

SEXUALITY AS SEEN IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POEMS, "WOMAN ME", "PHENOMENAL WOMAN", AND "SEVEN WOMEN'S BLESSED ASSURANCE"

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ABSTRAK

Puisi-puisi Maya Angelou yang berjudul "Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman", dan "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance" menampilkan topik tentang seksualitas wanita yang memikat dan meluap-luap, yang menarik lelaki kepadanya. Menggunakan pendekatan ekspresif, puisi-puisi tersebut dipelajari dan dianalisis untuk mengungkap gagasan dan perspektif Angelou mengenai seksualitas. Berbeda dengan Angelou, para wanita dalam puisi-puisinya memiliki percaya diri yang sangat besar. Mereka menerima karakter fisik mereka, bangga akan penampilan mereka, dan berhasil mengubahnya menjadi titik kekuatan, menegaskan bahwa mereka adalah wanita-wanita yang sangat kuat dan percaya diri. Melalui puisinya, Angelou menampilkan gagasan mengenai seksualitas yang bertolak belakang dengan dirinya semasa muda.

Kata Kunci: *Woman Me, Phenomenal Woman, Seven Women's Blessed Assurance, Seksualitas*

ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou's poems entitled "Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance" present a topic of woman's captivating and overwhelming sexuality and beauty that draw men toward her. Using the expressive approach, these poems are studied and analyzed to reveal Angelou's ideas and perspective of women's sexuality. In contrast to Angelou, the women in her poems are very confident about themselves. They accept their physical traits, proud of the way they look, and manage to make it their strong point, defining themselves as very strong, confident women. Through her poems, Angelou represents the idea of sexuality completely the opposite of what she was like in her younger years.

Keywords: *Woman Me, Phenomenal Woman, Seven Women's Blessed Assurance, Sexuality*

INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou is a Black-American poet, novelist, educator, actor, producer, filmmaker, dancer, civil rights activist, and one of the most recognized voices in the United States. She is noted to write poems about segregation and discrimination toward African-American in the United States. Other than the issue of racism, some of her poems also talk about

women and are related to her own experiences in life.

Woman sexuality is one of various themes in Angelou's poems. "Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance" are three of her poems talking about sexuality. They present the same topic, which is woman's captivating and overwhelming sexuality and beauty that draw men toward her.

Jeffrey Weeks defines sexuality as “the product of a host of autonomous and interacting traditions and social practices: religious, moral, economic, familial, medical, juridical” (Weeks, *Discontents* 6). As a product shaped by many historical and social factors, the concept of sexuality is influenced by biological, mental, religious, moral, economic, familial, medical and juridical aspects. It is interesting when the poems are compared with, or related to, Maya Angelou’s life story as a woman. Being put side by side with the sexual abuse and anxiety she experienced, these poems seem to depict a completely contradictory story that somehow related to the way she was treated sexually in her early life.

Wayne Shumaker, in his book, **An Approach to Poetry**, defines poetry as “the sole existing medium for the expression of certain kinds of perceptions, feelings, and even thoughts” (10). In his book, **The Mirror and the Lamp**, M.H. Abrams states that:

A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings. (22)

Therefore, it can be concluded that “Woman Me”, “Phenomenal Woman”, and “Seven Women’s Blessed Assurance” are the products of Maya’s experience regarding men and her sexuality. Using Abram’s approach, the three poems and the ideas of woman sexuality expressed in it, as well as Angelou’s sexual life in her early life along with its impacts in Angelou’s attitude towards men and herself are studied to reveal Angelou’s feelings, thoughts and imaginations, particularly, towards sexuality

MAYA ANGELOU AND SEXUALITY

Maya Angelou, born as Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, was the daughter of Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter. Bailey Johnson Jr., Maya’s elder brother, gave her the nickname Maya. When she was three year old, her parents got a divorce and sent both Maya and Bailey to Stamps, Arkansas to live with Annie Henderson, their paternal grandmother, who was referred to as Momma. (Bloom, *Comprehensive Research*)

Her parents’ divorce was the very first event that caused Angelou to develop insecurities, which would tag along until adulthood. She believed that she must have done something bad for her parents to abandon her when she was only three year old.

She grew up under the nurture of Momma, without the figure of a father. Even though there was Uncle Willie, he was not sufficient to fill in the empty place. Growing up without a father’s figure affected Angelou’s strong desire in her adulthood to have a husband and build a happy family.

