery forced them to cluster together to build a common identity for themselves. This identity has today marked their history and literature as distinct from those of other regions. By the 1830s, black communities had many groups, organized specifically to oppose slavery and promote racial advancement. Schools and literary societies were common in the urban North and virtually all black organizations were dedicated to abolishing slavery. At this period, communities began sending delegates to an annual National Negro convention Movement where they discussed strategies for the abolition of slavery and racial advancement, for black Americans.

The declaration of emancipation from slavery by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 and its complete abolition in 1865 while providing some kind of freedom, further aggravated the problems faced

by the Negros. These include the problem of displacement, poverty and racism, among others. These problems and the attempts to tackle them, provided further materials for the production of African American literature. With the emergence of Phillis Wheatley as the first African American to publish a book of poetry in 1773, and the controversy that followed, African American literature continued to develop. It can be said to have gained its ground in the circle of world literature in the 20th century even though the efforts of earlier writers like Harriet Jacobs, Booker T. Washington, Olauda Equiano, Fredrick Douglas, among other writers who were slaves at one time or the other, cannot be ignored, considering how they foregrounded their slave experiences in narrative literary forms. The inter-relationship between African American literature and history makes it easier to connect an African American literary text to a specific historical period.

To reflect the significant developments in African American history, Gates and Mckay (1997:1) chronicled African American literature into periods based on historical viewpoints. Thus, the period of 1746-1865 features the literature of slavery and freedom. This includes the vernacular tradition of the Negro spirituals, blues, folk narratives and the classical slave narratives; 1865-1877 featured the literature of the reconstruction; 1878-1900 saw the literature of post-reconstruction period; the literature of the Harlem renaissance flourished between 1920-1940; 1940-1960 featured literature of the civil rights movements, while the period of 1960-1970 saw the manifestation of the literature of the Black Arts Movement. From the period of 1970, modern African American literature emerged to comment on diverse issues affecting the modern African American society. Though African American literature now centers on diverse issues, the experiences of slavery and racism remain core issues in its artistic enterprise. Some problems that were created for the African Americans by the condition of slavery and racism remain key

issues in African American literature till date. One of such issues is the problem of single parenthood and mother-centered families.

1.1 Background of the Study

The roles of women either as authors, characters, or both in African American literature have so added to the growth and development of African American literature that their contributions cannot be overemphasized. Among these women are single mothers who are faced with the challenges of raising children alone, without the presence and support of the fathers of their children. From the works of slave narrators such as, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a slave Girl* among others, mothers appear to be at the forefront of African American families. The condition of slavery placed the sole responsibility of parenting in the hands of African American mothers. It is historically recorded in various slave narratives that some white masters had sexual affairs with their female slaves which in turn produced children whose paternity were never openly discussed. This was to spare such white masters the responsibility of being care givers to those children. Even though there were few records of marriages among slaves, sexual relationships equally existed among them. In the case of the latter, as was in several instances, the product of such relationships lacked paternal claim. Like the case of Linda in Jacobs (1973), the child comes out to become the property of her mother's slave owner. Thus, the paternal links of most African American children born during slavery were lost. This strong matriarchal lineage can be seen in most slave narratives from Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Mary E. Lyons' *Letters From A Slave Girl*, to Ernest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, among others.

The post slavery era with all its challenges on blacks in America further aggravated the problem of single motherhood among blacks. The Southern whites took action against black women by

passing legislation, declaring that all children born to black women during slavery shall be known as the legitimate children of their mothers alone. According to Alice Childress in "The Negro Women in American Literature" (1966:18):

> In the first generation of "freedom" the black woman was abandoned, not only by the white father-owner, but by any black man faced with acknowledging children bred by the slave-master, or by other black men, since women were mated by the owners with various men, to bring forth various kind of offspring. Mated for strength, endurance, size, color, and even docility. With one stroke of pen, she was told that no man, black or white, owed her anything, and her children were disinherited of all property rights.

Having been stripped of family relations, without paternal claims for their children, these mothers were left with no choice than to form the foundation of their own families; families of mothers and children. By playing the role of both father and mother, these single mothers protected their children as far as they could, against the otherwise harsh environment, answer their pleasant and un-pleasant questions, provided for them and most importantly, they were faced with the bitter task of explaining to their children the historical truth of blacks and whites in America. This task had to be done before the children were old enough to mingle with the society, to avoid social harassment. Generally, when a woman is not under the protection of a man, facing the world alone makes her stronger. Thus, the emancipated Negro woman of America did everything she could for the survival of her family.

Some of the familial problems created by slavery have had lasting effects which are evident today in American society. One of such problems is that of single motherhood. Though many ex-slaves were legally married after emancipation, in reality however, most African American mothers lived like they were singles in their marriages. The poor state of living and extreme poverty faced by blacks in America after emancipation did not give African American mothers

the opportunity to become full-time homemakers or house wives. Like Richard's father in Richard Wright's *Black Boy,* frustration and circumstances forced most black men to abandon their families and disappear into the wild American world. In some cases, even with the presence of the father figure, black mothers keep toiling for the survival of their families as though they are single mothers. Describing her mother in the essay titled "In search of Our Mothers' Garden" (1974), Alice Walker puts it thus:

> Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school. She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds. During the "working" day, she labored beside - not behind - my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thought; never a time free from interruption- by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children.

Stressing on the dedication of the above essay to her mother and other African American mothers who were not famous, Walker says that it was for the sake of these mothers that she went in search of the secret behind the strength of black American mothers.

The appearance of single mothers in African American history and literature remains like a stream of water that has kept flowing from slavery till present day. In African American fiction, autobiographies, biographies, music and movies, the theme of absent fathers has remained an issue that has kept recurring. In an article, "The effect of slavery and emancipation on African-American families and family history research" (African-American Research; Crossroad, March 2011), Tristan L. Tolman agrees that slavery and the condition of its aftermath created the platform for mother-centered family. According to him:

> The condition of the black family in America has been an issue of intense debate since the civil war. At the heart of this debate is the belief of some scholars that slavery created a propensity for a weak and fatherless family. This matrifocal (mother-centered) family, they argue, became typical of African Americans both during slavery and after emancipation and has been perpetuated generally to the present time.

It is in the context of the foregoing and based on all these historical struggles by black mothers in America that writers like Maya Angelou and James McBride set out in their books *Mom & Me & Mom* and *The Color of Water* respectively to reconstruct African American cultural and social history by revealing to their readers the struggles by their mothers in leading them through tough historical passages.

1.2 The Concept of Single Motherhood

Motherhood as a term means different things to different people. While some have viewed it as simply the state of being a mother, others see it as possessing the qualities and characteristics of a mother. Thus, a single mother is a woman who is raising a child or children with little or no help of a man. She is sometimes referred to as solo mother. She is a parent, living without a spouse. For this, the sole responsibility of raising her child or children lies in her hands. The free Dictionary defines a single mother as a woman who has a dependent child or children, and who is widowed, divorced or unmarried (www.thefreedictionary.com/single-mother). Dowd E. Nancy in her *In Defense of Single-Parent Families* (1997) opines that a single mother is usually considered the primary care giver for her child or children. Thus, single motherhood is a term which suggests the presence of only the female parent in raising a child or children. There are variety of reasons that can place a woman in the position of a single mother. Some of the reasons are: single motherhood by choice, divorce, rape, careless sexual affair, widowhood, among others. Basically, single mothers can be classified into three categories. The first category are

those without visible spouses. In this case are widows and those that adopted, those that became pregnant by insemination and those that were raped by unknown men. The father figures in this category are not involved because they do not exist or, are not traceable. The second category are single mothers with non-residence spouses. That is, the ones whose partners do not reside in the same house with them. The third category are those with non-involved spouses. Unlike in the second category wherein the father may be involved in any way in raising a child or children, even though he does not reside with them, non-involved fathers are not in any way involved in child upbringing, even though they exist and can be traceable. The only difference between a non-visible father and a non- involved father is that the non-involved father is alive and traceable yet, is not involved in his child or children's upbringing. In all these categories of single mothers, one thing is common; the fact that the father figure is absent.

In most cases, a single mother bears the financial responsibility of her child or children alone. In such cases, the single mother works full time or even takes more than one job to meet up with her family's financial needs. Like the mother hen, most single mothers are over protective of their children. This is tied to the fact that by being solo parents, single mothers commonly assume that if they cannot protect their children, no one will.

1.3 Autobiography and New Historicism

1.3.1 The Concept of Autobiography

The term autobiography is of Greek origin. It is made up of three morphological components: 'auto', 'bio' and 'graphy', which means 'self', 'life', and 'write' respectively. Over the years, various scholars have attempted a definition of the term as well as drawing its scope. For this, there have been contradictions in conceptualizing what an autobiography really is. While some

scholars believe it to be a true account of the life of its author, others argue that there cannot be a true account of a person without some elements of fiction in it. Scholars that argue in support of the latter, believe that since the autobiographical writers make use of fictional writing techniques such as characterization, point of view and dialogue, there must be a fusion of fiction and facts in the story they want to present. Among scholars who champion this argument is Stuart Bates. He defines autobiography as "a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned" (Bates 1937:13). Bates argues that a pure autobiography is impossible and proposes the term 'autofiction' for a work about the life of its writer. However, critics like Philippe Lejeune in Anderson (2001:7) defines an autobiographical work as "A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality". Thus, Lejeune is of the opinion that if a work states within it that it is an autobiography, then it is. Rita Truschel in agreement with Lejeune defines autobiography as, "The story of a person's life, written by that person" (Truschel 2012:41). She goes further to assert that since ancient times, autobiography has been the purview of people with important and lasting accomplishments, for the purposes of explanation, self-justification, public instruction, moral example, and entertainment. She also points out that with the rise of popular press in the 17th century, the scope of autobiographical subjects has expanded to include popular celebrities and lesser persons with significant or scandalous experiences.

Notwithstanding the arguments on whether an autobiography is pure or has elements of fiction, it is pertinent to note some key features that are being expected of an autobiographical work. One of such features is the narrative voice of the work. Grammatically, an autobiography makes use of first person narrative voice, since the work is about personal self. In most cases, autobiographical writers embark on search for identity and self fulfilment. Another feature of

autobiography is that it is subjective in nature. It accounts as well as reflects on self. Through the writing of their own experiences, autobiographical writers express their retrospective feelings and thoughts. By being the authors of their own history, most autobiographers use such as a therapeutic tool, to heal themselves of "historical diseases", which could be some negative attributes or occurrences that are not favourable to their personalities. This notwithstanding, while some authors use the autobiographical form to merely present the story of their lives and comment on socio-political issues that affect them negatively or positively, others seize it as an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-define their past for better understanding of their present. The redefinition of the self through the writing of autobiography empowers its writers to define themselves as well as share their self-identity with the readers.

1.3.2 The Relationship between Autobiography and New Historicism

Historical criticism in general insists that to understand a literary piece, the critic needs to understand the author's biography and social background, ideas circulating at the time, and the cultural milieu. However, in the case of new historicists, they insist that ideology manifests itself in literary productions and discourse, explaining why the attention and interest is in the interpretive constructions which the members of a society or culture apply to their experience. According to Michael Delahoyde:

> New historicists concern themselves with the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a "truth" but a "cultural construct") reflected in a given work (www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/new.hist.html).

Delahoyde's contention here is that history is not a mere chronicle of facts and events, but rather a complex description of human reality and evolution of preconceived notions. Thus, literary

works may or may not tell us the facts of the world from which they emerge, but they will surely carry the ideologies and prevailing ways of thinking, prejudices and the historical make ups of the society that produces them. Explaining the historicity of texts and textuality of history in his essay; "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture" Louis Montrose (1989) says:

> I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing-not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question- traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual meditations when they are construed as the 'documents' upon which historians ground their own texts, called 'histories' (31).

Bearing the above view in mind, the task of a new historicist critic is thus, to analyse the interplay of culture; specific discursive practices, being mindful that these too, are practices and so participate in the interplay they seek to analyze. New historicism equally erases the distinction between fact and fiction, and by so doing, it implies that one no longer acknowledges the special and crucial authority of facts. According to Hayden White (1978):

> Readers of histories and novels can hardly fail to be struck by the similarities. There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal (or I should say formalist) terms. Viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another (121).

White further posits that history is fiction with ethical consequences. A comparison of two or three books for example, could possibly show the specific differences between the fictional and the autobiographical approaches as means of attempting to tell some nearly untellable events. New historicism sees a record of historical events as literary text and acknowledges the crucial role that the study of such text plays in the understanding of historical periods. Thus, it insists on the historicity of the text itself, fictional or non-fictional. Rather than denying the distinction between history and fiction, the new historicists define their field of study in such a way that both are necessary for the study of each other.

In an article, "Autobiographical Texts as Historiographical Sources: Rereading Fernand Braudel and Annie Kriegel", Jaume Aurell is of the view that the rise of historian-autobiographers after the 1970s led critics to consider a "historians' autobiographical turn" (www.academia.edu/.../Autobiographical/-). Aurell further explains that during the period, approaches to history and autobiography became more complex, as historians began to dialogue more personally with the events that they had previously analyzed from a clearly defined critical distance. In this regard, the historian autobiographer uses his or her own perspective to present crucial issues to the reader. In an article, "Coordinated lives: Between Autobiography and Scholarship", Jeremy D. Popkin (2001) defined an academic autobiography as:

> A published text presented as a truthful account of the author's own life, written by someone who has spent a significant part of that life as a professional member of an academic discipline, and in which the role of that academic discipline in the author's life is evident either in the content or in the construction of the narrative, or both (790).

By asserting that autobiography is a text presented as a truthful account of its author's life, Popkin in the above definition is agreeing with the fusion of fiction in autobiographical

narratives. In trying to establish the relationship between history and autobiography, Popkin in *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, analyses the connection between history and autobiography. He uses the autobiographical accounts of historians as sources for historical understanding. He concludes in the book that the connection between history and autobiography is that of reconstructing the past, approaching texts as sources for the knowledge of the historians' experiences and professional positions. Popkin sees autobiography as a framework for knowing the ways in which authors function professionally. He also states that autobiographies can equally be used as a reference for comprehending the way historians construct the readers' access to the knowledge of the past, that is, the historical texts. Popkin further states that the practical and methodological links between history and autobiography are important because they share structural formulations that invite the reader to read them in conjunction, and decipher possible ways their enactments of events might be similar. Thus autobiography increases ones understanding of history and most importantly, the writing of history. It can therefore be summed up that autobiographies contribute greatly to history because they enable readers to have a clearer view of historical issues. It is against this background that this work looks at the way James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Maya Angelou's *Mom&Me&Mom* have contributed to issues that may be seen as belonging to the sphere of contemporary history and also re-shaped ones understanding of history.

1.4 Maya Angelou and James McBride as African American Writers

1.4.1 Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou is described as "America's most visible black female autobiographer" (www.poemhunter.com/maya-angelou/). She was one of the first African American female writers to lay open her life in autobiographical form for public criticism. She was born

Marguerite Johnson, on April 4th, 1928, and grew up in a broken home which led her and her only brother to be raised by their paternal grandmother in rural Arkansas. She experienced a bitter effect of a broken home when she was raped by her mother's male friend at the age of seven. This left a great psychological trauma on the young Maya. Growing up in the rural South provided the young Maya with a firsthand experience of racism as an African American. In her teenage, Maya became a single mother. This new status of a single teenage mother led Maya out of her mother's house in search of independence. She ventured into so many careers, including dancing, acting, producing, directing, journalism, teaching, and writing etc.

As an African American writer, Maya chronicles her life history as well as other issues in her seven autobiographies. In presenting the story of her life as a product of a broken home, an African American, a civil rights activist, and a single mother, Maya touched on quite a number of issues that concern blacks in America. Thematic concerns in her seven autobiographies include, racism, identity, family and travel. The complicated issue of motherhood is a unifying but also a disruptive theme throughout her autobiographical series.

Angelou is today, one of the most celebrated African American female writers. Her first autobiography; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) was nominated for a National Book award. She wrote six more autobiographies after, *Mom & Me & Mom*, being the last. In 1972, she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poetry; *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie.* In 1981, she became the Reynolds professor of American studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. Angelou's contribution to African American literature is well documented. Her literary works have contributed greatly to the study of African American literature, and they have won her a presidential medal under President Barack Obama (http:www.britannica.com/…/Maya-Angelou).

1.4.2 James McBride

James McBride first attained fame in literary circles with the publication of his debut piece; *The Color of Water: A Black man's tribute to his white mother*. The book gives a deep insight about his life, his mother, and his effort to come to terms with his biracial identity. His father Rev. Andrew D. McBride was an African American, while his mother Ruth McBride Jordan was a Jewish immigrant from Poland. Though McBride started his writing career as a journalist, it later dawned on him that like most African Americans, his background lacks clear identification. This awakening led him to go into historical reconstruction after which he came up with a memoir: *The Color of Water*, which was published in 1996. The memoir is so handy and timeless that it remained on the New York Times Bestseller list for two years (http://www.thefamouspeople.com/.../James-...). It has equally been translated into more than sixteen languages with a record sales of 2.5 million copies. The book has become an American classic and is widely read in schools, colleges and universities. It won the prestigious Anisfield wolf book award in 1997.

For its revelation of the strength and sacrifices of a single mother, *The Color of Water* was in 2002 chosen by The New York Women's Agenda as the book for "New York City Reads Together" project; the first book selected for that honour. The great success of *The Color of Water* motivated McBride to venture into fiction. He later came up with his first fictional novel; *Miracle at St. Anna*, and in 2008, he published his second fictional novel; *Song Yet Sung*. In 2013, McBride published his first comic literary piece; *The Good Lord Bird* which won him a national book award. The creative gift of McBride is not limited to literature, but extends to music where he has won lots of musical awards (http://www.academia.edu/445900/color-of-water-Guide).

