

Phenomenal Woman: A Catalyst for Dismantling Patriarchal Norms

Surachhya Shrestha, Ph.D.

Lecturer, Bal Kumari College, Chitwan

Email: surachhyashrestha8@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" as a catalyst for challenging conventional beauty norms and empowering women within the context of patriarchal structures. The main objective of this paper is to examine how the poem disrupts traditional perceptions of beauty and cultivates empowerment among women. This is a qualitative research; descriptive and analytical research design has been followed. The required information for the study has been gathered both from primary and secondary sources. The primary source of data is Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman". Likewise, secondary data sources consist of books, journal articles, dictionary, encyclopedias, videos, and web browsers related to the works of Maya Angelou. Through a feminist lens, the paper analyzes the poem's themes, language, and narrative to unveil the ways in which it challenges and defies traditional gender roles, promoting female empowerment and autonomy. The researcher also employs a close reading approach, which involves a detailed and in-depth examination of a particular text. This method focuses on understanding the language, structure, tone, style and figurative expressions of the poem. Lastly, the research questions have been answered. The key finding in the poem is celebration of womanhood, emphasis on inner strength, self-acceptance, confidence, women empowerment, and the beauty that goes beyond societal expectations.

Keywords: Phenomenal, Maya Angelou, women empowerment, patriarchal norms.

Introduction

Maya Angelou is an iconic African-American poet, memoirist and civil rights activist. She was born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. Angelou is best known for her autobiographical series of books, starting with "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," which detailed her early life and the challenges she faced while growing up. Angelou's early years were marked by hardship and trauma. She faced racial discrimination and childhood adversity, including the trauma of sexual abuse, which profoundly impacted her formative years. Yet, she exhibited incredible resilience, intellect, and an unyielding determination to rise above those obstacles. Maya Angelou is one of woman writers who use feminism approach in her work. In her poems, Angelou expresses about the woman during racial discrimination, segregation, and male domination. These experiences greatly influenced her writing and her advocacy for equality and social justice throughout her life. Her ability to channel her pain into art and her unwavering strength continue to inspire many people around the world. The poem "Phenomenal Woman" is one of Angelou's most famous and empowering poem it celebrates the beauty, strength and confidence of women particularly African American woman. It was first published in 1978 as a part of her collection of poems titled, "And Still I Rise". In this poem Maya Angelou explores the essence of womanhood and challenges conventional beauty standards glorifying the distinctive attributes, charm, and inner fortitude of the speaker, and portraying her as extraordinary and captivating. Through this poem Angelou encourages all women to recognize and embrace their own unique beauty both inside and outside and to be proud of their own identity and strength. Thus, the poem is a symbol of female empowerment and a reminder that every woman is remarkable in her own way despite race, class and physical attributes. So, Based on the explanation above the research questions are formulated as below:

Research questions

- How does Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" serve as a catalyst for challenging and dismantling patriarchal norms and empower women?
- What are the key literary devices used in the poem and how do they contribute to the poem's overall message?

Objectives

- To analyze instances in the poem where gender norms and patriarchal expectations are challenged.
- To explore and analyze specific literary devices such as language, metaphor, refrain, and tone employed in the poem

Literature Review

Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" stands as a powerful testament to the empowerment of women and the deconstruction of patriarchal norms. Across various literary and feminist discourses, Angelou's work has been extensively examined and celebrated for its revolutionary stance.

In the realm of feminist literature, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, "The Madwoman in the Attic," explores the ways in which women writers have challenged societal norms and the male-dominated literary canon. Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" emerges as a prime example of how women's voices break free from traditional constraints, reshaping narratives of femininity and beauty.

Moreover, bell hooks, in her book "Feminism is for Everybody," emphasizes the importance of cultural products, including literature and poetry, in challenging and dismantling patriarchal norms. Angelou's poem serves as a rallying cry, inviting women to embrace their inherent worth and reject societal standards that confine them to prescribed roles.

Additionally, within the context of African American feminist literature, scholars like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker have discussed the significance of self-empowerment and self-definition for black women. Angelou's poem echoes these sentiments, highlighting the strength and resilience of black womanhood in the face of intersecting oppressions.

