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# Depiction Of Vivian Baxter's Motherhood In Maya Angelou's Autobiographies

## Introduction

Maya Angelou is one of the greatest African American Autobiographers. She is known as a 'Global renaissance woman'. Her writing, dance career, political activism, acting career and speaking engagements have made her a national treasure.

## Meaning of Motherhood

Motherhood has different meanings for those who experience it. It is only one part of the women's lives. It is very significant part nevertheless. It is not only a biological determined role but also socially defined one as well.

The word mother means a female parent who brings up a child, takes care of her and loves absolutely by putting the needs of her children over her own. It is very difficult to play a role of mother. It includes social, physical and emotional feelings. Motherhood is an important theme in contemporary women's literature. It is an universal experience.

## Black Motherhood

In African American literature different writers describes the different mother portraits. The writer describes the mothers and their mothering.

Mammy – The image of Mammy was created during the period of slavery. Their work was to take care of the children of the white masters.

Jezbel – They were identified as the charming black women for reproductive aims. She had lack of mothering qualities and unable to bring up the children.

Foster Mothering – This concept of Foster mothering has its roots in traditional African culture. In it the absence of biological mother, some members of the community took responsibility of child nurturance.

Single Mother – In African American culture the new trend of black single motherhood is created

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by giving birth to black children without marriage. After World War II there was a domestic increase in the employment of black women. They started to get economic power. Employment possibilities also avoid them of marrying. So, they preferred to be a single.

In African American community, 'Other Mothers' stood differently from biological mothers. But they share common responsibilities of mothering.

## **The Enraged and Tough Mother: Vivian Baxter's Motherhood**

The paper focuses on the Vivian Baxter's motherhood in the autobiographies of Maya Angelou. Angelou depicted the theme of motherhood in almost all her autobiographies. In the autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou discusses the subject of motherhood of how she comes to have two mothers. Vivian Baxter Johnson was her own biological mother and Momma Henderson was her paternal grandmother. She refers both as her mothers' because they both played a major role in growing up her. Angelou spends more time of her childhood to Momma Henderson more than that of her biological mother, Vivian Baxter. Because her mother earlier neglect of her children's welfare and upkeep, the role played by Angelou's grandmother. But she spends her later life when she is young with Vivian Baxter.

So Maya and Bailey Jr. spend their childhood instead of love and care of their biological mother. The loss of motherhood begins Angelou's problems. After so many years of absence from their lives, both Maya and Bailey Jr. returned to their mother Vivian. Maya was very upset to go to her mother. When they saw her, they were awestruck of their mother's beauty. Maya was terrified of the first meeting with her mother. When she met her first time she describes her mother "To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow".

There was a positive picture of Vivian at Angelou's younger age. She understood her mistake. After six year stay with Grandmother, children came to Los Angeles and now Vivian accepted her responsibility towards her growing children. Mr. Freeman was her mother's boyfriend, who was living with her. Vivian provided the children all the necessities. She was rarely at home as she was in the gambling halls and bars. She leaves her children in the care of Mr. Freeman. Mr. Freeman raped Maya. When Vivian knew Maya's rape, she considered herself responsible of it. Vivian doesn't seem to grieve his loss or his murder. During Maya's illness, Vivian took motherly care of her. She was making broth, cooking cram of wheat, taking Maya's temperature, calling a doctor. After Maya's rape, Vivian sends Maya to hospital, bringing her flowers and candy. In this way mother becomes a nurturer, a builder, a teacher and much more to her. Vivian may be a positive and negative role model to Maya.

After her rape Maya became mute. So she sent back to Stamps to her grandmother. Stephanie

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Demetrakopoulos and Mary Jane Lupton criticized Vivian. They said that she was irresponsible mother, who pin the blame of the rape indirectly on Vivian. Mary Jane Lupton is even strongly criticized of Vivian. She says that 'Vivian uses Maya, somehow knowing that in her own absence Maya will keep her lover amused'. In Stamps children miss their mother terribly because their stay with their mother developed a strong bond between Vivian and children.

Vivian proved her loyalty when she knew teenaged Maya's pregnancy. She supported and encouraged her without condemnation. Vivian opposes abortion, she accepted Maya's impending, unwed motherhood. So Vivian said, "We will not ruin three lives. We, you and I and this family are going to have a wonderful baby". Vivian watched over Maya for the next three weeks. In the period she stayed in the house, and was talking to Maya and telling her the stories about babies, pregnancies and delivering babies. Vivian gave Maya first and most important lesson about trusting maternal instincts. Maya liked her honesty, her caring nature. She was a trained and registered nurse. She took Maya to see a doctor. Vivian helped her in the delivery room. After the baby arrived, it was the Vivian's duty as a mother and a woman to bring her daughter through this threshold of motherhood and womanhood. Marguerite didn't know how to handle the baby and how to care for baby. As a mother she taught her all these things.