1.5 Statement of the Problem

The study and criticism of African American literature is largely centered on issues such as slavery, racism, migration, displacement, poverty, violence, survival, quest for identity, gender marginalization and crime, among others. Although some scholars have not failed to acknowledge the contributions and importance of women to the growth and development of African American literature, yet, looking at the American society today, there is still need to critically appraise the efforts of mothers who as single parents, have led their children through the cultural, social and historical difficulties that confront blacks in the American society.

Most of the works on the subject of motherhood and women's contributions to literature and society have been looked at from the viewpoint of feminism as a literary theory, but by looking at the same subject matter from the new historicist point of view, the dynamic nature of historical narratives will be established, particularly given the nature of the primary texts which are autobiographical navels

By taking a slightly different direction from previous research works concerning the focus on African American mothers, this study posits that rather than being a problem to the society, African American single mothers can contribute and have contributed positively to their society. Again, it is generally assumed that black women possess such a great strength to manage a family with or without the presence of the father figure, but, by appraising a white single mother within the context of African American literature, this study illustrates that the vigor is not inborn in blacks, rather, that a literary character who in many senses is a real character, is a product of the society that produces him/her.

Furthermore, looking at the relationship between a text and the historical and cultural contexts that produced it helps a critic to prefigure an author's hidden message in any given text.

This study is therefore anchored on the propositions that:

- Although the end of slavery and civil war seem to have brought about legal freedom from slavery, black families have generationally faced the challenges of keeping a family with the presence of both parents.
- The continuing recurrence of the presence of single mothers in African American literature is part of the larger narrative on poverty, physical and mental displacement, high death rates among black men, among other challenges.
- The concept of single motherhood has generally been seen as a negative influence on African American literature and society, whereas, there are single mothers who amidst challenges have greatly impacted on their literature and society as well.
- African American biographies and auto-biographies have served as viable tools for scholars to look at some social and cultural issues pertaining to African Americans.
- A white single mother within the context of African American Literature is not immune to sufferings and other difficulties faced by black single mothers, owning that literary characters are products of the socio-cultural context that produces them.
- More than any other literary theory, new historicism opens a point of entry into the study of the curious and enabling relationship between literature and history.

1.6 Aim and Objectives of the Study

By critically studying the selected primary texts for this research, alongside other secondary materials, using New Historicism as literary theory for the study, this work aims at

demonstrating that single motherhood in African American Literature is a historically dated and a rooted occurrence which till today has remained an issue among blacks in America. Consequently, the study also seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To attest to the dynamic nature of history by looking at the generational issues as well as the day to day activities and lives of authors and characters in the selected autobiographies.
- To illustrate that autobiographers greatly participate in, and contribute to the various discourses on African American social and cultural history.
- To show how single mothers in African American literature have come to be for their children, social and historical interpreters, as well as survival pillars.
- To expound that the place and importance of single mothers in African American literature and history requires more critical appraisal and at such, cannot be overemphasised.
- To demonstrate how both Maya Angelou and James McBride deploy their narratives to interrogate the social, historical and political contexts that define their experiences and reality as African Americans.

1.7 Justification of the Study

The phenomenon of single mothers in African American society is like a norm in African American literature. As blacks in America passed through various historical phases, the issue of single motherhood kept trailing them. For this reason, quite a number of African American children have lost, or struggled to come to terms with their paternal lineage. As the case has been, the strength of family lines lies more on the maternal, rather than the paternal side in the African American community. Children grow up to see themselves under the care of one parent

(the mother), and they are left to puzzle on the existence of the other (the father). Thus, there is need for a critical appraisal of the root cause of this situation that has persisted since slavery, as well as the various social, economic and cultural dimensions that are the consequences of this development.

Though some scholars have acknowledged the issue of single motherhood as a vice in African American literature, even then, a critical look is required in order to foreground the re-occurrence of the problem. There is equally need to appraise the strength of single mothers who have single handedly raised children that have contributed positively towards the growth and development of African American literature, history and community. Some of these single mothers have applied various measures in order to circumvent the problems they face as single mothers. Examining some of these measures will serve as a form of awareness as well as providing viable solutions to one of the societal problems: parenting.

1.8 Scope and Delimitation

This research focuses primarily on two African American autobiographical texts: Maya Angelou's *Mom&Me&Mom* and James McBride's The *Color of Wate*r, to drive home its argument. The study limits its scope to the aspects of autobiographical writings that new historicism as a literary theory pays attention to. Though to further boost its arguments, other secondary materials have been consulted. Its scope is also limited to single mothers within the context of African American literature. Although there are some other literary texts that Angelou and McBride have written, the two under study were chosen because they are exhaustive memoirs, about single mothers in African American literature.

1.9 Research Methodology

For the purposes of this research, books, journals, articles, interviews, unpublished dissertations and internet materials have been consulted. The work also applies qualitative analytical research method as it explores the two selected primary texts using the New Historicist literary theory. Some of the propositions of new historicists scholars like Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Catherine Gallagher, among others, have been deployed to analyse the literary efforts of Maya Angelou and James McBride in the selected primary texts: *Mom & Me & Mom* and *The Color of Water*.

On the whole, this chapter has given a general introduction to this research work and has provided a background of the study. It equally has broadly introduced the concept of single motherhood and outline the various instances that places a women to the position of being a single mother. It has also focused upon some notable stages in the lives of African Americans and the occurrence of single motherhood in each stage. The chapter also justifies the need for this research and outlined what this research sets out to do as well as how it achieves its aim. This chapter has also, introduced the primary texts to be used in analyzing this research as well as their authors. It also has explored the literary theory to be applied in order to draw home the argument of this research.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Literature Review

The concept of single motherhood in African American community has attracted lots of critical comments both within and outside of literature. From anthropological, historical, journalistic and literary perspectives, research have shown that most African American families are being run on a matrifocal platform. Thus, it is not surprising that the subject and theme of single motherhood features in most African American literature. Since one of the essence or functions of literature is to comment and provide perspectives on societal issues, African American writers have not failed to acknowledge in their works that the high rate of single mothers among blacks in America is a historical and social ill. Thus, various genres of African American literature have featured the theme of single motherhood as an issue that worth a critical look. Writers from various fields have shown that single motherhood can be traceable to the period of slavery. From slave narratives to modern day African American literature, black single motherhood has been a topic of extensive debate and investigation. Research has shown that the African American community has a long and detailed history of association with single motherhood. In most African American literature, black women are seen to be at the forefront of the African American familial structure.

As a very sensitive issue, the concept of single motherhood has broadly attracted both social and literary comments, with most of the comments gearing towards feminist, Marxist and gender studies perspectives. According to Kay S. Hymowitz in an article, "The Black Family: 40 Years of Lies", "Almost 70 percent of black children are born to single mothers" (www.hist.umn.edu/.../AF-AM-fam.pdf). The issue of single motherhood among blacks in America has given birth to such terms as "Black matriarchy". The term is used in reference to the

cultural phenomenon of African American households with children within them being largely headed by mothers, with the children's biological fathers mostly absent. Alisha Gray in "A Thesis On Black Single Motherhood: From Slavery and Beyond" (www.academia.edu/.../A-Thesis-on-Black...) comments that:

> It is clear that race, class and patriarchy have intersected to further impede the progress of black women; post slavery. And just as other intersections cause women to be a burden upon society; so does the unwelcome concern of black single motherhood. It could indeed be perceived as yet another societal burden.

No wonder Linda in Harriet Jacobs' *Incident In The Life Of A Slave Girl*, points out that the secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the inquisition. One of such guarded issues is the unquestioned secret of how slave girls beget children that are half black and half white. According to Linda in Gates (1987:367):

> My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences.

Linda in this slave narrative exposes the ills of slavery especially as it concerns female slaves. She describes male slave owners as the "wild beast of slavery" who will rather keep molesting their slave girls than selling them for whatever amount (Gates 1987:368). Reading through Linda's story opens one's eyes to the strong matriarchal links of slave children. Linda's family line moves from her mother who died when she is quite young, to her grandmother, a freed slave. Her grandmother, Martha, stands as the foundational pillar for her children and grandchildren. The story of this grandmother, her daughter and granddaughter also reveals a line of single mothers in slavery. Linda describes her grandmother as "that blessed old grandmother, who for seventy-three years had borne the pelting storms of a slave-mother's life." From this description

one can deduce that being a slave is one thing, but being a slave mother is much more an issue (Gates 1987:465). While rounding off her story, Linda acknowledges that the dream of her life is not yet realized because her story "ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage" (Gates 1987:513). She therefore still longs for an ideal home where she will live with her children because even in post slavery, marriage remains a mirage to her as it is with most African American women.

In Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1906), there is yet another picture of what it means to be a single mother during the time of slavery. While introducing himself in the autobiography, Washington says, "My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings…I was born in a typical log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet square. In this cabin I lived with my mother and a brother and sister till after the Civil War, when we were all declared free" (Gates and McKay (1997:490). Washington confesses that he lacks information about his family beyond his mother and adds that in the days of slavery, little or no attention was given to black family history and records. Talking about his paternal side, he reveals thus:

> Of my father I know even less than of my mother. I do not even know his name. I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations. Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing. But I do not find especial fault with him. He was simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time (Gates and McKay 1997:491).

From the above quotation, one can see how the institution of slavery encouraged and promoted single motherhood among blacks. Thus, since little or no attention was given to family history, Washington accepts his status as a slave child with a father that was merely living somewhere.

Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* reveals that slave masters who desire to own more slaves without having the means of acquiring them forced their female slaves into the business of procreation. Talking of Mr. Covey; a character in his narrative, Douglass says:

> Mr. Covey was a poor man; he was just commencing in life, he was only able to buy one slave; and, shocking as is the fact, he bought her, as he said, for a *breeder*. The woman was named Caroline. Mr. Covey bought her from Mr. Thomas Lowe, about six miles from St. Michaels. She was a large, able- bodied woman, about twenty years old. She had already given birth to one child, which proved her to be just what he wanted. After buying her, he hired a married man of Mr. Samuel Harrison to live with her one year; and him he used to fasten up with her every night! The result was, that, at the end of the year, the miserable woman gave birth to twins. At this result Mr. Covey seemed to be highly pleased, both with the man and the wretched woman. Such was his joy, and that of his wife, that nothing they could do for Caroline during her confinement was too good, or too hard, to be done. The children were regarded as being quite an addition to his wealth (Gates 1987:292).

Just like many other slaves, Caroline was forced into being a single mother in order to produce more slaves for her master. No wonder Toni Morrison is of the opinion that "The perceived value of Black women was situated in their capacity to breed, to literally reproduce chattel slavery from their wombs either voluntarily or involuntarily" (Morrison, 1987).

The illusionary freedom ushered in by emancipation helped to increase the rate of male absence from home. The men were only freed from being slaves, but not freed from poverty, racism and other forms of injustices. For this, most men were not ready to carry the burden of being the head of their families; especially financially.

The involvement of black men in American Civil and Vietnam wars respectively, is also a factor that helped in aggravating the rate of single motherhood among blacks. The mass participation of

black men in the war front forced most African American mothers to be single parents. Some of the men were killed in the wars while so many others who survived became more of a burden to their families. This is evidenced in the lives of the men of Toni Morrison's *Sula.* Like Richard's grand-father in Richard Wright's *Black Boy,* most black men who survived the wars were wounded either physically, mentally or the both. The presence of such wounded men in the home further increases the roles of their wives as single mothers. Thus, the presence of wars and chaos in an American environment of slavery, segregation and racism never gave African American men the opportunity to take their rightful positions in their homes.

Collins P. H in "Work, Family and Black Women's Oppression" (http://www.caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/08/11h/) opines that black women have been plagued by the historical connection from slavery to Black single motherhood. Historically, racial discrimination against black men made traditional values including that of the male as the economically powerful breadwinner of the family unrealistic.

In Ernest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines equally draws another historical link of single motherhood to slavery. In the autobiography, Jane, the narrator, literally carries the reader through emancipation and the post slavery era. Jane is a product of slavery, and as such, her paternal link is lost and not traceable. Jane got her name from an anti-slavery soldier, corporal Brown, who changes her name from Ticey to Jane Brown. Jane explains that blacks, especially the youths, were so excited to take names of influential people after emancipation because of lack of information in regards to their birth and upbringing. Talking about her foster son, Ned, Jane says:

> Before, he was Ned Brown-after me. We didn't know his daddy's name, so he was Ned Brown. Then he changed it to Douglass, after Mr. Frederick Douglass. He was go'n be a great leader like Mr.

> Douglass was. He was Ned Douglass awhile, then he was Edward Stephen Douglass. All the rest of the young men round him was taking on names like that. Some Douglass, some Brown-after John Brown,…some Turners, after Nat Turner; some Sherman. Ask one his name, right off he would tell you John Brown. Ask him his daddy's name, he told you Ed Washington (Gaines 1971:73-74).

This illustration is evidenced in the life of Booker T. Washington who took the name 'Washington', a house hold name in America. Jane also acknowledges the irrelevance of marriage to blacks during slavery. She equally points out that this tradition follows them to the post slavery era. Talking about her relationship with Joe Pittman, she says, "We didn't get married… we just agreed to live together, like people did in the slavery time" (Gaines 1971: 129). Explaining the mystery behind black children fathered by whites, Jane reveals that: 'They used to give these great balls before the war, and the white men used to go there to choose their colored women" (Gaines 1971:158). She goes further to elaborate that the white men do not marry their chosen colored women, but can keep them for the rest of their lives.

Richard Wright in his autobiographical novel, *Black Boy* also touches on the issue of single motherhood by showing how black men like his father abandoned their families, due to the hardship and some other vices that blacks are faced with during Reconstruction. With the absence of Richard's father, his mother underwent several menial jobs at a time to cater for her two sons. Talking about his mother's ordeal, following his father's disappearance, Wright says:

> Sometimes, when she was in despair, she would call us to her and talk to us for hours, telling us that we now have no father, that our lives would be different from those of other children, that we must learn as soon as possible to take care of ourselves, to dress ourselves, to prepare our own food; that we must take upon ourselves the responsibility of the flat while she worked (Wright 1970:13).

With this turn of event, Richard confesses that whenever he feels hungry, he thinks of his father with a "deep biological bitterness" (12). When his mother becomes paralyzed and as such, could

not take care of her two sons, Richard and his brother fall back on their maternal family. Thus, understandably, Richard grows from childhood to adulthood under matrilineal care.

Part of the problems that blacks face in America that Barack Obama outlined in his *Audacity of Hop*e, is that of single motherhood. He sees the high rate of single motherhood among blacks as the sole reason why black youths go into all manners of crime. He stresses that most black single mothers cannot tell their children anything because they themselves are still children. According to him, the collapse of the two-parent black household is "a phenomenon that is occurring at such an alarming rate when compared to the rest of American society" (2006:245).

In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"(http://www.jstor.org), Hortense J. Spillers acknowledges that though in certain human societies, a child's identity is determined through the line of the mother, but the United States is not one of them. Spiller agrees with Moynihan P. Daniel (1965:75) that "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure." Thus, both Spiller and Moynihan see the strong matriarchal structure of most African American families as a product of a wrong foundation. Belinda Hurmence in *Tancy* (1984) reconstructs historical moments by narrating the story of Tancy's emancipation from Miss Pudding, her surrogate mother. The story tells of how Tancy sets out to look for her real mother after the American Civil War. Thus, the implication is that Tancy's mother stands as the only family she has.

In an article, "Feminist Theories and the Voices of Mothers and Daughters in Selected African-American Literature for Young Adults", Hilary S. Crew discusses some of the different feminist theoretical positions from which the mother-daughter relationship has been studied in black American literature. Crew situates his analysis within the context of black single parent family structure. One of the outcomes of Crew's analysis is that most of the black family networks are

"mother-centered'. Quoting Johnetta Cole's preface in Double Stitch, Crew agrees that the mother-centered family which is common in black American literature is a product of slavery. According to Johnetta, "Other issues which are germane to the study of the black mother-daughter relationship are the sharing of a collective history of the injustice of slavery in which mothers and children were forcibly separated" (1993). After looking at some selected young adolescent African American literature like Childress Alice's *Rainbow Jordan* (1981), Chodorow Nancy's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) among others, Screw sums up that the absence of the father figure in most black American homes has aided the continuous increase and occurrence of black single mothers. He stresses that with the presence of only the mothers in most black homes, black female adolescents find it easier to rebel and push themselves away from their families to start new families of their own. This can be vividly seen in Jacqueline Woodson's *The Dear One* where a twelve-year old Afeni realizes that her one-parent family structure is not providing her with the kind of family life she needed. As a career woman, Afeni's mother; an attorney, fails to be for her daughter, the stereotypical image of the strong black mother. With this, Afeni rebels out of her mother's house and subsequently, becomes a single mother like her mother. The novel presents a network of single mothers, and most of these mothers are teenagers who are themselves products of single motherhood.

In celebration of mother's day 2000, Nelvia M. Brandy celebrates African American mothers and daughters in her memoir *This Mother's Daughter* (1999). In the book, Brandy recollects the relationship between twenty mothers and their daughters in order to expose the struggles of mothers in maintaining family values among black families in American. Talking of the challenges faced by African American women in the introduction to the text, Brandy (1999: vii) says:

> We live in a world where daughters in general are undervalued and where African American daughters are even more challenged to maintain personal and family pride, dignity and a belief in a loving humanity amidst racism and sexism. Our lives, like time, are on a continuum of critical developmental changes, experiences and emotions. Many of us go through these changes, experiences and emotions with wisdom, guidance and strong assistance provided primarily by the mothers and mother figures in our lives.

