Abstract

This paper is an attempt in the field of feminist stylistics approach to explore the stylistic devices employed by Maya Angelou in (And Still I Rise, Phenomenal Woman and Woman Work). The purpose is to uncover how she used language to defy the problems that women face and how she presented her own identity. Angelou expressed herself in her poetry and the medium to convey that self-image is language. Thus, the analyses of the poems were conducted depending on the feminist stylistics approach proposed by Sara Mills (1995) and an eclectic approach which draws upon the previous works on stylistics and pragmatics. According to Mills (1995), the purpose of the feminist stylistic study is to display how gender is represented in a literary text, and to detect the reasons which push the author to express herself in a particular way. Scrutinizing the poems at the levels of words, sentences and discourse showed that Angelou employed linguistic devices to defend herself, to create her identity and to display who she is.

Keywords: Feminist Stylistics, Self-image, Self-identity, Deixis.

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between feminism and language as reflected in the aforementioned poems of Maya Angelou. Defining both feminism and stylistics is not an easy task because they have various types and critics and analysts have different views about them. Mills (1995:1) believes that the ‘feminist’ and the ‘stylistics’ are complex and may have different meanings for readers, and states that “feminist stylistic analysis is concerned not only to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyze the way that point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender, to discover whether women’s writing practices can be described, and so on”. Mills’ description clarifies that in feminist stylistics the focus is on the linguistic devices and the sphere which surrounds the text to find out how the female writers express women issues in their writings. This view paves the way for researchers to study texts at various levels to tackle a certain topic.

In the selected poems (Still I Rise, Phenomenal Woman and Woman Work), Maya Angelou does not only focus on sexism (or discrimination on the basis of gender), but she tries to display her self-image and to construct her identity through using linguistic devices.

Roy F. Baumeister & Debra G. Hutton (1987:71) state:
Self-presentation is behavior that attempts to convey some information about oneself or some image of oneself to other people. It denotes a class of motivations in human behavior. These motivations are in part stable dispositions of individuals but they depend on situational factors to elicit them.

According to this definition, Angelou or the speaker women in these poems talk about themselves and they try to show who they are. The medium through which Angelou presents herself or women in general is language. Angelou, first as a woman and secondly as a black feminist writer, “depicts her triumph over formidable social obstacles and her struggle to achieve a sense of identity and self-acceptance. Such themes tie Angelou’s writings closely to the concerns of the feminist literary movement” (Bomarito and Hunter, 2005:65).

Angelou fights to present a beautiful image and to construct an acceptable identity. Exploring and proving these aims need a close examination of the language of the selected texts which can be conducted through application of the tenets of feminist stylistics and pragmatics including the pronouns, the speech acts and implications.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:60) state:

We also use language to color ourselves as we talk. Linguistic resources can be used to present oneself as a particular kind of person; to project an attitude or stance; to affect the flow of talk and ideas. And these can involve gender in a myriad of ways. Tone and pitch of voice, patterns of intonation (or “tunes”), choice of vocabulary, even pronunciations and grammatical patterns can signal gendered aspects of the speaker’s self-presentation. They can also signal the speaker’s accommodation to, or enforcement of, the gender of other interactants in a situation.

Eckert and Mcconnell-Ginet’s view clearly shows that the used language represent the personality of the speaker; for instance, people who are hesitant or suffering from psychological disorders cannot talk fluently and those who are in power speak authoritatively. Gendered language or genderlect is not the concern of this paper; therefore, the focus will be on the linguistic features to uncover the implied meanings not to decide on the femininity of her language as interpreted by Lakoff (1975) who characterizes women’s language as hesitant, ingratiating and weak. Weatherall (2002: 57) explains that Lakoff’s explanation of this style was that “women are socialised to hedge meaning, in order to avoid offending men”. Contrary to Lakoff’s view, Angelou’s language is adamantly strong and obvious. She raises her voice and publically expresses who she is, of course as a woman not as Maya Angelou.

The aim of the paper is to display how Angelou uses language to portray women and to establish the identity of women through exploring the pragmatic and linguistic features in the studied poems. The features include the pronouns, lexis, sentence and the contexts which surround the texts. According to Mills’ theory (1995), the analysis can be undertaken at the level of word, sentence and discourse. The same approach can be applied here to achieve the purpose of the paper and to conclude that language is not utilized to show the gender of the writer, that the author is female, but to study significant issues such as self-image and building self-identity.