As a child, Angelou also developed insecurities about her physical appearance. Angelou longed to be blonde, blue-eyed, and pretty. She even convinced herself that she was living in a nightmare, and someday she would wake up as a beautiful, white little girl. She had also often fantasized about growing up to be a housewife.

At the age of eight, Angelou was sexually abused by Mr. Freeman, Vivian’s boyfriend. The sexual abuse took the form of molestation, then rape. Angelou at first thought that Mr. Freeman’s molestation was merely an expression of physical affection. However, when

Mr. Freeman raped her and threatened to kill Bailey if she told anyone about what happened, Angelou felt betrayed.

At court, Angelou gave testimony about the sexual abuse Mr. Freeman had done to her but she denied having taking pleasure in Mr. Freeman's actions. The next day, when she found out that Mr. Freeman was killed, she thought that her testimony and the evilness in her words had killed Mr. Freeman. Consequently, she decided not to talk to anybody because she was afraid her voice might kill someone else. She only talked to Bailey because she loved him so much that she believed her love would protect him. She only started talking again five years later, owing to Mrs. Flowers, who encouraged her to speak by introducing Angelou to poetry and having her read them aloud.

As a girl, Angelou developed many insecurities, one of them was about her sexuality, because she was too tall and big for girls of her age. Approaching womanhood, she became even more worried about her sexuality. Her boyish attributes caused her to suspect herself to be a lesbian. In order to prove her sexuality, she thought that it was necessary to have a boyfriend. Therefore, she asked a popular neighborhood boy to have sex with her. This experience changed her life completely—not only she confirmed her sexuality, she also became pregnant. Angelou ended up giving birth to her son at the age of 16.

During her adolescence, Angelou fell in love very easily. She also fell in the fantasy of marrying her man every single time. She met and had romantic relationships with several men, none of which ended happily.

When she was working at the Creole Café in 1946, Maya met Curley, a navy man 14 years older than she was. Curley wanted to have a relationship with her, even though he also explained that he was engaged and going to get married soon. Being very much in love, Angelou accepted his request and they began a relationship. Angelou felt, for once, that she belonged to someone and she gave much of herself to this relationship. Two months after, when Curley finally left, Angelou was devastated.

In 1947, Angelou met R.L. Poole, a nightclub tap dancer looking for a new partner for his act. Knowing that Angelou had taken dance classes, he hired her. She promptly fell in love with him. Not long, Poole's former partner and girlfriend showed up. Poole left Angelou and it made her frustrated and discouraged. To deal with the loneliness and frustration, she started using marijuana. However, she continued to dream about meeting a man with whom she could build a life and who would be a good father for Clyde.

Angelou subsequently moved to Stockton, where she met a 45-year-old married gambler named L.D. Tolbrook. Even though he was married, he told Angelou that he would leave his wife for her. When Tolbrook told Angelou he had run up a \$5,000 gambling debt, Angelou volunteered to help him earn the money. The plan was for her to spend a month working every day as a prostitute. She felt there was nothing wrong with her situation—she was helping her man, after all. However, it was obvious that Tolbrook was manipulating her and there was the same old desperation inside Angelou as she convinced herself that everything would eventually work for her.

During this time, Angelou lost Clyde. Devastated at the possibility of losing her son, Angelou went to Tolbrook's house to ask for help. He was furious that she had come to his home where he lived with his wife. He considered her nothing more than a common prostitute. This left Angelou even more devastated. She eventually found Clyde by herself and moved back to San Francisco where she met Troubador Martin. (Stewart)

Troubador sold stolen goods—mostly women's dresses and suits. Angelou worked with him by allowing Troubador to use her place for his customers to try on the clothing before they bought it. As time went on, she began thinking about Troubador as a possible husband. While Troubador was a heroin user, Angelou wondered if he would feel more comfortable about deepening their relationship if she offered to take heroin, too—just once. One day Troubador took Angelou to a hotel room full of heroin users and made her vow to never use the drug. The next day, Angelou decided that she and her son would go to live with her mother. (Stewart)

However, even after failing in building relationships with four different men, Angelou was still dreaming about finding a man and having a family. Angelou was working in Melrose Record Shop in San Francisco in 1950 when she met a Greek sailor named Tosh Angelos, whose name was later modified as her last name. Tosh was handsome, quiet, and he became very good friends with Clyde. Again, Angelou fell instantly in love. So when he proposed, Angelou accepted.

