



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

An analysis of the Representation of Women in Maya Angelou's poem Phenomenal Woman

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze Maya Angelou's poem Phenomenal Woman from a feminist stylistic point of view. The analysis is carried out by focusing on the poetic features of the poem that work together to represent women powerfully and confidently. At the semantic level, poetic devices such as metaphor, repetition, and imagery are examined to explore the inner strength and pride expressed by the speaker. The poem redefines beauty through self-assurance and individuality rather than physical appearance. At the stylistic level, the structure, tone, and rhythmic elements of the poem are considered concerning feminist theory. These stylistic devices highlight the poet's purpose to break traditional gender norms and celebrate womanhood from a personal and collective perspective. The study finds that Angelou's use of affirming language and strong voice gives a new dimension to female identity. This stylistic analysis helps understand how poetic language serves as a tool of empowerment and how it differentiates literary expression from everyday communication.

Key words: Feminist Literacy Criticism, Maya Angelou, Phenomenal Woman, Representation of Woman

Introduction

One of the most iconic poets, Maya Angelou, is known for her contributions to feminist literature and African American cultural thought. In addition to being a poet, she is also a memoirist and a civil rights activist. Her literary work blends autobiography with poetry to voice Black women's issues in a society that is shaped by not only racism, but also by sexism and inequality as well (**Braxton,**



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1999). Angelou used her personal experience to speak on social issues to help shape a space for women of colour with political and literary landscapes.

Phenomenal Woman is one of her most celebrated poems, which was published in 1978 in a time when feminist movements were challenging gender roles and norms, working to expand the image of womanhood. In her poem, she redefines what it means to be powerful and beautiful and focuses not on appearance, but on inner confidence and strength. The speaker of the poem loudly espouses her identity, using repetition, rhythm, and affirming language that expresses a different vision of womanhood that goes against patriarchal standards **(Jayageetha & Rani, 2018)**. **Shrestha (2024)** says that this poem not only functions as a proclamation of self-love, but it also functions as a tool that dismantles societal expectations placed on women.

This research article aims to explore how Angelou represents women in her poem through the feminist lens. This is going to be done by analyzing the language of the poem, its structure, and themes. Further, this article is also going to explore how Angelou reclaims the narrative around female identity and challenges cultural definitions of power and beauty.

Research Question

RQ: 1 How does Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" challenge traditional beauty standards and empower female identity through poetic language?

Research Objectives

RO: 1 The main objective of the study was to analyze how Maya Angelou portrays women in her poem "Phenomenal Woman."

Literature Review

"Literature review is a clear overview of the sources in an organizational pattern, and its purpose is to estimate earlier works related to the current topic" **(Ahmad et al., 2021, p.3)**. Maya Angelou is a famous African American poet, activist, and author, whose work has greatly contributed to feminist and Black literature. Her poetic works usually revolve around themes of self-worth, identity, race, and the power of women. One of her most famous poems is Phenomenal Woman. It was published in 1978, during which feminist movements were on the rise and typical gender roles were being questioned. In Phenomenal Woman, Angelou rejects the narrow definition of beauty given by society. Instead, she advocates for a broader vision of what it means to be a woman. Her speaker in the poem becomes a voice for the women who have been silenced due to their identity or appearance.

In the article "Image of Woman: A Feminist Reading of Maya Angelou's Phenomenal Woman" by **Jayageetha and Jansi Rani (2018)**, **Jayageetha and Jansi Rani (2019)** argue in the articles, "Image of Woman: A Feminist Reading of Maya Angelou's Phenomenal Woman" that Angelou's poem challenges the beauty norms of society directly and elevates women by representing them as strong, independent, and proud. Authors consider the poem a declaration of empowerment and self-love. They also assert that Angelou defines beauty differently by focusing on inner qualities, such as confidence, charm, and grace, instead of physical appearance. The feminist lens shows that



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Angelou's speaker finds strength in her individuality, which resonates with women who are marginalized by the beauty standards of society.

In the same way, in her article, "Phenomenal Woman: A Catalyst for Dismantling Patriarchal Norms," **Surachhya Srestha (2024)** places much emphasis on how the poem boldly rejects patriarchal values. She also says that the poem uses rhythmic repetition and direct language to reclaim confidence. Further, she says that Angelou's depiction of women is revolutionary, as it values women's self-perception, instead of society's judgment. Moreover, she also says that the poem is not only about confidence, but it is also about resisting the pressure to conform, and it dismantles the patriarchal gaze that defines the worth of women only based on appearance alone.

In addition, although **Nina Gracia's** commentary on the poem is not an academic article, her reflection on Phenomenal Woman sheds light on how readers connect with the poem on a personal and emotional level across generations. She says that Angelou's words motivate women to feel proud of their uniqueness and who they are. This real-life impact underpins scholarly interpretation that the poem has both cultural and literary significance, impacting how women see themselves in a society that is full of expectations.

These studies shed light on the fact that it is more than just a personal poem. It is a statement that redefines the idea of beauty, womanhood, empowers female identity, and supports the idea that beauty is about standing out. She uses the poem to give voice to the resistance, empowerment, and pride. Undoubtedly, it is a key work of feminist literature. This research article analyses the poetic devices and feminist themes in the poem by challenging the dominant concepts of power and beauty.

(Actual Text of the Poem)

*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.
I say,
It's in 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.
I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,*



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*The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.
Men themselves have wondered.
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch.
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them
They say they still can't see.
I say,
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.
Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about.
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need for my care,
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.*

Analysis / Discussion

The poem of Maya Angelou starts with the rejection of traditional beauty standards

The speaker says:

“Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.”