Pointing to the issue of single motherhood and how widespread it is among African American women, Brandy says that "Mothers, in many of our communities, are so young that they have had little chance to experience life, before they are positioned to ready daughters for this complex world" (Brandy 1999:viii). Brandy also notes that the continuing occurrence of single motherhood is akin to the fact that circumstances surrounding African American women never give them a chance to know their bodies and sexuality. Preparing the minds of her readers on what they should expect from the book, Brandy cautions thus:

> You will shed tears about the struggles African American mothers and daughters face with sexual abuse and relationship violence, and other burdens they quietly carry. You will take pride in their heroism and acknowledge the strength, resilience and courage they have shown against great odds (x).

In the stories of Brandy's twenty mothers and daughters, single motherhood is a glaring issue because over eighty percent of Brandy's mothers are single. Most of the daughters equally turn out to becoming single mothers themselves. This can be seen in the story of Erica and Rose (2-8), Elanna and Sylvia (31-38), Geraldine and Maggie (38-45), Gloria and Teresa (52-58), Roslyn and Annette (92-97), Leila, Mary and Nancy (103-108), Rhonda and Margaret (109-114) among others.

Toni Morrison is yet another African American writer that depicts the problem of single motherhood in most of her works. Being a single mother herself, the theme of single motherhood has been a reccurring one in her literary works such as *Sula, Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

Morrison also attributes the continuing appearance of single mothers and strong maternal lineage in African American literature to the effects of slavery. Households of former slave families where the mother is the central figure are common in Morrison's novels. Johanna Wising in an article "Motherhood and the Heritage of Slavery in Toni Morrison's Novels *Sula* and *Beloved*" (www.diva-portal.org/...fulltexr01.pdf), contends that "A paternalistic society where households are run by females is a recurring aspect of Morrison's novels." Wising goes ahead to opine that black men are used to being sent away by their slave masters, while the black women are caged in their roles as slaves and mothers. In Morrison's *Sula* for example, Eva's husband, BoyBoy leaves her after five years of marriage with three children to fend for. Nel at the other hand spends her adult years as a single mother, raising three children while mourning the absence of Jude, her husband who leaves her and the children. *Beloved* features the extent to which slavery encouraged male absence and single motherhood among blacks in America. As an emancipated slave woman and a single mother, Sethe sees no need for a man in her life after being separated with Halle, the father of her four children. Her intimacy with Paul D only gears towards satisfying her sexual need. Thus, in both *Sula* and *Beloved*, Morrison presents strong single mothers who on daily basis, contend with obstacles they encounter as a result of slavery or their race and gender. Morrison in the two novels depict how the heritage of slavery and the experience of oppression affects women like Sethe and Eva, as well as how the effect of the experiences empower them to be great single mothers. Explaining the strength of Eva and Sethe as single mothers, DeLancy Dayle B (1990:17) says:

> Perhaps it is that because African-American women have traditionally been exposed to life at its harshest….In the case of the escaped slave and the turn-of-the-century rural African-American, life was not carefree; neither, then, was motherlove. For Eva and Sethe, it is the fact that life is not carefree- that reality is so terribly bleak- that makes motherlove take on deadly proportions.

DeLancy in this instance historically traces the root of single motherhood among black women to slavery and notes that the harshness of slavery, and its aftermath, especially towards women, has prepared African American mothers to face life's challenges, even without the men. With this in mind, the development of most of Morrison's female characters follows a stereotypical pattern of maternal force with a strong matriarchal link.

Similarly, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* presents the issue of single motherhood among African American women from a psychological angle. In the book, Walker presents Celie, the central character, not just as a single mother, but one who is forced into single motherhood by the man she calls "father". For this, Celie is so traumatized of her father's repeated rape and the fact that her two children are products of the rape. Even though Celie was later forced by her father to marry Mister, the fact that her own father is the biological father of her two children remained an emotional trauma for her all through the novel. From the story of Celie, one can deduce that the various circumstances that force African American women into single motherhood are most times beyond their control.

In the case of Maya Angelou, her series of autobiographies reconstruct the black woman's image by making motherhood a prevailing theme. Through her experiences as a single mother, a daughter and a granddaughter the reader sees the place of African American mothers as central figures in their homes. In her *Gather Together In My Name*, Angelou reveals her strong reliance on her maternal side. In trying to cope with life as a single teenage mother, Angelou turns to her maternal home for acceptance. Comparing the reception from her maternal home to what would have been obtainable from her father's side, she says: "My father, who spent his time drinking tequila in Mexico and putting on high-toned airs in San Diego, would give me a colder reception

than the one I'd just received" (Angelou 1974:28). The absence of a father in the home means the absence of paternal family link.

The warm reception given to Angelou and her son by the Baxters (her maternal family) made her to stick to the Baxters' side, and vowed to be successful enough to be included in the Baxter's family legend. Watching the Baxters as they recount their individual experiences and achievements, Angelou says, "Someday, as they sat around in the closed circle recounting the fights and feuds, the prides and prejudices of the Baxters, my name would be among the most illustrious (Angelou 1974:28). Lamenting on the lack of a father figure all through her life, Angelou says, "Mother's men, whom I had called Daddy Jack, Uncle Bob or Hanover Daddy, came and went with such regularity that whatever name I tacked on after the paternal title escaped me after a few months (Angelou 1974:145). This shows the extent to which the father figure is an illusion to Angelou. Paralleling her life as a single mother with that of her mother who is also a single mother, Angelou in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* says this of all black mothers:

> The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance (Angelou 1969:272).

In both *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* and *The Heart of A Woman* (1981), Angelou continued with her theme of single motherhood. She presents herself as a strong African American single mother who make several sacrifices for the happiness of her son Guy. In both autobiographies, Angelou takes her motherhood role to her son as the uppermost priority above every career of hers. As a single mother, she faces lots of challenges, which include that of taking her son around places that she travels to for her music and teaching careers. In all of

Angelou's autobiographies, the theme of motherhood, especially single motherhood is a recurring one. If she is not celebrating her grandmother, she is celebrating her mother or herself as a mother. Thus, the issue of single motherhood among African Americans have placed mothers as strong family pillars. No wonder Angelou decided to honour her mother with her last autobiography; *Mom & Me & Mom* and James Mcbride does same in his *The Color of Water*.

With the above review, it is quite obvious that the issue of single motherhood in African American society has attracted lots of criticism both in and outside literature. Going by one of the poetics of new historicism which states that to understand the present and future, one needs an understanding of the past, this review helps in grounding the argument on the prevalent issue of single mothers in African American literature. This research therefore seeks to add to knowledge by looking at it through the lens of the tenets of new historicism. Thus, rather than merely pointing to the presence and prevalent issue of single mothers among African Americans, this work will go further to see how the issue has either negatively or positively shaped the African American society at large.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

New historicism as a critical method of literary interpretation developed as a reaction against literary formalism. It is one of the pedagogical tools of literary interpretation and understanding which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like some other literary theories, new historicism emerged to counter some existing literary propositions even as it introduced new concepts into literary interpretation. Prior to the emergence of new historicism, traditional literary historicism holds that the proper aim of literary criticism is to reconstruct the past objectively, whereas, new historicism suggests that history is only knowable in the same sense literature is; that is, through subjective interpretation. One of the key arguments of new

historicism as a literary theory is that all history is subjective and at such, there is no totality or total version of history. The new historicists equally posit that history is shaped by the people who lived in a society and they believe in the concept of inter-connectedness of works of art. This concept of inter-connectedness explains why new historicism is not an independent literary theory. As a theory, it borrows some of its tenets from other literary theories. For example, just as feminism upholds the liberation and re-defining the image of woman in literary narratives, so also, new historicism believes that autobiographical form enables its writer to re-create him/herself. Again, the new historicists' belief that the life of a character in a literary text can be used to project an ideology goes in line with the feminists' view that womanhood is a very powerful institution in every society. Stressing on this in an article "African Motherhood- Myth and Reality" Lauretta Ngcobo in Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (2007:540) writes that "If writers took time to explore the circumstances, the pressure and the deprivations that their characters suffer, this would soften the social conscience and society's scale of justice would shift towards the correct balance". In same article, Ngcobo says:

> We are looking for a self-defining image of women who win respect in their own right because they are strong and achieve things in their lives and triumph, not only because they are men's wives or mothers of sons, but because they are valued members of their societies, outstanding in their societies as bread winners, teachers, farmers, nurses, politicians and whatever else. These portrayals will in time focus correctly on the values that our societies should uphold and preserve (ibid).

This inter-connection between new historicism and feminism explains why even though this work focuses on new historicism as an analytical tool, it unavoidably manifests some aspects of feminism. These include the celebration of motherhood as a vital tool for positive societal change, the exploration of the role of women in child care and wellbeing, the philosophical role that women play in shaping both literature and history, among others.

Some other major key arguments of the new historicist that this study dwells on is the belief that history and literature must be seen as disciplines to be analyzed together. It also proposes that all texts are social documents that reflect and respond to their historical situations. To unlock textual meaning, new historicism investigates three areas of concern; that is, the life of the author, the social rules and dictates found within a text, and a reflection of a work's historical situations as evidenced in the text. These are done within the social and historical contexts that produce the texts.

New historicism holds that one's understanding of the past is always conducted by one's present consciousness. Louis Montrose in his "Professing the Renaissance" (1989) points out that critics are historically bound, and can only reconstruct histories through the filter of human consciousness. According to him:

> Our analyses and our understandings necessarily proceed from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points; that the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, themselves, historical subjects(23).

Against this backdrop, one could contend that new historicism is based on the assumption that a literary work is the product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition. Its preliminary concern is to prefigure the relationship between texts and the cultural system in which they were produced. Contrary to the new critical insistence on the autonomy of literary texts and the importance of reading such texts intrinsically, Booker M.K (1996:138) says that, "new historicism believe that it makes no sense to separate literary texts from the social context around them because such texts are the product of complex social 'exchanges' or 'negotiations'". Thus, the best way of literary analysis is achieved through the lens of the culture that produced it. Catherine Gallagher (1989:37) defines new historicism as; "reading literary and non-literary

texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts." The new historicists see literature and history as parts of a dynamic exchange. They therefore reject the autonomy of both an artist and works of art generally, arguing that literary works cannot be read and understood in isolation to the society that produces them. They posit that literary texts must be read and interpreted in their biographical, social and historical contexts. According to Sinha Yogesh Kumar (2005:558), "New historicism combines the spirit of deconstruction with the ideological orientation of Marxism and post- Marxism, and finds a rich source in the concepts of power and history as set forth by Foucault." He further posits that in its historical and political interpretations, new historicism owes something to Marxism. Sinha's view can be seen in the way literature affects the society, and society as well affects literature.

New historicism emerged as a theoretical movement alongside cultural materialism. They both use a literary text as a point of entry into the study of history, and are both interested in understanding the socio-historical context of a literary text. New historicism sprouted from America while cultural materialism originated from Britain. Both new historicists and cultural materialists are interested in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanism of repression and subjugation. Both schools of thought reject the autonomy and individual genius of the author and the autonomy of the literary work, and see literary texts as absolutely inseparable from their historical contexts. Quoting Clifford Geertz in his famous essay "Renaissance Self-Fashioning", Stephen Greenblatt in Nilanjana Gupta (2004) argues that the literary text and the author are both cultural artifacts. He says accordingly that:

> There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture, complexes of concrete behavior patterns-customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters, but rather, a set of control mechanisms-plans, recipes, rules, instructions, for the governing of behaviours (249).

In the above quotation, Geertz and Greenblatt are in agreement that literature is historical and is therefore a social and cultural construct. They are also in agreement that since no man has transcended history, the text can only be used as a basis to reconstruct the social and cultural ideology of the period that produced it. The study of a text reveals more about a history and studying history reveals more about a text. The literary text is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social and economic dispensation. It is therefore directly involves in history. Literature is not simply a product of history, but rather, it actively participates in the making of history. For this reason, new historicists prefer parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts of same historical period or ideology. They therefore treat literary texts in the same way that they treat other non-literary texts. In his essay "Resonance and Wonder", Stephen Greenblatt in Peter Barry (1999) explains the tenet of new historicism thus:

> The new historicism obviously has distinct affinities with resonance; that is, its concern with literary texts has been to recover as far as possible the historical circumstances of their original production and assumption and to analyze the relationship between the circumstances and our own. New historicist critics have tried to understand the interesting circumstances not as a stable, prefabricated background against which the literary texts can be placed, but as a dense work of evolving and often contradictory social forces. The idea is not to find outside the work of art some rock onto which literary interpretation can be securely chained but in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both history and our own. (80)

In the course of interpretation, new historicism actually situates the literary text within its social and historical context. It also tries to recover as far as possible the repressed historical meanings which is the historicity of the text. It then goes further to examine the relationship between the historical and cultural meanings of the text and the situation of the reader in order to arouse the

reader's cultural insight at the resonance of the text. Greenblatt emphasizes on the social and cultural practices that surround the text. Thus, a textual representation or a literary text, is therefore the product of its negotiation with history and cultural exchange which becomes an interesting site for the new historicists. Literature therefore, cannot be understood without having the knowledge of its historical context, just as it cannot be known except through linguistic intervention, either written or oral. The literary text to the new historicists is interpreted as product and producer, as well as the source of history. Thus, the textuality of history and the history of the text therefore remain the key concepts of new historicism that Louis Montrose, Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher and other champions of new historicism have proposed. To them, the concern of the literary critic should be to recover the ideology that gave birth to the text, and which the text in turn helped to spread within the culture. New historicism therefore, aims at locating the literary text among other traditionally nonliterary discursive practices' of an age. It looks for ruptures in a text, the way in which it challenges and undermines the ideology it perpetuates. It also seeks to blur the line between high and low art, the literary and socio-political. Its interest in addition is to recover lost or suppressed histories.

This work will therefore dwell on the following postulations of new historicism. There is nothing like the totalizing version of history, everything is, on some level, caught up in the circulations of power in a given time period. All cultural products, whether they are high art, political documents, personal letters, biographies and autobiographies or trash, are a part of larger discursive structures and, so, can offer clues to the ideological contradictions of a given time period. Man is seen as a social construct, and the author, critic, and historian as being trapped in their own historicity. History is subjective and dialogic, with ideological freight, and text, an agent of a culture's ideology, a social and cultural construct shaped by the author's

consciousness. Text as a particular vision of history; a product and producer of history, intimately connected to its historical and social context. Art generally, shapes rather than merely reflects an age's understanding of human experience and potentiality.

This chapter has demonstrated that single motherhood and the absence of the father figure among African Americans are issues of great concern for both critics and writer from diverse fields of study. Anthropologists, historians, sociologists, literary writers and critics among others, have attempted in various ways to look at the emergence, causes, effects, and possible solution for single motherhood among blacks in America. Part of the reasons why the issue is of serious concern is because of its negative effects on both the children that are being raised by single mothers and the society that produces them. Politicians like Barack Obama have attributed the rise in crime in black neighborhoods to one of the negative effects of single motherhood. Thus, the issue of single motherhood among blacks in America has affected the value system of African American homes negatively.

Since literature is a reflection of the society that produces it, it is not surprising that almost every African American literary piece has a glimpse of the theme of single motherhood in it. From the slave narratives which established the foundation for African American literature, the presence of single mothers has remained a major theme, if not a subject matter. It has become quite an issue in African American literature that even contemporary African American writers have continued to point through their works, to its prevalence.

In addition to literature review, this chapter has also explore new historicism as the theoretical framework that it will employ in the analytical chapters. The arguments and poetics of new historicist's scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Catherine Gallargher, Clifford

Geertz, Sinha Yogesh Kumar among others have been proposed to form the basis for the argument of this work.

Since the issue of single motherhood has been more of a course than a blessing to the society, the next chapter will look at James McBride's *The Color of Water* to see how an exceptional single mother; Ruth McBride Jordan was able to surmount the obstacles of being a single mother, thereby, making a positive mark in the society she lived in. Through the text, the chapter will look at the relationship between history and literature, and see how the life of an author and characters in literary text can affect societal values either negatively or positively. Thus, while agreeing to the prevalent issue of single motherhood in African American literature, the next chapter will look at how a single mother has contributed positively to the society despite the challenges of her time.

CHAPTER THREE

Historical Inquiry in James McBride *The Color of Water*

3.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at James McBride's *The Color of Water*, a text written in many respects as a tribute to his mother. The book is both a biography and autobiography. It has two first person narrative voices that narrate the stories of mother and son. In this regards, McBride employs a unique narrative technique in which he weaves his own life story in and out of his mother's story. This allows readers to learn about the life of both mother and son within the context of a single narrative. The use of two first person narrative voices and a complex plot structure enables the author to discuss multiple issues from diverse perspectives. In the text, McBride partially allows his mother to tell her story herself. Thus, both McBride and his mother, Ruth McBride Jordan take turns in different chapters of the text to narrate their parts of the story that make up *The Color of Water*. In twenty-five chapters, and an epilogue, *The Color of Water* brings to the fore issues such as race, religion, identity, migration, poverty, gender and single motherhood. McBride's desire to figure out his identity and that of his mother, pushes him into historical inquiry. Thus, McBride may not just have participated in the making of history, but has inquired into history in order to recreate history. Through the juxtaposition of the stories of both mother and son, *The Color of Water* reveals a strong motherly love and sacrifice, the importance of history to the life of a literary character, among other things. Over all, it is a tribute by McBride to his superb and determined mother and a historical exploration of the strength of a single mother.