Even though Vivian disapproved of their relationship because Tosh was white and relatively poor, Angelou and Tosh got married

anyway. Angelou soon learned that it was not a happy marriage. Other than the fact that Tosh was an introvert, Angelou hated his telling Clyde that there was no God. Unwilling to challenge her husband openly, Angelou began sneaking out of the house on Sunday mornings and attending various black churches. Once Tosh found out, things exploded. Tosh was furious. He told Angelou he was tired of being married and they parted in 1952. (Stewart)

In 1957, Angelou made a commitment to become a writer and black civil rights activist. After that, she moved to Brooklyn and participated in the Harlem Writers' Guild. She was also most politically active in this period of her life. She organized a fund-raiser called "*Cabaret for Freedom*" in support of Martin Luther King Jr. As a result of this, she was appointed Northern Coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a position she held briefly from 1959 to 1960. During the period, Angelou also succeeded in Bayard Rustin as a northern coordinator of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. (Bloom, *Comprehensive Research*)

Despite her intelligence and career, Angelou extremely longed to live the rest of her life in a marriage. During this time, Angelou was engaged to Thomas Allen, a Black American bail bondsman. Being a very lonely woman, Angelou wanted to marry Thomas even though she did not love him.

However, it all changed when Angelou met a South African activist named Vasumzi (Vus) Make in 1961. She fell instantly in love and promptly threw away Thomas. Within a week, Angelou and Vus got married. Howev-

er, she was not happy about the restrictions Vus put on her own life. He wanted Angelou to be an African wife, which meant she should be subservient to her husband. During her marriage with Vus, the "strong-willed, independent, high-spirited Angelou again became a meek housewife" (Cox, 50).

Angelou and Vus left the United States and settled in Cairo, Egypt, where Vus could continue his work, gaining support for South African freedom. However, once again, Vus forbade Angelou to work outside the home and their finances were in shambles. Angelou decided to look for a job anyway.

She finally found employment at an English-language news weekly called the Arab Observer. She was made associate editor. When she told Vus, he was furious with her for not being a good African wife. As Vus was raging at her, she realized that she was no longer in love with him. In addition, she had begun to suspect that Vus was cheating on her. It was time she decided to think about ending the marriage. Once Clyde, who had changed his name and was now called Guy, was graduated in 1962, she and Vus finally parted—as friends. (Stewart)

Angelou returned to The United States in 1965 and married a Frenchman writer and cartoonist, Paul du Feu, in 1973. At first Angelou was worried about the interracial marriage, but this turned out to be her longest marriage. She never speaks publicly about her marriages, but it has been suggested by the closest to her that this was her happiest marriage. Angelou and Paul bought and restored a home in California. They divorced in 1980 but remain friends, and this was Angelou's last marriage. (McGraw)

MAYA ANGELOU'S PERCEPTION OF SEXUALITY

Angelou's perception of sexuality can be deduced from the events that happened in her life and how she reacted to them. Evidently, Angelou did not consider sexuality as a sacred thing. It can be seen from the decision she took when she was 16 to have sex with a neighborhood boy just to prove her sexuality—that she was not a lesbian. Such perception resulted from her having a sexual intercourse when she was a child, leading her to assume that there was nothing to lose if she once again had sex.

It can also be seen that Angelou did not feel the need to have any kind of emotion to engage in a sexual intercourse, proven by her choice of partner—she chose a boy she did not really know, with only the fact that the boy was good looking and popular taken into consideration. Angelou also displayed similar perception of sexuality when she willingly became a prostitute for her boyfriend. Not only did she think of her sexuality casually, but she also treated it as a commodity, with which she could earn money.

As a woman, Angelou had always fantasized about an ideal husband. She tended to fall in love easily and imagine each of the man she was in love with as a possible husband. In every relationship she had, she only met the man for a short period of time before eventually fell for him. This tendency often resulted in a broken heart and left Angelou hurt and devastated, because her feelings and dreams were not mutual with those of her men.

Angelou also tended to willingly do anything for the man she was in love with, dreaming about the man being her future husband

and a good father for her son, disregarding the reality that was seldom in her favor. As an example is her being in a relationship with Tolbrook, who was a married man. She even went as far as willingly becoming a prostitute to earn money in order to pay Tolbrook's debts. Another extreme example of Angelou's desperate craving for a husband is Angelou's willingness to start using heroine just to make Troubadour comfortable to deepen their relationship.

