



## THE BLACK NUCLEAR FAMILY'S COLLAPSE IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* AND REBECCA WALKER'S *BLACK WHITE AND JEWISH: THE DAUGHTERS' TESTIMONIES*

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### RÉSUMÉ

L'effondrement du modèle conventionnel de la famille nucléaire est une préoccupation majeure qui informe la littérature afro-américaine. L'autobiographie des femmes noires nous en donne des exemples édifiants à travers les témoignages des auteures, en tant que filles de parents séparés. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* de Maya Angelou et *Black White and Jewish* Rebecca Walker illustrent avec éloquence les hypothèses sus-soulignées. Le comparatisme, le féminisme et la narratologie constituent les canaux scientifiques de cette étude qui démontre de quelles manières les deux récits témoignent différemment et jettent de nouveaux éclairages sur la désintégration de la famille nucléaire noire et ses conséquences sur les enfants.

**Mots-clés :** Famille nucléaire, Africain-Américain, Autobiographie, effondrement, témoignage, divorce

### ABSTRACT

The collapse of the conventional two-parent nuclear family model is a major concern that informs African-American literature. Black women's autobiography gives us enlightening accounts through the testimonies of authors as daughters of divorced parents. Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *Black White and Jewish* eloquently illustrate the above-mentioned assumptions. Comparatism, feminism and narratology are the scientific channels for this study, which demonstrates how the two narratives testify differently to, and shed new lights on the disintegration of the black nuclear family and its impacts on the offspring.

**Key-words:** Nuclear family, African-American, Autobiography, collapse, testimony, divorce

### INTRODUCTION

The two-parent traditional model with good family relationships is disappearing in the black community. African Americans are increasingly showing difficulties to start a strong family, with a father, a mother and a child or children in one household. The issue is of great concern and interest. Indeed, the collapse of the black American nuclear family is a subject of major interest for researchers, scholars and literary artists. In his book, *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), sociologist Edward Franklin Frazier analyzes the change that has altered African-American's family from the time of slavery

to the 1930s. Equally, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 study, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, examines the causes of black poverty and the rise of black single-mother families. The decline of African-American's household is the main concern of Bill Moyers's 1986 documentary, "The Vanishing Black Family – Crisis in Black America". In a similar vein, William James Raspberry warns in his 2005 article that: "There is a crisis of unprecedented magnitude in the black community, one that goes to the very heart of its survival. The black family is failing."<sup>1</sup> For Raspberry as well as other researchers, if the stable traditional two-parent nuclear family is disappearing among contemporary African Americans, children seem to pay the cost of this fragmented cell. Investigating the aftermaths of this failing world in his edited book, *Our Kids : The American Dream in Crisis*, Robert D. Putnam (2015, P.78) pinpoints: " Children who spend part of their childhood in a single-mother home are more likely to have sex earlier and to become young, single parents, re-creating the cycle." The pervasive ill effects of the broken family world on black children are also explored by Frank F. Furstenberg and Andrew J. Cherlin in *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When the Parents Part* (1991). For Patrick F. Fagan and Robert Rector (1991, p.32), the impacts of parental separation on offspring today bring about that "American children are becoming weaker educationally, emotionally and physically." Though the foregoing sociological investigation bespeaks how researchers are preoccupied by the pandemic issue of black conjugal family's collapse and its aftermaths, the personal experiences represented by literary artists such as Maya Angelou and Rebecca Walker are very enlightening.

In fact, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou tells the story of her life, her frustration and precocious childhood for being abandoned by her divorced parents. In *Black White and Jewish*, Rebecca Walker narrates her life experience of a child born of Alice Walker, a black mother and Mel Leventhal, a white father who finally get separated to leave her to herself.

This paper seeks to analyze how the nuclear family's disintegration is explored in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Black White and Jewish*. The purpose of the work is to show how Maya Angelou and Rebecca Walker —as daughters of parents who divorce— relate their own experiences to bear testimony and to shed new lights on the black nuclear household's crumbling and its consequences on children. Focusing on the study of two narratives by two black American women writers, the work is theoretically

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<sup>1</sup> William Raspberry, "Why Our Black Families are Failing", July 25, 2005. See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/24/AR2005072401115.html>, Last accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2019

indebted to comparative approach<sup>2</sup> as well as to feminist and narratological perspectives. It aims at pointing out how these female writers differently expose the common issue of black nuclear family's collapse in their personal narratives. The first part of the article scrutinizes the literary techniques used by Maya Angelou and Rebecca Walker to vehicle and bear witness to their personal experiences while the second discusses the exploration of family's disintegration and its results on children.