One of the tenets of new historicism is that historical texts are complex description of human reality. Thus, in this narrative, McBride opens up his life, and more especially, that of his mother for public appraisal. It is the story of Ruth McBride Jordan, and how she dedicates her life to raising her twelve black children after being married and widowed twice. Born in a Jewish home, Ruth becomes a black woman in white skin by marrying two black men respectively. Depicting her strong motherly love for her twelve black children, Ruth ignores all the stares and insults from white Americans. She creates for herself and twelve black children a self-sufficient world; a world wherein they are proud of their identity. Ruth displays her first sacrificial act by marrying an African American. An act that makes her Jewish family members to perform "kaddish" for her; a ceremony of the dead. This single act excommunicates her from the world of the whites to that of the blacks in America. Her first marriage to Andrew McBride produced eight children; James being the last. At the death of her first husband, Ruth marries another black man, Hunter Jordan, who also dies after adding four children to the eight of McBride's. Ruth's biography which includes her struggles in raising her twelve black children in a racial environment is what makes up *The Color of Water*. From this Jewish, white and black racial identity that lingers around the story of Ruth, one of the poetics of new historicism is perceptible. That is, the notion that a historical work of art carries historical make ups of the society that produces it. The story of Ruth reveals the multi-racial history of the land of America. *The Color of Water* equally proves that every text has historical implication.

Through the juxtaposition of the present and past life of Ruth, James is able to recreate a new history that *The Color of Water* presents. In line with Louis Montrose's proposition that history can only be reconstruct through the filter of human consciousness, James tries in the text to understand his present and future life by understanding the past life of his mother. He does this

through his employment of some literary devices such a complex plot structure, characterization, images, metaphor, diction, among others. McBride uses a complex plot structure to weave his own life story into his mother's story. This can be seen in the way he plot the chapters of the text wherein he uses two first person narrative voices, one being himself, and the other, his mother's. With this, both McBride and his mother take turns in each chapter of the text to narrate their own stories. As they alternate in each chapter, Ruth's own version of the story appears in italics, to show the author's direct quotation of her words. By allowing Ruth's narrative voice to tell her own story, McBride wants his readers to hear directly from his mother's voice. This narrative style of the story, enables MacBride's readers to appreciate the character of Ruth, even as it adds to the verisimilitude of the narrative. Thus, *The Color of Water* is not simply a product of history, but rather, McBride has through it, participated in the making of history. As a literary text, *The Color of Water* has also presents to its readers, the image of an American society at a particular period of time. Through the reading of the text, one cannot but see the image of lack and poverty, especially within the African American community. In the text, one can also see the central character, James McBride in conflict with his society wherein he struggles with the complex social structure and his bi-racial identity. It is this struggle that awakens his consciousness into an inquiry into history in order to reconstruct his social and cultural ideology.

3.1 The Relationship between History and Literature in *The Color of Water*

New historicism as a literary theory argues that history and literature are two concepts that must be analysed together. This is because the new historicists see the lives of authors and characters in literary texts as being greatly influenced by their historical contexts. In line with the text under study, McBride as a character in his text is only able to make progress in life after his inquiry into Ruth's historical background which forms part of his own history. His journey to South

America in a bid to trace his maternal link, gives him a great inspirational insight that made him the writer he is. This goes in line with the new historicists' proposition that literature is a point of entry into the study of history. Also, aside Ruth's sacrifices as a single mother which James witnesses himself, hearing from Ruth's mouth, her ordeals as a result of her decision to marry a black man inspires him greatly. Every step taken by McBride in order to uncover the history of Ruth, gives him a better understanding of himself, even as it adds to the aesthetics of the text. Hence, another new historicist's tenet that the study of a text reveals more about a history and the study of a history reveals more about a text. The discovery of his white maternal linkage widens his sense of identity: his white blood and Jewish ties. This in turn, provides him with freedom of choice when opportunity demands. According to him, "During the rare, inopportune social moments when I found myself squeezed between black and white, I fled to the black side, just as my mother had done" (262-263).

It is equally obvious from the text under study that human beings as literary characters cannot run away from their past. Despite Ruth's attempts to hide her Jewish and white past from her children, some occasions still push her back to her history. James in the text, recalls an instance when there is need for him to fill in his mother's maiden name in a form. When he calls Ruth to ask for her maiden name, she tries as usual to deflect on the issue. But hearing that it is for James' educational pursuit, she reluctantly says "Shilsky" and hangs up the call, leaving James to figure out the spelling. This proves that history is indispensable, and at such, no one can completely run away from his or her past.

Again, having a historical knowledge of a character helps a critic to analyse such character better. Thus, an inquiry into Ruth's past helps both James and his readers to understand her

actions and inactions. After long hours of listening to Ruth as she recounts her history, McBride writes:

> It was typical Mommy neurotic behavior, and I didn't fully understand it till I learned how far she had truly come. For her, Jewish side is gone. She opened the door for me but closed it for herself long ago, and for her to crack it open and peek inside was like eating fire. She'd look in and stagger back, blinded, as the facts of her own history poured over her like lava. As she revealed the facts of her life I felt helpless, like I was watching her die and be reborn again (yet there was a cleansing element, too), because after years of hiding, she opened up and began to talk about the past, and as she did so, I was the one who wanted to run for cover. I can't describe what a shock it was to hear words like "Tateh" and "rov" and shiva" and "Bubeh" coming from Mommy's mouth…Imagine, if you will, five thousand years of Jewish history landing in your lap in the space of months. It sent me tumbling through my own abyss of sorts, trying to salvage what I could of my feelings and emotions…It was a fascinating lesson in life history----a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction marvel, to say the least (269-270).

In the preceding lines, McBride confesses that as Ruth relates her life before him, his own life begins to rebuild itself. An indication that history plays a great role in shaping the present and future life of a character in literary texts. Going back into history equally helps Ruth to openly assert her stand, and decision to remain on the African American side of things and reality. This clear reveal of the historicity of the text, brings about a recovery of Ruth's repressed history which in turn, gives meaning to young McBride's life.

3.2 A White Woman Undergoing Aspects of the Black Experiences

One of the problems that America faces today, especially within the black neighbourhood, is that of high increase in the rate of single motherhood. According to new historicism, all texts are social documents that reflect and respond to their historical situations. Thus, it is not surprising that McBride chooses to make public, Ruth's ordeal as a single mother. Even though Ruth is

white by race, her affinity with an African American man puts her in same experiences with black single mothers in America. As a mother of black children, the racial American society does not spare her. Being a single mother is a huge task on its own, but being a single mother on the black side in America within the practical period of racism is an unpalatable experience. The historical experiences of racism by blacks in the American society is so cruel that if given an opportunity, most blacks would want to pass as whites. This is evidenced in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912),* where the unnamed male narrator passes the colour line to become white, so as to avoid racial injustices against blacks. Even though a black man has risen up to such a position of being the President of America, being black in America still remains to some extent, a concept that is not too pleasant to associate with. With this in view, it is quite a huge sacrifice for a white Jewish American young lady to pass herself to being black through marriage. Part of the reasons why James McBride wrote the *Color of Water* is to expose to the world, the sacrifices his mother passed through in her decision to be a "white black woman".

Ruchel Dwajra Zylska (James' mother) is born an orthodox Jew in Poland. When her family migrates to America, her name changes to Rachel Deborah Shilsky to fit her new nationality. James uses the character of his mother, Ruth, to present the image of a strong self-reliant single mother who made history by putting up a kind of sacrificial act that was uncommon in her time. At the age of nineteen, Ruth demonstrates an uncommon act by choosing to have a marital relationship with a black man in a racist American society. This she does by marrying Andrew McBride; an African American. Narrating her cross over story to her son James, she says, "My family mourned me when I married your father. They said kaddish and sat shiva. That's how Orthodox Jews mourn their dead. They say prayers, turn their mirrors down, sit on boxes for

seven days, and cover their heads. It's a real workout, which is maybe why I'm not a Jew now" (p.2). The gravity of Ruth's sacrifice can only be clearly understood if placed within the socio-historical context within which *The Color of Water* was produced. No wonder the new historicist literary critics argue that to appreciate a text, it must be placed within the historical context of its production. Ruth marries Andrew in 1942; a period when being black in America is not something to boast about. Her marriage to Andrew can be likened to the marriage between Barack Obama's parents in Obama's *Dreams From My Father*. Ruth demonstrates her total cross over to the world of blacks in America by changing her name from Rachel Deborah Shilsky to Ruth McBride; after her black husband. Thus, *The Color of Water* as a literary work is a true product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition. The racial treatment that Ruth receives as a result of her choice to marry a black man reveals the relationship between a text and the cultural system that produced it. A culture that is so cruel to blacks that the Shilsky family considers their daughter dead as a result of her marital relationship with a black man.

In raising her twelve curious black children, Ruth hides her white background from her children. Knowing the potency of history, she fears that uncovering her history will destroy the lives of her children. Thus, as she struggles to build her children's future, she equally struggles to conceal her past from them. According to James:

> As a boy, I never knew where my mother was from – where she was born, who her parents were. When I ask she'd say, "God made me." When I asked if she was White, she'd say, "I'm light-skinned," and change the subject. She raised twelve black children and sent us all to college and in most cases graduate school. Her children became doctors, professors, chemists, teachers – yet none of us even knew her maiden name until we were grown. It took me fourteen years to unearth her remarkable story – the daughter of an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi, she married a black man in 1942 – and she revealed it more as a favor to me than out of any desire to revisit her past (xix).

Ruth's attempt to conceal her past from her children does more harm than good to them. As a solo parent, it almost destroys her children's sense of identity. As they grow up without a father figure, they hope to rely on Ruth's side in a bid to connect their lives somewhere, but Ruth's refusal to open up her identity to them brings nothing but confusion to them. According to James, "Answering questions about her personal history did not jibe with Mommy's view of parenting twelve curious, wild, brown-skinned children. She issued orders and her rule was law. Since she refused to divulge details about herself or her past…what I learned of Mommy's past I learned from my siblings" (p. 21). James equally reveals that he and his siblings trade information about their mother the way people trade baseball cards at trade shows, offering bits and pieces fraught with "gossip, nonsense, wisdom, and sometimes just plain foolishness (p.22). James sees their growing up amidst a mother they do not quite understand as dealing with realities over which they had no control of. Finding it difficult to unravel the question of who their mother really is to them, James and his siblings sometimes wonder if they were adopted by Ruth. Ruth on her part tries using diverse means to quench her children's curiosity, but in all, she refuses to acknowledge her whiteness. By hiding her identity from her children, Ruth is only trying to fully identify with their black race.

Her choice to identify with the black race raises various forms of persecutions from the whites, and suspicions from the blacks. This is a true reflection of the socio-historical context that produced *The Color of Water*. Despite Ruth's total acquiescence with blacks in America, they in turn, fail to associate freely with her for fear of racial injustices against blacks. According to James, "As a boy, I often found Mommy's ease among black people surprising. Most white folks I knew seemed to have a great fear of blacks. Even as a young child, I was aware of that" (31).

The presence of James and his siblings around Ruth attracts lots of hatred from the whites. Her state of being a white mother of black children is seen as foolishness by the whites. The white rage against her was so vivid that even her children feared for her. James reveals this rage thus:

> I could see it in the faces of the white people who stared at me and Mommy and my siblings when we rode the subway, sometimes laughing at us, pointing, muttering things like, 'Look at her with those little niggers.'… a white man screaming at Mommy somewhere in Manhattan, calling her a "nigger lover.' Mommy ignored them all, unless the insults threatened her children, at which time she would turn and fight back like an alley cat, hissing, angry, and fearless (p.31-32).

James likens the way his mother ignores affronts and insults to her personality as a white-black woman to the way a seasoned boxer slips punches. By using the expressions "little niggers" and "nigger lover" as in the above quotation in reference to him and his siblings, and his mother respectively, McBride is simply exposing the social rules and dictates of his narrative, as well as the historical situations evidenced in the text. All these sacrifices by Ruth marks her out as a unique white mother engulfed in experiences that blacks commonly undergo in America.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that most blacks do not treat Ruth any better. The presence of a white mother of twelve black children in a black neighbourhood, raises suspicion among blacks. James' narrative recalls a moment when two black women point at Ruth as she leads her children along the street saying, "Look at that white bitch" (31). But despite the unpleasant stares, insults, and sometimes physical attacks, Ruth is always at ease among blacks. Notwithstanding her being at ease with blacks, her children still fear for her, especially with the emergence of black power movement in the 1960s, a black revolutionary movement that permeated the black neighbourhood after the killing of Malcom X. Ruth sees no wrong in her children joining in the

revolutionary movement, so long as it does not affect their education. To show her loyalty to the black race in America, Ruth openly declares to her children, her love for Malcom X. When they ask who Malcom X was, she answers: "He was a man ahead of his time" (p. 32). Thus, being caught up in between two worlds; that of the whites and blacks in America, Ruth chooses to be black; an identity that is marked by lots of difficulties. Even in arduous moments of single motherhood, Ruth maintains her black side consistently.

3.3 The Reality of Single Motherhood in the *Color of Water*

One problem that virtually every single mother faces is that of insecurity. The absence of a father figure puts a single mother in a double role: that of father and mother. The death of Ruth's first husband; Andrew McBride, leaves her with seven children and pregnancy, James being the unborn child. He leaves behind no insurance policy, no dowry, no land, and no money for his pregnant wife and young children. Ruth remarries Hunter Jordan, another black man, who adds to the number of Ruth's children, making it up to a dozen, but never lives as a husband should with her. Hunter only moves in with Ruth when he is down with stroke, and it is not long before he dies. Thus, aside Ruth's time with Andrew, she remains a single mother all through the text. For this, she serves as the head of her family, answers to her children's curiosities, and wages wars against them, both physically, emotionally and psychologically. Though Hunter contributes to the wellbeing of the children, Ruth bears the greatest burden, even financially. She works day and night and still attends to her children's basic needs without any help. James confesses that his mother "barely had time to wipe the behind of one child before another began screaming at the top of her lungs." James equally recalls that his first day in school is the first time he is ever alone with his mother. This is because she has to walk him to the bus stop. Describing his mother's position in the home and the contribution of his step father, James says:

> She was the commander in chief of my house, because my step father did not live with us. He lived in Brooklyn until near the end of his life, staying away from the thronging masses to come home on weekends, bearing food and tricycles and the resolve to fix whatever physical thing we had broken during the week. The nuts and bolts of raising us was left to mommy, who acted as chief surgeon for bruises ("Put iodine on it"), war secretary ("If somebody hits you, take your fist and *crack* 'em"), religious consultant ("Put God first"), chief psychologist ("Don't think about it"), and financial adviser ("What's money if your mind is empty"). Matters involving race and identity she ignored (p. 9).

Despite all Ruth's effort to bridge the gap that both Andrew and Hunter create in the lives of her children, they still feel the absence of a father figure in their lives. James confesses that the consciousness of having a father first flashed in his memory when Hunter junior; the eleventh child of his mother is born. He recalls that, that is the first time of acknowledging Hunter Jordan senior as a stepfather. Revealing the absence of a father figure in his life, he says, "As a small boy, I was never quite aware of the concept of 'father.' My real father, Andrew McBride, died before I was born. I was lorded over by Mommy, my older siblings, friends of Ma's, and relatives on my father's and stepfather's sides whom, years later, I would recognize as guiding forces in my life" (p. 118). Not having the opportunity to know his biological father, and having a stepfather who is like a visitor to the house makes James to view fatherhood as an illusion. Living in a home with so many siblings with only his mother caring for them influence James and his siblings to wonder why their home should be different from other homes. He describes his family as a "huge family with twelve kids" (p. 9). Ruth's children lack the image of an ideal family. When they look outside or watch the television screen, they see the picture of homes different from theirs. For this, they sometimes in their mental imaginations create a perfect home where everything is in its perfect order. James recalled one of his fantasies thus:

> As a kid, I remember wishing I were in the TV show Father knows Best, where the father comes home from work every day wearing a suit and tie and there are only enough kids to fit on his lap, instead of in my house, where we walked around with huge holes in our pants, cheap Bo-Bo sneakers that cost $ 1.99 at John's Bargains store, with parents who were busy and distracted, my stepfather appearing only on weekends in sleeveless T-shirt, tools in hand, and Mommy bearing diapers, pins, washcloths, Q-tips, and a child in each arm with another pulling at her dress (p. 9-10).

The above experiences create inferiority complex in the minds of Ruth's children. They see themselves as products of an abnormal home. A home marked by constant lack and insufficiency of both material and emotional needs. Describing his first-day-to-school attire, James says, "My clothes were clean, but not new. The pants had been Billy's, the shirt was David's, the coat had been passed down from Dennis to Billy to David to Richie to me" (p. 11). He seems not to understand how a family can be so large that his mother often appear not to know who bears which name. This realistic presentation of what life is for James and his family as in the above quotation is part of the qualities that marks *The Color of Water* as an autobiography. With the death of Hunter, the situation intensifies, Ruth withdraws to her piano and bicycle and the children become more confused than ever before. James turns a new life in trying to hide from reality. His new found life style features one of the psychological effects of single motherhood in the lives of children. According to him:

> I virtually dropped out of high school after he died, failing every class. I spent the year going to movies on Forty-second Street in Time Square with my friends. "James is going through his revolution," my siblings snickered. Still, my sisters were concerned, my older brothers angry. I ignored them. Me and my hanging-out boys were into the movies. Superfly, Shaft, and reefer, which we smoked in as much quantity as possible. I snatched purses. I shoplifted. I even robbed a petty drug dealer once. And then in the afternoons, coming home after a day of cutting school,

> smoking reefer, waving razors, and riding the subway, I would see my mother pedaling her blue bicycle (p. 6).

Here is yet, another depiction of a graphic and honest account of life. McBride does not spare or hide the fact that he once robbed a petty drug dealer, smoked reefer and engaged in some other unlawful acts. Thus, by exposing the good, the bad and the ugly part of his life, McBride is trying to convince his readers that *The Color of Water* is truly an authentic account of his life.