Furthermore, discussions in the field of literary criticism, notably by Elaine Showalter and Judith Butler, underscore the subversive nature of literary works in challenging dominant ideologies. "Phenomenal Woman" disrupts the conventional portrayal of beauty and challenges the male gaze, offering an alternative narrative that celebrates self-assuredness and confidence.

Jayageetha P et al (2018) Feminist critics analyze how women are showed, how the text discussed gender relations and sex differentiation. Maya Angelou is a feminist writer and her work encompassed the struggles and triumphs of a black woman in America. This poem celebrates the power of a woman and the speaker is portrayed as a strong and confident woman. Her power, her behavior and her confidence become the inner mystery that makes her to be a phenomenal woman.

In the research conducted by Indiani Eka Permatasari et al. (2016), they analyzed discrimination toward black women as depicted in Maya Angelou's poems. Specifically, the researchers chose three of Angelou's poems: "Still I Rise," "Phenomenal Woman," and "Caged Bird." To uncover the themes within these poems, the study employed feminist theory along with historical and biographical approaches.

In her 2014 study, Rohmania Rista undertook an intrinsic analysis of Maya Angelou's poems "Phenomenal Woman" and "Still I Rise." Focused on the intrinsic elements, a component of the structuralism approach, the research aimed to discern these elements within Angelou's poetry and their portrayal of the female figure. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study elucidated the intrinsic elements and depicted the figure of the black woman within these poems.

The researches reviewed have explored diverse aspects of the poem, Phenomenal Woman using different theories and approaches. However, there are still so many dimensions in the poem that still invite serious research on its various unexplored aspects. In this paper the researcher attempts to explore the thematic aspects of the poem using feminist literary criticism approach and also literary aspect using close reading approach.

Research Method

This is a qualitative research; descriptive and analytical research design has been followed. The required information for the study has been gathered both from primary and secondary sources. The primary source of data is Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman". Likewise, secondary data sources consist of books, journal articles, dictionary, encyclopedias, videos, and web browsers. To analyze thematic aspect of the poem the researcher employed feminist literary criticism approach. The researcher also employed a close reading approach,

which involves a detailed and in-depth examination of a particular text. This method focuses on understanding the language, structure, tone, style and figurative expressions of the poem.

Theoretical Implication

Patriarchal norms refer to the social structures, beliefs, and practices that prioritize men and grant them more power, authority, and privilege over women. These norms often perpetuate gender inequality by reinforcing the idea that men are superior to women and should hold positions of dominance in society. During Maya Angelou's time, (1928-2014), the United States was deeply entrenched in a patriarchal social structure. The definition of women's beauty was heavily influenced by societal standards that often emphasized specific physical traits and characteristics. Women were often expected to have an hourglass figure with a small waist, full breasts, and hips, which was considered the epitome of femininity. Women were often portrayed as objects of desire or as fitting certain stereotypes. Their roles and responsibilities were assigned based on gender. There was an expectation for women to be polite, demure, and submissive, which also extended to how they presented themselves physically. Modesty in behavior was often encouraged. Women were encouraged to present themselves in a polished and refined manner. But in her poem, "Phenomenal Woman" Maya Angelou has challenged such limited definitions of beauty advocating for a more expansive and inclusive view of human worth and beauty. Therefore, it is relevant to employ literary criticism approach to guide this paper and explore the different layers of poem. Feminist literary criticism is an approach to analyzing literature through a feminist lens, focusing on how gender is portrayed, constructed, and challenged within literary works. It emerged in the second half of the 20th century and continues to evolve, aiming to uncover and address gender biases, power imbalances, and societal norms embedded in literature. This approach challenges patriarchal ideologies and structures prevalent in literature, society, and language. Feminist literary criticism aims to uplift and amplify female voices in literature. It focuses on works by women writers, highlighting their perspectives, experiences, and contributions to literature that were often overlooked or dismissed.

.Analysis and Discussion of Phenomenal Woman

According to Oxford Dictionary the word phenomenal means very great or impressive. In Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman," she uses the term in broader sense to describe the exceptional qualities and essence of a woman who defies societal standards of beauty and grace. It emphasizes her extraordinary nature, inner strength, confidence, and allure that transcend conventional notions of attractiveness. Moreover, phenomenal woman is someone who inspires and empowers others through her actions, resilience, and ability to transcend societal expectations. Thus, the title of the poem itself acts as a catalyst to dismantle the patriarchal norms.

