

A Comparative Analysis of Feminism in Maya Angelou's Phenomenal Woman and Nikki Giovanni's Woman

Surya J. Vijayan

University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, India

Email – suryajvijayan123@gmail.com

Abstract: Literature has always been equivocal when it comes to the representation of women. From its inception onwards, literature was under the monopoly of man. Gender difference was quite evidently found in every walks of life including literature. The society was pervasively patriarchal and it is conceived, organized and implemented in such a way to make women inferior to men in all cultural domains. The male dominated literary world always portrayed women as innocent, weak, mere emotional creatures without any practical knowledge or wisdom. Thus, man created the so called 'good women' who are innocent, all accepting, complying, ever smiling, angelic figures. Twentieth century witnessed radical changes in every sphere of life: social, political, economic, religious, art and literature. Strong female writers began to emerge and they raised their voice against the hegemony of men. Literally, there was an explosion of feminist writers who began to express the true emotions and feelings of women rather than the imaginative and speculative feminine expression of male authors. Despite gender inequality, severe racism made the condition of black women more miserable. Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni, two noticeable writers whose writings reflect the authentic self of a woman, especially black woman. This paper is an attempt to make a comparative analysis of feminism in Maya Angelou's 'The Phenomenal Woman' and Nikki Giovanni's 'Woman'.

Key Words: Feminism, Racism, Gender inequality, Independence, Patriarchy.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Gender inequality and racism are two issues which always prevailed in the society. The subjugation of women by men was normalized culturally and was accepted as a convention. The patriarchal society was formulated in such a way that women themselves were conditioned that they are inferior to men. In literature also, the portrayal of women was biased. It is widely held that while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender – of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behavior – are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. (Abrams, 122). As Simon de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.....which is described as feminine" (Simon, 301). When women in general suffer inequality, black women went through discrimination in every walks of their life. Black women suffered not only from subjugation but oppression, discrimination, harassment and they were denied of the basic decency of life. In the wake of feminist movement, racism also emerged as a critical social issue. Black women writers began to express their inner self in their own terms. They started writing about their struggle and the painful stories of discrimination as well as they have a strong desire to free themselves from the fabricated stereotypical image created by the outside world. Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni's writings have a significant influence on the feminist movement, especially in the arena of black feminism. The study examines a comparative analysis of feminist approaches in the poems 'Phenomenal Woman' (Maya Angelou) and 'Woman' (Nikki Giovanni).

2. ANALYSIS:

Phenomenal woman (1978) is a poem which celebrates womanhood. It is universal in its nature that it exhorts all women across the world to find beauty within oneself rather than fulfilling the beauty standards put forward by the outside world. In the beginning of the poem itself, Maya Angelou says that 'I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size' (Phenomenal Woman, 1st stanza). This line is infused with the spirit of feminism in it. She proposes the idea that she is not fit for the stereotypical conception of 'cute' women or her physical appearance is not built like a fashion model. Maya Angelou sharply criticizes the societal construction of feminine beauty wherein the framework of a woman's body is already conventionalized by the male dominated society.

Feminist criticism seeks to challenge traditional notions and establish, instead, the perspectives and experiences of women which had been marginalized for ages. It is generally accepted that the gender difference is the foundation for structural inequality between men and women by which women suffer sympathetic social injustice. The inequality between sexes is not the result of biological necessity, but is produced by cultural construction of gender differences. (Nagarajan, 206) Society is always judgemental towards women and her body. The male dominated society has created certain set standards and notions for feminine beauty in accordance with their own necessity and vision. Maya Angelo challenges the common assumptions about black women and the typical societal outlook of comparison especially, the parameters of beauty of black women. Literature often depicted negative images of black women with a hidden agenda of racism, sexism and classicism.