Having been widowed twice, Ruth resolves to raise her twelve children with her self-created principles. Her rule number one; "You stick to your brothers and sisters, that's it. Don't tell nobody your business neither! Never, ever, ever tell your business to nobody" (p. 13). She issues orders and according to James, "her rule was law" (p. 21). She insists on absolute privacy for her children, excellent school grades and non-trust of an outsider of either race. She instructs her children never to reveal details of their home life to any figures of authority: teachers, social workers, cops, storekeepers, or even friends. Playing in the street is discouraged and often forbidden and if any of the children does manage to slip out , then comes rule number two; "Get your butt in this house before dark" (p. 27). This second rule she enforces to the bone. Describing his mother's order of governing her home, James says:

> If anyone asked us about our home life, we were taught to respond with, "I don't know," and for years I did just that. Mommy's house was an entire world that she created. She appointed the eldest child at home to be "king" or "queen" to run the house in her absence and we took it from there, creating court jesters, slaves, musicians, poets, pets, and clowns (p. 27).

Even though Ruth spends most of her time away from home, swinging from one job to another, she makes sure that her rules speak in her absence. She will not hesitate to pick any job that will in one way or the other, better the lives of her children. Having so many children and less than

enough to feed them, she moves from one job to another. Any job that has additional benefit such as provision of meal among others, entices Ruth. All these she do for the sake of her children because any edible benefit from work place usually follows her home. According to James, "There was always a mad scramble for Ma's purse when she showed up at two A.M. from work. The cafeteria at the Chase Manhattan Bank where she worked served dinner to the employees for free, so she would load up with bologna sandwiches, cheese, cake, whatever she could pillage, and bring home for the hordes to devour" (p. 67). Thus, living in a house where there is little money and little food, Ruth's children are always on a look out for the arrival of their mother. Ruth often laments the fact that she cannot afford to buy her children fruits, and hates the junk that usually serve as their main meal.

The experiences of Ruth's Orthodox Jewish family which include, being harsh on children, a focus on money, a deep distrust of all outsiders and tyranny, largely shaped her model of parenting. In Ruth's case, her obligations include: hard work, no nonsense, quest for excellence, distrust of authority figures, and a deep belief in God and Education. Her children are not allowed out after five o'clock. Her anthem remained; "Stay in school, don't ever follow the crowd, and follow Jesus" (p. 251).

Ruth's advice to her children is that money without knowledge is worthless, and that education tempered with religion is the way to climb out of poverty in America. She insists that her children strive for the highest professional goals. Not even the tiredness of returning back from work at two a.m. will stop Ruth from inspecting her children's homework. James puts it thus: "When she got home from work she was exhausted. We'd come downstairs in the morning to find her still dressed and fast asleep at the kitchen table, her head resting on the pages of someone's homework, a cold cup of coffee next to her sleeping head" (p. 67). Excuses for not

doing homework are not accepted in Ruth's house, and will draw beating. Like a reminder, her voice is always fresh in the minds of her children; "Do your homework and don't tell stories" (p. 69). Ruth supports anything involving the improvement of her children's education and general condition.

Despite the constant hunger and lack in Ruth's house, she never goes outside for financial help. She is against welfare and never applies for it despite her needs. She prefers to be among the poor, the working-class poor of the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn: the cement mixers, bakers, doughnut makers, grandmothers, and soul-food church partisans who remain her lifelong friends. Her motto, which stands like a home anthem is, "If it doesn't involve your going to school or church, I could care less about it and my answer is no whatever it is" (p. 27). Despite the environmental challenges around her, Ruth aims high for all her children. Whenever there is a case of crime on television or newspaper, she will always turn to her children and deliver to them her invariable lecture: "You don't need money. What's money if your mind is empty! Educate your mind!" (p. 33). Ruth's strife for quality education causes her to send her children to all-white schools. She pays deaf ears to all their complaints about racial discrimination and encourages them to focus on acquiring knowledge. Because of her admiration for the way Jewish parents do raise their children to be scholastic standouts, Ruth tacitly forces every one of her children to go to predominantly Jewish public schools. She does not mind the distance her children have to travel to acquire quality education; leaving their black neighbourhood to attend all-white schools. James reveals this thus:

> By age twelve, I was travelling an hour and a half one way to junior high school by myself, taking two buses each direction every day…we grew accustomed to being the only black, or 'Negro', in school and were standout students, neat and well-mannered, despite the racist attitudes of many of our teachers, who

> were happy to knock our 95 test score down to 85's and 80's over the most trivial mistakes (p. 89).

Ruth's bent for hard work, Christian principles and trust in God keeps her going through all her life long battles. Her love for blacks and Christianity sprout from her observation of the lives of blacks in the South where she grew up. She confesses that despite the hardship that characterized the living condition of blacks in Suffolk; south America, they never complained to anyone. Their love for God in such condition makes Ruth to fall in love with Christianity. In her own narrative voice she says, "*What always struck me about black folks was that every Sunday they'd get dressed up so clean for church I wouldn't recognize them. I liked that. They seemed to have such a purpose come Sunday morning. Their families were together and although they were poor, they seemed happy"* (p. 61). No wonder she founds New Brown Memorial Baptist Church with her first husband; Andrew McBride, in Red Hook. Thus, church principles and her self-made laws stand out as the yardsticks that Ruth uses for her parenting. Cursing is not allowed in her house. In fact, her children are not even allowed to say the word "lie". Ruth loves God and dedicates herself to His service. Describing his mother's enthusiastic love for God, James says:

> Mommy loved God. She went to church each and every Sunday, the only white person in sight, butchering the lovely hymns with a singing voice that sounded like a cross between a cold engine trying to crank on an October morning and a whining Maytag washer. My siblings and I would muffle our laughter as Mommy dug into hymns verve and gusto: *"Leaning…oh, leaning…safe and secure on the ___"* Up, up, and away she went, her shrill voice climbing higher and higher, reminding us of Curly of the Three Stooges. It sounded so horrible that I often thought Rev. Owens, our minister would get up from his seat and stop the song (p. 45)

In this open and humorous language employ, McBride shows that Ruth holds and values church and religious activities the same way she value education and hard work. The church serves as a

place of emotional relief for her. As a child, James confesses of being marveled as to how a grown woman; his mother, will be crying in the church. And once he asks her, "Why do you cry in church?" (p. 50). Ruth's answer is that God makes her happy. Remembering those tears of his mother as a grown man, James writes:

> Mommy's tears seemed to come from somewhere else, a place far away, a place inside her that she never let any of us children visit, and even as a boy I felt there was pain behind them. I thought it was because she wanted to be black like everyone else in church, because maybe God liked black people better, and one afternoon on the way home from church I asked her whether God was black or white. A deep sigh, 'Oh boy… God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit.' (p. 50).

Curiosity still leads James to further ask what colour is God's spirit. Ruth replies him that God doesn't have a colour: "God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color" (p. 51). This answer so inspire James' life that he decides to make it the title of this narrative. James reveals that his mother is utterly confused about all but one thing: Jesus (p. 165). She equally tries to share her love for God with her children. Thus, most of her private discussions with any of them will always end with a quote: "You know time is not promised,…That's why you better get to know Jesus" (p. 261). This works for Ruth, because her Godly life always serves as guiding steps for her children.

As a single mother within the context of African American society, Ruth never finds it rosy. The American racial environment poses the major trait for Ruth as she raises her children single handedly. But in all her challenges, her determination, especially towards the academic and general success of her children keeps her going.

3.4 Overcoming the Challenges of Single Motherhood

The new historicists are of the opinion that text is an agent of cultural ideology. While Ruth champions her children's quest for knowledge, she seems to be unaware that a text possesses the power to transform its readers either positively or negatively. When Ruth's children begin to dive into whatever book they could lay their hands on, a conflict of power does arise in her home. The issue of race is one topic that Ruth strictly avoids in her home. She dreads anything that will make her children feel that they are less important than others in the society. Again, Ruth knows that raising the issue of race in her house will reveal her true identity which remains hidden from her children. Thus, whenever her children come up with the question of colour or race, she tacitly changes the discussion with one of her philosophical statements. She makes sure she feeds her children with enough Christian morals, books, music and other forms of arts, but all these could not quench the inquisition of race in them. One confusion that can be seen in the life of young James is that of the true identity of his being. As a boy, he couldn't understand why he and his siblings are of different shades of brown, different textures of hair, with a mother that looks white.

The new historicists' proposition of the power of a text seems to act upon James' life when he come across the phrase "tragic mulatto" in a book. The term seems to describe his identity, so, he brings it home for discussion. As a child being raised by a single parent, is not surprising that James takes his inquisitive to his mother. As soon as the words comes out of his mouth, anger flashes across Ruth's face like lightening and at that moment, she wish she could delete the phrase from her child's memory. Her answer and conclusion to the matter is that James should never read the book that supplies him such information again. When James further asks if he is black or white, Ruth replies; "You're a human being, educate yourself or you'll be nobody!" (p. 92). She uses a certain joke of a teacher and the types of beans to arrive at the conclusion that all

humans are *human beans*, and that ends the discussion. James has no other option than to take his quest to his older siblings who as usual will always complicate issues for him. Talking of race he says: "The question of race was like the power of the moon in my house. It's what made the river flow, the ocean swell, and the tide rise, but it was a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable, and thus completely ignorable. Mommy kept us at a frantic living pace that left no time for the problem" (p. 94). The unfathomable colour confusion in Ruth's house sometimes makes James to wish they are just one colour, black or white.

Ruth's approach towards issues like identity, self-expression and ambition soon becomes too weak for her grown and inquisitive children. The black power revolution of the sixties seems to possess Ruth's older boys that it almost rift her house into two. This revolution seems to be the savior all her children have been waiting for. Both sons and daughters start defiling her rules, fashioning out their lives the way they deem fit. Describing the scenario, James says:

> The sixties roared through my house like a tidal wave. My sister Helen's decision to drop out of school and run off at age fifteen, though she returned home five years later with a nursing degree and a baby girl, was the first sign of impending doom. Now the others began to act out, and the sense of justice and desire for equal rights that Mommy and my father had imparted to us began to backfire…one by one, my elder siblings broke with her rules, coming home bearing fruits of their own confusion, which we jokingly called their 'revolution'. An elder brother disappeared to Europe. Another sister had an affair at college and came home with a love child, fairly big news in 1967. My brother Richie got married at eighteen over Mommy's objections, divorced, then entered college, and was home on summer break he got stopped by two cops while walking down the street with a friend (p. 96).

Richie's arrest seems to revive in Ruth, a strength she thought she had lost. On the day of his arraignment, Ruth arrive quite early to court and when she sees her son being handcuffed and dirty, she could not contain her grief. She begins to mutter like a crazy woman, wringing her hands. When the court-appointed lawyer advise Richie to plead guilty, Ruth jump and scream

that none of her kids has ever been in trouble with the law before. She explains that her son is a college student and out of pity, Richie is released to her custody and the charges are later dropped. Richie's case makes Ruth to bear down on her younger children more than ever before. She has to resort to her king/queen system of governing her home where the eldest child is the king or queen and the rest like his or her slaves. With this, orderliness is restored in her home because none could defy the orders of his/her majesty. Talking of this system of home governance, James says, "The king/queen system gave us a sense of order, rank, and self. It gave the older ones the sense that they were in charge, when in actuality it was Mommy who ruled the world. It also harked back to her own traditional Orthodox upbringing where the home was run by one dominating figure with strict rules and regulations" (p. 98). Ruth equally aligns herself with any relative or friend who has interest in the discipline of any of her children and will not hesitate to send them off to stay with whichever relative that promises to straighten them out. Since her family is not available to her, the extended black family remains Ruth's hole card, and she plays it as often as the times demand. While the characters of Ruth's children compliment her story, the author also uses them to pose conflict to the character of Ruth. Thus, aside being in conflict with the society wherein she is living as a widow with twelve children, she is also in conflict with her parental role. All these conflicts and her methods of tackling them enables readers to appreciate her character credibly.

In Ruth's methods of discipline, the biblical saying of "spear the rod and spoil the child" appears handy because she will not spear any child for whatever wrong doing. James in the book recalls one of his days of drunkenness; a day that he is so drunk that he cannot even make it home. He says, "My friend Joe carried me to my house, where I fell down, got up, pissed in the street in front of my sisters, who were desperately trying to get me into the house without Mommy seeing

me, then collapsed. When I woke up hours later, Mommy was sitting at the foot of my bed. Whipping belt in hand. She whipped me mercilessly, tears in her eyes" (p. 140). In the midst of all these challenges of parenting, Ruth is bent on making great men and women out of her children. Her number one priority is providing quality education for them. As Ruth battles with the revolution in her home, being caused by her children's encounter with texts and the ideologies they carry, one thing comes to mind. That is, the new historicists' view that text and art generally, shapes rather than merely reflect an age's understanding of human experiences and potentiality.

3.5 Ruth as a Social Construct for her Children and McBride's Readers

The life of Ruth that is portrayed and foregrounded in *The Color of water* stands as a social exemplar to every reader of the text. Parenting for her is like a war, where she battles with societal vices over her children. Despite her emotional state of being a widow, and the constant lack that marks her home, she strives to see that her children acquire education. In doing this, she makes sure that every money she acquires from her late husband's pension, to her small salary, goes to her children in college and graduation school. She does not hesitate to send James to summer school when she realises that he has grown too old to be punished for skipping classes. When every physical effort to put James back in order failed, Ruth's admonitions and Godly life work for her. Describing the magic pill that put him out of drunkenness, weed and street life, James says, "Like my own mother did in times of stress, I turned to God. I lay in bed at night praying to Him to make me strong, to rid me of anger, to make me a man, and He listened, and I began to change" (p. 161). James is the eighth straight child Ruth send to college, the seven before him all graduate and move on for higher degrees. Sending her children to schools that are far away is Ruth's way of training them to be independent. She will not hear of it when they

apply to schools that are near home. Yet, she will wipe her eyes with the back of her hand and watch silently through the living room window as they wave goodbye. Describing the scene of his own departure, James says: “As usual, she was broke, dumping single dollar bills, change, pennies on the counter to pay for the one-way ticket to Ohio. As I stepped on the bus she squeezed a bunch of bills and change into my hand. “It’s all I have,” she said. I counted it. Fourteen dollars. “Thanks, Ma.” I kissed her and got on the bus quickly to hide my own tear” (p. 189).

Ruth wins the wars of parenting, and her children’s achievements are her life’s work. She raise twelve creative and talented children and according to James, *The Color of Water* wouldn’t have made any difference if the achievements of Ruth’s children are not mentioned. He outlines them thus:

> ANDREW DENNIS MCBRIDE, B.A., Lincoln University; M.D., University of Pennsylvania Medical School; M.A., Public Health, Yale University; Director of Health Department, City of Stamford, Connecticut.
>
> ROSETTA MCBRIDE, B.A., Howard University; M.S.W., Social Work, Hunter College; Staff Psychologist, New York City Board of Education.
>
> WILLIAM MCBRIDE, B.A.; Lincoln University; M.D., Yale University School of Medicine; M.B.A., Emory University School of Business; Medical Director South-east Region, Medical and Scientific Affairs, Merck and Co. Inc.
>
> DAVID MCBRIDE, B.A., Denison University; M.A., History, Columbia University; Ph.D., History, Columbia University; Chairman of Afro-American History Department, Pennsylvania State University.
>
> HELEN MCBRIDE-RICHTER, R.N., Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania; G.O.N.P., Emory University School of Medicine, Graduate Student in Nurse Midwifery, Emory University School of Nursing.
>
> RICHARD MCBRIDE, U.S. Army veteran, B.A., Cheney University, Chemistry; M.S., Drexel University; Associate Professor of Chemistry, Cheney State; Chemistry Research Associate, AT& T.
>
> DOROTHY MCBRIDE-WESLEY, A.A., Pierce Junior College; B.A., La Salle University; medical practice office manager, Atlanta, Georgia.

JAMES MCBRIDE, B.A., Oberlin College; M.S.J., Journalism, Columbia University; writer, composer, saxophonist.

KATHY JORDAN, B.A., Syracuse University; M.S., Education, Long Island University; special- education teacher, Ewing High School, Ewing, New Jersey.

JUDY JORDAN, B.A., Adelphi University; M.A., Columbia University Teachers College; teacher, JHS 168, Manhattan.

HUNTER JORDAN, B.S., Computer Engineering, Syracuse University; computer consultant, U.S. Trust Corporation, Ann Taylor.

HENRY JORDAN, junior at North Carolina A&T University; customer service and purchasing, Neal Manufacturing, Inc., Greensboro, North Carolina.

RUTH JORDAN, B.A., Temple University, 1986.

By presenting the above profile, McBride is simply telling his readers that Ruth has single handedly raised twelve successful children, most of whom are leaders in their own right. Her story remains an inspiration, not only to her children, but to as many that come in contact with *The Color of Water*. For this, she has been described by Lawyeraau of *Hall of Fame* Reviewer as, "a woman who succeeded and achieved the American dream, despite the societal obstacles placed in her way". (http://www.amazon.com/The-Color-Water-Tribute-Mother/product-reviews). Thus, in presenting the challenges of single parenting, James has shown the strength and wisdom of a single mother, and how the life of a single mother has positively affect the generations after her. The text also touches on the issue of race in America. As Ruth metamorphose through marriage, from a white Jewish girl to an African American Christian mother, one can see a glimpse of an attainment of the American dream which is the dream of:

> A land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability of achievement…a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Cullen Jim 2004: 59).

Even though Ruth is aware that her white identity will offer her a better opportunity than black will, she chooses to identify with the black race in America, and allows her personal achievements to determine her social order.

Looking at the character of McBride and that of his siblings, against the social rules and dictates found within the text, it is obvious that Ruth has greatly contributed and positively shaped her society.

In presenting the biography of Ruth and his autobiography in *The Color of Water*, James McBride has demonstrate to his readers that there is no total version of history. The book reveals its version of white, black and Jewish relationship in America. Through the chronicle of the lives of Ruth and James, *The Color of Water* offers clue to the ideological contradictions of particular periods of time. These include: the Holocaust that led to the immigration of Jews like Ruth's family to the land of America, racism against blacks in America, American Civil and Vietnam wars, the black power among others. Hence, one of the new historicist tenet that the study of a text reveals more about a history, and the study of history reveals more about a text.

