

Female Oppression in 'Phenomenal Woman' and 'Woman Work': A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative study between two selected poems by Maya Angelou, and aims to explore the female oppression as portrayed in her those selected poems. The researcher's objective is to explore the hegemonic culture through subordination, marginalization, and oppression of women. The study is qualitative descriptive with textual analysis by conducting comparative criticism between mentioned poems. Data analysis would be conducted by using the particular ideas of feminist such as Simone de Beauvoir in her book "The Second Sex". Angelou showed oppressed female but in the end Angelou shows how the women not only survive but also triumph. Researcher suggests that there are still so many complexities in the poems of Angelou that other researchers can explore. Scholars can compare more poems of Angelou or other feminist writers with above mentioned poems, and researchers can also conduct their study by taking more than two poems of Angelou for comparative analysis, they can investigate any view point other than female oppression.

Keywords: female oppression, stereotypes, African-American women, female subordination

1. Introduction

Literature is the reflection of writers own personality, and literature is beautiful art coming from human life. According to Permatasari, as far as Wayne Shumaker is concerned poetry is, "the idea or mind of the poets are flowing as a media to express certain kinds of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts" (1965, p.10). Poems can be used as a medium to express the emotions, and feelings based on the condition, situation and imagination. In the recent times there are many poems that are written by the writers by using the subjects such as, segregation, female oppression, male domination

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and racial discrimination. That's why the researcher chooses the works of Angelou to be analyzed, because her poems are also written in above mentioned subjects.

Angelou is an African-American writer, poet, novelist, dramatist, actress, civil rights activist and a dancer too. Angelou shows the mental conflict and female oppression because of the hegemonic culture in her poetry such as *Phenomenal Woman*, *Still I Rise*, *On the Pulse of Morning*, *Woman Work*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Female oppression is a type of injustice and can be described as the discrimination on the basis of gender and it is the belief that one gender is superior to the other gender, and especially the men are superior and women are inferior to them.

According to Spivak (1988), the third world women are doubly segregated. They are segregated. They are oppressed because of their men and also because of the white upper class. They are considered inferior discriminated not only on the basis of their gender but also class color and caste. Spivak (1988), described the term subaltern. Subaltern are those people who are always oppressed and have complete loss of voice.

According to Beauvoir (1949), the concept of females as inferior to males is constructed socially by males as she says: "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 282). Feminists are of the view to reject the roles of women as wives and mothers as their never ending duties in order to produce some creative writing; this is also a view of Woolf, in her work, *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf (1929) who advocates the female oppression has belief that all the growth and enjoyment belongs to men and all the domestic works, mental burdens, child bearing, home chores, and backwards belong to women.

Such thoughts and ideas also influence the contemporary writers; they use their writings and poems in order to spread such beliefs. Angelou explains women's painful lives and sufferings in her poems. The recent paper aims to re-exam that how Angelou explores the women in her two poems, *Phenomenal Woman*, and *Woman Work*.

2. Literature Review

Woolf (1929) is an extended essay given and based on two lectures delivered by Woolf in 1928 at Newnham College and Girton College. These are the women colleges at the University of Cambridge. The themes that are used in this feminist text are confinement of women, femininity, literature and writing, wealth, and women oppression and suppression. Her famous quotation is, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". In this essay she tried to explore the material and psychological conditions, and historical constraints that are blocks in the path of women to produce creativity. She also told how and why women are oppressed in the patriarchal society.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) is an autobiographical novel by Angelou in which she also explored the female oppression in the society of white people. She revealed her life experiences in this book, that how she faced racism, sexism, loneliness and violence. In the name of this novel she used the metaphor of bird that is struggling to escape from the cage. The caged bird is Angelou and she is singing freedom, freedom, and freedom.

Sylvia in her poem *Daddy* (1965) explored her life experiences and showed her feelings of oppression in this poem. There is a conflict in this poem that is the male authority versus the rights of females in order to control their own lives and females being free from male domination. She has suffered from the damage because of her father and then her husband and in this poem she compared that damage came to her because of two males in her life. She was married to a poet that deceived her because he had an affair with another woman. The main theme in this poem is also female oppression, suppression and male domination.

Women, Race and Class (1981) is a book by Davis who is an American author, political activist and an academic. This book is divided into several chapters and explored a different aspect of female struggles for equal rights throughout the history. She explored that the needs of the black community are even ignored by the feminist movement led by the white females. She wrote about the black females who were legally free but still oppressed in the contemporary society. Black women are given the worst types of works and they are confined to only domestic works where they experience sexism

and violence by the male employers. According to Davis (1981), the white feminist movement is maintaining the status quo and never racial.