**A Persistent woman in And Still I Rise**

Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary African American literature. Angelou has stated, “I speak to the black experience but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at and still survive” (Bomarito and Hunter, ibid.). She is very well-known for her autobiographical works, but as she says she talks about women in general.
In *And Still I Rise*, Angelou uses first person pronouns such as I, me and my (subject, object and possessive) thirty three times and uses second person pronouns such as you and your (subject and possessive) only thirteen times. The difference between the number of the first and second person pronouns prove the speaker’s existence as a woman who challenges male dominance. The challenge becomes quite apparent when she manipulates (will) with the pronoun (I) and (may) with (you). The (will) denotes future action and challenge which displays that the speaker (Angelou herself or any other woman) will survive the brutalities (trod me in the very dirt) that she faces every day.

In the second and third stanza, the speaker introduces herself and explains how she can challenge her opponent. She is lively, but her antagonist is desperate. She makes a comparison between herself and some natural phenomena such as moon, sun and tides which they rise again after each fall hopefully and dynamically (Just like hopes springing high, Still I’ll rise). Angelou exploits deictic expressions to a great extent to prove her existence and that no force in the world can bury her alive. In the fourth stanza, she uses temporal deixis to confirm that she surpassed male atrocities. She starts the stanza with a rhetorical question followed by another two questions and the tense is past (Did you want to see me broken?). She does not question males’ purposes regarding females as she already knows very well. She employs the form to express challenge; indirectly telling them (men) that they wanted to destroy her (women), but they could not; she did not fall and now she is active and standing on her feet. She uses (3) rhetorical questions in which she reminds them that their aims to make women feel weak and surrender to men’s wishes had failed.

In the next stanza (5), she again asks questions, but this time she uses present tense. She applies the two tenses to show what the men wanted to do to her in the past and her current image in the present time. Her current status characterized by laughtiness and happiness (laugh) is a challenge to men’s brutalities which are clearly stated in stanza (6) in which she summarizes males’ actions towards females in some words such as (shoot, cut, kill and hate). The stanza ends with a challenging sentence (But still, like air, I’ll rise), and this defiance occupies the rest of the poem and the phrase (I rise) is used seven times.

Angelou arranges a sequence of words which represent men’s attempts to deprive women of life, of living as a normal human being and of freedom. But after each mishap, she rises again and refuses to give up. The title of the poem “And Still I Rise” clearly shows her power especially when it starts with “and” because it is a bald reaction to those deeds which can done be men against her, whatever the deeds could be; some are mentioned in the poem and pointed out in the previous paragraph. Towards the end of the poem, she manifests her hope. She portrays her image as a lady who has suffered a lot but never surrendered. She is an ocean; after each fall, like the waves, she rises. She has left the dark days and now moving toward light; toward a brighter day. She becomes the symbol of resistance and hope for the women who are still treated as slaves. She paints her own picture; a picture of a woman who laughs and looks hopefully at a bright future “I am the dream and the hope of the slaves”.

**Unheard Voice in Phenomenal Woman**

In *Phenomenal Woman*, Angelou reads another page of the same book. Woman is the book that each page tells a new story. This page’s story is about a woman who faces problems not only with the opposite gender but with her gender (women) as well. In the first poem ‘And Still I Rise”, Angelou addresses racism, persecuting females by males, she highlights both racism and intra-racism in this poem, woman attacking woman, though briefly.

In the poem, Angelou uses first person pronouns thirty times mostly to describe herself or to show who she is. At the end of the three stanzas, she repeats (I’m a woman, phenomenally, phenomenal woman, that’s
A question could be raised here. What does she mean by phenomenal woman? To answer this question, we need to borrow a figure from Mills’ *Feminist Stylistics* (1995:20).

![Figure 1 Conventional model of text](image)

In the poem, she talks about her relationship with both males and females, and this relationship has a sociohistorical background. Her daily-life experience creates critical situations for her and finds herself in struggle with her surroundings. In the description of her model, Mills (1995:20) writes:

I would like now to attempt to unearth some of the assumptions underlying this model, since this model implicitly forms the theoretical basis for many theories of literary production. First, it is assumed that thought precedes the production of words and speech, that thought is somehow separate from language and exists outside language. Second, it is assumed that the message which is encoded in language is exactly the same as the message which is decoded, that is, that there are no impediments to communication and there are no misunderstandings.

According to Mills’ speech, we can say that Angelou felt the miseries of women in general and black women in particular and thus she decided to compose these texts; she had the thought and then it became words. The duty of a researcher or a critic here is to decoded the messages that are encoded by Angelou through scrutinizing the poems and penetrating into them through the stylistic devices such as words, punctuation marks or syntactic elements. For instance, in the first line she state “pretty women”; by this she distinguishes herself from a group of women who are beautiful which simply means she is not pretty. In the second line she makes her aim clear when she frankly says she is not “cute”. Her problem with that group of women is not only physical (in her complexion), but it is psychological as well.