In the first stanza, the speaker boldly challenges the narrow definition of beauty imposed by patriarchy emphasizing that she doesn't fit into that framework. She writes, "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies. I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size. But when I start to tell them, they think I'm telling lies."

(Phenomenal Woman, 1st stanza) In these lines she states that pretty (white) women, often inquire about the secret behind her allure. Despite the skepticism and disbelief she faces when she shares her truth, she maintains unwavering confidence in her identity as a phenomenal woman, embracing her ample physique and curvaceous form. The speaker emphasizes the essence of inner beauty over external appearances. Furthermore, she proudly celebrates her physical attributes, refusing to conform to societal norms, and asserts that her allure and strength stem from embracing her unique physical qualities, ultimately defying the patriarchal notion that a woman's worth is confined to a specific body type or appearance. Through this poem the speaker tries to send a message to the readers to appraise themselves although their physical appearance isn't perfect. She suggests that her magnetism and self-assurance originate internally, stemming from her mannerisms, gestures, and the poise with which she presents herself. She writes, "It's in the reach of my arms, The span of my hips, The stride of my step, The curl of my lips. "I'm a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me". The speaker is so proud with her vast arms, hips, step and thick lips. Although her physical attributes are unlike whites, the speaker is still proud with her physical features.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the effect she has on men, emphasizing that it's not just her physical appearance but also her confidence and charisma that command attention. This challenges the patriarchal idea that a woman's power lies solely in her ability to attract and please men by their physical beauty. The poet states that she walks into a room being cool but the men fall down on their knees and gather around her just like honeybees gather around the queen bee in a hive. The reason behind this is because of the fire on her eye and the flash on her teeth make her exceptionally beautiful. She is proud of everything in herself and she again declares that

she is a phenomenal woman.

In the third stanza the speaker states that that men themselves are in wonder that why they are attracted towards her. Even if the speaker tries to reveal her inner mysteries, they are still unable to see it. She asserts that her beauty is in the arch of her back, in shining of her smile, in the ride of her breast and in the grace of her style. She can attract men and women by her power, behavior and confidence that makes her be phenomenal woman.

In the last stanza she clarifies the reason behind being a phenomenal woman. She declares that she is outstandingly, phenomenally phenomenal because she has not let anybody to bow down her head. For this she does not need to shout or jump about. She states that anybody passing by can feel proud of her as she is attractive because of the click of her heels, the bend of her hair, the palm of her hand and the need of her care. Finally she concludes with a strong self-affirmation, repeating the idea of being a “phenomenal woman.” This repetition serves as a bold assertion of self-worth and confidence. It challenges the patriarchal norms that dictate how women should view themselves, encouraging self-pride and confidence irrespective of societal expectations.

Overall, the poem challenges patriarchal norms by, rejecting narrow beauty standards, celebrating individuality, embracing self-confidence, and asserting the speaker’s identity and worth independent of societal validation or male-defined standards.

Analysis of Poetic Devices

Structure of the Poem

The poem is divided into four stanzas, each with a varying number of lines. This irregular structure presents the speaker’s confidence and boldness refusing to conform to traditional patterns, much like the “phenomenal woman” herself.

Inclusive Language

Angelou’s use of inclusive language, such as “we” and “us,” invites other women to join in the celebration of their own uniqueness. By using such language the poem aims to empower all women, encouraging them to embrace their individuality and recognize their inner strength. In addition, throughout the poem, Angelou uses simple and direct language, making the poem accessible and relatable. The repetition of the phrase, “I’m a woman” emphasizes the speaker’s pride in her identity and femininity. The use of first-person narration brings a personal and intimate tone to the poem, making it feel like a conversation or a declaration.

Assertive Tone

The tone of the poem is confident, defiance and empowering which emphasizes speaker’s belief in her strength and allure. She declares her self-worth and inner beauty with conviction, using phrases like “I walk into a room” and “I say”. The poem’s confident and assertive tone challenges the idea that women should be seen and not heard, encouraging women to speak up and celebrate their own voices and experiences.