### 1. Daughters' Testimonies: The autobiographical discourse

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Black White and Jewish* are two books which chronicle Angelou's and Walker's own life stories as young girls whose parents are separated. By recounting their personal experiences about the implosion of their family cell and the failure of their genitors to live together, the two female writers attempt to produce a testimonial discourse. They give an account of their real life, using relevant words and events that serve as evidence. If the rhetoric of testimony credibly enlightens the personal accounts of black family's decline in the United States of America, it pertains to autobiographical writing as "a literary testimony... of the burden that the victims bear in testifying to the social injustices suffered by them." (Warner, 2013 P.18) In line with the idea that autobiography is sometimes a tricky and problematic subject, it seems interesting to see how Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *Black White and Jewish* fit within the basic theoretical settings of the genre, and how they can legitimately be considered as testimonies.

In defining the genre, Bates E. Stuart (1937, p.2), labels autobiography "a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned." Theorizing the generic patterns, Philippe Lejeune (2007, p.298) proposes that "the author, narrator and protagonist had to be identical, using the proper name of the author as reference." The gist of this theorist's tenet is that "in order to create an autobiography, the author enters into a pact or contract with readers promising to give a detailed account of his or her life, and of nothing but that life" (Lejeune, 2007, p.298). Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani compares autobiographical writing with a judicial process through legal acts such as, among other things, testimony and defense or accusation. Arguing this connection, Mathieu-Castellani (1996, p.192) posits that "Self-life-writing does not define a single genre, but it

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<sup>2</sup> The approach is inscribed within the framework of technical process of comparison and thematic criticism as deployed in works by Russell Morton Brown, "Critic, Culture, Text: Beyond Thematics" (1978), "The Practice and Theory of Canadian Thematic Criticism: A Reconsideration" (2001) and Jean-Pierre, Makouta-Mboutou, *Systèmes, théories et méthodes comparés en critique littéraire, Volume II*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2003.

illuminates various types of texts and forms of discourse in which the exploration of the subject is done in writing and by writing.”

Understandably, self-life writing is multifaceted as Leigh Gilmore ascertains in his 2001's book, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Proceeding with trauma as a key concept to deconstruct the generic restrictions between various texts on autobiographical elements such as biography, memoirs and history, Gilmore demonstrates the limits of autobiography through the blurring boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. The complex relationship between the imagined and the real is also discussed by Philippe Gasparini (2004, pp. 335-336) who upholds that “the ambiguity of fictional autobiography allows the author to reveal a personal and collective truth.” Truthfulness is a key point and a matter at stakes in autobiographical writing when we consider everything that authors write about their lives cannot be false or true. Nevertheless, one has to recognize the interest of autobiography rests on its being trustworthy. Trustworthiness in autobiographical work lies in referentiality, as upheld by Warner (2013, p. 25): “A referential commitment to reality is a necessary quality of testimony.” The reference to the external world certainly accredits the autobiographies of Angelou and Walker as reliable documents and testimonies.

At the very outset, Angelou's and Walker's works gain their legitimacy as daughters' testimonial voices through verifiable references to people, places and events. If these referential paradigms can be proved in the different stories, the two accounts are conveyed by two distinctive daughters' voices. The difference between the two female voices does not only derive from their individual life experiences, but it also comes from their particular ways to narrate and bear witness to their stories.

### **1.1. Maya Angelou's first-person narration**

A distinctive feature of Angelou's work is that she uses the first-person narrative voice to tell a story in linear time. This mode of storytelling which is characterized by the use of the first personal pronouns “I” or “we” suggests the presence of narrator as a witness or the central character relating his or her own story in a chronological order like in real life. It can also be read as an expression of commitment for the storyteller to “enter into a pact” of truthfulness with the readers without any equivocation. The foregoing assumptions are evidenced in Angelou's text through the life story of Maya or Marguerite, the protagonist who is at the same time the narrator and the author. The exposition functions as a testimony of Angelou who recounts her own story and the history of her family's disintegration:

When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed— “To Whom It May Concern” — that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach, California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson.

