The Narrative Strategies in Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*

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Abstract: This paper examines the narrative strategies in Maya Angelou's fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, through the lens of classical narratology. Drawing upon Wayne C. Booth's concept of the implied author and narrative voice, alongside Gérard Genette's frameworks of focalization and narrative time, the analysis investigates how Angelou constructs her "roots-seeking" experience in Ghana during the early 1960s. The paper argues that Angelou employs deliberate narrative techniques—the temporal distance between experiencing and narrating selves, strategic shifts in focalization, and patterned manipulations of narrative time—to negotiate the complex relationship between African American identity and African heritage. Furthermore, engaging with Douglas Taylor's scholarship on trauma and narrative limits, the study explores how the Kaeta market episode presents a moment where historical trauma exceeds conventional narration, requiring what might be termed "narrative beyond narrative."

Keywords: Maya Angelou; classical narratology; narrative voice; focalization; diaspora

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Introduction

Maya Angelou's fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*(1986), chronicles her sojourn in Ghana during the early 1960s—a period when the country's newly won independence promised pan-African unity and invited the question: Can the descendants of the enslaved truly "return" to a homeland they have never known? This central problem of diasporic identity places the text at the intersection of personal narrative and collective history, making it a rich site for examining how autobiography negotiates selfhood across temporal and spatial distances. The present study approaches Angelou's text through the lens of narratology, drawing upon Wayne C. Booth's concepts of the implied author and narrative voice from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* alongside Gérard Genette's frameworks of focalization and narrative time from *Narrative Discourse*.

This paper argues that Angelou employs three interconnected narrative strategies—the temporal distance between experiencing and narrating selves, strategic shifts between internal and external focalization, and patterned manipulations of narrative time—to negotiate the complex relationship between African American identity and African heritage. Furthermore, engaging with Douglas Taylor's scholarship on trauma and narrative limits, the paper contends that the Kaeta market episode presents a limit case where historical trauma exceeds conventional narration, requiring what might be termed "narrative beyond narrative": a ritual enactment that operates outside standard autobiographical representation. Section II examines the temporal distance in narrative voice; Section III explores the shifting lens of focalization and its enactment of "double consciousness"; Section IV considers the limits of narrative in the Kaeta funeral ritual, followed by a conclusion on the implications of Angelou's strategies for African diasporic writing.

1.The Temporal Distance in Narrative Voice

Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* provides the foundational framework for understanding narrative voice in autobiography through his concept of the implied author—the created image of the writer who guides reader response through deliberate narrative choices. Central to this framework is the distinction between the narrator who tells and the author who creates that narrator, a distinction that becomes particularly significant when the narrator is also the protagonist of the story. In autobiographical narrative, this dynamic generates what narrative theorists identify as the temporal gap between the living of an experience and its telling—a gap that produces two distinct

entities: the experiencing "I" who undergoes events without knowledge of their outcome, and the narrating "I" who retrospectively shapes those events into meaningful pattern. In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, this temporal distance operates across multiple key episodes—from personal trauma to historical encounter to ancestral reckoning—each demonstrating how the narrating "I" transforms raw experience into layered meaning.

1.1 The experiencing "I" versus the narrating "I"

The temporal distance between experiencing "I" and narrating "I" operates most viscerally in Angelou's treatment of her son Guy's near-fatal car accident. The experiencing "I" of 1962, newly arrived in Ghana with "the future plump with promise," is shattered by an event that defies immediate comprehension. Angelou writes: "July and August of 1962 stretched out like fat men yawning after a sumptuous dinner. They had every right to gloat, for they had eaten me up. Gobbled me down. Consumed my spirit, not in a wild rush, but slowly, with the obscene patience of certain victors."(Angelou 4)The visceral imagery of consumption captures the raw, unprocessed quality of immediate trauma—the experiencing "I" became "a shadow walking in the white hot streets, and a dark spectre in the hospital."(Angelou 4) Yet this passage is filtered through the narrating "I" who possesses the metaphorical language to articulate that devastation. When Angelou reflects, "Had I been less timid, I would have cursed God. Had I come from a different background, I would have gone further and denied His very existence. Having neither the courage nor the historical precedent, I raged inside myself like a blinded bull in a metal stall,"(Angelou 4) she layers the moment with retrospective cultural analysis. The experiencing "I"raged internally, prohibited by her spiritual inheritance from questioning God; the narrating "I" can name those historical forces—the Black church tradition, the "historical precedent" of African American faith—that shaped the very structure of her grief.