Once she was finally able to live her dream as a housewife, in her first two marriages, Angelou didn't mind losing her strong and independent self and throw away everything she had only to become a submissive housewife that her husbands wanted. It shows how she desperately wanted to define herself as a woman by being a man's wife. The first time she eventually stood for herself was in her marriage with Vus, when she disobeyed Vus's restrictions and stood up for it. This marked Angelou's first step out of the fantasy that had been keeping her down, proven by her taking the initiative to end the marriage.

After divorcing Vus, Angelou became her old strong, able, independent, and intelligent self. She also became mature enough to stop fantasizing about marriage and falling in love easily. When she married Paul du Feu eleven years after, she was a different kind of wife compared with her previous marriages. Her career was not impeded during her marriage with Paul. On the contrary, Paul was a very supportive husband.

When eventually her marriage with Paul ended, Angelou stayed single. She focused on her works and did various kinds of professions. Angelou finally found the way to define

herself, not by her sexuality only, but also by living her life to the fullest as herself and not letting anything, or anyone, get in her way.

WOMANLY QUALITIES IN "WOMAN ME", "PHENOMENAL WOMAN", AND "SEVEN WOMEN'S BLESSED ASSURANCE"

Physical and Sexual Appeal

A. Woman Me

In the first stanza, Maya Angelou describes major objects that reflect the power of woman sexuality; breasts and vagina, the latter being expressed as 'the meeting of thighs'. Most of the times, women are identified with breasts and vagina, sexual organs of the body that men do not have and that attract men's attention the most. The organs are also very sexual in nature, as to most sexual activities are focused on those organs, especially the genital.

In the lines "Deafening revolutions nestle in the / cleavage of / your breasts" the speaker represents the breasts as the place where a massive phenomenon is situated—the revolution, which denotes how men are obsessed with them. The obsession itself, in reality, is shown in the huge vocabulary men use to refer to them.

Angelou also pictures 'meeting of thighs'—the female genital, which symbolizes sex, as something that is wanted by numerous men from various social groups. In the poem, the lines "Beggar-Kings and red-ringed Priests / seek glory at the meeting / of your thighs" is used as a symbol picturing the number of men wanting to attain sex and the range of their social status. With no exception, the speaker boldly mentions 'Priests' as one of those who want sex, to emphasize how much she is wanted.

It is stated in this poem that what men seek in sex with women is 'glory'. It denotes the magnificence in woman sexuality—it is something of honour, beauty, pride, respect and pleasure. Based on the description, it clearly shows that Angelou portrays woman sexual appeal as a grand object.

B. Phenomenal Woman

"Phenomenal Woman" is one of the poems in which the writer can easily be found. The description of the woman speaking in this poem can easily be matched with Maya Angelou, the writer.

"The span of my hips" illustrates the shape of the speaker's body. The word 'span' is used to imply the speaker's rather wide hips. "The stride of my step" describes the speaker's manner of walking. She does not jump around, she neither walk slowly nor timidly. The word 'stride' is defined in **Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus** as "a long step" and "manner of striding" (1024). It points that the speaker walks in long steps, suggesting a firm manner of walk. Maya Angelou herself, being very tall and due to her long legs, can naturally be pictured walking in long steps.

Not stopping there, the speaker continuously lists her appealing physical characteristics. In the second stanza, "the flash of my teeth", is an expression referring to the speaker's smile. Hornby and Wehmeier define 'flash' as "a sudden bright light that shines for a moment and then disappears" and "the sudden appearance for a short time of sth bright or colourful". Therefore, it is clear enough to deduce that the first line of the stanza above pictures the speaker's sudden and momen-

tary smile. The speaker is not too friendly to smile all the time, but she is the kind of woman who knows when to be friendly and this adds to her charm.

Also in the second stanza, "The swing of my waist" once again portrays the speaker's gesture—the way she walks. Apart from her long steps, the speaker also walks with her waist swinging. This manner of walk is commonly assumed to be attractive for men, because it emphasizes the curves of a woman's body.

In the third stanza, the speaker describes her sexual appeal by, again, cataloging her strength as a woman. "The arch of my back" strongly shows the speaker's quality as a woman—the curve of her body. Woman's body is delicately curved. The image of a woman's curved back offers sexiness as well as softness. The second line, "The sun of my smile", again, describes the speaker's smile. While the previous description was about her occasional smile, this line describes the nature of her smile—that the speaker's smile is the kind of smile that gives others comfort, a gracious smile radiating warmth and light like the sun does.