Our parents had decided to put an end to their calamitous marriage, and Father shipped us home to his mother.<sup>3</sup>

As deployed in the above quote, expressions like “When I was three”, “Our parents had to put an end to their calamitous marriage, and Father shipped us” are particularly significant. Not only do the expressions show Angelou’s first-person narrative approach, but they also announce the beginning of a human adventure of children who unjustly pay for their parents’ failure to build a family. Though one may not take for granted what Marguerite tells about her own story at the age of three, the book has some material foundations. One of the basics of the narrative is its being rooted in reality as proved by its chronological representation of a life story, its references to real places and true person proper names.

Angelou relates her life story in a chronological order in the same way as things usually happen or evolve in real life. If the chronological arrangement supports the narrative account, it is propelled by the motif of displacement. As shown in the book, Marguerite and her elder brother Bailey Johnson Junior who is only four are sent like a parcel post by their father Big Bailey Johnson to his mother Annie Henderson at Stamps, Arkansas. In chronicling this first and significant experience at their grandmother’s place, the narrator recalls: “We lived with our grandmother and uncle in the rear of the Store [...], which she had owned some twenty-five years.” (IKWTCBS, 7) If this early life experience at grandmother Annie’s house is memorable, it lasts five years as Marguerite recounts:

[...] Our father came to Stamps without warning. It was awful for Bailey and me to encounter the reality of the abrupt morning. We, or at any rate I, had built such elaborate fantasies about him and the illusory mother that seeing him in the flesh shredded my inventions like a hard yank on a paper chain (IKWCBS, 53).

The protagonist’s father Big Bailey unexpectedly comes to Stamps to take the narrator and her brother to live with their mother Vivian Baxter in St Louis, Missouri. Moving from their grandmother's home to their mother's is a very important step in the protagonist's life. The importance of this displacement does not only come from the narrator’s estrangement and disillusion in seeing her own mother, but it also marks an

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<sup>3</sup> Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, New York: Random House, 2009, p.5. All subsequent references to this book will directly appear in the text under the abbreviation (IKWCBS) followed by the page number

awareness of her want of a true family with a father who can love and protect her. Significantly, in portraying the woman who has given birth to her, Marguerite asserts:

To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power [...] My mother's beauty literally assailed me. Her red lips (Momma said it was a sin to wear lipstick) split to show even white teeth and her fresh-butter color looked see-through clean. Her smile widened her mouth beyond her cheeks beyond her ears and seemingly through the walls to the street outside. I was struck dumb. I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she was called "Mother" (IKWCBS, 59).

In St Louis, the protagonist and her brother live with their mother and her boyfriend Freeman. There Vivian's live-in boyfriend Mr Freeman gets Marguerite so intimately close to him when other people are away that the narrator affirms: "This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last." (IKWCBS, 72) If the need for a loving and caring father can justify the little girl's naive illusion to have found her real father in Freeman, Marguerite is soon disappointed as the so-called father is a vicious and perverse old man.

After a rather short stay at St Louis, Marguerite and Bailey junior are sent back again to Stamps to live with Momma. The grandmother attempts to look after her granddaughter who has withdrawn into herself after being sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend in St Louis. At Stamps, Annie introduces Marguerite to Mrs. Bertha Flowers who nurses the little girl by means of a bibliotherapeutic treatment that consists in reading works of literature out loud. Interestingly, this experience heals the protagonist and gives her a taste for reading and learning. Literature opens Marguerite's mind so quickly to the world, especially to the American racist environment which, at age ten when she takes a job with a white woman who calls Maya "Mary" at her convenience, she reacts to by breaking the woman's fine china.

As suggested by the first-person narrator's account, the motifs of instability and transfer—moving from place to place—are distinctive features of Marguerite's life story. Indeed, at the age of thirteen, the protagonist and her brother leave Stamps to live with their mother Vivian in Los Angeles first, then in Oakland, California, and later in San Francisco when their mother marries Daddy Clidell, a successful businessman. At fifteen, Marguerite goes to spend the summer holiday with her father, Daddy Bailey in southern California. According to the narrative voice, Marguerite has an unpleasant stay at her father's home in California because she and Daddy Bailey's girlfriend Dolores dislike each other. Because of the hostile atmosphere that forces her to abandon her father's home, she explains: "At fifteen life had taught me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice." (IKWCBS, 245) Angelou's narrative ends when Marguerite becomes a mother to a male baby at sixteen,

as indicated in her closing sentence: “[Vivian] turned out the light and I patted my son’s body lightly and went back to sleep.” (IKWCBS, 285) If this quote announces Marguerite’s entrance into motherhood, it marks the end of the chronological presentation of the first-person’s account on her childhood. Noteworthy, motherhood and childhood are significant references made to give evidence of the protagonist’s life story.