The temporal distance operates differently but equally powerfully in the Berlin breakfast episode. When Angelou and her fellow cast members from *The Blacks* are invited to breakfast by Dieter, a German architect, the gathering becomes a site of profound historical confrontation. What unfolds is a story duel of devastating proportions. After Angelou offers a Brer Rabbit folktale that receives polite, empty laughter, the Jewish actor Torvash responds with a Holocaust story about a Nazi officer with a glass eye—a narrative that leaves the German hosts "ashen-faced." Dieter then retaliates with a German parable about a bird saved from freezing only to be eaten by a wolf, delivering its cruel moral: "Once you find yourself in shit, keep your big mouth shut."(Angelou 170) The experiencing "I" senses the enormity of what has transpired but cannot fully process it in the moment. Only later, at the end of the visit, does Dieter reveal his true purpose: he wants to use Angelou's connections in Ghana to smuggle African art. The experiencing self can only feel used and violated. But the narrating "I" understands the full layered meaning: that the elegant breakfast was never simply hospitality, that the story duel was a battle over historical trauma, that Dieter's collection of African masks and bronzes represented the same predatory relationship with Africa that slavery once did. Torvash's parting words—"Neither you nor I can afford to be so innocent. Not here in Germany or anywhere in this world, unless we admit that we want the return of slavery and the concentration camps."(Angelou 173)—carry a meaning the experiencing "I" registered only as warning, but the narrating "I" can articulate as diagnosis.

The Kaeta market episode represents perhaps the most profound instance of temporal distance in the text, as it involves not merely personal reflection but ancestral memory. When Angelou visits the village of Kaeta, a former slave-trading post, the journey itself foreshadows the encounter: crossing a bridge, she is seized by unexplained terror and insists on walking, later learning that the bridge was historically crossed only on foot for survival—knowledge she could not have possessed. In the market, an elderly woman who strikingly resembles Angelou's grandmother initially confronts her with anger, mistaking her for someone else. Only when Angelou presents her California driver's license and the words "American Black" are spoken does the woman's fury transform into mourning. She touches Angelou's face, places her hands on her head, and begins the Ewe funeral wail. The experiencing "I" is overwhelmed, confused, and emotionally flooded: led through the market as the woman

announces “this American Black” at every stall, Angelou watches vendors respond with shock, covering their heads and weeping, pressing gifts upon her. She learns that Kaeta was devastated by the slave trade—its people killed or taken, its surviving children hiding in forests and witnessing their families’ destruction, passing the memory down through generations. The experiencing “I” weeps without fully understanding: “I didn’t know why. I didn’t know for whom.” The narrating “I,” however, can name what was happening: “Descendants of a pillaged past saw their history in my face and heard their ancestors speak through my voice.”(Angelou 207) The older narrator possesses the theoretical language of diaspora, the concept of “historical trauma,” and the understanding that African Americans carry within their bodies the unprocessed grief of generations. The younger Maya could only weep, could only be the vessel through which ancestors mourned; the older narrator can interpret those tears as the voice of the enslaved speaking through her, as the return of the repressed of history. This is the ultimate work of the narrating “I”: to transform inchoate emotion into historical consciousness, to give language to what the experiencing self could only endure, and thereby to make personal experience speak for collective memory.

2.The Shifting Lens

Gérard Genette’s theory of focalization, developed in *Narrative Discourse*, provides the essential vocabulary for analyzing who perceives in a narrative—the crucial distinction between “who sees” and “who speaks.” Genette challenges the traditional hierarchy of “showing” and “telling” by demonstrating that all narration is a form of telling, but the regulation of narrative information varies according to the focal position adopted. He proposes three categories: zero focalization (the omniscient narrator who knows more than any character), internal focalization (the narrative is restricted to what a particular character knows, sees, or feels), and external focalization (the narrative is focused on a character, not through him)(Genette 10). For autobiographical narrative, focalization proves particularly significant because the “I” who narrates must decide how much access to grant readers to the experiencing self’s perceptions at any given moment. In *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou strategically shifts between internal and external focalization to enact what W.E.B. Du Bois theorized as “double consciousness”—the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others.

2.1 Internal focalization and the representation of estranged experience

Internal focalization operates throughout *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* to render Angelou’s experience of Africa as simultaneously familiar and profoundly strange. When she first arrives in Ghana, the narrative restricts itself to her sensory perceptions, filtering the new environment through her American-born consciousness. The description of Accra’s atmosphere exemplifies this technique: “The breezes of the west African night were intimate and shy, licking the hair, sweeping through cotton dresses with unseemly intimacy, then disappearing into the utter blackness.”(Angelou 3) The personification of the breeze—“intimate,” “shy,” engaged in “unseemly intimacy”—reflects the experiencing self’s ambivalent response to Africa: it is welcoming yet unsettling, familiar yet improper. The reader has access only to what Angelou perceives and how she emotionally registers those perceptions, creating what Genette terms “restricted field” narration.

The estrangement effect becomes even more pronounced in moments of unexplained bodily knowing. When Angelou crosses the bridge on the way to Kaeta, she is seized by inexplicable terror and insists on walking—a moment of physical memory that precedes conscious understanding. The narrative restricts itself entirely to her subjective experience: the fear, the compulsion to disembark, the relief once on foot. Only later does Adae explain that the bridge was historically crossed on foot for survival—knowledge she could not have possessed.