The Color of Water equally proves the new historicists argument that one's understanding of the past is always conducted by one's present consciousness. The book came into limelight as a result of James' continuous quest for identity. His consciousness of digging into his mother's past so as to discover who he is led to the writing of *The Color of Water*. As he grows from a little inquisitive boy to a confused adult, he realises that the part of him that wants to understand who he actually is, continue to irk and itch at him like a mosquito bite that cries out to be scratched. According to him, "There were two worlds bursting inside me trying to get out. I had to find out more about who I was, and in order to find out who I was, I had to find out who my mother was" (p. 266). James further confesses that he decides to delve into writing partly to

expel some of his own demons regarding his brown skin, curly hair, and divided soul. Thus, the book gives Ruth her past, and James, a reconstructed past and present, as well as a focused future. As the biography of Ruth begins to unravel, James confesses thus, "The uncertainty that lived inside me began to dissipate; the ache that the little boy who stare in the mirror felt was gone. My own humanity was awakened, rising up to greet me with a handshake as I watched the first glimmers of sunlight peek over the horizon" (p. 229). Worthy to note in McBride's narrative is his unique poetic use of words which can be tied to his music carrier. Most of his words in the text are so weighty that they have to be looked into beyond their surface connotation. For example, "rising up to greet me with a handshake" as in the above quotation.

Above all, Ruth's parental ideology that *The Color of Water* presents serves and will continue to serve as guide lines to parents, especially single mothers who are faced with the challenges of solo parenting. According to James, "I have met hundreds of mothers-African American, Jewish, European, Arab, Latino, African, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist-and all of them understand that family love, a mother's love, gives us grace, courage, and power beyond measure" (p. 293). *The Color of water* has placed Ruth as one of the inspirational figures in contemporary American literature, as her story is being studied by students in sociology, literature, history and creative writing classes. Her life enclosed in a text speaks to so many parents, especially on the issue of raising children. James concludes *The Color of Water* by saying that the book has always been, and will forever be for him, a book about a mother and her children, and how that mother raised her children with love and respect and God. He describes Ruth as the CEO, and commander in chief of the McBride-Jordan army, and acknowledges that in running away from her past, that Ruth has created her own nation, a rainbow coalition that descends on her house every Christmas and thanksgiving (p. 277).

In line with the new historicists, a critical look at *The Color of Water*, reveals that ideologies manifest in literary production and discourse. This can be seen in the way McBride shows the role a person's past plays in shaping that person's future. Ruth's attempt to completely close her Jewish past to avoid her children's intrusion only tries to mar their lives. But laying open her past, helps them, especially James, to recollect themselves for better and promising future. At the other hand, by opening her past, Ruth equally frees herself from fear and cage of secrecy. Studying her life as a literary text equally shows that history is a complex description of human reality, and evolution of pre-conceived notions. The text is thus, a product, producer and source of history.

CHAPTER FOUR

Historical Re-visitation in Maya Angelou's *Mom & Me & Mom*

4.0 Introduction

This chapter centers on Maya Angelou's last autobiography, *Mom & Me & Mom*. *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) is the seventh and final series of Angelou's autobiographical works. In honour of motherhood generally, the book was published in 2013, shortly before mother's day which was on the 12th of May. Just as the title portrays, *Mom & Me & Mom* focusses on Angelou's relationship with her mother, Vivian Baxter, both as a mother and a care giver. Angelou's series of autobiographies which are like strings of a chain are typical portrayal of the tenets of new historicism in terms of the inter-connectedness of works of art. However, unlike in Angelou's other autobiographical works wherein she in some instances, shows more of resentment than love towards her mother for abandoning her and her elder brother, Barley Johnson jnr, Angelou in *Mom & Me & Mom* chronicles her reunion and reconciliation with her mother. Thus, the book is like a summary of all Angelou's autobiographies wherein she reconciles all her conflicts with her mother and herself as well. Thus, in accordance with new historicism, the text presents Angelou's readers with yet another "model of truth".

In the first section of the book entitled "Mom & Me", Angelou looks back at her life before the age of seventeen, and for the first time, sees love, rather than resentment and distrust from her mother. In the second section entitled "Me & Mom", she takes time to share the unconditional love, support and assistance her mother gives to her as a single mother. Having known what it takes to be a single mother herself, Angelou must have come to the realization that her mother

truly loves her even when she seems to have abandoned her in the hands and care of her paternal grandmother.

As an autobiographer, Angelou seems to be among African American autobiographers who seek to develop an authentic self through her writings. Even though her seven autobiographies centered closely on her life as a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter, and a mother, there are other issues of societal concern that her books champion. Themes in her autobiographies include that of quest for identity, racism, insecurity, instability, love and family. Regardless of the criticism of Angelou's autobiographical works as to whether they are truly her life story, McPherson Dolly (1990:18) sees her as one of the greatest African American female autobiographers. When asked about the sometimes slippery notion of truth that marks most non-fiction in an interview with journalist George Plimpton (2008:30), Angelou confesses thus, "I sometimes make a diameter from a composite of three or four people, because the essence in only one person is not sufficiently strong to be written about". This goes in line with the new historicism proposition that there is no access to a full and authentic past.

Her autobiographical series conform to the standard structure of the autobiographical genre in the sense that they are all written by a single author, and are chronological. Her autobiographical works also contain elements of character, themes, literary language, among other literary techniques that qualify them to be literature texts. The voice of Maya Angelou herself, remains the narrative voice in all her autobiographies. In creating a unique tradition of the autobiographical form, Angelou places the developments of her life in books. As she matures from a young girl to an adult single mother, the theme of maturing motherhood evolves in her books. The theme of motherhood is established *in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where Angelou gives birth to her son, and in the subsequent autobiographies, there are emphasis on the

importance of the need to elaborate the theme. As she faces the problem of parenting, relationships and survival as a single mother, her thematic issues expand to include other issues like race, gender discrimination, single motherhood, instability, poverty, among others. According to Mary Jane Lupton (1998: 108), motherhood is a prevailing theme throughout Angelou's autobiographies. Her role as a single black mother who is determined to make a life for herself and her son against the obstacles of race and gender remain a subject matter in almost all her autobiographies.

As the central character in her own books, Angelou faces both internal and external conflict. These conflicts are the forces that drive the series from her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, to the last, *Mom & Me & Mom*. Her primary and internal conflict is her struggle to identify herself as well as her goals and also defend them against other important demands from the outside. Externally, she is in conflict with her mother, her society and more importantly, her role as a loving mother is in conflict with her career. Thus, she uses her seven autobiographies to illustrate the battle field for all her internal and external conflicts.

Aside putting her personal experiences in books, Angelou uses her life stories to unravel the social and historical make ups that control human activities in the time periods of her writings. One of such powers is that of racism which gives room to other powers such as slavery and gender discrimination. While contributing to the literary field, Angelou also contributes to the expansion of history by writing her own version of the historical events that her autobiographical works present. Thus, she is a participant in the creation of the version of American and African American history that her works present.

4.1 *Mom & Me & Mom* and its Intertextual Dimension

Even though each of Angelou's autobiographical works presents specific periods and events of her life, one common aesthetic in her autobiographies is the technique of bringing in elements of her past works into the present. This means that none of Angelou's autobiographical work is independent of others in terms of the issues they present. For example, the issue of her rape by her mother's male friend at the age of seven is present in almost all her autobiographies. This continuous re-visitation of her past helps her to continue improving on her future. In Angelou's other autobiographies she presents a new chapter of her life even as she goes back to issues already presented in previous works. But, *Mom & Me & Mom* is like a complete walk back to events that happened in her life. This can be vividly seen in the plot structure of the book. The plot of the book is not sequential. In the book, Angelou goes through all her life events and picks out incidents of her mother's exceptional display of love which she has been undermining in her previous works. So, each event she presents in the book has one thing or the other to say about her mother's unconditional love for her. The memorial nature of the book can be seen in the way Angelou sometimes brings in events that are out of narrative order into her writing. For example, in chapter eight of the book, Angelou starts by saying, "When I was fifteen years old, I received a scholarship to attend the California Labor School" (Angelou 2013: 109), after talking of her marriage with Tosh Angelos in the previous chapter. In, *Mom & me & mom* thus, Angelou continues to revisit some of the remarkable incidents of her childhood, growing up and adulthood, such as the abandonment by her mother, her rape, period of single motherhood, failed marriage, and career pursuit. As the title indicates, the focus of *Mom & Me & Mom* is on Angelou's relationship with her mother Vivian Baxter whom for the first time in her

autobiographies, she acknowledges, more than she has done in her other books, with positive remarks.

In her usual first person narrative point of view, which is customary with autobiographical works, Angelou celebrates her mother's immeasurable contributions towards her life. In the prologue of the text, Angelou writes:

> Frequently, I have been asked how I got to be this way. How did I, born black in a white country, poor in a society where wealth is adored and sought after at all costs, female in an environment where only large ships and some engines are described favorably by using the female pronoun----how did I get to be Maya Angelou? (Angelou 2013:ix)

Maya's response to the above question is that the real question should rather be how she survived all the odds. She concludes the prologue of the book by asserting that *Mom & Me & Mom* is written to examine some of the ways love heals and helps a person to climb impossible heights and rise from immeasurable depths. Thus, *Mom & Me & Mom* is like a re-visitation of Angelou's previous autobiographies, and the essence is to show how motherly love has helped her both as a single mother and a career woman.

While the character of Maya Angelou has been enjoying being the heroine of Angelou's earlier six autobiographies, in *Mom & Me & Mom*, Angelou presents her readers with two heroic women, herself and her mother. In this presentation of two heroic characters, Angelou exposes how her heroic mother has greatly contributed in making her the hero she is. In her earlier six autobiographies, Angelou seems to be uncertain about the influence of her mother on her life. Every attempt by her mother to correct the bad impression Angelou has about her proves abortive. Like a shadow, the image of un-forgiveness seems to cover the eyes of Angelou, thereby, preventing her from seeing the good side of her mother, Vivian Baxter. In *Mom & Me &*

Mom, Angelou has to re-visit her reunion with her mother after spending her early years with her grandmother in Stamps. But unlike the tone of distrust with which she relays this same incident in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* in *Mom & Me & Mom,* Angelou celebrates with all appreciation, the humility of Vivian Baxter as she tries to win her daughter's heart. As she journeys to meet with her mother in California, Angelou confesses that by the time the train carrying her and her grandmother reaches California, she has become too frightened to accept the idea that she is going to meet her mother at last. In the first two weeks of her arrival in California, Angelou and her mother barely talk to each other. Vivian has to break the ice by calling her daughter for a "sit-down talk-to" (Angelou 2013: 15). In this recreation of a history that Angelou has already presented *in I know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* she presents the image of her mother as a loving humble go-getter. By making use of dialogic diction to show her mother's words that won her heart, Angelou wants her readers to see beyond the tone of anger and distrust with which she wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* The words of her mother go thus:

> Maya, you disapprove of me because I am not like your grandmother. That's true. I am not. But I am your mother and I am working some part of my anatomy off to pay for this roof over your head. When you go to school, the teacher will smile at you and you will smile back. Students you don't even know will smile and you will smile. But on the other hand, I am your mother. If you can force one smile on your face for strangers, do it for me. I promise you I will appreciate it (Angelou 2013: 16).

Vivian does not just sermonize to Angelou for a friendly smile, but she goes ahead to force a smile out of her by making a funny face at which Angelou has to smile against her will. The sight of a smile on Angelou's face makes Vivian to start crying because it is the first time she ever sees her daughter smile. She calls it a "beautiful smile" (Angelou 2013: 16). Angelou confesses that she was not used to being called beautiful, and that, that singular act by Vivian

taught her that she can be a giver simply by bringing a smile to another person. Just as the new historicist scholars have postulate, Vivian stands for her daughter as a social construct; that is, a model. Angelou equally points that this act by her mother to win her heart stands like a principle for her all through her life time. She puts it thus, "The ensuing years have taught me that a kind word or a vote of support can be a charitable gift. I can move over and make another place for another to sit. I can turn my music up if it pleases, or down if it is annoying" (Angelou 2013: 16). By the time Angelou's elder brother; Bailey reunites with his sister and his mother in California from Arkansas, Angelou confesses thus, "I was glad that I had my brother and a woman whom I was beginning to like, and maybe even to love. Perhaps life was going to be all right after all" (Angelou 2013: 30). This means that Vivian has already influenced her daughter positively, thereby, winning her heart in the process.

In a bid to also appreciate her mother, Angelou makes another re-visitation of her past by re-echoing the story of the serious beating she received from her jealous boyfriend. This story is first disclosed in Angelou's book of essays entitled *Letters to My Daughter* (2009). The essence of the incident in *Mom & Me & Mom* is not just to attract pity from the readers, but to bring out the image of love which her mother embodies. As Angelou recreates this horrific beating by her boyfriend, she makes emphasis on her mother's act of love and sacrifice to save her life. In doing this, Angelou quotes her mother's exact words on locating the house of Mark Jones; her boyfriend thus, "Break it down. Break the son of a bitch down. My baby's in there" (Angelou 2013:87). In this blunt use of words in reference to Mark, Angelou is trying to show her mother's zealousness in finding her as well as her anger towards her daughter's abductor. On seeing the condition of her daughter, Vivian even threatens to "kill the bastard" (Angelou 2013: 87), referring to Mark. To further express her mother's love for her, Angelou (2013:87) says:

> The sight of my face swollen to twice its size and my teeth stuck into my lips was more than she could stand. So she fell…She felt guilty like all mothers who blame themselves when terrible events happen to their children. I could not speak or even touch her but I have never loved her more than at that moment, in that suffocating, stinking room. She patted my face and stroked my arm.

To further demonstrate this huge sacrifice and demonstration of love by her mother, Angelou paints a tough and somehow "cruel" image of her mother with regards to the above scene. Vivian even goes further to waylaying Mark and offering her daughter her .38 Special pistol to kill him. As Angelou writes that she has no such heart as to kill somebody, not even the one that has inflicted pains on her, she balances the negative image she has created of her mother by showing Vivian's delight that she did not heed to her words. Vivian acknowledges her daughter's action by saying thus, "You are good, honey" (Angelou 2013: 91), and wrapped her in her arms. By the re-narration of all these already stated events of Angelou's life in her other autobiographies, she aims at bringing out Vivian's qualities that have contributed to the great person and writer she is. This also conforms to the new historicist postulation about the author being trapped in his or her own historicity. Thus, being trapped in her own historicity, she always tries in her writings to adjust her story line, in order to bring out the message she wants to pass to her readers.

By also going back to the event of how she and her elder brother Barley use to destroy the toys sent to them by their mother, Angelou tries to show her readers that even though Vivian had been viewed by her to have abandoned them, that the reverse in view of her new experiences and maturity is rather the case. She re-visits the event in *Mom & Me & Mom* to prove that if Vivian had abandoned them as she earlier thought, she wouldn't have been kind and thoughtful enough to have been sending them toys. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou creates the character of Vivian as inhumane for sending off her two toddlers to Arkansas from California

without an adult supervision. But, in *Mom & Me & Mom*, she recreates Vivian's character by proffering a favourable reason why Vivian acted the way she did.

In her review of the text under study, Sturges Fiona of the British publication *The Independent* is in agreement that the book is a re-visitation of Angelou's previous autobiographies. She is also in agreement that Angelou details and make emphasis of some of her past events to make them "no less grim for their familiarity" (http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/review-mom-me-mom-by-maya-angelou.html). Thus, Angelou aims at bringing out something new out of an old order of events. Hence, another new historicist postulation which states that there is no totalising version of history. Also, in his review of *Mom & Me & Mom,* Bernardine Evaristo of *The Observer* says that even though Angelou has done a great re-visitation of her past stories in her newest book, that some of the re-visited events contradict their earlier versions. Thus, since Angelou as a writer is trapped in her own historicity, it is not surprising that she has in *Mom & Me & Mom* reconstructed her history to bring out a new version of history. Angelou herself in a 1989 interview with BBC asserts that her ritual of always going back to her past experiences is to "enchant" herself and "relieve the agony, the anguish, the *Sturm und Drang*" (http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/3943/mom-and-me-and-mom-by-maya-angelou.html). To do this, Angelou places herself back in the time she is writing about to create a new impression on her readers and to access her memories more effectively. So, unlike the traumatic mood that accompanies *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou in *Mom & Me & Mom* captivates her readers by unraveling the love and support of her mother through her traumatic experiences.

4.2 The Theme of Single Motherhood in *Mom & Me & Mom*

Aside making a re-visitation to her past and demonstrating how intertextually her autobiographies are connected, Angelou in *Mom & Me & Mom* also brings out the issue of single motherhood among African Americans in American society. In doing this, she presents the characters of two single mothers; Angelou and Vivian who succeed in making positive history out of prevailing societal challenges. Just as McBride does in *The Color of Water*, Angelou in *Mom & Me & Mom* delves into her mother's past in order to understand her actions and inactions. Perhaps, Angelou must have come to the realization that to appreciate her mother and make her readers do so, there is need for her to uncover Vivian's past. This also aligns with one of the new historicist propositions which says that history and literature must be analysed together because every text has historical implication. For this, Angelou uses the first chapter of *Mom & Me & Mom* to dwell on the background or history of Vivian. She opens the chapter by saying that:

> The first decade of the twentieth century was not a great time to be born black and poor and female in St. Louis, Missouri, but Vivian Baxter was born black and poor, to black and poor parents…Her father, a Trinidadian with a heavy Caribbean accent, had jumped from a banana boat in Tampa, Florida, and evaded immigration agents successfully all his life (Angelou 2013: 3).