In the second stanza the feminist undertone became stronger and she mocks the typical masculine behaviour of wooing behind women by focusing on her outward beauty. Maya Angelou writes,

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
(Phenomenal Woman, 2nd stanza)

She is actually exploring the male identity which is opposed to the established notion. She compares men to “a hive of honey bees” who swarm around her. Angelou is criticizing the established notion of masculine power which is often considered as the epitome of strength. At the same time, these men who considered as the dominant power in society also have the menial double identity of running around women. In the following lines, she strongly and courageously glorifies her own body – the passion in her eyes, the flash of her teeth, the swinging of her waist and the joy in her feet, all these makes her charming and attractive. She describes her physical features including gestures and mannerisms in detail. Through her words, it is evident that she loves her body in every way. The representation of black women is often distorted in literature and here, Angelou is proud and confident about her own body and she is literally celebrating its beauty. The poem, thus, show cases a woman who is appreciative and satisfied of her own beauty and her own self. Angelou exhorts to all women that the real beauty comes from within and it is important to love one’s own body and to have the confidence in that body rather than waiting for the acknowledgment of others. Maya Angelou expresses how a man perceives a woman, especially, a black woman:

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can’t touch
My inner mystery
(Phenomenal Woman, 3rd stanza)

She states that a man can only see the outward beauty of a woman and they can never touch the inner beauty of a woman. She affirms that the real beauty of a woman resides in her inner self irrespective of the colour of her skin. She further says that “When I try to show them. They say they still can’t see”. (Phenomenal Woman, 3rd stanza) She expresses her feminist attitude much more deeply in these lines that men, in general are not able or they are not really willing to understand the innate self of women.

At the end of the poem, Angelou concludes that it is her self confidence and self acceptance that enables her to live in this world with her head held high. The expression “my head’s not bowed” implicitly indicates the image of black women who were once considered as slaves and who made prolonged struggles for their rights and dignity. She does not shout or jump or talk loudly to attract the attention of others, rather, she already have the charm and self confidence that makes her beautiful and attractive. In the final stanza of the poem, she sharply criticizes the same men who consider themselves to be dominant and powerful actually desire the care of women. The refrain used in the poem is striking and powerful and it gives an in-depth tone and meaning to the poem.

I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal Woman
That’s me.
(Phenomenal Woman, 1st stanza)

Maya Angelou employs the refrain at the end of all stanzas, thereby, proclaiming herself as a phenomenal woman. It is the power and confidence in oneself that makes a woman phenomenal. She affirms and inspires every woman to be phenomenal, that is, to be an extraordinary woman of self worth.

'*Woman*' (1978) written by Nikki Giovanni can be considered as a woman's journey of self realization. It is a thought provoking poem that inspires all women to realize their self worth. In the very beginning of the poem, Nikki compares a woman to a tender blade of grass.

She wanted to be a blade
of grass amid the fields
But he wouldn't agree
To be a dandelion
(*Woman*, 1st stanza)

She just wanted to be a simple blade of grass in the vast field. But, the man is not willing to be her dandelion. Although, dandelion is often considered as a deep rooted weed, it is believed that it is highly nutritious and has been used in many forms of traditional medicine. In the poem, the woman desires to live a very ordinary life like an insignificant blade of grass and she wanted the man to be a strong support in her life, but he is not willing to provide any support for her.

In the next stanza, the woman compares herself to a robin who sings through the leaves. But he refused to be her tree. She wanted to be a lively and peaceful woman like a robin who happily sings throughout the day, but the man is not willing to provide a shelter to the woman. Giovanni is portraying a desperate woman who desires the presence or companionship of a man. But irrespective of all her attempts, he is moving away from her and not even ready to understand her feelings. Nikki Giovanni compares the woman to a spider.

She spun herself into a web
And looking for a place to rest
Turned to him
But he stood straight declining to be her corner
(*Woman*, 3rd stanza)

Spiders are independent in nature and they are able to make their own web. Corners are supposed to be the safest place to make a web, but he declines to be her corner. In the poem, Nikki Giovanni sharply criticizes man who is not even ready to extend a helping hand to a woman who is willing to live the most ordinary life. The web also symbolizes the limitations that she had built for herself in order to make the man happy and satisfied, because she feels that she needs him in her life.