Observably, in Angelou’s chronological narration, the use of toponyms – accurate names of places like Stamps, St Louis, San Francisco, California – and onomastics—proper names of real persons like Bailey Johnson, Annie Henderson and Vivian Baxter contributes to underscore the narrative as a reliable material of a girl’s testimony to her life in raising with separate parents. The same narrative arrangement is made by Rebecca Walker in *Black White and Jewish* which naturally differs from Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as regards to the personal life experience and its way of being told by a narrator who maintains her real name as the main character, the storyteller, the writer and the author of her story.

## 1.2. Rebecca Walker’s autodiegetic narrative discourse

In scrutinizing the narrative discourse in *Black White and Jewish*, one is ineluctably struck by the voice which narrates or the eyes which present the story. Remarkably, the point of view which orients the readers and gives the narrator’s account the stamp of real and reliable testimony is held by the first-person narrative voice. In support of this, one need only take as an example this recollection of the autodiegetic storyteller who firmly claims:

I am not a bastard, the product of a rape, the child of some white devil. I am a Movement Child. My parents tell me that I can do anything I put my mind to, that I can be anything I want.  
I am not tragic<sup>4</sup>

The narrative discourse in the above quote combines the first-person narrative voice and the narrative perspective to testify the protagonist’s account. The testimony is not simply in the literary use of the first-person pronoun “I”. It can be seen in the narrator’s claim of her identity and personal history as “a Movement Child” born in marriage from parents who challenge the racial barriers in the name of love. If Walker’s identity claim is legitimate, the historical context of her parents’ union is verifiable, as evidenced by this analeptic reference:

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Walker, *Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2001, p.24. All subsequent references to this book will directly appear in the text under the acronym (BWJ) followed by the page number.

When they meet in 1965 in Jackson, Mississippi, my parents are idealists, they are social activists, they are "movement folk". They believe in ideas, leaders, and the power of organized people working for change. They believe in justice and equality and freedom. My father is a liberal Jew who believes these abstractions can be realized through the swift, clean application of the Law. My mother believes they can be cultivated through the telling stories, through the magic ability of words to redefine and create subjectivity. She herself is newly "Black." She and my father comprise and "interracial couple."  
[...] In 1967, when my parents break all the rules and marry against laws that say they can't, they say an individual should not be bound to the wishes of their family, race, state, or country. They say that love is the tie that binds, and not blood. In a photograph from their wedding day, they stand, brown and pale pint, inseparable, my mother's tiny five-foot-one-inch frame nestled birdlike within my father's protective embrace. Fearless, naïve, breathtaking, hey profess their shiny, outlaw love for all the world to see (BWJ, 23-24).

In addition to attesting to her account with the use of dates in connection with confirmable past realities in the south of the United States, Walker takes responsibility for the implementation of her narration. This responsibility is noticeable through the use of the name —Rebecca Walker— as the author, the writer, the main storyteller and protagonist of *Black White and Jewish*. Obviously, her commitment to tell the story of her life and testify to a personal experience.

In short, it comes out that in *Black White and Jewish* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the narrative strategies are purposely used to inform the literary work and evidence an individual experience of the collective plight of the Black nuclear family's disintegration.

## **2. The experience of the family disintegration**

The disintegration of the black nuclear family is a central theme in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Black White and Jewish*. Beyond its abstract conception, this theme is inspired by social and sociological reality. It is certainly the most realistic representation of human concern in creative writing. Without raising the question of the complex relationship between fiction and reality, the literary theme —the subject of writing an autobiography, for instance— is unescapably bound up with human adventure and social events. This is what reasonably prompts Wale Adebani's conception of (2014, PP. 405-420) "the writer as social thinker." Instructively, Angelou and Walker chronicle their own stories to enlighten the societal issue that they endure as daughters raised in households without father and mother. If the collapse of the elementary family model is a common experience, it is differently lived by both writers as regards the uniqueness of the stories and contingencies of life.