Ain't I a Woman?: Black Woman and Feminism (1981) is a book by hooks that explored the effect of sexism and racism on black women, the feminist movements and the civil rights movements from suffrage to the 1970's.

Hook (2000, p. 8) in her book *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* tells that "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression". Feminism is a movement led by oppressed females to remove sexism and female oppression from the society. Maggie Humm (1990, p. 74) in her book *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* says that "feminism is for equal right for women and for creating a world beyond their social equality". She gave the concept that women must be considered equal to men and they should be given equal social rights in the society and she even created a concept of attributing women with special social rights. She also forced the concept that women are oppressed in patriarchal society.

Davies (1996) in *Gender Theories in Education* says that feminism is like a way for women to get equal rights and to get equality with men in roles and positions in public. Krolokke and Sorensen (2005) told about feminism its history, the waves of feminism and women's suffrage during those times. They told about the waves of feminism led by females in order to get rights in each and every field equal to males. They told about the sufferings and oppressions that women faced in their lives and even during their struggle to get equal rights they faced obstacles and discrimination instead of being treated well. Kennedy and Gioia (1995) discussed about the approach related to analysis of biographical work that:

"Biographical approach "begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work." Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text. However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that writer: the biographical critic "focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life."

Furthermore, they stated that “Historical Approach “seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it—a context that necessarily includes the artist’s biography and milieu.” A vital objective behind using the technique of historical critics is to elaborate and elucidate the consequence of a literary work upon its original readers.

Ratna (2005) in “Sastra dan Cultural Studies Representasi Fiksi dan Fakta” stated that “Feminism is the concept generalization of women. A critical of social theory which has the purpose to obtain women’s right”.

According to the research findings of Radfar, comparative history examines the international literary relationships; it studies common elements in various literature as well (2006). In comparative literature based on the unity of human thought, it can be realized how a thought in one part of the world is represented by a writer, a scholar and someone that appears in another way in another part of the world.

3. Research Question

This research paper will aim to give the answers of the following questions:

1. How Angelou explores the hegemonic culture through subordination, marginalization, and oppression of women in her poems *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman Work*?

4. Methodology

The recent study is qualitative descriptive and having the textual analysis by conducting the comparative criticism as a mean to criticize the two poems of Angelou. The source of data of this paper is the Angelou’s poems that are *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman Work*. These two poems have been selected by the researcher because these have been written about women and can be analyzed from a feminist perspective.

Angelou suffered in her life not only because of her sex but also because of her color and race. Angelou tried to express her sufferings and oppression through her literary work. That is the reason the researcher has been chosen the works the Angelou. Data analysis would be conducted by using some

particular ideas of feminist, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) as a support.

5. Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this study is *The Second Sex* (1949) that is a book written by a French writer, intellectual, feminist, social activist and existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). She emphasized on female self, and tried to portray her fears and anxieties, through female's characters irrespective of the patriarchal construct. This book was published in French in 1949, and then translated into English in 1953. This book has been known as "Feminist bible". It has two volumes, one is "Facts and Myths", and the other is "Lived Experience".

According to Dunbar (1969), "The Second Sex is the most intelligent, complete and human document that has ever been written on the oppression of women and male supremacy".

In this book there is a theme of other versus self in which men traditionally define them as the "neutral", and "positive", and women are defined by their difference from men. According to Beauvoir, young girls turn to daydreaming more than young boys because young girls know that their dreams are not achievable and being a female they cannot take concrete steps in order to turn their goals into reality.

Beauvoir states that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 282). It is the society that has given the concept of femininity and masculinity. According to her, all of us either men or women should be considered as human beings rather than considering the two sexes as male (masculinity), and female (femininity).

Men and women relationship is like master and slave relationship, and man is oppressor who cannot control over the situation and women. She writes men say women as subordinate creatures because of their biology. In her book she gave a comprehensive description about female oppression, suppression, male domination, social construction, gender and racial discrimination, stereotypes, and female subordination.

6. Data Analysis

Angelou is the most famous African-American author of the 20th century. She speaks on the behalf of her and other many African-American black women and also slaves who suffered during the black civil war. Many of her works are autobiographies and she wrote seven autobiographies first of them is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* because she contains many of her experiences as a black woman.