The woman tries to be a book, thereby, opening her mind before him, but he would not read her. She tries to express her inner feelings and thoughts to him, but he refuse to listen and understand her mind. Towards the end of the poem, the woman turned herself into a bulb, but he is not allowing her to grow. By turning herself into a bulb, she is actually lowering herself to the maximum level, even after that he is not letting her to grow. Nikki Giovanni criticizes the male chauvinist attitude where men neither support women nor they allow her to grow fully and independently.

Nikki Giovanni writes "she decided to become a woman", even though he refused to be a man. She decided that it was alright to be in such a state. She was willing to modify her identity as a woman to adjust into a man's world, even after that, the dominating mentality of man is not ready to accept her. Finally, she realized that her identity and self worth as a woman is not dependant on a man's acceptance. She recognized that a woman does not need the support and care of a man and she is independent by herself. Feminist writings also strive for such kind of realizations that woman has an independent identity and her emotions and feelings are unique and no male authority can truly express her utmost emotions. Through the poem '*Woman*' Nikki Giovanni inspires all women across the world and propagate the idea that a woman is complete in her own identity and she does not need the approval, acceptance, love or care from any external authority.

It is often held that the traditional categories and criteria for analyzing and appraising literary works, although represented in standard critical theory as objective, disinterested, and universal, are in fact infused with masculine assumptions, interests, and ways of reasoning, so that the standard selection and rankings, the prevailing canon, and the critical treatments of literary works have in fact been tacitly but thoroughly gender – biased. (Abrams, 123) But poems like *Phenomenal Woman* and *Woman* are infused with feminist spirit and these poems truly reflect the spirit of women. Feminism seeks to address the inequalities that exist between man and women in a society. Feminists refuse to accept these disparities as natural and seek to examine the material reality of the lives of women to understand and explain the pedagogy of oppression (Mukhopadhyay, 11). Writers like Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni not only express feminism through their works, but also raising their strong voice against the age old racism that black women suffered.

3. CONCLUSION:

The main purpose of feminism is to understand the social and cognitive mechanism that establish and sustain gender inequality, and change it, as much as possible. Feminist writing question and study the ways in which cultural representations normalize and strengthen the social, political, economic, and psychological suppression and oppression

of women in society. Feminism can be considered as a psychological and radical outbreak against the conventional patriarchal norms of society as well as against the biased representation of women in literature. When women in general suffer subjugation from men, Black women underwent double marginalization. They were not just oppressed by white men, but also by the black men. Moreover, they were the victims of bitter racism and sexism. Maya Angelou was an exceptional writer from the black community who showed immense courage to express the true identity of a woman, especially black woman in a world of gender inequalities. The refrain “Phenomenal woman” that Maya Angelou employed in the poem absolutely hammers the literal meaning of the word ‘phenomenal’ that is, extra ordinary woman. The word ‘phenomenal’ become more powerful when it is set in the historical background of racism. The entire poem which focuses on the importance of self acceptance and self love is a strong inspiration to all women irrespective of class or geographical boundaries. It is a sharp weapon against the narrow mindedness of male dominated society. ‘Woman’ by Nikki Giovanni is a poem about a woman’s journey of self – actualization in the midst of gender inequalities. It promotes the idea that a woman does not need the support or approval of a man to live a happy and decent life in this world. In both poems, the concluding lines are empowering and give strong message to women. Though, ‘Phenomenal Woman’ reflects racism, the poem in its entirety is an exhortation to all women irrespective of the colour, caste or geographical boundaries. Both poems are infused with the spirit of feminism and convey strong awareness and empowerment for women.

REFERENCES:

1. Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 10th ed. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012.
2. Angelou, Maya. The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou. New York: Random House Publishing Group: 1994
3. Beauvoir, Simon de. The Second Sex. New York: Knopf, 1952.
4. Mukhopadhyay, Arpita. Feminisms. Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2015
5. Nagarajan, M. S. English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History. Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2012.

Web Reference:

<https://hellopoetry.com/Woman> – Nikki Giovanni