The pretty women ask her about her secret, but when she replies they do not believe her. What secret do they mean? in the second stanza, the secret is revealed which is related to men. They mean why men care about her or she is sought after. She explains that her secret is only in her femininity. It is important for men but super-dubious for the rest of the women around her. The pretty women do not believe her because they think that her features and countenance are not providing pleasure; yet, men crave her. That’s why she says she is “phenomenal”.

In the final stanza, the speaker points to the problem that she faces in a masculine society. Men do not understand women and when they try to explain who they are men still do not know them. The speaker confesses that men do not understand her inner feelings and emotions “inner mystery”. They only care about the outer part of woman; they only think of feeding their lusts and fulfilling their desires; they cannot find a door to enter their inner world because they do not want to. She says “I am a woman” several times and she describes herself in different ways, but men still do not know her. She shouts that she is a human being; she is made up of physical material (body) and soul, but men do not hear her and thus the spiritual part remains cryptic.
Women around us: The Image of Women in *Woman Work*

In this poem, we meet a human being, a woman, who never feels tired, never grows fed up with serving people around her, and always enjoys keeping things decorated and neat. In the first stanza, we see the hand of women everywhere in the house; we see a caring woman; a persistent mother who wants to take rest only to collect her strength and start a new day actively and healthily so that she can provide a sweet home and happy day for the family. She takes care of the children; prepares food; does shopping; washes clothes, cleans the house, nurses the sick. If she does all these things, it is impossible to forget her even for a moment.

At first she counts the home works she does one by one. In fourteen poetic lines, she arranges fourteen actions subsequently without any grammatical or stylistic break; she uses no punctuation marks until the end of the stanza where she puts a period. Stylistically, mentioning the actions so fluently simply clarifies that woman do all these things repeatedly every day and thus she does not need to pause and think of them. It is not difficult for a woman to remember all the things she does all her life. The most important thing we should notice here is that there is rhythm; it seems that she sings. What a wonderful creature! A woman! A mother!

In the rest of the poem, the four stanzas, she uses apostrophe; she addresses nature, sun, rain, snow, air, mountain... etc. She feels quite alone; no one cares about her; no one helps her that is why she turns to nature. She asks nature to give her power and comfort (cool my brow again), to take her away from the merciless and wearisome earth only to have a bit of rest (storm, blow me from here) and to allow a night for rest (let me rest tonight). It is really a pity that a loving mother, a caring woman, does not have a human companion! She is obliged to find rest in nature since she cannot have it among her species. In *And Still I Rise*, she also compares herself to some natural categories such as moon and sun and in *Phenomenal Woman*, she mentions some natural elements like fire. In the three poems, nature is the source of life, rest and happiness for her.

In the poem, she is not fed up with what she is doing every day because she feels that these are her duties, but she is angry at the human race (men) that does not value her physical and mental work. She is a wife and a mother, but she feels alone. That’s why at the end of poem, she tells the natural elements and categories, except human beings, that they are all she has (You’re all that I can call my own). She criticizes human indifference toward a human being, a woman, who sacrifices her whole life just to secure a comfortable life and peaceful world for others.

**Conclusions**

In *And Still I Rise*, the speaker woman challenged the masculine world stating that she never yields because life without her is incomplete. In *Phenomenal Woman*, she elucidated that she is a human being and others must see her, must understand her; and in *Woman Work*, she illuminated that she exists everywhere. Angelou did not feel inferior because of her gender; on the contrary, she is proud of being a woman, though it is not easy to be, and she showed woman as a strong being who can stand by herself side by side with men, not as subordinate to them.

Angelou’s attempt to introduce herself was an indirect criticism of the men who did not see or feel women’s existence and efforts. She performed the action in two ways. First she shed some light on her role in the society and secondly she returned to nature as a haven so that she could take some rest. Angelou used language to carry out her attacks. She performed the discourse acts of challenge, expressive, declaration, commissive, assertive...etc, and she also employed deictic expressions especially feminine pronouns.
Though she is the victim, she did not hurt anyone’s feelings and indirectly criticized and silently but solemnly complained. She strove persistently and she refused to surrender. She presented herself and clarified facts about herself so that she could persuade the society to acknowledge the crucial role of women in the life of human being on earth.

References