She further gave a very great influence in literature as an activist of women and because of this reason she has received many awards. Both of her poems that are selected for comparative study in the recent paper have similar form and style in order to express the female oppression. The women are oppressed and victimized in the patriarchal society and she also presents women as survivors after being oppressed.

6.1 African-American Women and Feminism

The recent paper aims to examine that how the ideas and concepts that are adapted by feminists are used in order to analyze the poems of Angelou. Angelou depicts women in her poems as oppressed and suppressed because of the domination of the white people. The recent paper also aims to examine the way by which Angelou challenges the society of white people and their stereotypical representation as it is practiced in the poems such as *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman Work*.

Algerian (2017, p.120) argued about feminism that “It is concerned with the refusal and denial of the masculine notion of the authority or truth as well as the rejection of the patriarchal culture and its dominance over matriarchal one in all spheres of life” Selden et al. (1997, p.115). Angelou like many other feminists raised her voice against violence, and dominance of males over females.

According to Beauvoir (1949), Women are only thought as the productive member of the society who lives a life of slave or in semi-slavery. She explored that women are constructed as secondary, oppressed and nonessential creatures, by society. Black women not only face sexism and violence but also racism with gender discrimination. They suffer because of their color and appearance. Black women suffered from slavery and also considered as an inferior creature in the society of whites.

Many feminist writers like Beauvoir (1949), Woolf (1929), Angelou (1969), hooks (1981) and Spivak (1988) raise their voice in favor of gender equality through their literary works.

6.2 Female Oppression and Black Women

As Angelou was an African-American black writer and she used her poems as a medium for capturing the oppression and suppression of black women in the white dominating society. She exposed how the black women in America are forced to be separated from the mother culture. The cultural identity of black women is distorted, threatened and brought down to the inferior position.

According to Spivak (1988) 'subaltern' are those who are always oppressed and women are doubly suppressed and voiceless because they cannot speak. When women try to speak their voice is not heard in the society. Similarly, in African-American society black women are voiceless, who cannot express their thoughts, ideas and even cannot speak for their rights. When black women try to speak their voice and message is being distorted.

In *Phenomenal Woman* Angelou described how black women face the attitudes of the people because of their race, color, and poor living conditions. For example, when Angelou said: "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies." Angelou has a concept of beauty in her mind and she said white women "pretty women" and she also said: "I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size."

In her poem Angelou also represents the irony in the way how the world perceives the beauty and how the poet thinks about the beauty. Such as Angelou said:

"But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies."

(*Phenomenal Woman*)

The American standard of beauty is to have sharp features, fair color, blue eyes and yellow hair. But as an African-American woman Angelou was fat, black girl with kinky hair. Angelou herself faced the oppression in the world

of white people such as in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) she told the reader about her bitter experiences and that how she faced the results of sexism, and racism. Angelou confronted the effects of segregation and racism in America at a very young age. Maya internalized the idea that blond hair is beautiful and that she a fat black girl trapped in a nightmare.

This poem also represents how Angelou is being treated by the society and it is showing her mental concepts and her reaction towards the concept of beauty that exists in the minds of the white people. In this poem she also showed her reaction towards people and showed the way by which she challenged the society of white people. Angelou also represents in her poem that how other white women perceive her and how the society of white people considers her ugly and black but she remains confident with her huge body and black color Angelou believes that the real beauty of a woman is her inner beauty and she feels confident in her huge physique and curvaceous body.

Angelou further argued in her poem:

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

(*Phenomenal Woman*)

In the above lines she explored her mental thought by saying that she is not cute and not like the fashion models because she was a fat, heavy black woman, with curly black hair, and she had a concept of beauty in her mind that was only related to white color, rosy cheeks, yellow hair and blue eyes. That’s why she is saying the pretty women wonder that where her secrets lie such as she is not beautiful and cute like them, but when she tells them the truth they began to think that she is telling lies. These lines also show how the people of white society consider her ugly and black because of her race.

Phenomenal Woman can also be analyzed as a poem that one can read as a celebration of a successful life of woman. There is a repetition of some lines

in her poem that also shows the success and celebration in the mind of a woman, as follows:

“I’m a woman
Phenomenally,
Phenomenal Woman,
That’s me”

(Phenomenal Woman)

There is also a joyous tone of celebration for the success of woman throughout the poem. As in the poem she says:

“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.”