The opening line presents the central conflict. It talks about the dissociation between how the speaker is perceived and how she sees herself. The phrase “pretty women” represents the idea of beauty in society. Whereas, the speaker asserts that her power comes from something deeper.

She further says:

“I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size.”



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In this line, she is going against the Western ideals of feminine beauty. Acknowledging that she does not fit the criteria set by society, she is not expressing her insecurity, rather, she is setting the stage for defining beauty in her way. (Jayageetha & Rani, 2018).

In the poem, she repeats the following phrase:

“I’m a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / that’s me.”

This line acts like a chorus, and it is affirming and powerful. The repetition of the line reinforces her confidence and wants the readers to internalize the same belief. It is like a mantra of empowerment for the women who have been excluded from the definition of beauty set by society. (Shrestha, 2024).

She also uses physical imagery to celebrate the natural body of the speaker:

“It’s in the reach of my arms, / The span of my hips, / The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips.”

These lines of the poem discuss ordinary features that are overlooked and not valued much. Angelou reclaims the female body as a source of beauty by highlighting these features. Her language is simple to read and understand, but it has deep meaning. It tells the reader that beauty is not about being perfect but about having confidence and self-acceptance.

Then, the speaker describes how her presence has an impact on those around her:

“Men themselves have wondered / What they see in me.”

This line shows how true power and attraction come from self-belief. She shows that authenticity and confidence are magnetic to those who expect women to behave according to the norms of society.

The tone of the poem is strong, proud, and playful. She does not present the speaker as someone waiting for approval; rather, she already knows her worth. According to Braxton (1999), Angelou’s female characters reflect her journey toward awareness and self-love, and the poem’s speaker is no different.

The repetition of the lines returns by the end of the poem, emphasizing again:

“Phenomenal woman, / That’s me.”

This final line is a final stamp of identity. It reminds the readers that being “phenomenal” does not come from outside, but from inside. It comes from embracing oneself, disregarding how others define beauty and femininity.

Angelou gives a voice to the women through this poem to those who were told they were not enough. She shows that power comes not from meeting the standards, but from setting the standards. Her bold representation of women is proudly feminist, rejecting the male gaze and celebrating self-defined strength, presence, and beauty.

Findings

The analysis of Phenomenal Woman reveals several key insights about the way Maya Angelou represents women and challenges traditional norms:

- **Rejection of Conventional Beauty Standards:** The poem opposes the societal definition of beauty, particularly those based on appearance, size, or physical perfection. Angelou highlights qualities such as confidence, grace, and inner strength as more powerful and lasting.
- **Empowerment through Language:** Angelou uses repetition, affirming phrases, and vivid imagery to construct a voice that is proud and self-assured. The repeated chorus, “Phenomenal woman, that’s me,” acts as a declaration of identity and power.



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- **Positive Representation of the Female Body:** The speaker celebrates her physical form without shame or comparison. Features like the “span of my hips” and “arch of my back” are described as sources of beauty, shifting focus from society’s gaze to self-perception.
- **Disruption of Patriarchal Expectations:** The poem confronts the idea that women must seek validation from men. The speaker does not wait for approval—she already knows her worth, which challenges traditional gender dynamics.
- **Universal Message of Self-Worth:** While rooted in Angelou’s personal experience, the poem speaks to women across backgrounds. It encourages all women to take pride in who they are and to define beauty and power on their terms.

These findings support the idea that Phenomenal Woman is not only a personal expression but a broader feminist statement. The poem offers a new lens through which womanhood can be seen—one that is self-defined, confident, and empowering.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on textual analysis and interpretive literary criticism. The study aims to explore the representation of women in Maya Angelou’s poem Phenomenal Woman, using feminist literary theory as the main analytical lens.

The primary source for this study is the poem Phenomenal Woman from Angelou’s collection *And Still I Rise* (1978). The poem is examined through close reading, where literary elements such as imagery, tone, repetition, metaphor, and diction are analyzed to understand how Angelou constructs a non-traditional and empowering image of womanhood.

This analysis is supported by a feminist theoretical framework, drawing upon secondary sources including academic articles, feminist literary criticism, and previous interpretations of Angelou’s work (Jayageetha & Rani, 2018; Shrestha, 2024; Braxton, 1999). The study is interpretive, aiming to understand deeper meanings rather than measure or quantify data.

The methodology is suited to the research objective because it allows for a deep exploration of the poem’s language, structure, and symbolism, especially concerning how women are portrayed in literature. It also helps position the poem within a broader feminist discourse, emphasizing themes of self-worth, body positivity, and resistance to patriarchal norms.

Conclusion

Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman” is a powerful celebration of womanhood that challenges traditional ideas of beauty and strength. Through simple yet effective poetic language, she redefines what it means to be beautiful, not by society’s standards, but by one’s inner confidence and presence. The speaker of the poem embraces her identity without apology, using her own body, voice, and spirit as symbols of pride and empowerment. Angelou’s use of repetition, physical imagery, and strong tone makes her message easy to follow and emotionally impactful. She shows that beauty is not about fitting into a model’s size or seeking approval from others. Instead, it is about standing tall, speaking with pride, and being comfortable in one’s skin.



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The poem gives a voice to women who have often been ignored or judged because they do not meet certain expectations. It reminds the reader that real power comes from within. Angelou's message is timeless—it continues to inspire women today to accept themselves and recognize their worth. Overall, —Phenomenal Woman is not just a poem about one woman's experience. It is a universal statement about confidence, identity, and self-love. Through this poem, Maya Angelou leaves behind a lasting message: every woman is phenomenal in her way.

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