



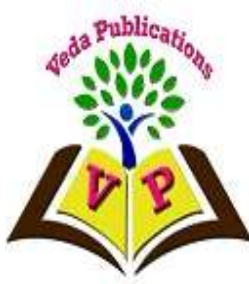
IMAGE OF WOMAN: A FEMINIST READING OF MAYA ANGELOU'S *PHENOMENAL WOMEN*

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ABSTRACT



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. Maya Angelou is one of the poets who use a poem as a media to express her isolation from her environment. Maya Angelou through the poem *Phenomenol Woman* presents that sexuality of a woman is not directly related to a pretty face. It's about how a woman feels within herself. 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.

Keywords: *Maya Angelou, Feminism, Self-Identity, Womanhood, Sexuality,*

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The Oxford English dictionary defines feminism as “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle is to achieve this aim” (p. 489). In the humanities, feminism is concerned with the concept of feminist literary studies and the focus is on women and their rights. The terms ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women’s movement which emerged in the late 1960s. Since the late 1960s when feminist criticism developed as a part of an international women’s movement, the assumption of this study feminist literary criticism has become an attractive option. The main focus of the work of feminists in the late 1980s is about language. The challenge is reshaping the sexual relationship between the expressive and powerful language, literary form and the soul of men and women, by questioning the relationship between gender identity and language. Feminist critics analyze how women are showed, how the text discussed gender relations and sex differentiation.

Maya Angelou is a celebrated poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, singer, historian, film maker and civil rights activist. Born on April 4th 1928 in St. Louis (Missouri), Marguerite Ann Johnson is the daughter of Bailey Johnson, a naval dietician, and Vivian Baxter. She was raised in St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps she experienced the brutality of racial discrimination but she also absorbed the unshakable faith and values of the traditional African-American family, community and culture. As a teenager, Angelou’s love for arts won her a scholarship to study dance and drama at San Francisco’s Labor School. At fourteen, she dropped out to become San Francisco’s first black American female cable car conductor. She later finished high school, giving birth to her son Guy, a few weeks after graduation. As a young unmarried mother she supported her son by working as a waitress and cook; however her passion for music, dance performance and poetry soon took center stage.

Maya Angelou is one of poets who uses a poem as a media to express her isolation from her environment. She is a black woman living in America where Whites are majority in society there. Maya

Angelou is one of woman writers who use feminism approach in her work and her poetry is a painful process of recalling and remembering a past that is broken into fragments. “Phenomenal Woman” was published in 1978 and it tells about black woman who lives among Whites. Maya Angelou through this poem presents that sexuality of a woman is not directly related to a pretty face. It’s about how a woman feels within herself. This poem celebrates the power of a woman and the speaker is portrayed as a strong and confident woman. The "phenomenal woman", a term taken from the poem "Phenomenal Woman" is symbolic of the journey undertaken by the "caged bird" in its quest for self-knowledge and self-identity in order to become "phenomenal". Angelou's poetry asserts the courage, audacity, strength and often the creative and willful spirit of the "phenomenal woman". It is this very courage and strength of character that assures her of being a "phenomenally, phenomenal woman".

The speaker of the poem is plain looking herself, she's not cute or slender or fashionable in shape but she can tell the pretty ones about her own physical attribute and the full extent of her womanhood, the decisive way she gets about, the allure of her smile. The speaker says

Its in the reach of my arms
The span of my hips
The stride of my step
The curl of my lips

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. Then the reader can imagine the way the speaker walks that could make men surprise until they stand up just to see the speaker walking on and they fall down on their knees because they are amazed with the speaker and then they swarm the speaker like bees swarming honey.

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



The men who are instinctively drawn to the phenomenal woman, some even start to worship her, They can ogle all they want, but this female's secret is hidden inside, There as on why the men are amazed with the speaker is,

It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.

It is evident that the speaker has beautiful eyes and people who look at her eyes would be amazed because her eyes are shining as if there is fire. Besides that, the speaker's teeth are so white and clean so when she is smiling her teeth flash and when she is walking, the swinging of her waist is so beautiful. The speaker then attempts to clarify that she can hold her head high as she is: proud of being an individual without the need to submit to society and its false stereotypes and to its idea of what a beautiful female should like and aspire to be.

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.

The phenomenal woman's humility and respect for other's space, her dignity and inner strength mean she doesn't have to advertise her qualities or be brash and popular. No. Her essence, her well-being, goes far deeper.

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.

In this poem, the speaker always repeats the word "Phenomenally, Phenomenal Woman, That's Me". By just repeating those words she wants show that she is a phenomenal woman who with her difference she can be a great woman until the fellows admire her.

The main focus of this poem is about a woman's place in the world, how she is viewed and what her attitude should be. Through this poem the speaker tries to send a message to the readers to appraise themselves although their physical appearance isn't perfect. Maya Angelou argues that the sexuality of a woman is not directly related to a pretty face. It's about what a woman feels within herself. The speaker tries to explain that she is not beautiful. Although she doesn't have perfect body, she can attract men and women. Her power, her behavior and her confidence become the inner mystery that makes her be phenomenal woman. Her knowledge and expression show that she's confident. Her steps, her arms, the palms of her hand, and her walking are powerful because they exude confidence and pride of being a woman. When she walks between men, she walked elegantly and makes the men give big attention to her. The speaker describes what she has and it makes the men admire her. She is proud of everything in herself. In this stanza, the speaker still declares that she is a phenomenal woman and she shows how confident she is with herself and through visual imagery too, the writer also can see the speaker's behavior. The way she walks and smiles makes her be a phenomenal woman. Lyman B Hagen's *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet* insists that "The woman described is easily matched to the author herself. Angelou is an imposing woman-at least six feet tall. She has a strong personality and a compelling presence"(p118-136).

Maya Angelou has presented herself as a role model for African-American women by reconstructing the African-American woman's image through her works. No African-American woman in the poetic world of Angelou can ever be losers. In her work Angelou has debunked the stereotypes of African-American mothers as breeders and matriarchs, and has presented them as having a creative and personally fulfilling role. According to critic Mary Jane Lupton, Angelou's journey toward self-discovery takes her from "ignorance to knowledge, from silence to speech, from racial oppression to a liberated life" (46).The "phenomenal woman" according to Angelou, "should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and the... woman



warrior who is armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate victory" (*Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey*, 7).

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