

## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAYA ANGELOU'S SELECTED POEMS THROUGH SARA MILLS' LENS

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### Abstract

*The purpose of present research is to investigate the ways Maya Angelou incorporates in her poems to celebrate and cherish womanism while challenging the metanarratives ideologies and stereotypes related to black women. The present research is based on qualitative method. It incorporates Sara Mill's Feminist Stylistics and the perspectives of black feminism in the analysis of Maya Angelou's selected poems. The findings reveal that Maya Angelou has very exquisitely and purposefully employed subversive strategies in her poems to counter both patriarchy and western feminism. The findings further suggest that these are well-crafted poems which transgress the stereotypes associated with black women not only by patriarchy but also by the white feminists. Self-acceptance and self-praise and inner mystery allows the black woman to celebrate and cherish their bodily parts rather than being apologetic and lamenting at fragmentation. This study can be further extended on feminist stylistic analysis of Maya Angelou's memoirs.*

Key Words: Feminist stylistics, Womanism, Gender, Maya Angelou.

### Introduction

Language is not only a tool and vehicle of ideas rather a material entity which formulate these ideas. In this way Feminist Stylistics Analysis can be used to analyze linguistic features in texts to change the way gender is represented (Mills, 1998). 1970's is considered a defining decade for contemporary black feminism. Many influential African American writers such as Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Toni Morison have talked and wrote about gender within the context of racism. They tried to represent the black women's complex identity by being both black and female which is often overlooked by the white feminists. Although she is a white author but Sara Mills' work seems to be relevant in this context because she her herself proclaims that it is dangerous to assume 'women a homogenous group' because there are as many differences between women as there are differences from men (Mills, 1998, p.3). In this context womanism is a term introduced by black feminist Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* as a an alternative to feminism to propagate that black women can cherish their blackness with the spirit of self-acceptance, self-confidence, spirituality and resilience rather than being apologetic and regretful about their existence as black and female (Walker, 1983).

### Literature Review

The research article by Hamidah and Oktaviani (2024) reveals that Maya Angelou's use of language in *Still I Rise* (1994) not only highlights the theme of defiance but also contextualize it with the socio-political environment of time.

The elements of aspiration have been traced in Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise* (1994) and *Caged Bird* (1994) by Aslam (2021) in her article. The findings suggest that Maya Angelou has used poetry as tool for productive survival.

Shreshta (2024) aims to examine the poem Phenomenal woman disrupts conventional norms of beauty. The qualitative analytical research states that Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou is a catalyst for transgressing the traditional beauty standards and empowering women within the patriarchal societies.

This research fills a gap in literature by offering a new perspective of Maya Angelou's selected poems while incorporating both black feminism and feminist stylistics

### **Research Methodology**

The primary data for this brief research article is Maya Angelou's three poems i.e. Phenomenal Women, Still I Rise and Women Work. The present research is based on qualitative method. It incorporates Sara Mill's Feminist Stylistics and the perspectives of black feminism in the analysis of Maya Angelou's selected poems. The present study aims to investigate the ways Maya Angelou incorporates in her poems to celebrate and cherish womanism while challenging the stereotypes related to black women. So this research methodology aligns with the purpose of the research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist Stylistics (1995) is specific branch of stylistics which combines feminism and stylistics. It focuses on the linguistic portrayal of gender-related concerns within a text. The primary goal of feminist stylistics is to analyze how focalization, agency, metaphors, fragmentation and transitivity are employed in representing gender, as well as to elucidate instances of sexism (Mills, 1995). Toni Morrison as a Black Feminist • Morrison addresses class and gender inequality in "What the Black Women thinks about Women's Lib," Morrison explores the source of anguish and misery bedeviling black women. She describes how black women are perceived as worthless by society. Black women are not given priorities or privileges as their white counterparts. White women were perceived as soft, modest, and helpless" while Black women were perceived as "unworthy of respect" (Morrison, 1971).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The present study aims to investigate the ways Maya Angelou incorporates in her poems to celebrate and cherish womanism while questioning stereotypes related to black women.

### **Significance of the Study**

This brief research can be significant in black feminist studies. The study can be fruitful in women studies as the present study aims to explore the way the language has been used by black author as a tool to dismantle the stereotypical representation of black woman.

### **Research Question**

The overarching question of present study is

- How do the feminist stylistic strategies contribute towards the theme of racism, sexism and celebration of womanism in Maya Angelou's selected poems?

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the present research are followings:

- To bring to surface the ways black woman celebrate womanism.
- To incorporate Sara Mills' feminist stylistics and black feminism to analyze Maya Angelou's selected poems.

