

## Politicizing Women's Bodies as seen in Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Women"

Nurunnisa

Faculty of Adab and Cultural Sciences, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

alhumairah2432@gmail.com

Phenomenal Woman is a poem by Maya Angelou that talks about women's bodies. From the first read, it seems that woman in this poem is defending herself against others woman with stereotype. Yet does she really defend herself? Or in fact fall into men's ideal in defending herself? The research analysis was conducted using Feminist Stylistic analysis approach. This research aims to elaborate how women's bodies is politicized and becomes a discourse in a poetic texts. This research used an objective approach in the analysis the researcher wants to reveal and explain the representation and the image of the character "I" in this poem. From this research, the result shows that not only text, short stories or novels can be analyzed by discourse analysis, through feminist stylistic theory moreover poem can also be seen by the discourse analysis' point of view. Thus, there can be the result that there is politics of women's bodies. There are three criteria that can be found to identify the poetic language style in politics of bodies such us body as site of conflict, women's bodies as men's ideal (patriarchal paradigm), and women's bodies as discourse.

**Keyword:** Poem, Feminist Stylistics, Phenomenal Woman, Discourse

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In creating literary works, such as prose, poetry, and drama, poets use language as a medium. Literary work is always fiction. The examples of literary fictions are prose, novels, short stories, and drama. Fiction "is any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that actually happened" (Abrams, 2009:116). Fiction can be divided into two types, prose and poetry. Poetry is a literary work regulated by certain norms and rules which are different from drama and prose. Some examples of literary poetry are poem, epic, and lyric. Poetry can be defined as a kind of writing form. In poetry, the use of language is arranged to get aesthetic quality. The emphasis of aesthetic language, the use of repetition and certain rhyme are some differences that distinguish poetry from other literary works, for instance drama or prose. According to Culler, aesthetic means that literature as an aesthetic object. The features of literature add the organization of level-linguistic, a comparison of the practical context to utterances. The fictional relationship with the world can be united together under the title of the common aesthetic language function. The aesthetic is historically named for the theory of arts and involved a debate about whether beauty was the property of being objective of artwork or subjective responses of viewers, and about relationship between the beauty of true and good (1997: 32). Immanuel Kant via Jonathan Culler said that according to the principle theorist of Western aesthetic modern, aesthetics is an effort to bridge the gap between the material and spiritual worlds, between the world powers, the quantity and world concept (1997). An object of aesthetics, such as a painting of a literary work with a combination of sensual form (color, sound) and spiritual content (idea), describes the possibility of the unity of materials and spirituals. Hence, the literary work is an aesthetic object with other communicative functions originally grouped or suspended, which involves readers to consider the links between form and content.

"Phenomenal Woman" presents a beautiful image. 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 act, and implications.

In this research, the researcher focuses on the representation of woman through discourse by using feminist stylistics theory. The discourse itself refers to Maya Angelou's poem. As Mills says feminist stylistics only focuses on the linguistic devices and the sphere which surrounds the text to find out how the female writers express woman's issues in their writing.

This research is interesting because this poem contains gender issue like women's rights and is different from other research. Besides that, from the first read, it seems that woman in this poem is defending herself against other woman with stereotype. Yet does she really defend herself? Or in fact fall into men's ideal in defending herself? Therefore, this research is different from other research. This research aims to elaborate how women become discourse in a poetic text. The features include pronouns, lexis, sentence, and the contexts contained in the texts. According to Mills' theory, analysis can be undertaken at the level of word, sentence, and discourse (1995). The same approach can be applied here to achieve the purpose of the paper and that not only texts, short stories or novels can be analyzed by discourse analysis, but the poem can also be examined through discourse analysis.

## **2. METHOD OF RESEARCH**

The type of research, this paper used qualitative research design because the subject of the research was a text. According to Creswell (2009: 1), qualitative research is a method used to explore and understand the human or social class whether individual or groups, then making interpretation of them. The study also offers a section with the interpretation of word-by-word analysis based style. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to apply research. This means that this study is assumed as a research object "something which stands free from what is often called an "extrinsic" relationship to the poet, or to the audience, or to the environing world" (Abrams, 2009: 63).