### **2.1. Maya Angelou's experience of the family disintegration**



In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou recounts how, as a little girl she is sent to live with her grandmother. She has no memory of her parents' conjugal life, nor does she know the reason for their separation. But she remembers the story of her shift from Long Beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas. Significantly, she has reminiscence of the event of this displacement and her growing up with her father's mother in the deep South, as she evokes: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." (IKWCBS, 6) This evocation is very interesting. It demonstrates how deeply the writer is marked by her transfer from Long Beach to Stamps with a tag on her wrist instructing any person "To Whom It May Concern." (IKWCBS, 6) By the same token, her growing up with her grandmother does not only unveil how she is the victim of her parents' choice, but it also highlights how her experience is singular. A major singularity of her experience stems from her rather weak condition and unfair disadvantage —as a child, a girl and a black in the segregated South. She relates that

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed (IKWCBS, 25).

Behind Angelou's evocation of her situation, the cause of her separation from her parents is hardly hidden. As indicated in the narrative, the protagonist is separated from her parents because they decide to put an end to their union.

In Angelou's text, divorce is explored both as a major social act and a literary motif which substantially contributes to the development of the theme of family's collapse. Meaningfully, it is presented as a recurrent act in African-American couple that marks the legal ending of marriage so that husband and wife are free to marry again. A salient case in point is certainly *Grandmother*, as the narrator states:

Momma had married three times: Mr Johnson, my grandfather, who left her around the turn of the century with two small sons to raise: Mr Henderson, of whom I know nothing at all [...]; then finally Mr Murphy. [...]  
People spoke of Momma as a good-looking woman and some, who remembered her youth, said she used to be right pretty (IKWCBS, 45-46).

Like divorce, remarriage is an important act which propels and revitalizes Angelou's account. Functioning both as a social fact and a literary motif, it serves as dynamic micro-narrative unit that drives the story and enlightens the key issue of the black family's crumbling. As shown in the narrative, Angelou's parents get divorced and remarry, both on their side. This shows how parents are sometimes self-centered in

giving more importance to their personal desire — divorcing and remarrying — than constructing a harmonious elementary household in their children's interest. Visibly, the possibility given to a couple to divorce and remarry anyhow is a source of family instability. Remarriage bespeaks parents' estrangement from their children's concerns in the same way that divorce jeopardizes the family unit.

It is worth noting that if divorce causes the split of Angelou's parents' couple, its cause is not clearly stated. This makes sense as the consequences of divorce are more important than the reasons for the dissolution of marriage. A significant consequence of divorce is the destruction of the family unit with the impossibility of children to fully benefit from parental care for their education and social balance. Undoubtedly, this quest for affection sets the roots for Angelou's being raped at eight by Mr. Freeman, her mother's live-in boyfriend. In fact, Mr. Freeman takes advantage of Vivian's absence at home and Angelou's need for a tender father to force sexual intercourse on the little girl, leaving on her traumatic effects. The writer's account is very revealing:

"We was just playing before"

[...]

Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot.

I thought I had died - I woke in a white-walled world, and it had to be heaven. But Mr. Freeman was there [...] "I didn't mean to hurt you, Ritie. I didn't mean it. But don't you tell.....Remember don't you tell a soul" (IKWCBS, 77).

Beyond its traumatic and post-traumatic impact, the rape shows in some way that living with parents in the same household provides a more secure place for children against sexual predators. Contrary to real parents, stepparents and stepchildren can hardly live in harmony under the same roof. This is also confirmed by the protagonist's visit at her father's in southern California where Angelou and Daddy Bailey's girlfriend, Dolores Stockland hate each other. The narrator reveals their mutual hate to her father:

[...] I didn't like her [Dolores] because she was mean and petty and full of pretense [...] She didn't like me because I was so tall and arrogant and wasn't clean enough for her (IKWCBS, 225).

To this revelation, the father's reaction is all the most meaningful, as he declares: "Well, that's life." (IKWCBS, 225) This response can be construed as an expression of the philosophical stance of Daddy Bailey who is aware of the conflicting relationship of stepmother and stepdaughter and ready to assume responsibility for his life choice. In this connection, it is very telling that when Dolores cuts Angelou after a heated argument, Bailey Johnson chooses to defend his own image and his female friend to the

detriment of his daughter who has to stay friends overnight. Disappointed by her father's attitude, Angelou eventually decides to go out and live for a month with other homeless children in a junkyard. This proves formative for her as she asserts : " The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life." (IKWCBS, 250) Given that street or informal education teaches her more about life than the experience she lives in each of her single parent's home, the quest for independence becomes fundamental for Angelou. As such, she decides to rely on herself rather than counting on her father or her mother.