When the baby was two months old, Maya got a job and found a place to live. Vivian's treatment of Maya and her love for her baby earned her the right to be called 'Mother'. Vivian met Maya's son twice in a week. She took him to her house where she fed him peaches, cream and hot dogs. Maya visited her for dinner once in a month. Mother would often make red rice, which was Maya's favorite dish. Vivian was very serious about her delicious meals. After dinner, she said, "Baby, I have been thinking and now I am sure. You are the greatest woman I have ever met." She continued, "You are very kind and very intelligent and those elements are not always found together. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, and my mother yes, you belong in that category." Vivian was sure her daughter could achieve anything she wanted to achieve.

Vivian continued to influence Maya. As far as mother-daughter relationship is concerned, due to Vivian's mistake there was separation between them, but gradually they learnt to understand each other. Maya was quite aware of Vivian's drawbacks as well as her positive influence. Vivian was unable to instill in her daughter a sense of self-worth but she has taught her a sense of 'self'. So in later life Vivian became a positive role model. She has given knowledge about survival technique in a hostile and racist world. She was not conventional black mother but she was a good mother in her own unique way. Vivian Baxter was an extremely vital personality. She was Angelou's role model. Angelou accepted her personal philosophy. She was a better parent for a young adult rather than a small child to see her strength and passion. As an example of how her young mother wasn't well equipped to parent a small child, when Angelou

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was just a toddler. Maya remembered when she asked for something to her mother and she didn't give it to her, and so Maya slapped her on her leg. And she backhanded Maya off the porch, into the dirt. She may not have known how to handle a small child but she was more capable of parenting an older one.

Vivian Baxter challenged white world or black men who attempted to construct her being. She advised Maya that no black woman has to accept the pitiful words of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, "The black woman is the mule of the world". She warned Maya Angelou, "People will take advantage of you if you let them. Her mother inspired her to set high goals, to maintain her sense of dignity and self-worth, and to work hard to succeed. Her mother's words guided Maya throughout her life. Maya Angelou always followed the words of her mother's advice, "Life is going to give you just what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait" has been her lifelong motto. Maya called her mother 'Lady'. Vivian sensed Maya's resistance to her and didn't mind being called "Lady". She was smart by not forcing a relationship with Maya. She decided to embrace that title. In many events we find her protective nature like Momma.

There was a fair understanding that has developed between Maya and her mother. But their political ideology was different. When Maya was shattered by the news of Malcolm's assassination, her mother was sorry about it and Maya recalls, "Mother had the grace to give her sympathy". Vivian drew Maya out of her depression due to Malcolm's death.

In her *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* there is a description of Guy's accident and hospitalization. During that time Maya was very upset. But she remembered the words of her mother. She got an inspiration through her words, 'Hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. You may not always get what you pay for, but you will definitely pay for what you get.' These words of her mother helped her to overcome her nervousness. As a typical black mother, Vivian was the protector of her daughter. She has given her important tips of worldly wisdom. She knew that Black women face the dangers of racism and sexism in America. So she taught her survival tactics to face the dangers. Vivian advised Angelou against marrying Make because she feels he is a total stranger to the culture of the Black American lifestyle.

When Maya has to go for her job, she leaves her son in mother's care. Vivian takes care of her son. She satisfied his financial needs. As she says, "He is my grandson. I won't see him needy". In this way, she played the role of a good grandmother. Vivian told her some of the evidences of her ghetto mentality and blues sheet tradition. She advised Maya "you're a woman. 'You can make up your own mind. Be the best of anything you get into.'" The two mature women understood each other completely. Their interactions between them during the later ages described in her autobiography are less frequent.

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Vivian Baxter knew her duties, responsibilities towards her children but she gave much importance to herself. Their mother-daughter relationship continued to grow. Marguerite accepted Vivian as her mother, she tried to speak with her openly. She taught Maya about 'fear'. Vivian says 'Animals can sense fear. They feel it. You know that human beings are animals, too. Never, let a person know you're frightened.' However the relationship of Maya and Vivian as mother and daughter sometimes change depending on their needs.

Vivian Baxter certainly plays a major role in moulding Maya's personality. She has been an exceptional mother in many ways. Although it took many years for Maya to trust her mother.

## Conclusion

Motherhood is not only affected by issues related to cultural, economic and sociological aspect of the life but the psychological aspect of the mother-child bond, and more specifically the mother-daughter bonding is highly influential in understanding motherhood.

Angelou's relationship with her mother began to improve as she grows to see her positive qualities and she no longer harbor bitterness cling towards her mother's past abandonment. But after some years, when Angelou became young is able to understand the spirit, affection and independence of her mother. She derived her philosophy in a better way. The two main maternal influences changed Maya's life. Despite her childhood displacement, Vivian has to keep proving worth to Maya at all times so that she may be considered as useful to her.

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