



## Celebrating Black Womanhood: A Womanist Analysis of Maya Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman*

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### Abstract

The following article aims at showing how Maya Angelou's poem *Phenomenal Woman* is a womanist piece of art in the patriarchal context of white American culture. First, it discusses the criteria of beauty in the above-mentioned context. Then, the study demonstrates how the poem is a feminist denunciation of the patriarchal criteria of beauty and how these perceptions are oppressive toward the black woman who does not fit into the set criteria. After denouncing the unfair definition of feminine beauty, the article displays the pride expressed in black womanhood, through the description of the speaker of the poem who does not look like the white fashion model. The poet achieves her aim in the usage of commonly known poetic devices such as structural repetition, rhyming, refrain, and diction.

**Keywords:** beauty, femininity, womanist, womanhood, celebration

## I. Introduction

I come out of a tradition where those things are valued where you talk about a woman with big legs and big hips and black skin. I come out of a black community where it was all right to have hips and to be heavy. You didn't feel that people didn't like you. The values that [imply] you must be skinny come from another culture... Those are not the values that I was given by the women who served as my models. I refuse to be judged by the values of another culture. I am a black woman, and I will stand as best I can in that imagery. (Reagon, 11 *Italic mine*)

In the above quotation, *those things* that are valued are some characteristics related to a woman who is neither slim nor white, meaning a black woman who looks like the speaker of the poem *Phenomenal Woman*, as we shall see. Reagon displays a double action of rejection of an oppressive ideology and an assertion of self-identity for the black woman. This double action is reflected in the poetry of African American poet Maya Angelou. In fact, through her poem entitled *Phenomenal Woman*, Angelou simultaneously addresses America's denial of black womanhood and asserts her identity. The current article analyses the womanist dimension of the poem. We argue how the poem responds to the womanist agenda of denouncing discrimination and celebrating women's sub-cultural and communal values.

Before engaging in the debate, I will first express my understanding of the terms womanist and womanhood in

accordance with Alice Walker, the African American writer who coined the word womanist. According to Walker, womanist comes from the black folk expression of mothers to their female children, 'You acting womanish' which implies being outrageous, courageous, willful, responsible, and traditionally capable (Walker, xi). It is this particular emphasis on folk culture that conveys courage, pride, and responsibility that I am particularly going to use in this analysis. The article examines as well how Angelou's portrayal of the cultural dimension simultaneously denounces the dominant American culture and celebrates the African American feminine values.

As for the concept of womanhood, it is commonly understood and defined as the state of being an adult woman in opposition to girlhood. However, this notion encompasses various assumptions and realities that might vary according to the community under consideration. The current study focuses on some realities about beauty and femininity in the American context in order to examine how Angelou deals with the notion of womanhood in the poem.

## II. Context: criteria of beauty and the notion of femininity in the white American culture

According to the feminist historian Barbara Welter, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American patriarchal society, "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity . . . with them she was



promised happiness and power” (qtd. in Carby 23). Many patriarchal cultures share these values. The criteria of beauty and attractiveness should be added to the list because they go along with the attributes mentioned above, as women are constantly judged by the society according to their physical appearance.

Even in black communities, beauty pageants inspired by predetermined or presumed physical standards are still held across countries. Across cultures, beauty pageants influenced by set or assumed physical criteria continue to be organized in black communities. The story of the Jamaican beauty pageant of 1986 is highly illustrative of the influence of Western values on other cultures. In fact, when the twenty-two-year-old Lisa Mahfood was announced Miss Jamaica, the audience aroused so much contestation because they thought she was too white and too European to represent a black community. The beauty queen was so shocked about the behavior of citizens whose country motto is “Out of many one people” as the Jamaican community is composed of different races. (Barnes 286). However, one should go beyond the apparent color issue to understand that the general public reaction is more than a face-value issue. People were surely rejecting the criteria that were used in the contest. Most beauty contests, across cultures in Africa, rely a great deal on some Western criteria of beauty.