In data collection technique, the researcher used close reading. According to Creswell, close reading is detailed analysis of the complex inter-relationship and ambiguities of verbal and figurative components within a work (2009: 217). That means, the researcher must observe the details and be clear in the poem's verses. First, the researcher performed the poem close reading. Second, the researcher took the data in the poem language styles (word, phrase/sentence and discourse level). Last, the researcher categorized the data based on feminist stylistics features.

The data were analyzed by using descriptive analysis method. According to Kothari, descriptive analysis concerns with the characteristics of a particular individual or of group (2004: 5). It also concerns with specific predications, with narration of fact and characteristics of individual, group, or situation. With this method, several steps were carried out to analyze the data presented as follows: first, finding how feminist stylistic features in the poem are used by reading the poem intensively. Reading poem intensively means reading by repeating the poem and focusing on the language rather than the content. Some of the examples are the learning of new vocabularies, grammars and expressions, translating the passage (sometimes called careful reading), or being involved in looking intensively (inside) the poem. Second, determining and interpreting the data based on the categories of feminist stylistic features. Data were determined based on categories of feminist stylistic features with word level, lexical, and discourse analysis. Thus, the data were interpreted based on the categories of stylistic features by seeing the determination of categories already mentioned before (word, phrase /sentence, and discourse analysis). The last, drawing the conclusion of all analysis results in the research.

### 3. DISCUSSION

This chapter elaborates the position of woman that is represented through discourse in “Phenomenal Woman”. In this poem, the existence of feminist language is reflected in the pronoun response (I, You, They, and Themselves). The poem discusses a woman's ability or strength over anything that directly denies the gender stereotypes that people have for women. In this case, the researcher analyzed women’s representation in the poem using feminist stylistics theory by Sara Mills. To analyze the poetic language style, the researcher used feminist stylistics framework. Besides, in analyzing the poem the researcher poetic language and also helped by Feminism Body Politics theory to strengthen the analysis of how women are represented in the “Phenomenal Woman” poem. Feminist stylistics of the poetic language style is identified one by one whether they are informs of word, phrase, sentence, and discourse level analysis.

#### 3.1 Politics of Bodies

The terms body politics refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body. Individual and movements engage in body politics when they seek to alleviate the oppressive effects of institutional and interpersonal power on those whose bodies are marked as inferior or who are denied rights to control their own bodies ([www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)). There are three criteria found to identify the poetic language style in politics of bodies, such as bodies as sites of conflict, women’s bodies as men’s ideal patriarchal paradigm, and women’s bodies as discourse.

#### 3.2 Bodies as Sites of Conflict

Body as the site of conflict in this poem means that a female as deviant or individual. Deviant means abnormal. It is the conflict between abnormal and normal. This poem can be divided into two parts, namely the body as doing something that means that the body is active (mannerisms) and the body that is not doing something that means the body is silent (physical characteristics). In “Phenomenal Woman”, it is illustrated that there is a difference between I and Them in looking at a woman's body. This can be seen in stanza 1:

- (1) *Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.*
- (2) *I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size*
- (3) *But when I start to tell them,*
- (4) *They think I'm telling lies.*
- (5) *I say,*
- (6) *It's in the reach of my arms*
- (7) *The span of my hips,*
- (8) *The stride of my step,*
- (9) *The curl of my lips.*

The word “Pretty Woman” is generic noun, meaning that women in general have a normal and general view of beauty. Furthermore, *I'm* in the second line *I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size* means that “I” have their own beauty standards for women in general. “Pretty women” means women’s bodies become conflicts; then in this case it is answered in lines 6-9 with a metaphor of body that shows the new standard of beauty of the “I” which is considered abnormal by women in general. In this regard, lines 6-7 use the body as doing something that means the body is active (mannerisms). In line 6, *It's in the reach of my arms* illustrates the stretch of the speaker's arm. According to Cambridge Dictionary the word “reach” that is someone's reach which is the distance within which they can stretch out their arm and touch something. Therefore, the metaphor *it's in the reach of my arms* means that the speaker has huge arm or another woman has huge arms. In the previous research about *Phenomenal Woman* by Moh. Tabir .A., it is mentioned that *it's in the reach of my*