(Phenomenal Woman)

Angelou further argued:

“I say,
It’s the fire in my eyes
And the flash of my teeth,
The swarm in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.”

(Phenomenal Woman)

Similarly, Beauvoir (1929) emphasized the concept that each individual regardless of its gender should take on the individual responsibility with freedom. All men and women should be given equal rights irrespective of their sex and women should not be considered as a second sex.

6.3 Female Subordination

Woman Work represents the jobs and chores and everyday routine and oppression and subordination of women throughout the day. In this autobiographical poem Angelou explores how the women are oppressed because of their daily hard working routine. Angelou was a single mother and this poem also represents her life's struggles and her loneliness and burden on her as a single parent.

The first stanza of the poem shows a bunch of jobs and chores that a woman performs in one day. This poem also explores that her each and every day is full of burdens and stress and there is not even a moment in her life that she spent for her own self. Such as Beauvoir (1929) argued that society prepares women to become mothers and housewives and it destroys their creative sense and potential.

Angelou also includes the role of nature in her poem that it is the only thing in her life that does not give her stress and burden it is the source of relief and peace for her. This poem also points out towards the lives of poor women who live in South. In the end of her poem Angelou wants nature to take her stress and herself away from everything that is giving her burden as she wants relaxation and mental peace. A list of works is stated in her poem:

"I've got the children to tend
 The clothes to mend
 The floor to mop
 The food to shop
 Then the chicken to fry
 The baby to dry
 I got company to feed
 The garden to weed
 I've got shirts to press
 The tots to dress
 The can to be cut
 I gotta clean up this hut
 Then see about the sick
 And the cotton to pick."

(Women Work)

All these works show how a female get oppressed because of her hectic routine. The tensed and tired tone is used in the first stanza of this poem when she told about the list of chores done by women in single day. Similarly, according to Woolf (1929), "For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished" (p. 88).

From second to fifth stanza she used a graceful tone. However, female struggle, suffering, oppression and suppression is shown in this poem, women loneliness is also shown there as she mentioned her children in it three times but never mentioned her husband even a single time. The representation of nature in her poem represents her tendency towards escapism and her wish to get relief from her hectic life. As stated in the poem:

"Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and
Let me rest tonight."

(Women Work)

This also shows her love for nature and her seeking for relief from tired life style.

6.4 Stereotypes

All the stereotypical roles are given to women as they are supposed to do home jobs, to cook food and clean up the homes and take care of children. In patriarchal society women are assigned all the inferior jobs and men are supposed to supervise, and hold superior work types. These stereotypical roles that are attached to only women cause stress, and suppression in their lives.

These gender stereotypes are very much harmful for people because of them people can't fully express themselves and their abilities according to Woolf (1929). In the poem *Woman Work* even the title of the poem is showing the

daily work routine of women, and all the works that are mentioned in the poem, and that belong to females only are stereotypical in nature.

7. Findings and Discussion

The recent paper found that female is shown as suppressed and oppressed in both poems of Angelou, *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman Work*. In the discussion above it is proved by using the reference of these poems that women especially the black women suffer and face the results of racism, violence and oppression in their lives. Women are not given rights equal to men in the society and their powerlessness is vivid in patriarchal society. So this study shows the hegemonic culture through subordination, marginalization, oppression, and stereotypes. Data analysis also shows that Angelou as a Black African-American woman encourages the female protagonists as mentioned in her poem, *Phenomenal Woman*. And in the end she showed that women not only survive in male dominant society, but also triumph.

8. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

The recent study has set out to examine the two selected poems of Angelou that shows female oppression. She has resisted portraying the women as powerless, weak, and submissive in her poems. She cleverly developed her women as protagonist, capable, daring, and strong as well. Angelou not only told about the female oppression in the society but also other issues that she faces in her life. According to Angelou women suffer a lot in their lives, but the black women suffer more than white women, because they not only suffer because of their gender but also because of their race.

As she explored in her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* her bitter life experiences, because of her race, color and sex. The recent study is qualitative descriptive and conducting by comparative analyzing the two mentioned poems of Angelou. Researcher has analyzed the selected poems from the perspective of female oppression, but there are still many complexities in these poems that other researchers can explore by conducting their study on these poem, and scholars can analyze these poems from different angles too. Scholars are also recommended to compare more poems of Angelou with above mentioned two poems in order to explore the clear view point of Angelou about female oppression. Researchers can

conduct their study by selected more than two poem of Angelou and also by comparing her poems to other feminist writers.

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