Values and criteria such as beauty, piety, submissiveness, or their remnants are common to most patriarchal communities across cultures and across time. These values outpace time and that is why they continue to be the concern of writers and critics from fields as varied as sociology, psychology, literature, philosophy, etc. Thus, twentieth-century American culture is not an exception to the rule. Maya Angelou, an African American poet, explores in her poetry, various ways that patriarchy and slavery still influence American communities today.

Even though the above 19<sup>th</sup>-century values have a patriarchal dimension, African American women were not considered as part of this category of women. It is because Maya Angelou is conscious of the state of affairs that she has to produce such a poem. Discussing the *othering* of the woman in “Woman as Other”, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that “A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man” (834). In the same vein, the white woman does not need to assert that she is a woman. But the speaker of Angelou’s poem does have to state that she is a woman because she is being “othered” in an oppressive dominant white culture.

As stated above, this study clearly shows how, through her poem, Angelou simultaneously denounces and celebrates some realities and assumptions in her society. Right from the first two lines of *Phenomenal Woman*, Angelou directly introduces the modern American ideology of beauty through the pretty top models:

**Pretty women** wonder where my secret lies.  
I'm not cute or built to suit a **fashion model's size**

A look at any popular beauty magazine such as Women’s Health, Vogue, Cosmopolitan, to name only a few, will edify anyone who would like to know how a model looks like: “Taller is always better... the minimum height requirement ... is about 1.78 meters for gals and 1.80 for guys. Actually, supermodels are much taller than that.” There are other requirements on body types, weight, age, hair, and skin. (American Beauty Magazine - Physical Requirements)

If the speaker in the poem says she is not built to suit a fashion model’s size, we clearly understand that she is neither slim, nor tall, she does not have the long legs either, she is neither white nor light, and neither does she have the silky long hair. We might add the blue eyes. She is implicitly referring to the white American criteria of beauty. As early as the first two lines of the poem, the speaker denounces the white American perception of beauty and the business that goes with it without naming them overtly.

From the above perception, the beauty of a woman is certainly determined by subjective criteria of the dominant culture. Women are labeled pretty or not pretty according to these criteria. How many women in Angelou’s America are excluded from the category of beautiful women? Obviously, many white women and even more black women do not fall in this group. Consequently, according to popular culture, they are labeled unattractive. As the psychologist Judy Scheel rightly points out in “*Culture Dictates the Standard of Beauty*”, culture and media do succeed at deciding what is or ought to be visually desirable, regardless of our own intuitive draw or what we really want or find attractive ... Why show the truth when un-truth sells more clothing, beauty, and diet products?” (Scheel).

In her article, “*Notions of Beauty and Attractiveness*”, the feminist critic, Portia T. Loeto argues that “what is attractive varies from one culture to another”; but despite these variations, she recognizes that today the thin ideal is becoming more and more widespread even in cultures where the beauty criteria are different from the Euro-American type perception, especially due to the impact of globalization and the media.

In stating the difference of the speaker of the poem, Angelou denounces the oppressive aspect of the American notion of the pretty woman and the business that sustains it. In undertaking this battle, she is not alone. In fact, many other black women writers have addressed the problem. The physical appearance, the skin color, the hair texture appear as constant and recurrent themes that seem to traumatize many women. Black women writers are so much aware of the problem that it has become a recurrent preoccupation of their narrators or characters. As illustrations, we can name writers such as the African American Toni Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, the Jamaican authors Hazel Campbell and Lorna Goodison in their short stories respectively *The Thursday Wife* and *Bella Makes Life*, and the Nigerian Flora Nwapa in her novel *Efuru*, to name only a few. Discussing the recurrence of the beauty of the characters created by black women

writers, the Jamaican writer Desirée Reynolds, in her article “*We Are Still Writing Against Ourselves*” states:

I don't care about their beauty. As female writers (this applies to all writers, but I'm addressing this issue), the battle to keep the male gaze at bay is a constant battle not just a thing that would be quite nice to do, but a life-threatening necessity, because if we cannot construct our stories without references to a patriarchal idea of beauty then we run the risk of creating 6 without autonomy, originality or depth. We will literally lose ourselves. (afropean.com.)