Angelou goes ahead to trace the maternal background of Vivian and reveals that she was the firstborn of the Baxter children with a sister; Leah, and four brothers; Tootie, Cladwell, Tommy, and Billy. By digging into the background of Vivian, Angelou is trying to understand and also reveal to her readers why Vivian could not stay in the marriage with her first husband; Bailey Johnson Senior, Angelou's father. Talking of Vivian and her siblings, Angelou says:

> As they grew up, their father made violence a part of their inheritance. He said often, 'If you get in jail for theft or burglary, I will let you rot. But if you are charged with fighting, I will sell your mother to get your bail.' The family became known as the 'Bad Baxters.' If someone angered any of them, they would track

> the offender to his street or to his saloon. The brothers (armed) would enter the bar. They would station themselves at the door, at the ends of the bar, and at the toilets. Uncle Cladwell would grab a wooden chair and break it, handing Vivian a piece of the chair. He would say, 'Vivian, go kick that bastard's ass.' Vivian would ask, 'Which one?' Then she would take the wooden weapon and use it to beat the offender. When the brothers said, 'That's enough,' the Baxter gang would gather their violence and quit the scene, leaving their mean reputation in the air. At home they told their fighting stories often and with great relish (Angelou 2013: 5).

While the above quotation explains the reason behind Vivian's toughness as a character, it equally shows that a female character with this kind of upbringing will surely find it difficult to stay in marriage. The quotation equally explains why Vivian could not bear the responsibility of bringing up Maya and her elder brother Bailey after separating with Bailey Johnson Snr, her first husband. Hence, one of the new historicist's standpoint that the study of a text reveals more about a history and the studying of history reveals more about a text. Talking of her parents' early years of marriage, Angelou says:

> My parents soon proved to each other that they couldn't stay together. They were matches and gasoline. They even argued about how they were to break up. Neither wanted the responsibility of taking care of two toddlers. They separated and sent me and Bailey to my father's mother in Arkansas. I was three and Bailey was five when we arrived in Stamps, Arkansas. We had identification tags on our arms and no adult supervision (Angelou 2013: 8).

In this metaphoric language, "matches and gasoline" as seen in the above quotation, it is obvious that both Vivian and her husband were not prepared to stay in marriage. Her relationship with Bailey Johnson continued to worsen from separation to divorce. Hence, her status as a single mother.

In Angelou's previous autobiographies, Vivian's act of sending her children away is presented as the worst thing a mother can do. But in *Mom & Me & Mom*, Angelou explains Vivian's reason for doing so in the following words of Vivian to her children:

> Your father and I began to dislike each other almost as soon as we got married. Then both of you were born and we had to think about what we would do with you. We tried for nearly a year but we realized there was nothing that could keep us together. We fought like wild animals. His mother wrote us and said to send the children to her. When we got her letter, we went out, and for the first time in a year, we had an evening without cursing each other out and slamming out of a restaurant…I missed you but I knew you were in the best place for you. I would have been a terrible mother. I had no patience. Maya, when you were about two years old, you asked me for something. I was busy talking, so you hit my hand, and I slapped you off the porch without thinking. It didn't mean I didn't love you; it just meant I wasn't ready to be a mother. I'm explaining to you, not apologizing. We would have been sorry had I kept you (Angelou 2013: 25).

Angelou has to use this dialogic technique in this instance, to make Vivian explain to the readers, her reason for sending her children away. Angelou also uses this first person narrative voice of Vivian to prove to her readers that it was out of love that Vivian sent her children away and not the other way round. Vivian so loves her children that she does not want to hurt them given her unpreparedness as a mother.

As a single mother, Vivian faces lots of challenges especially when it comes to parenting. First, her daughter Maya was raped in her own house by her boyfriend during what Angelou term "one horrific visit to St. Louis" (Angelou 2013: 8). When Maya reunited with Vivian as a teenager, she sees Vivian as not possessing enough qualities of a mother. She therefore prefers to call her "Lady". This hurts Vivian, but to further demonstrate her love for Maya, she accepts the name "Lady" even though she is not satisfied with it. Announcing Maya's choice of name for her to Daddy Cliddell; her second husband, Papa Ford; her house keeper, and Bailey; her son, Vivian says, "I have learned that Maya doesn't want to call me Mother. She has another name for me. It seems like I don't fit her image of a mother" (Angelou 2013: 32). Angelou brings this out in *Mom & Me & Mom* to explain to her readers that while she was holding up anger towards

Vivian's past actions and inaction, Vivian at the other hand was busy trying to accommodate and win her love.

Angelou equally presents one of Vivian's challenges in parenting her in the events where she takes her mother's liquor to children in a movie house. When Vivian tries to kindly ask her daughter if she has been drinking her liquor, Maya rudely answers that she has been giving it to underage children. When Vivian tries to inform her of how risky and incriminating her action is, Maya response is, "Please, Lady, don't make such a big thing out of it. There are only sixteen shots in a bottle and they only cost a dollar twenty-five a shot" (Angelou 2013: 38). Even though the above statement earns Maya a slap by Vivian, she uses it to show Vivian's patience in holding on with her youthful exuberance. When her elder brother Bailey, whom Maya describes as "my heart, my Kingdom Come" (Angelou: 2013: 38) equally criticises her action, she apologises to Vivian for the first time in her life. This apology from Maya so melts Vivian's heart that she not only accepts Maya's apologies, but embraces her and never mentions the matter again. Bringing up this issue in Mom & Me & Mom, Angelou says:

> I wanted to share it here because there are times when no one is right, and sometimes among family and children, no one can admit that there is no right, and that maybe at the same time there is no wrong. But in this case I was wrong and I appreciate Vivian Baxter for being big enough to accept my apology (Angelou 2013: 39).

Even though Vivian later remarries Clidell Jackson, whom Angelou presents as a character who is willing and kind enough to help Vivian with the challenges of single motherhood, Maya and Bailey still feel the gap of not having their both biological parents with them. The presence of Clidell in the house makes little or no difference to both Maya and Bailey. They merely see him as their mother's husband, not as a father figure. Clidell on the other hand is cautious enough to relate with them from a distance. Even though he offers bits of advice once in a while, he does

this without any atom of authoritativeness. He allows Vivian to make rules for her children and dictates for them. Angelou reveals that as a teenager, neither she nor her elder brother Bailey had any idea of what their father was like. Vivian arranges for them to separately visit their father. The visitation turns sour and the character of Bailey Johnson senior is not mentioned again in the text. By not developing the character of Bailey Johnson Senior, Angelou must be trying to point out his insignificance in both her life and that of her brother.

Even though Clidell is presented as a careful character and Bailey Johnson senior as a careless one, Vivian's children seem to accept their fate of not having a father figure. With all the kindness and care of Clidell, Maya and Bailey, take him to be of no importance to their lives. This becomes more of a challenge to Vivian. Like the case of Ruth in McBride's *The Color of Water* who uses her older children to rule the younger ones, Vivian places Maya under the care of Bailey. At age fifteen, Maya is allowed to stay out until eleven at night only if Bailey is with her. According to her, "Mother knew he would not only tell me what to do, he would tell others what they could and could not do, with me and around me" (Angelou 2013: 53). Unfortunately for Vivian, the 'others' as in the above quotation also includes her. This can be seen in the event when she hits Maya for staying out till midnight and Bailey threatens leaving with his sister. Talking to their mother, Bailey says, "We are leaving your house. Nobody, but nobody, beats up my baby sister" (Angelou 2013: 57). To further demonstrate Vivian's love and humility as a mother, Angelou says that Vivian Baxter got down on her knees and prayed to God to ask for forgiveness, and then in the same quivering voice, also begged her, Maya for forgiveness. Angelou explains to her readers, Vivian's fury that led her into slapping her in the following words of Vivian to her daughter:

> I was crazy. I was out of my mind. I remembered what that bastard had done to you when you were seven years old. I couldn't imagine someone else taking you, abusing you, and maybe even killing you. I had just left your empty room when I came down the stairs and suddenly you were at the door, opening it with a smile on your face. I had the key ring in my hand with at least twenty keys on it and I hit you without thinking (Angelou 2013: 58).

In a piteous cry, Vivian equally begs for Bailey's forgiveness and promises never to hit his sister again. Angelou also makes use of this dialogic narrative point of view to enable her readers hear from Vivian's mouth, and in turn, see her reasons for celebrating her as an exceptional mother. Vivian's challenges with mothering her children, especially Bailey keeps growing from bad to worst. At age seventeen, Bailey quits school one month to graduation and announces that he has joined the merchant marine. This news disheartens Vivian, especially the fact that Bailey accuses her of negligence and selfishness. She tries to stop him but he declares that he is already sworn in and that nothing can be done to stop him. Worse still, at age eighteen Bailey quits the merchant marine and turns to drugs. He subsequently becomes an addict, living in an environment notable for hard drugs. Bailey's choice of life throws Vivian to a sullen state. She sees herself to have failed once again in her role as a mother.

Not long after Bailey's leaving, Vivian is hit by yet, another challenge. Maya becomes pregnant for a nineteen year old boy, Babe. A boy she merely used to experiment her sexual fears. Vivian accepts the news of Maya's pregnancy in a friendly manner. Probably, to avoid her moving out like Bailey has done. Maya reveals that Vivian did not hate her or cause her to hate herself, but rather, she keep giving her the same respect she has always shown. Vivian cancels every of her trip and stays with her daughter till her delivery. As a registered nurse, Vivian even helps her daughter through delivery. Revealing her mother's support through her pregnancy and child birth, Angelou says:

> I thought about my mother and knew she was amazing. She never made me feel as if I brought scandal to the family. The baby had not been planned and I would have to rethink plans about education, but to Vivian Baxter that was life being life. Having a baby while I was unmarried had not been wrong. It was simply slightly inconvenient (Angelou 2013: 72).

Maya gives birth to her son, Guy, thereby, becoming a single mother in her mother's house. The birth of Guy ushers Maya into a new status and responsibility of single motherhood. Even though Vivian is willing to take care of both Maya and her son, Maya feels it is time for her to move out of Vivian's house and start a life of her own. As Guy turns two months, Maya announces to her mother that she wants to move out. Even though this news did not go down well with Vivian, Angelou uses it to show that even in the present situation that Vivian cares for her happiness. Thus, Vivian supports her daughter's decision to move out of her house but equally advises her to always do what is right. She equally reminds her that her house is always open for her to come any time she wishes.

Vivian's immense support to her daughter through pregnancy, child birth and afterwards, earns her the title, "mother". For the first time, Maya addresses Vivian as "Mother", rather than "Lady" that she has been calling her. In Angelou's previous autobiographies, the character of Vivian is presented by Angelou as a woman who gave birth to her. But in *Mom & Me & Mom*, she recreates history to show that Vivian is not just the woman who gave birth to her, but a mother without whom she does not know what life would have become of her. Talking of using the title "Mother" on Vivian, Angelou says:

> I was aware that after the birth of my son and the decision to move and get a place for just the two of us, I thought of Vivian Baxter as my mother. On the odd occasion and out of habit, sometimes I called her Lady, but her treatment of me and her love for my baby earned her the right to be called Mother. On the day we moved from her house, Mother liberated me by letting me know she was on my side. I realized that I had grown close to her and that she

> had liberated me. She liberated me from a society that would have had me think of myself as the lower of the low. She liberates me to life. And from that time to this time, I have taken life by the lapels (Angelou 2013: 73).

Angelou's sudden realisation of the position of Vivian as her mother as in the above quotation, explains the new historicist notion that there is no total version of history. It also shows that as a writer, Angelou is caught up in her own historicity, hence, the need to keep revisiting it. Vivian's care for Maya and her son does not stop following their departure from her house. She picks up Guy twice a week, takes him to her house and feeds him with delectable meals. She supports her daughter through her new state of single motherhood. She understands and encourages her self-reliance.

Angelou in *Mom & Me & Mom* touches on the issue of single motherhood by presenting both her mother and herself as single mothers who passed through various challenging phases of life to become the heroes they are. Even though Maya marries Tosh Angelos after giving birth to Guy, she returns to the state of becoming a single mother after the three years that the marriage lasts. Her mother supports her through and through. Aside the physical supports and care Vivian gives to her daughter, Angelou equally reveals in the narrative that her mother's philosophy about life generally is part of the things that made her all that she is.

4.3 Vivian as an Embodiment of Philosophy

In *Mom & Me & Mom,* Angelou presents Vivian as a philosopher that has impacted to her life especially with words. Vivian's verbal encouragements which Angelou presents in a dialogic manner form a greater part of *Mom & Me & Mom*. By allowing Vivian to bring out the philosophical sayings herself in the text, Angelou is simply trying to let her readers know how

great a mentor her mother is. As a child, Maya grows up with a low self-esteem. This can be tied to the case of her rape at the age of seven. After the rape incident, Maya sees herself as an ugly girl that cannot be attracted to any man. This thought follows her into her teenage years. The time she re-unites with her mother in California, the sight of her mother's beauty which she describes as that of a movie star, makes her to want to hide for shame. Maya's act of giving liquor to underage children at the movie which had earlier been discussed, was done to win the children's love. And, the sexual act that results to the birth of Guy was Maya's mere offer of sex to a boy that have never shown any sign of love towards her. All these explains she grows up with low self-esteem.

Angelou confesses in *Mom & Me & Mom* that Vivian is the first person to use the word "beautiful" on her, in reference to her as a personality. She equally reveals that Vivian's kiss is the first she can ever attest to. Thus, when people see ugliness in her, Vivian sees beauty, and she works tirelessly to bring out the beauty in her daughter. On Maya's arrival from visiting her father, Vivian encourages her to get a job since she is already behind school schedule. When Maya declares her decision to be a condoctorette on a streetcar, Vivian assures her of getting the job even though it is obvious that all the women in the job are whites. She teaches her daughter the philosophy of "ordering good food in a restaurant" and puts her through what to do in order to get what she wants. For two weeks, Vivian makes Maya go to the office she desires to work in, sits through working hours and returns home on closure. Maya's determined act earns her the job. According to her, "I got the job, and the newspapers wrote, 'Maya Johnson is the first American Negro to work on the railway'" (Angelou 2013: 51). In a bid to protect her daughter, Vivian makes driving Maya to work a routine which she keeps all through Maya's days as a streetcar condoctorette. When Vivian inquires of Maya of her job experience and Maya replies

that she learned that Vivian was probably the best protection she will ever have, Vivian in objection says thus, "No, you learned that you have power, power and determination. I love you and I am proud of you. With those two things, you can go anywhere and everywhere (Angelou 2013: 52).

On another occasion, Vivian also encourages her daughter thus, "Baby, I've been thinking and now I am sure. You are the greatest woman I've ever met…You are kind and very intelligent and those elements are not always found together" (Angelou 2013: 80). From the above quotations, it can be said that Vivian is not just a loving mother, but equally a great motivational speaker. When Maya becomes frustrated with her responsibilities as a single mother, she turns to blaming others and the American society for every wrong thing happening around her. At this point, Vivian in her wisdom is able to sense that her daughter is in a deep financial frustration. Thus, she calls her daughter for a sit down talk. Here, Angelou again employs a dialogic narrative method in order to make her readers hear from the voice of her mother. Talking to her daughter, Vivian begins:

> I know you are too proud to borrow and you would never beg, but here is the truth: You have a child who is not well and you have a mother who loves you. I do not want to lend you any money but I do want to invest a thousand dollars in your future. This is not a loan, nor is it a gift. This is an investment. I will expect you to start repaying me in three months. I expect you will be able to spend more time with your son (Angelou 2013: 93).

With the above offer, Maya does not have to run two jobs. She walks her son to school leisurely rather than her previous routine of dropping him off in a hurry. This does not only relieve Maya, but equally brings about a kind of happiness which Angelou describes as "contagious" in the life of Guy, Maya's son, who also improves in his health. Hearing from her friends on how Maya has

been jumping on the street with Guy as if they were both children, it gladdens Vivian's heart that she has touched her daughter's life and that of her grandson.

Even though Angelou presents the character of Vivian as an exceptional mother, she equally shows that Vivian is not without flaws. Angelou must have done this to show that Vivian's character is a real life character. When Maya makes the decision to marry Tosh Angelos, a white man, Vivian objects to it simply because Tosh is white. Maya's decision so infuriate Vivian that she decides to move to Los Angeles, away from her daughter. Nevertheless, Maya marries Tosh, and when she call her mother after her marriage, Vivian says to her, "You know that I love you and that I hope you will be happy. You also know that I am not a liar, so I would not tell you that I expect you to be happy with the husband you have chosen. But I do hope that you will not be totally miserable" (Angelou 2013: 102). In this uncompromising words of Vivian, Angelou shows that pretense is not part of Vivian characteristics. Just as Vivian predicts, Maya's marriage with Tosh begins to sour because Tosh is an atheist and at such, he does not allow Maya to go to church or profess her belief in God. Maya fears for herself and Guy, so, she steals away time to go to church and when Tosh is not home, she teaches Guy about God and puts him through Christian religious activities. Just like the African proverb that says that the anger of a blood relation does not get to the bone, Vivian does return to her daughter and humbly asks for her forgiveness. Apologising to her daughter, she says "Baby, please forgive me. I don't care if you marry a donkey; I will never walk off and leave you alone again" (Angelou 2013: 106). While at the dining table with Maya and Tosh, Vivian addresses them saying:

> Ignorance is a terrible thing. It causes families to lose their center and causes people to lose their control. Ignorance knows no binds. Old people, young people, middle-aged, black, white, can all be ignorant. I thought my daughter was throwing herself away. She has already had a rough life and I thought she was willingly being

> stupid. Now I hear her beautiful voice and I see how happy Guy is and I appreciate your beautiful home. Please accept my apologies and my thanks to you, Tosh Angelos. I admire you for loving my darling daughter (Angelou 2013: 106-107).