In the Kaeta market itself, internal focalization reaches its peak intensity. When the elderly woman confronts her, the narrative records only Angelou’s limited comprehension: she hears a language she does not understand, sees fury transform into mourning, feels hands on her face and head, but comprehends nothing. The narrative withholds explanation: “The women wailed and I wept with them. I didn't know why. I didn’t know for whom.” Only after the fact does Adae provide the historical context that transforms inchoate weeping into meaning.

The estrangement of cultural initiation appears also in Angelou's encounter with Comfort's story. Comfort explains that she is being killed by a rival wife's curse—how the woman came to her door, asked "Do you know the price of love? Are you willing to pay any price for love?" and left after Comfort's disrespectful response. The narrative remains anchored in Angelou's perspective: she listens, she observes Comfort's wasting body, she hears the accounts of European doctors and Ghanaian fetish priests failing to help.

The funeral of the unclaimed body that so devastates Efua is rendered through Angelou's externalized observation: she sees Efua's face "the color of gun metal,"(Angelou 186) her trembling hands, hears her cry "Oh, my Africa! What is happening to you? Where are you going?" (Angelou 187)The narrative reports Efua's words about every African having a "place" that only they can fill, about the desecration of a body lying two days unclaimed. But Angelou's consciousness stands slightly apart, analyzing rather than sharing the grief: "As usual, as if I had been sent to the continent on assignment, I placed the African and Black American cultures side by side for examination."(Angelou 188) The internal focalization here is not on the meaning of the unclaimed body but on Angelou's own observer position—her estrangement from the very grief she witnesses.

2.2 External focalization and the representation of cultural conflict

If internal focalization renders estranged experience, external focalization operates in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* to present cultural conflict with apparent objectivity. Genette defines external focalization as the "behaviorist" or "objective" narrative, in which the narrator reports only what can be observed from the outside, without access to characters' inner states.(Genette 188) Angelou employs this technique most notably in scenes where cultural difference produces tension or misunderstanding, allowing readers to observe the gap between what is said and what is meant, between gesture and intention.

External focalization operates in Angelou's depiction of the Ghanaian servant's response to news of the Harlem riot. The scene is rendered through dialogue and observable reaction: the servant cannot understand why African Americans would riot over "one dead child." He offers the metaphor of the elephant and the rat—the elephant does not even notice the rat on its back. The narrative reports his words, his evident incomprehension, his cultural confidence. But it does not enter his consciousness to explain why he feels this way, nor does it enter Angelou's consciousness during the exchange.

The scene of Malcolm X in Ghana refusing to dance at the journalists' club exemplifies external focalization of political tension. The narrative reports the setting—the highlife music, the celebration, the expectation that Malcolm will join. It reports his stillness, his fingers lacing and unlacing. It reports his speech: he cannot dance because he is thinking of black people suffering in America, in the Congo, in South Africa. It reports the Ghanaian response—some annoyed at the "party-pooper," others defending his right to speak. But the narrative never enters Malcolm's consciousness to explain his refusal from within, nor does it enter the Ghanaian journalists' consciousness to explain why celebration feels appropriate to them.

The scene of Comfort's death, perhaps most strikingly, maintains strict external focalization throughout. Angelou records Comfort's symptoms—thirty pounds lost, hands too weak to braid. She records Comfort's account of the rival wife's visit and curse. She records Comfort's journey to Sierra Leone, her death within a week, the friend arriving to deliver the news. But the narrative never enters Comfort's experience of dying, never confirms or denies the curse's efficacy, never explains what killed her. Angelou describes her agreement with Comfort that they would continue their friendship upon Comfort's return; the next sentence reports Comfort's death a week later. The external focalization here—refusing access to interiority, refusing explanation—makes Comfort's death more, not less, devastating. It remains opaque, ungraspable, like the Africa Angelou can never fully possess.

The shifting between internal and external focalization thus constitutes a narrative enactment of double consciousness. When Angelou employs internal focalization, readers inhabit her estranged perception of Africa—the uncanny knowing of the Kaeta bridge, the incomprehensible weeping of the market, the helpless witnessing of

Comfort's decline. When she shifts to external focalization, readers observe both Angelou and Africans from a distance. This is the work of focalization in Traveling Shoes: not merely to convey information, but to structure the reader's experience of diasporic consciousness itself—always inside and outside, always knowing and not-knowing, always belonging and estranged.

3.Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how Angelou's strategic manipulations of narrative voice, focalization, and time construct a complex negotiation between African American identity and African heritage. The temporal distance between experiencing and narrating selves transforms personal trauma into historical consciousness; the shifts between internal and external focalization enact a narrative equivalent of double consciousness; and the Kaeta market episode reveals moments where historical trauma exceeds conventional narration, requiring ritual as an alternative mode of meaning-making. Together, these strategies show that autobiographical writing is not the reporting of a pre-existing self but the active construction of one—transforming personal experience into collective memory and allowing a daughter of the diaspora to hear her ancestors speak through her voice.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by applying classical narratology to a text usually read through postcolonial or feminist lenses, revealing formal dimensions of Angelou's craft that have received less attention.

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