## **Results**

### **Feminist Stylistic Analysis: Subverting Stereotypical Feminine Beauty Norms**

A stereotypical feminine representation is associated with a classical attraction of women in her long tousled hair, make up, her looks, whiteness and pout (Mills, 1989, p.19). Maya Angelou subvert these stereotypical standard of being beautiful while directly referencing white women and men in her poem in the following verse

“Pretty woman wonder where my secret lies.

Men themselves have wondered” (Angelou, 1994).

And her answer to this wondering is

“They can’t touch my inner mystery.

This inner mystery is the realization of talent, potential, self-acceptance and self-confidence. The one who accept herself the way she is while transgressing the societal norms. In this way, she challenged both racist and sexist assumptions of beauty and power as being tied only to whiteness and masculinity.

### **Feminist Stylistic Analysis: Celebrating Fragmentation of Female Body in Phenomenal Woman**

Mills laments while quoting many examples from different genres that fragmentation of female body is used as a strategy to objectify and depersonalize female bodily with the intention to put emphasis that female cannot be represented as unified conscious physical being. This fragmentation in turn tends to co-occur with male focalization where fragmentation of female body is represented as a collection of objects for male gaze. Maya Angelou in her poem Phenomenal Woman subverts this focalization into female gaze/female focalization and cherishes and celebrates this fragmentation of female body rather being apologetic.

The fifteen references to anatomical elements of female (to the reach of my arms, span of my hips, stride of my steps, curl of my lips, the fire in my eyes, the flash of my teeth, swing in my waist, And the joy in my feet, the arch of my back, the sun of my smile, the ride of my breasts, the grace of my style, the click of heels, the bend of my hair, the palm of my hand), and focalization is totally that of female narrator while letting both pretty woman/white woman(fashion model size) and men in shock (Angelou, 1994). She, as a phenomenal woman, is celebrating and cherishing her female body, mind and soul. So beauty is not related to being white rather one who makes their weaknesses as their strength and feeling comfortable in your own skin (Angelou, 1994).

### **Feminist Stylistic Analysis: Rhetorical Questions as Strategy of Defiance**

Mills further states that women’s speech is more hesitant, less fluent, less logical, and less assertive, more silent, interrupt, with questions more than men. Men speech is considered a norm and women speech is considered a deviation (Mills, 1995, p.45). And Maya Angelou as black woman cherishes while transgressing these stereotypical assumptions. In her brief poem Still I Rise she has used nine times rhetorical questions in a sarcastic way to address apparently anyone but particularly to those who are racist and sexist. These rhetorical questions create an effect of Epilepsis which make her speech more assertive and more convincing and more fluent. She is celebrating her attitude of defiance. She directs her questions to the white feminist and patriarchy that expects black woman to be silent, submissive, dirty, gloomy, bowed head, weakened, broken and lowered eyes. In response to these expectations she exudes a defiant sense of irony in her song in a series of questions and she cherishes her sassiness, sexiness and haughtiness.

### **Feminist Stylistic Analysis: Subversive Use of Metaphors**

Mills states that feminists like Ellen Moers claims that women tend to use bird metaphors when they describe women characters perhaps showing them as a species of littleness, tortured. These

bird metaphors in women writings have some problematic assumption about themselves as weak, victims and sensual. She asserts that caged bird makes a metaphor that truly deserves the adjective female (Mills, 1989, p.54). Maya Angelou as a black woman subverts this notion while creating a binary of caged bird and free bird. The adjective caged bird here does not represent the female rather it represent black female. And whites are termed as free bird. Because the struggles of black women and white women are quite different so there cannot be a homogeneous representation.

A free bird leaps,

The caged bird sings,

Sings of freedom (with wings, clipped and feet tied) (Angelou, 1994).

The findings reveal that Maya Angelou has purposefully employed subversive strategies in her poems to counter both patriarchy and western feminism. The findings further suggest that these are well-crafted poems which transgress the stereotypes associated with black women not only by patriarchy but also by the white feminists. Self-acceptance and self-praise and inner mystery allows the black woman to celebrate and cherish their bodily parts rather than being apologetic and lamenting at fragmentation.

### Conclusion

To conclude we can say that Maya Angelou has used literature as a platform to teach black woman that there is no need to be regretful and apologetic for being woman and black. Rather they should cherish and celebrate it with self-acceptance, resilience and self-confidence.

### Recommendations

The present research is on a very small scale and delimited to Maya Angelou's three selected poems. It can be further extended to her other poems. The research incorporates Sara Mills's concept of fragmentation of female body, metaphors and rhetorical questions from her book feminist stylistics. It can be further extended while incorporating her three layer model.

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