The family disintegration forces the young girl to lie about her age in order to apply for a job, and then work as a driver and sling on streetcars in San Francisco. The experience of driving streetcars by a black girl like her is so surprising as instructive. The protagonist's report of the experience is very speaking:

Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware. And the worst part of my awareness was that I didn't know what I was aware of. I knew I knew very little, but I was certain that the things I had yet to learn wouldn't be taught to me at George Washington High School (IKWCBS, 267).

Axiomatically, the more Angelou becomes independent, the more this premature freedom puts her life in jeopardy. As a result of her independence, she precariously enters into adult world. A perfect illustration of the consequence of her precarious maturity is the unwanted pregnancy she gets at sixteen. In this connection, she writes to inform her parents – her mother and her mother's husband, Daddy Clidell with whom she lives: "*Dear parents, I am sorry to bring this disgrace on the family, but I am pregnant. Marguerite.*" (IKWCBS, 282) Interestingly, if her parents know the pregnancy only when she is almost six months pregnant, her baby's father abandons her during the fourth month.

Visibly, Angelou's pregnancy is symptomatic of the pandemic issue of the black nuclear family's collapse. Similar to her own situation, she gives birth to a baby whose parents are separated. Before the story which keeps repeating, Vivian's reaction is very expressive, as she states: " Well, that's that." (IKWCBS, 282) This statement bespeaks Vivian's acceptance of a single-parent family as an ineluctable fate or a " norm " in African-American society.

All in all, Angelou's story confirms the tragedy of the African-American family disintegration. It enlightens the difficulty of having the conventional family model, with a father, a mother and children in one household. What is more, it shows how the plight goes up in a spiral through the strong probability for an abandoned child of divorced parents to perpetuate the story and live the fate of a single parental family. If the

foregoing remarks are evidenced by Angelou's narrative, Rebecca Walker's work offers another insight into a girl's experience of family crumbling.

## **2.2. From a promising childhood to a condition of remainder: Rebecca Walker's experience of parental separation**

Born of an interracial union, Rebecca Walker who initially represents a symbol of love and hope for her parents and the American civil rights Movement does not enjoy the privilege of growing up in a unified family. Her parents' incompatibility and perpetual fights end up causing their separation when she is eight, as the autodiegetic narrator recalls: "[...] my parents sat me down on to tell me they were getting a divorce." (BWJ, 57) Glossing the reason for her parents' will to break up their union, Walker conjectures: "Like any normal couple, I suppose, my parents change, perhaps discovering the ways in which they are longer compatible, but also the real world begins to bleed into the margins of their idealistic love." (BWJ, 57) The decision to divorce seems to be as ordinary as paradoxical. In actual fact, the idea of maintaining family harmony in spite of divorcing is a fleeting illusion.

Divorce is a motif which does not only announce the dysfunction of the married couple, but it also shows the destruction of the family cell. If Rebecca Walker describes the splitting-up of her family as a way of her parents to become free and begin a new life again, she remains the question to be solved. This raises once again the issue of the children in case of parental divorce. In this connection, her account is very expressive:

The only problem, of course, is me. My little copper-colored body that held so much promise and broke so many rules. I no longer make sense. I am a remnant, a throwaway, a painful remainder of a happier and more optimistic but ultimately unsustainable time (BWJ, 60).

The importance of divorce derives from its consequences. In *Black White and Jewish*, Walker recounts that her parents' decision of divorce is marked by the sale of the family house followed by a legal arrangement according to which, "She [Rebecca Walker] will spend two years, alternately, with each of them [her father and her mother]." (BWJ, 116) If the sale of the family house clearly symbolizes the end of the couple's cohabitation and the breaking up of the family cell, the legal arrangement is so arbitrary as consequential to Walker. The apparently fair and right decision for the parents arouses confusion to the little girl and frustrates her legitimate desire to live with both of her parents.