In the above prudent use of words, Angelou again shows her mother's skills in amending her past mistakes. Coming back into her daughter's life, Vivian is able to detect that Maya is not totally happy in her marriage. She encourages her to stick to her husband's side while they sort out their differences. Unfortunately, Maya's three years marriage with Tosh ends in a divorce. This does not go well with Guy, who for the first time is enjoying the presence of a father and a mother who live in the same house. Angelou writes that Guy remains angry for about a year, and does cry himself to sleep often and piteously. To show that Vivian is not the type that takes glory for her actions or inactions, Angelou specifically points out that while she mourns her separation with Tosh, Vivian never reminds her of her prediction that the marriage will not work out. She encourages her daughter to rather be happy for not allowing Tosh to take away her person from her.

After Maya's divorce with Tosh, she goes into a professional dancing career. Angelou's re-visitation into this phase of her life which she has already presented in *Singin' and Swingin' and Makin' Merry Like Christmass* is to bring out her mother's support in her career. After Maya's first appearance as a professional dancer, Vivian acknowledges her saying, "You are going far in this world, baby, because you dare to risk everything. That's what you have to do. You are prepared to do the best you know to do. And if you don't succeed, you also know all you have to do is try it again" (Angelou 2013: 123). When Maya gets a job offer from the producers of *Porgy and Bess*, a musical soap opera that is to tour throughout Europe, Vivian encourages her to go with them and offers to take care of Guy in her absence.

Angelou presents Vivian as a great woman with lots of talent. She is a licensed real estate developer, a trained nurse, and a seaman. She equally owns a gambling house and a hotel. She teaches her daughter to always protect herself both physically, emotionally and financially. Talking to her daughter on the need to protect herself, she says, "You see, baby, you have to protect yourself. If you don't protect yourself, you look like a fool asking somebody else to protect you" (Angelou 2013: 149). After giving a thought to the above words of Vivian, Angelou comes to the realisation that a woman needs to support herself before asking anyone else to support her. No wonder Angelou herself remains a strong pillar both as a single parent and a career woman. Vivian equally opens her daughter's eyes on the need to ready herself for every situation. Addressing her daughter after an incident of racial discrimination in a hotel in California, Vivian says:

> Baby, you try to be ready for every situation you run into. Don't do anything that you think is wrong. Just do what you think is right, and then be ready to back it up even with your life. Make sure that everything you say is two-time talk. That means say it in the closet and be prepared to say it on the city hall steps, and give anybody twenty minutes to draw a crowd. Don't do it to make news. Do it to make it known that your name is your bond, and you are always ready to back up your name. Not every negative situation can be solved with a threat of violence. Trust your brain to suggest a solution, then have the courage to follow through (Angelou 2013: 141).

Vivian's philosophical words in *Mom & Me & Mom* cannot be overemphasised. By presenting her as a role model, Angelou aims at touching the lives of her readers with her mother's words, just as she herself has benefitted from them.

To show Vivian's kindness, Angelou equally presents her as a humanitarian. She uses the twenty-fifth chapter of *Mom & Me & Mom* to show Vivian's participation in a group called the Stockton Black Women for Humanity. This is a group that is geared towards providing

scholarships to eleventh grade graduates to enable them proceed to high school. As one of the pioneer members of the group, Vivian on her own also helps individuals and families with clothing and food stocks. Angelou uses this Vivian charitable act to people of all races, whites inclusive, to show that her mother is not a racist. It equally explains to her readers that Vivian's disapproval of her marriage to Tosh, is not an act of racism, but that of love and care for her.

Even in her forties, Angelou confesses that she still needs and enjoys Vivian's mothering. When she is faced with challenges with her filmmaking crew in Stockholm, Sweden, Maya calls her mother saying, "Mom, I need mothering. If you have ever done any, I need it now. I am sending you a check, and as soon as you get it please book a flight and come to Stockholm (Angelou 2013: 166). In response, Vivian says, "Baby, if any plane is leaving San Francisco today for Sweden, I will be on it. You pick me up tomorrow morning at the Stockholm airport (Angelou 2013: 166). In the above dialogue between mother and daughter, it is obvious that Maya can do less without the love and care of Vivian. On Vivian's arrival, Maya narrates to her how the filmmaking crew have been maltreating her. In response, Vivian tells her that, "A horse needs a tail more than one season" (Angelou 2013: 167), an assurance that the crew will soon realise Maya's importance to them. Vivian motivates and encourages her daughter saying:

> Baby, now they are treating you as if you are a horse's ass. Let me tell you something. All you have to do is get your work done. If these people live, they will come back to you. They may have forgotten how badly they treated you, or they may pretend that they have forgotten. But watch: They will come back to you. In the meantime, mother is here. I will look after you and I will look after anybody you say needs to be looked after, any way you say. I am here. I brought my whole self to you. I am your mother (Angelou 2013: 168).

Even at forty, Vivian still calls Maya "Baby", an indication that to Vivian, Maya remains her adorable baby that needs care irrespective of her age. Vivian stays with her daughter for the

entire shooting of *Georgia, Georgia* (1972). Every morning, she offers Maya some coffee, a kiss and words of encouragement. All these, go a long way in strengthening her. Talking of this act of love, Angelou says, "Having her there kissing me, offering me coffee, made me feel like a little girl, like allowing me sit in her lap. She stroked my shoulders and stroked my back and murmured to me. I stopped feeling sorry for myself" (Angelou 2013: 169). Aside making Maya feel happy and elevated, Vivian equally uses her spirited characteristics to woo friends for her daughter. Not long after Vivian's arrival in Stockholm, Maya suddenly realises that people are becoming friendly to her. Also, that their treatment of her changes in a reverse and positive order. In a rhetorical manner, Angelou asks:

> What happened? Why did they change their ways of treating me? I came to the realization that it was because I have a mother. My mother spoke highly of me, and to me. But, more important, whether they met her or simply heard about her, she was there with me. She had my back, supported me. This is the role of the mother, and in that visit I really saw clearly, and for the first time, why a mother is really important. Not just because she feeds and also loves and cuddles and even mollycoddles a child, but because in an interesting and maybe an eerie and unworldly way, she stands in the gap. She stands between the unknown and the known. In Stockholm, my mother shed her protective love down around me and without knowing why people sensed that I had value (Angelou 2013: 170).

While Maya is in Africa, Vivian writes her saying, "Airplanes leave here every day for Africa. If you need me, I will come" (Angelou 2013: 177). All this demonstrate that, she is a kind of mother that sacrifices her all for her child. She does not care what it will cause her or what she dares to lose, so long as her daughter is happy. Angelou confesses that Vivian's love and support encouraged her to "dare to live her life with pizzazz" (Angelou 2013: 177). This explains why Angelou excel in her careers despite her state of being a single mother. Looking at the life of

Angelou as an author, one can see the positive effects of Vivian's philosophical words as social rules that has shaped her.

In conclusion, Angelou makes it an open secret in *Mom & Me & Mom* that a larger part of her achievements if not all, are as a result of the presence of Vivian Baxter in her life. Thus, she recreates a new view and image of Vivian Baxter in the book. A history that celebrates her as an exceptional mother. Prior to the publication of *Mom & Me & Mom*, Angelou's readers have been made to view Vivian as a careless selfish mother who dumps her two toddlers in American South while she stays in the Northern part of the United States. But, having corrected that impression, Angelou shows that every act of Vivian, especially with regards to her children is geared towards love.

Vivian's positive influence in the life of her daughter is both a lesson and a guide line to every mother, especially the single ones. According to Angelou, "My mother's gift of courage to me were both large and small. The latter are woven so subtly into the fabrics of my psyche that I can hardly distinguish where she stops and I begin" (Angelou 2013: 175). She further points out that the larger lessons from Vivian are highlighted in her memory like Technicolor stars in a midnight sky. No wonder she remembers every word of hers that has shaped her life. Looking at all that her mother has been to her, Angelou believes that her relationship with her mother had been made in heaven, with thousands of baby angels dancing on the head of a pin (Angelou 2013: 177). Both mother and daughter remain each other's confidant till the death of Vivian at the end of the book. Even in intimate issues like that of sex, and relationships, both free their minds to each other. This can be seen when Vivian at the age of seventy-four, humbly confides in Maya of lack of sexual advancement from her fourth husband, of which Maya helps her

mother to talk to him. By stooping low to confide such an issue to her daughter, Vivian is probably trying to teach her to always speak up her mind instead of dying in silence.

One thing worthy to note in *Mom & Me & Mom* is the point of view with which Angelou presents Vivian's character. Earlier in the text, Maya seems to be the one habouring anger and bitterness against Vivian, while Bailey seems to have forgiven and forgotten their abandonment by her. But, later in the text, while Maya enjoys and celebrates Vivian, Bailey withdraws himself from her. In chapter twenty-eight of the text, Bailey twice, refers to Vivian as "Your mother", while in conversation with Maya. Thus, from Angelou's point of view, Vivian is an exceptional character, a role model and selfless mother, while from Bailey's point of view, she is a selfish mother with lack of self-discipline. Notwithstanding, Angelou's intention in the text is to make her audience see Vivian from her own point of view. Towards the end of chapter twenty-eight of the text, Angelou says, "Vivian gave me all she had to give me. Her son Bailey had disappointed her. She thought that since his father had not accepted the chance to teach, to guide his manhood, she would do it. She didn't consider that as a woman she could not possibly be a man, that as a mother she was unable to be a father" (Angelou 2013: 186). Though Vivian ladles the syrup of motherhood love on Bailey, he adores but is unable to always forgive her for sending him away at age five. Hence, in line with the new historicists' notion that there is no total version of history, if Bailey is to reproduce the history of Vivian, is definitely going to be different from the one Angelou presents in *Mom & Me & Mom*.

In both words and actions, Vivian's character is likely to make a great positive influence in the life of any reader of *Mom & Me &Mom*. Even in her death bed, Vivian displays her selfless love to Maya by encouraging her to answer an invitation to teach in England's University of Exeter for three weeks as a visiting professor. She assures Maya of meeting her alive on her return.

Vivian dies three days after Maya's return from the lecturing visit. Few hours before the death of Vivian, Maya holds her hands and says to her:

> You've been a hard worker-whites, blacks, Asian, and Latino women ship out of the San Francisco port because of you. You have been a shipfitter, a nurse, a real estate broker, and a barber. Many men and –if my memory serves me right-a few women risked their lives to love you. You were a terrible mother of small children, but there has never been anyone greater than you as a mother of a young adult (Angelou 2013: 196-197).

Mom & Me & Mom opens with the birth of Vivian, and ends with her death. An indication that Angelou strictly wrote the book to celebrate her mother. The book presents the pleasant and not too pleasant life of Vivian, but on both sides, Angelou wants her readers to see beyond the surface. Through the text, Angelou opens the character of Vivian for her readers' criticism, even as she wants them to see the sacrificial love, humility, brevity, kindness and greatness she has seen in her.

In celebrating the qualities of Vivian, Angelou reveals the ideology that gave birth to *Mom & Me & Mom*, an ideology which the text in turn helps to spread. That is, the ideology that forgiveness opens ones' eyes to see good things and qualities towards an offender while unforgiving heart does the opposite. Angelou is only able to produce such an exalted text about Vivian because her heart has been opened to forgive her.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 Conclusion

This research work has examined James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Maya Angelou's *Mom & Me & Mom* as literary texts that dwell on the relationship between literature and history. Deploying the autobiographical form, the authors, acclaim their heroic mothers for their contributions towards their lives. To show that there are a lot to be gained by analysing history and literature together, this research used the two narratives to explore the role and influence that history plays in the life of characters in literary texts. The importance of this study can be seen in its examination of the recurrent issue of the concept of single motherhood in African American literature. This has been viewed from the new historicism point of analysis. New historicism has been chosen because as a literary theory it concerns itself with the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. To do this, this research traces the history of single motherhood among African Americans down to the time of slavery. In this exploration, this study ascertains that the history of single motherhood in African American literature is both traceable to and a product of slavery. It is equally established that it is one of the products of slavery that have been trailing African Americans from beyond slavery to present time.

By looking at the day to day activities in the lives of the characters in the selected primary texts, this work has brought to the fore, the dynamic nature of history. It also exposes the various ways autobiographical writers artistically play with historical events in order to suit the subject of their narratives. Thus, history in this work is seen as being fluid and likely to change. Studying the lives of the authors of the selected literary texts as evidenced in the texts equally proves that autobiographical writers participate in the creation of their own histories. As a tool, the two autobiographical form has been used by the respective authors to interrogate history and uncover

the socio-historical, political and cultural experiences that shaped their lives and those of other characters in the texts.

This work focuses specifically, on appraising the inestimable strength of the two single mothers under study, especially on how they have been able to transform their society positively. In line with the new historicist literary theory, the work deconstructs the concept of totality and fixedness of historical truth in a literary text. It uses the two selected primary texts to show how their authors interrogate their past histories respectively in order to create new version of histories. It equally establishes that an author can recreate himself/herself by recreating his/her biography. This re-creative ability empowers an autobiographer to present to the readers the image of him/herself that he/she wishes to project.

This work also illustrates that ideologies manifest in literary production and discourse, which authors consciously want to inculcate in the minds of their readers. Both McBride's and Angelou's works as the current study has shown present ideologies of good parenting, forgiveness and reconciliation, morality, heroism and bravery, societal orderness, among others. As the characters in the selected literary texts emerge from the various internal and external conflicts that they battle with in the narratives, these ideologies and world views become glaring. The work shows that an author can impact on his society by projecting an ideology or ideologies through literary narrative.

This work has thus, projected art as an agent of societal change. It shows that rather than merely reflecting on an age's understanding of history, art is capable of making great impact on the society that produces it. In this case, this work explores the autobiographical genre as one of the literary manifestations used by African Americans to comment on socio-historical issues. This age long literary tradition, enables an author to use his/her personal experiences and that of other

characters in the text as a microcosm of the experiences of African Americans or those that associate with them in American society. By presenting their life experiences in autobiographical forms, McBride and Angelou demonstrate that an author is caught up in his or her own historicity. Thus, the autobiographical works that have been studied present a rich dynamic nature of history, even as they re-echo some societal challenges that African Americans have continued to face in America. The authors' deployment of autobiographical forms equally shows how the autobiography contributes greatly to history by giving a clearer view of the issues they present. By using their own mothers to present the issue of single motherhood in African American society, both authors give their readers glaring pictures of their subject matters.

Furthermore, this work critically examines the lives of the single mothers in McBride's *The Color of Water* and Angelou's *Mom & Me & Mom*. Through this examination, the work lauds the contributions of single mothers to the development of African American literature, especially their roles in parenting their children against societal vices. The work shows that a positive upshot can emerge from the issue of single motherhood which is seen as a negative influence on African American history and literature. By sampling the extra ordinary single mothers within the selected primary texts, the work demonstrates that single mothers have served as agents of positive societal change in African American literature. Irrespective of the ugly experiences of these single mothers and the harsh environment wherein they exist, they are able to give back to the society much more than they received from it. By studying a white single mother (Ruth) within the context of African American literature, this work has proved that a character is more of the product of the society that produces him/her.

Key issues in McBride's *The Color of Water* are struggle for survival, racism, and the absence of the father figure in African American homes. As these issues are being explored in the text, the

reader gets a clearer view of the strength of a mother in holding up a family with or without the presence of a father. McBride equally uses the text to accentuate the view that a single mother has no excuses whatsoever to bring up her child/children to become societal menaces, no matter the circumstances she finds herself in. He uses the character of Ruth to speak to single mothers in and outside America, owing to the fact that the issue of single motherhood is fast becoming a global problem.

Angelou in *Mom & Me & Mom* reveals to her readers that life can be looked at from various perspectives. She opens her readers' minds to know that it is only in love that one can see the positive side of a literary or life character. While also presenting the issue of the immeasurable strength of single mothers in the text, she stresses that mothers hardly give up on their children, even if it means putting their life on the line. Using the characters of her mother and herself as single mothers who experienced failed marriages, Angelou graphically contends that while a good marriage is good for parenting, a bad marriage is worse than single parenting in terms of its effect on a child's upbringing.

This work specifically, acclaims the extra ordinary strength of single mothers in the selected literary narratives. Both McBride and Angelou use their respective narratives under study as means of celebrating their single mothers for their immense contributions towards their lives and society as well. The authors equally portray their mothers as role models of positive societal change, and as Mothers who surmount various challenges of single parenting among other societal challenges. Through the struggles of these single mothers, both authors show how the decision of a character in a literary text affects not only the generations after her, but her entire society as well. Both authors equally use the respective characters of their single mothers to speak to their readers on motherly love. By this means, the new historicists' concern on the

author's conscious ideologies that manifest in literary production has been forcefully underscored.

One unique technique employed by the two authors in their respective narratives is that of dialogue. In both texts under study, the authors enter into dialogue with their mothers in order to connect with the histories that form the basis for the creation of the texts. This shows the vital role that the past plays in understanding the present and future. The dialogic technique equally allows the readers to assess and critique the texts accurately. This also enables the authors to interrogate some other socio-political issues present in the texts.

On the whole, this work is an appraisal of history and a celebration of motherly love, especially that of single mothers in African American literature. In its assessment of history, it reveals that a literary character cannot shut his/her past against his past or future. This is because, the past, no matter how dark it might have been, opens the door for a promising future. This is evidenced in the lives of both authors and other characters in the narratives that have been studied. Above all, this work has shown that single mothers are not societal burdens as some scholars have viewed them. Both Ruth, Vivian and even Angelou herself gave to the society more than they received from it. As they battle with raising their respective children alone, and equally pursued their individual careers, they never allowed themselves to be pitied by the society. Rather, the history they left behind as evidenced in their lives and those of their respective children proves that a character, whether fictional or real, has no excuse whatsoever for not impacting positively on his or her society.

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