The next line, "The ride of my breasts" describes a kind of journey made on the speaker's breasts. This indicates yet another sexual activity. Considering the fact that normally men are sexually attracted to, and sometimes obsessed with, breasts, minor as it is—since it is only a ride or a short trip—the chance to take pleasure from a woman's breasts, nevertheless, is a very enticing idea for them.

The last appealing physical characteristic listed in the poem is "The bend of my hair". A 'bend' is defined as "a curve or turn, especial-

ly in a road or river” (Hornby and Wehmeier). However, considering that the context is hair, it can be assumed that the speaker suggests the curls of her hair. Apart from that, this description precisely matches Angelou, who is an Afro-American with coiled curly hair.

C. Seven Women’s Blessed Assurance

This poem describes seven different women with different physical appearances, some match the code of being commonly acceptable as beautiful, but some do not. However different they are, these women share one common thing—the fact that all of them are desirable for men. It shows that, despite of how they look like, women are still attractive and they still have the ability to tempt men, with their own unique charms.

The first stanza describes a small and short woman, which portrays a woman of non-ideal size and height. In spite of this, she still knows how to find a man no matter where she is. Whereas, the second stanza describes a completely different woman—she is depicted as very tall and compared to ‘string bean’, emphasizing her skinny figure. With her height and thin build, this woman matches the standard of fashion model, which is why she has enough charm to make men fall for her.

On the other hand, the third stanza describes the look of a woman by showing off the youth and freshness of the woman. Her young age implies many things about her look—young and fresh skin, liveliness, innocence, and pure beauty of a female.

The fourth stanza, surprisingly, describes a woman unlike the modern ideal standard of beauty. She is described as “fat as butter”. ‘Butter’, which is defined as “a solid ed-

ible emulsion of fat obtained from cream by churning” (*Merriam-Webster*, 137), clearly contains calories, one source of body fat. Using ‘butter’ as a comparison to being ‘fat’, the speaker only emphasizes the fact that she is far away from having the ideal figure.

However, the speaker is also described as being “sweet as cake”. The word ‘sweet’, in terms of personality, is defined as “having or showing a kind character” (Hornby and Wehmeier). In terms of look, ‘sweet’ is defined as “attractive” (Hornby and Wehmeier). This quality is also emphasized by comparing it to a cake, a sweet food favoured by many people. Therefore, from the images given in the stanza, it can be inferred that even though she is fat and she does not fulfill the ideal standard of beauty, the speaker has a wonderful personality and she is somehow attractive. Her lovable personality assures that she would still be favoured in spite of her being fat. Regardless of the lack, with her quality and charm she can still make men ‘tremble’ in excitement.

The woman in the fifth stanza is yet another kind of woman. She is pictured as being “little and lean”. The word ‘lean’, when used to describe someone’s physical appearance, usually has positive or approving connotation. The second line “sweet to the bone”, a line suggesting that every part of the speaker is sweet, emphasizes her attractiveness very strongly.

The woman in the fifth stanza has the characteristics of a feminine woman, which is completely the opposite of those of men. She is described as having the nature that is often associated with the feminine. This is the reason why she is very appealing for men,

shown by the last two lines of the stanza, in which the speaker states that more than one man fancy and enjoy her presence by carrying her home.

D. General Picture of Sexual and Physical Appeal

In general, "Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman" and "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance" suggest that woman sexuality, especially in relation with the physical and sexual appeal, is a magnificent object wanted by many. In these poems, Angelou puts forward the idea that, while the society has maintained standards of beauty, regardless of how a woman looks like, every part of her is appealing—physically and sexually. Each woman, no matter how she looks like, is desirable for men and has a unique charm that will appeal to men.

Pride, Strength and Self-Confidence

A. Woman Me

Other than describing woman sexuality through physical and sexual appeal, "Woman Me" also portrays other qualities of the feminine. In the excerpts below, it is evident that Maya Angelou describes a woman glowing with strength in her poem.

In the line "A grasp of Lions", Angelou uses the image of lions to picture the strength of the woman described in the poem. Hornby and Wehmeier define the word 'grasp' as "a firm hold of sb/sth or control over sb/sth" and "the ability to get or achieve sth", while lion is known as the king of the jungle. Lions are the largest of the large cats and only few animals will dare to challenge them, since lions are also feared among beasts. The line express-

es the speaker's strength—she has the ability to firmly hold, control over, and/or achieve whatever it is she wants to achieve. In addition, Angelou does not only use 'lion', but 'lions', to add up to the sense of strength—it symbolizes an immense power and denotes the sense of pride and self-confidence.