As a result of her parents' separation, Walker is torn apart between two worlds as she has to live alternatively with her father and her mother. On the one hand, she must adjust to her father's conservative, traditional, wealthy, Jewish suburban community in Brooklyn, and on the other hand, comply with her mother's poorer black community lifestyle in the Bronx. Additionally, she must adapt herself to new manners and social realities when her mother moves to San Francisco and her father to Washington. Though she seems to belong to both her father and mother's worlds, she is fully accepted in none of their families. She permanently suffers from being regarded as an "outsider" by both communities. It is true that Walker is a mixed-blood girl, but her parents' separation constitutes a major cause of her frustration. The absence of a real family to protect her and socialize her clearly goes against her. Significantly, she exposes her frustration and her being left alone to find out her condition, as evidenced by this quote:

Growing up I did not, ever, feel contained. I never felt the four walls of my room or my apartment or my house or my town or my culture close around me. I never knew the feeling of the extended womb. My parents did not hold me tight, encouraged me to go. They did not buffer, protect, watch out for, or look after me. I was watered, fed, admired, stroked, and expected to grow. I was mostly left alone to discover the world and my place in it. (BWJ, 4-5)

Paradoxical though it may seem, Walker is threatened by liberty-based learning and self-discovery. The dual parental upbringing allows her much freedom and confidence to find her way. This makes sense in that parents have no rights and control over their daughter. Consequently, she is left alone to discover life realities. Because of this condition, Walker experiences juvenile depravities. By way of illustration, let us consider her comment on how she has sex with one of her boyfriends in her mother's house: "When my mother is away, Michael spends the night and we try out every sexual position we can think of. We suck and lick and taste every single part of each other..." (BWJ, 247) Following the example of these sexual relationships, Walker's unwanted pregnancy at fourteen eloquently illustrates how she is left to herself without any parental advice or restrictions. As shown in the narrative, parents are more concerned with their personal ambitions than with their child's education and wellbeing.

In *Black White and Jewish*, Walker endures her parents' self-centredness. Her upbringing is not their major concern. Walker's parents are more concerned about preserving their own image. One of the most striking examples is undoubtedly her mother's proposition of abortion as a solution to her daughter's unwanted pregnancy. The autodiegetic narrator's account is very instructive: "When I tell her, Mom, I think I am pregnant, she responds without too long a hesitation. Find a doctor to get a test, she says. Once you

know for sure, we'll schedule an abortion." (BWJ, 247) Walker is definitively forced by her mother to have an abortion. In so doing, the mother compels her daughter to commit an intentional death of her would-be baby and risk her life. Clearly, the mother's option throws doubt upon her worry about her daughter's life and future.

Thus, victimized by a frustrated childhood due to her parents' falling-out, Walker stands as a burdensome remainder who must rely on herself to survive and make her way in rather confused and hostile worlds. Her lately-acquired experience of life opens her mind to understand that she belongs to a social group, and beyond, as mixed-race child of divorced parents, she is not familyless. This is upheld by her closing words, as she writes: "I exist somewhere between black and white, family and friend." (BWJ, 322)

From all these, it follows that Walker's *Black White and Jewish* offers another understanding of the African-American daughter's account of her family's collapse. It strengthens through the autobiographic narrator's perspective how parental divorce exposes black girls to dangers and makes them vulnerable. Divorce is substantially explored as a kind of disease caused and ignored by parents. Behind divorce as a social malady is hardly hidden the concept of family therapy.

## CONCLUSION

The study of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *Black White and Jewish* perfectly enlightens the literary exploration of black nuclear family crumbling through daughters' accounts of their parents' separation. Proceeding by the paradigm that autobiography is a writer's representation of his or her own life story, the paper shows how Angelou and Walker write their personal experiences to bear witness to their family's collapse. The daughters' testimonies bespeak literature contribution to the explanation of the sociological issue of the African-American family disintegrating which mainly results from parental divorce.

If the family's disintegration is differently experienced and recounted by the two writers, it appears to be a plight that mostly affects the female black children. As shown in the narratives, divorce explodes the family cell and makes the black girls vulnerable by exposing them to dangers. This is testified by Angelou and Walker who precariously enter into adult world and experience unwanted pregnancy because they are left to themselves to discover life realities. In addition to being victimized by self-interested parents who fail to maintain the family cell and care for their children's upbringing, they are exposed to perpetuate the vicious circle of the black family tragedy. All in all, beyond the artistic representation of their personal accounts of the family vanishing and

its aftermaths on the offspring, Angelou and Walker differently show the stable two-parent conjugal household as the best place for a child's rearing and family therapy.

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