Refrain

The refrain in Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman” is the recurring line: “I’m a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That’s me.” This refrain is repeated throughout the poem, and it emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance, self-love, and self-confidence, encouraging women to stand tall and proud in their own skin.

Metaphorical Expressions

In her poem, “Phenomenal Woman,” Maya Angelou uses metaphorical expressions (to convey the speaker’s confidence and uniqueness) to convey deeper meanings and capture the essence of the speaker’s confidence and allure. Here are some key metaphors in the poem and their meanings:

“The fire in my eyes”: here fire is used metaphorically to symbolize passion, intensity and determination within the speaker. It suggests a strong and captivating gaze that reflects the inner strength and confidence.

“The sun of my smile”: This suggests that the speaker’s smile is radiant and powerful, much like the warmth and brightness of the sun. It symbolizes the warmth, positivity, and captivating charm of the speaker’s smile.

“The ride of my breasts”: This refers to the speaker’s breast movement as a “ride,” suggesting a sense of freedom and self-assuredness in her physicality. It conveys a dynamic and confident presence

“The span of my hips”: This implies the physical width or breadth of the speaker’s hips, symbolizing her confi-

dence and the power she exudes in her physical presence.

“The joy in my feet”: this expression symbolizes the speaker’s happiness and confidence, implying that she walks with a sense of purpose and contentment.

“The curve of my hips”: this is linked to the speaker’s sensuality and femininity. It represents a natural and confident aspect of her physicality that defies social expectations.

Thus, the themes as well as the poetic devices used in “Phenomenal Woman” collectively work to challenge and disrupt patriarchal norms by celebrating the confidence, allure, and inherent strength of the female protagonist, presenting a powerful counter-narrative to societal expectations imposed on women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Maya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman” serves as more than just a poem; it is a powerful tool for dismantling patriarchal norms. It challenges society’s fixation on external appearances, encourages women to embrace their uniqueness, and celebrate their inner strength, and resilience. By highlighting the importance of inner strength, self-acceptance, and solidarity among women, this poem continues to resonate as a beacon of empowerment and liberation for generations to come. As society progresses towards greater inclusivity and gender equality, this poem stands as a timeless reminder of the inherent beauty and strength of every woman, irrespective of societal norms or expectations.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M.H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms: Seventh Edition*. Boston: Thomson Learning, Inc.
- Angelou, Maya. (1969). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House.
- Angelou, Maya. (1994). *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. (1956). *The Second Sex*. Edited by H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Bhangu, Jaspreet Kaur. (2010). *Reaching Centrestage: Cultural Identity in African American Theatre*. Delhi: Aravali Books International (p) Ltd.
- Bloom, Harold. (2009). *Maya Angelou: Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Degout, Yasmin. (2009). “The Poetry of Maya Angelou: Liberation Ideology and Technique.” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Maya Angelou*. New Ed. New York: Infobase Publishing, 130.
- Hagen, Lyman B. (1997). “Something about Everything: Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou.” University Press Of America.
- Henderson, Stephen. (1988). *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hook, B. (2000). *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- Jayageetha, P., & Jansi Rani, S. S. (2018). “Image Of Woman: A Feminist Reading Of Maya Angelou’s Phenomenal Women.” *Journal Of English Language And Literature (JOELL)*, 5(1), 383-386.
- Kalyani, Dr. (Mrs.) Usha. (2008). “Black Autobiography: Maya Angelou Tells Her Tale.” *Critical Essays on American Literature*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.
- Krolokke, C., & Sorensen, A.S. (2005). *Three Waves of Feminism Gender Communication Theories and Analysis: From Silence to Performance*. Troundale: NewSage Press.
- Lauret, Maria. (1994). *Liberating Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Lupton, Mary Jane. (1998). *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Mance, Maria Ajuan. (2007). “Inventing Black Women: African American Women Poets and Self-Representation, 1877-2000.”
- Myrdal, Gunnar. (1944). *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Haper & Bros.
- Rosenstand, N. (2006). *The Moral of The Story: An Introduction to Ethics*, 5th ed. McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages.
- Shumaker, W. (1965). *An Approach to Poetry*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Whitson, Kathy J. (2004). *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.