Other than displaying strength in its common form, in the excerpt below, Maya Angelou illustrates the strength of a woman's tears. Tears, often associated with weakness, is portrayed as precious and very powerful. Using the terms "jeweled" and "strewn in a diadem", Angelou emphasizes the value of a woman's tears. Decorated with jewels and covered with a 'diadem', a woman's tears are strong enough to cause Pharaoh, the highest ruler of ancient Egypt, to throw away his pride and power to "ride deep in the bosom of the Nile", the longest river on earth, and risk his life.

The word 'tears' is not the only way Angelou presents the feminine strength. She also uses a very feminine form of a woman in pointing out a woman's strength in the line that reads "A bride of hurricanes". The word 'bride' means "a woman on her wedding day, or just before or just after it" (Hornby and Wehmeier). A wedding day is one of the most important days in a woman's life. On this day, women will put on their best make up and dress in their best dress—the wedding dress. Therefore, the word 'bride' is used to represent a woman in her best, most beautiful and celebrated condition.

The word 'hurricane', on the other hand, is defined as "a violent storm with very strong winds" by Hornby and Wehmeier. 'Hurricane' is used to imply a strong and bold character.

In another line, “A stomp of feet”, Angelou also displays a sense of power and authority. The word ‘stomp’ is defined as “to walk, dance, or move with heavy steps” (Hornby and Wehmeier). Therefore, both lines manifest the image of a beautiful, celebrated and strong woman.

Another image of strength and self-confidence can be found in the excerpt “Your laughter, pealing tall / above the bells of ruined cathedrals”. The first line illustrates the laughter of the woman described in the poem. The word ‘pealing’ gives the impression that the woman laughs suddenly, spontaneously and loudly. The voice is told to be louder and in higher pitch than that of the ring of church bells. Traditionally, the conventional norm instructs women to be well-mannered, gracious and elegant—one way to fulfill this standard is by holding in feelings, as well as laughter. Laughing loudly is considered a disgrace and will usually be associated with the behavior of low-educated people from lower social class that have no manner.

The image of “ruined cathedrals” is used to represent the disgracefulness. A cathedral is “the main church of a district, under the care of a bishop” (Hornby and Wehmeier). Being under the care of a priest of high rank, a cathedral is certainly a respectful place. However, since it is depicted as being ruined, the cathedral has lost its significance, and even though its bells ring, no one will come and pray in the cathedral. It is at a comparable state with the woman who laughs loudly, against the norm—no longer respected.

However, the woman described in the poem does not bother much about the standard made by the society. Laughing in this

manner clearly shows that the woman described in this poem has a modern set of mind and has set herself free from the traditional norms, even though it may cause her to be judged by other people. She believes in herself and she is strong enough to endure the consequence of her action, while also confident enough to be herself at the same time.

B. Phenomenal Woman

“Phenomenal Woman” begins with the speaker already illustrating her look. Unlike fashion magazine beauties, the speaker admits that she does not fit the general standard of being beautiful popular among the society. She clearly states that she is different. However, even other pretty women acknowledge the speaker’s beauty, while not knowing what makes the speaker the way she is. It is her ‘secret’ that makes her so attractive that pretty women wonder about her secret. However, it seems that the other women do not have this ‘secret’, or inner beauty the speaker has, because they do not believe the speaker when she tells them.

In this poem, Maya Angelou uses four particular lines to end each stanza. The first line, “I’m a woman”, emphasizes the fact that the speaker is a woman. The word ‘phenomenally’ used in the second line means “in a very great or impressive way” (Hornby and Wehmeier). The third line, “Phenomenal woman”, is a statement of a very great or impressive woman—a woman of phenomenal nature, while the last line underlines that the speaker is the woman of phenomenal nature. Throughout the poem, this stanza is repeated four times. This repetition, other than giving pattern to the poem, functions as an emphasis that strength-

ens the meaning, theme and main idea of the poem—the phenomenal woman.

The second stanza describes a scene where the speaker walks up to a man calmly, and other men react in a way that shows their dislike. One reaction is to 'stand', showing that they dislike what they see and want to take action. The other reaction is to "Fall down on their knees", showing that they feel defeated and have given up. However, both reactions are evidence for the charm and attractiveness of the speaker.

After that, the speaker, again, describes the way those men react towards her presence. They 'swarm' or move about around her in a large groups. The word 'swarm' is usually used to refer to a large group of insects moving around like bees. The speaker also uses 'honey bees' to symbolize how men try to get closer to her and when they make it, they stay there, moving around with the speaker as the focal point, showing that they are very interested in the speaker.