Keeping the male gaze at bay is surely part of the challenge but how can one do that? Whether the writer cares or does not care about the beauty of her characters as Reynolds states, does not lessen the impact of the criteria of beauty in the society and how it affects women's lives. Maya Angelou's speaker of *Phenomenal Woman* seems to be engaged in this battle by creating a parallel between her perception of beauty and the society's pretty women. The fact of addressing the issue certainly allows her not to lose herself. This is why she acknowledges and asserts her difference with the mainstream media beauty, which is an indirect denunciation and rejection of it.

Through this denunciation, she simultaneously expresses her own pride in being who she is. She asserts her beauty that she calls a secret. And of course, neither the pretty women, nor the men who are attracted to her, can see her secret, because both groups have adhered to or are victims of the mainstream criteria of the beautiful woman. They are under the complex multi-layered gaze that is not only male but also white, colonial, and patriarchal.

In fact, the origin of this traumatizing notion of beauty has many social and historical origins (slavery, colonialism, patriarchy). For example, in his book, *Deconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby argues how the interplay of race, class, and gender determines ideologies of black and white womanhoods. (17-20). This is why the issue has no geographical boundaries; whether the black woman writer finds herself in Africa, in Europe, in North America, in South America, or in the West Indies, the issue remains the same. Even the speaker's *fellow men* cannot see her beauty although they realize that she is attractive. Moreover, even when she tries to help them see, they still cannot understand her mystery.

To be able to understand why the “pretty women” cannot see her beauty, readers need to refer back to history. Sojourner Truth's powerful speech “*Ain't I a Woman?*” delivered at Ohio Women's Rights Convention in May 1851 is an evidence of the Black woman's awareness of the denial of her womanhood and its prerogatives by the system of both slavery and post-slavery times. Responding to a man from her audience, Sojourner Truth had to argue:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and

to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud- puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Sojourner Truth had to stand:

...before an assembled body of white women and men at an anti-slavery rally in Indiana and bared her breasts to prove that she was indeed a woman. ... She faced her audience without fear, without shame, proud of having been born black and female. Yet the white man, who yelled at Sojourner ‘I don't believe you really are a woman,’ unwittingly voiced America's contempt at and disrespect for black womanhood. (Hooks 159 – Italic mine)

According to Mahassen Mgadmi, during slavery, “There was a breadth of stereotypical perceptions of Black women, which placed them outside the enclave of delicacy, femininity, respectability, and virtue.” (Mgadmi 2) Such stand was what Sojourner Truth was denouncing more than a century and half ago.

The speaker of Angelou's poem is conscious of the strong remnants of history in American culture and that is why she simultaneously denounces the racist definition of womanhood and asserts her own. This is symbolic for all women who do not fall in the white racist definition of what it means to be a woman. These women do not need to be plain, have vast arms and hips, have thick lips (typical caricature of a Black woman), to refer to Jayageetha and Rani's description of the speaker of *Phenomenal Woman* although nowhere does she describe herself that way (Jayageetha 384).

Rather, she celebrates black womanhood through a double image: one that is denounced and one that is praised. The speaker creates in the mind of the reader two images: the fashion model image and the other one, which is different. She does not feel the need to describe them: for the first one, obviously, because it is constantly imposed on the audiences through the media, while for the second one, because the reader can imagine her as unlike the first one since she claims that she is not cute nor built to fit a fashion model's size. The poetic devices that the poet relies on to reflect the speaker's pride in being herself powerfully convey Angelou's pride message.

### III. Poetic Devices

What matters for the speaker of the poem is how she feels about herself: she is proud to look the way she is. Angelou, as a poet, manages to convey this pride by using the very devices

used by the complex male gaze: the woman's body. By using body diction, the poet conveys the pride of a speaker who displays her body. Displaying her body parts in the lines is a way of beating the oppressive female image that the culture tries to impose on people in general and on the black woman in particular.

Moreover, the repetition of the same phrase structure (Determiner–Noun-Preposition-Possessive-Noun) emphasizes her pride in her entire body: the arms, the hips, and the feet. The assertive phrase *I say* of line one is followed by four lines that have the same structure (Determiner–Noun-Preposition-Possessive-Noun). This repetition strengthens the expression of her pride that denotes her physical appearance. The usage of the above device is enhanced by the elegant rhythm that repetition of structure allows.