*arms* means obviously describes that speaker has huge arm or the speaker describes another woman's big arm. It does not only the huge arms of the speakers as black woman, but also in this line, the speaker tries to convey that she is a good woman because she has good social connection to the other people. Line 7 *the span of my hips*" illustrates the speaker's body shape. The word "span" means "the length of something". The word "span" is a word to describe the speaker has a wide hip or she is only discussing other women who have wide hips. In the previous research, Moh. Tabir .A. mentioned *the span of my hips* meaning that the word "span" is used to describe that the speaker's hip is wider than other women's. Therefore, the metaphor *the span of my hips* means that the speaker tries to convey that she is an ideal woman with wide hips. Men usually appeal to women who have wide hips. In this regard, the term wide hips is used because people in general love to see a beautiful woman with small hips, while in this poem, she describes her beauty with wide hips.

Besides the metaphor of body, this poem also explains the fragmentation. Fragmentation itself just explains about the parts of the body.

Stanza 1;

(6) *It's in the reach of my arms*

(7) *The span of my hips,*

(9) *The curl of my lips.*

In lines 6, 7, and 9 of stanza 1 the woman identifies herself by anatomical elements, such as "arms, hips, and lips". She composes a number of separate objects which are considered beautiful in their own right.

Thus, this poem, besides the fragmentation, also explains the focalization. In this regard, the focalization in this poem is found in stanza 1 lines 1 to 4 and stanza 4 lines 46 to 51.

Stanza 1 lines 1 to 4:

(1) *Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.*

(2) *I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size*

(3) *But when I start to tell them,*

(4) *They think I'm telling lies.*

Adab

In this stanza, the focalizer is the internal focalizer (IF). The word "I" is simultaneously recognized being the focalizer and narrator and the focalized object is pretty women. Pretty women are considered to be the focalized object because the focalizer focuses on their perception towards her.

### 3.3 Women's bodies as men's ideal (patriarchal paradigm)

In the poem "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou in stanza 3 lines 1-2 "*Men themselves have wondered*", "*what they see in me.*" Men is a generic noun that is men (The word "men" is a noun that means an adult human being (Cambridge Dictionary). Men show them as gender. Thus, they are a generic pronoun. The word "they" as a pronoun used as a subject of a verb to refer to people, animals, or things already mentioned or, more generally, to a group of people not clearly described (Cambridge dictionary). The word can be interpreted as men in white community or referred to all of men in white and black community. The poem *Phenomenal Woman* says the man wonder what is seen from the author. This means the physical standard that is "in me", not in accordance with the ideal of men. The logic of men cannot understand the beauty of the person "I". It means that in the poem it is depicted that beautiful women (in general according to the patriarchal system) and enchanting, are judged physically. That is evident in the relationship between line 2 in stanza 1 "I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size" and line 1 in stanza 3 "*Men themselves have wondered*" where the author is not physically beautiful (see line 2 stanza 1), but it can

be interesting. In this poem the author draws it according to the standards she has made herself, because the whole female body belongs to the woman.

### 3.4 Women's Bodies as Discourse

Women's bodies as discourse is how the body is portrayed or described. When the body is portrayed or described, it also becomes problematic. There are several types of bodies that are considered good and bad. However, the human bodies, especially women's, are very often compared and discussed by men in general or even by other women. Because of the conversation about the women's bodies, the women themselves often have serious concern about their bodies so that people will talk nicely about their physical appearance. In this case, it can be said that narcissism is a feeling of love for itself as excessive as it is. In accordance with Frederick Rhodewalt, narcissism is characterized by an inflated self-image and addiction to fantasy, by an unusual coolness and composure shaken only when the narcissistic confidence is threatened, and by the tendency to take others for granted or to exploit them (2007). In this regard, the narcissism is not only for you, but also for others. This makes a woman always change or make her body as attractive as possible or in accordance with people's expectation. Although there are also some women who change their body shape to be very attractive because of the oddity, still most women want their bodies to be considered good by men, by other women or even by themselves.