The excerpt "It's the fire in my eyes" suggests that the speaker has a very strong character. The eyes are parts of a person that show their mind, feelings and character. The fire in the speaker's eyes denotes a strong emotion, strength of mind, and determination. Other than physical beauty, the strong character the speaker possesses is a factor that draws men towards her. "And the joy in my feet" describes the speaker's character shown in the way she walks. This line depicts that the speaker walks happily, which suggests that she is not a glum woman. She is happy of herself and her life.

The attractiveness of the speaker is not merely physical. The fact that men cannot put

their hands on what makes the speaker attractive also drives them towards the speaker. The statement that the speaker remains an unsolved mystery for men is expressed in the third stanza.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker also describes her strength, pride and confidence in a very imposing way. This stanza pictures the speaker's profile, physically and emotionally. The speaker uses "my head's not bowed" to illustrate the way she holds her head up high and values herself enough not to place herself in the background. She is confident enough not to put herself inferior to anyone.

She also does not "shout or jump about" nor "have to talk real loud", implying that the speaker does not need to attract attention by making loud noise or doing an excessive action like jumping about. The speaker does not need to do any of those, since she does not need approval or acknowledgment from other people because she is comfortable with and sure of herself.

In the last two lines, the speaker confidently states that just seeing her passing should make the beholder proud. The speaker attracts enough attention as it is. Someone has to be in such impressive or remarkable condition for other people to be proud of seeing her/him, and this is the condition the speaker is in. If other people are proud of only seeing her, the speaker herself must be very proud of being her.

Another line in the last stanza that shows the speaker's strength is the line "the palm of my hand". Having someone in the palm of one's hand means having control or influence over her/him. Therefore, it can be deduced that 'the palm of hand' the speaker is point-

ing out refers to her control or influence over other people, one of her qualities as a phenomenal woman.

C. Seven Women's Blessed Assurance

There are several lines in this poem that express how easy it is for the speaker to attract men. They exude very strong confidence from each of the woman described in the poem. In the first stanza, the speaker explicitly states that she can find a man no matter where she goes, while in the second stanza the speaker boldly says that men will fall for her very easily after only seeing her.

The speaker of the third stanza is radiant-ly confident. Not only has she praised herself, she also states that everybody loves her. She confidently ends the stanza by saying "and so do you", emphasizing that even the readers love her, after only knowing that she is "young as morning and fresh as dew".

In the fourth stanza, even though the speaker is fat, she can still make men 'tremble'. She does not feel inferior or ashamed because of her figure. Instead, she embraces the fact that she is not the typical pretty girl considered beautiful by the society. She does not complain about it. In fact, she still knows how to be appealing to men.

Even though most of the times beauty is identified with youth, and that aging is considered getting less and less beautiful, the speaker of the sixth stanza does not sound insecure about her age. Even though she is no longer young, she does not need to pretend to be anything or anybody else—she "dropped pretense". She sounds very sure of herself, because she has "got some sense". The speaker knows that she is smart, and

that is enough to attract men or keep her man with her.

In the last stanza, the speaker is even older, but the confidence expressed is equally strong. The speaker states that even at the age of fifty-nine, a woman is still 'perfect', without weaknesses. She still has all that is necessary to attract and keep her man with her, because even at that age she can still fulfill the needs of men, which in that age will not be as much as those of the younger age.

D. General Picture of Pride, Strength and Self-Confidence

In these poems, Angelou paints a very strong idea that a woman is defined also by her strength, self-confidence, and the way she embraces herself, because even objects that are considered as weakness of the feminine can also be used to define a woman's strength. Furthermore, Angelou also emphasizes that even though a woman does not suit the standards of beauty set by the society, her strength and self-confidence will still win over men. Therefore, a woman does not have to abide and burry herself in the traditional standards of beauty. She should not be defined by others. A woman has to believe in herself and be strong enough to accept herself and be beautiful the way she is.

Femininity

A. Woman Me

There are several parts of the poem "Woman Me" that portray the qualities of femininity. The first one is the excerpt "Your smile, delicate / rumor of peace" The woman described in the poem is portrayed as having a smile that brings peace, and that this quality

has been known and talked about. This excerpt displays the softness of a woman.