I say,

It's in the reach of my arms

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

The same device is used in stanza two where the speaker introduces the effect she has on the men through a powerful metaphor: the fellow men, as she calls them, are a hive of honey bees who find her attractive but wonder about what they see in her, why they behave like a hive of boney bees. These men are also victims of the mainstream criteria of beauty. That is probably why they cannot understand this attractive mystery of hers.

The theme of the impact of a mixed or multi-layered mainstream ideology (patriarchal, racist, and social) on black men is recurrent in the writings of black women. Toni Morrison deals with it in her novel *Sula*, in the passage where Jude is seen striving to play the role of the breadwinner of the family according to the patriarchal ideology. Unfortunately and ironically, Jude cannot understand that the same racist and patriarchal system, which teaches him to assume a masculine role, is the one that denies him a job. Moreover, without a job, he cannot be the breadwinner for the family. The Jamaican writer, Hazel Campbell, also deal with the theme in her short story *The Thursday Wife*, when despite the poverty in which they live, Bertie refuses to allow his wife to work because he thinks that with her light skin, brown curly hair men would want to touch her, and that would cause him to commit murder. Just like Jude in *Sula*, Bertie also experiences joblessness, a status that does not allow him to be sole breadwinner of the family.

It is this oppressive aspect of the mainstream culture that Angelou fights against by asserting her speaker's pride to be different from the fashion model. Through her poem, she celebrates physical difference. This pride is reflected in the different parts of her body through the stylistic and poetic devices that she uses as we can, for instance, in the first and second stanzas.

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 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.

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,

The swing in my waist,

And the joy in my feet.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

We see how Angelou uses rhyming to create a relationship between her ideas and those of the pretty women: she claims to have a secret that **lies** in all the parts of her body while others think she is telling **lies**, whereas it is the fashion model itself which is a **lie** for women like her since it cannot be applicable to them. Moreover, it is oppressive to many women, not only to women like the speaker herself. As stated above, the repetition of the assertive phrase *I say* and the last four lines constitute a refrain. The use of the same structural device, to talk about where the secret lies, makes the assertion of her identity and black womanhood stronger and highly rhythmic.

The last stanza ends the poem with a message and the repetition of the assertion of her pride using the same devices

mentioned above. The message consists in telling the reader/listener that now s/he understands why her head is not bowed, she does not shout, jump about, or talk real loud but when s/he sees her passing, it ought to make her or him proud. The *speakerly* assertive tone conveys her message effectively. The last stanza also denounces and rejects two stereotypical images of the black woman, the loud woman and the passive one, before repeating the powerful refrain.

The closing stanza shows effectively what this study sets out to analyze i.e. the womanist dimension of the poem. Not only does it denounce the patriarchal, sexist, and racist dimension of the overall American culture, but at the same time it celebrates the difference of the black woman and beyond her all those rejected by the mainstream American culture. In this stanza too, the key poetic devices are rhyming, structural, and phrasal repetition. In fact, lines two and six are connected rhyme-wise: the head of the proud black woman is not bowed because she is not submissive, neither does she talk loudly because she is ladylike. By being ladylike and refusing to be submissive, she rejects two racist and stereotypical images of the woman. The remaining lines of the stanza are the lines that celebrate her proud womanhood especially the refrain found at the end of each stanza.

#### IV. Conclusion

All in all, this study has examined how Maya Angelou's poem is womanist because it displays the double womanist perspective which consists in denouncing the oppressive aspect of her culture and celebrating her pride in the black woman's identity. She uses a strategy similar to the one used by the dominant culture: using the woman's body to impose an image on her audience. In other words, Angelou relies on a different body image to express the pride of a black woman. By doing so, she adheres to the womanist agenda of fighting against patriarchal manipulation and psychological oppression. The key devices that the poet relies on to reach her aim are the common poetic devices such as metaphor, rhyming, and repetition of words and structures.

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