In accordance with Simon de Beauvoir, long before the eventual mutilation, women are haunted by the horror of growing old. The mature man is involved in enterprises more important than those of love; his erotic ardor is less keen than in the days of his youth; and since in him the passive qualities of an object are not called for, the changes in his face and body do not destroy his attractiveness. In woman, on the contrary, it is usually towards thirty-five, when all inhabitations have been finally overcome, that full erotic development is attained. Then it is that her sexual desires are the strongest and she most keenly wishes to have them satisfied; she has gambled much more heavily than men on the sexual values she possesses; to hold her husband and to assure herself of his protection, and to keep most of her jobs, it is necessary for her to be attractive, to please; she is allowed no hold on the world save through the meditation of some man (1953: 147-148).

The last lines of each stanza saying "*I'm a woman, phenomenally, phenomenal woman, that's me*", show repetition leading to an interpretation that strength, beauty, and grace come to form the femininity already attached to it; rather than the external nature given by society. Examined in the poem's choice of words, one cannot escape one's decision to use the word "phenomenal". According to dictionary.com, the word can have several meanings. The first and most obvious is "highly extraordinary, exceptional" and this fits right in with what the author says in the poem. The author is an exceptional woman, who intrigues both men and woman, but also exceptional because she is a woman. However, the word "phenomenal" is directly related to phenomenon, which means "a fact, occurrences, or circumstance observed or observable". The word phenomenal is referenced in the line above, which is how the body is portrayed or described.

Stanza 1:

- (1) *It's in the reach of my arms*
- (2) *The span of my hips,*
- (3) *The stride of my step,*
- (4) *The curl of my lips.*

In this stanza, the author tries repeatedly to show her innate femininity and strength by showing word choices like in the lines 6-9 "*the reach of my arms, the span of my hips, the stride of my step, the curl of my lips*" to emphasize the word "phenomenal" based on the shape of the body.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This chapter elaborates the position of woman that is represented through discourse in “Phenomenal Woman”. The poem is written by a civil rights activist and a poet Maya Angelou (an African-American). This poem is one of four poems in her collection called “Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women”. “Phenomenal Woman” is free verse poems (do not have rhyme schemes). In “Phenomenal Woman” poem, it is against the concept of traditional beauty and tells readers how beautiful she is and makes her very proud of it. Women represented through discourse is seen from politics of bodies. The politics of bodies is how body is politicized by using body as a subject. There are three criteria found to identify the poetic language style in politics of bodies, such as bodies as sites of conflict, women’s bodies as men’s ideal (patriarchal paradigm), and women’s bodies as discourse.

The bodies as sites of conflict is how body becomes a conflict that means a female as deviant or individual. Deviant means abnormal. It is conflict between abnormal and normal. In “Phenomenal Woman”, it is illustrated that there is a difference between I and Them in looking at a woman's body.

The women’s bodies as men’s ideal (patriarchal paradigm) is how women have seen their rights in social life, but they are still confined to physical obsession and beauty concept which is very limited. The beauty standards are formed because of the patriarchal system that women must be physically perfect, in the sense of white, slim, young, sexy, and wearing make-up. Women’s bodies as discourse is how body is portrayed or described. When the body is portrayed or described, the body also becomes a problem. The human bodies, especially women’s, is very often compared and described by men in general or even other women. Regarding women’s bodies, the women themselves think about how people talk about their bodies. As a result, women always change to be as attractive as possible. However, there are also some women who change their body shape to be very attractive because of its weirdness. Therefore, most women still want their bodies to be considered good by men, by other women, or even by themselves. From the explanation above it can be concluded that the beauty standard of women is subjective. It means that everybody has their own beauty standard; thus, it cannot be generalized. The representation of women through discourse in “Phenomenal Woman” is also mentioned in Surah At-Tiin verse 4:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

“We have certainly created man in the best of stature” (Q.S At-Tin:4).

From the verse above, the word “man” refers to creature. The correlation between the representations of women in this verse is among God’s creatures on the surface of this earth, man and woman are created by God in the best and the most perfect form. According to Ibnu Arabi in *tafsir* book called Al-Qurthubi, there is no creation of God which is the most perfect, but for a creature named human where God has created it in an alive, knowledgeable, capable of doing, having desire, being able to speak, being able to listen and see, and be able to take care of his affairs and punish (2009: 368-369).

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