The word 'lap' means "the top part of your legs that forms a flat surface when you are sitting down" (Hornby and Wehmeier), and 'lamb', apart from its literal meaning, a young sheep, is often "used to describe or address sb with affection or pity" (Hornby and Wehmeier). This line "A lap of Lambs" describes a 'lap' with 'lambs' on it, which displays affection emanated by the woman described in the poem.

In the excerpt "A swarm of summer wind", the woman described in the poem is compared with the summer wind. Wind blowing during summer, the hottest season of the year, will surely bring fresh air that not only will bring refreshment, but also affects the weather by making it more comfortable. This poem suggests that a woman, like "A swarm of summer breeze", brings refreshment and comfortable feelings to her surroundings.

Another character of a woman described in this poem can be found in the excerpt "A bevy of swift hands". The definition of the word 'bevy', according to Hornby and Wehmeier, is "a large group of people or things of the same kind". When in reality human normally only has two hands, the line describes a group of hands able to do things quickly. It implies that the woman described is a very adept woman. Apart from the skills in many other things, it displays an essence of a homemaker, which is a quality of femininity, since being a homemaker has long been strongly associated with the feminine.

B. Phenomenal Woman

Naturally, the feminine nature of a woman attracts men, both emotionally and sexually.

In this poem, apart from the glorious beauty of a woman, Maya Angelou also mentions ideas of feminine nature.

The word 'arms' in the line "It's in the reach of my arms" can imply embrace and shield. An embrace connotes affection, friendship and tenderness. On the other hand, a shield indicates protection and shelter. From those two different connotations of the word 'arms', it can be concluded that in the arms of a woman is a comfortable place offering affection, tenderness, and safety—it can embrace, yet protect at the same time.

Other than the embrace of a woman, femininity can also be seen in her manners and the way she does something, which is also a quality that appeals to men. The line "The grace of my style" states that there is grace in the speaker's style. Often associated with woman and femininity, the word 'grace' means "an attractive quality of movement that is smooth, elegant and controlled" and "a quality of behaviour that is polite and pleasant and deserves respect" (Hornby and Wehmeier). Therefore, it can be inferred that the line above affirms that the speaker is graceful in her movement, also in the way she does something and behaves.

Furthermore, the feminine nature is not only seen by the behaviour of the woman. It can also be observed through what she wears. The woman described in "Phenomenal Woman" mentions 'heels' to represent one of her qualities as a phenomenal woman. High heels is one type of woman shoes, in which the heel of the foot is taller than the toe. High heels are items considered fashionable, and most of the time, sexy.

Heels are not something one simply wears on their feet, but a passion, hobby, personal ex-

pression, source of authority, sexual independence, staple of gendered feminine culture, mark of flaunted femininity, psychologically empowering, and joy. ([Abeyta](#))

These shoes are special in a way that it enhances the beauty of the leg line. High heels also make the one that is dressed in them look taller, slimmer and more graceful. Other than that, these shoes have an upper class connotation. By wearing high heels, the speaker confirms her femininity and defines her sexual independence.

Another trait that is very strongly related to feminine quality is motherhood. This characteristic is shown in the excerpt "The need of my care". The word 'care' illustrates a very strong maternal instinct of a caring mother. Comprising this characteristic as one of the appeals of a woman, Maya affirms that the very basic role of a woman as a mother is also another strength that is very much related to woman sexuality.

C. Seven Women's Blessed Assurance

In this poem, Maya Angelou expresses two manners in which a woman can assert her feminine nature. The first one is through her physical appearance. In the lines "I'm little and lean, / sweet to the bone" the speaker is described as the perfect manifestation of the feminine figure of a woman. She is little, lean and sweet—all of these traits are often associated with the ideal picture of a woman.

Another way to express a woman's feminine nature is by her character. The excerpt "cause every man needs / to rest sometime" pictures a motherly woman, whom men can rest on. The way the speaker is described gives an impression that the speaker is a

dependable and reliable woman, and what is more, this woman feels like home. This characteristic somehow suggests the typical homemaker, which is a very feminine quality. When a man looks for a wife, most of the times he will look for a woman that can be a good wife, and in accord with the popular norms, a good wife is one that can take care of the house and the family, one a man can return to, to rest.

D. General Picture of Femininity

Angelou expresses various feminine qualities in "Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman", and "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance". She describes the women in her poems as full of affection, a source of refreshment and comfort, a 'home'. Cataloging these qualities considered feminine, Angelou also suggests that being feminine is a woman's innate nature. This is the characteristic men do not have and also one that serves as an attraction for men, which is a large part of woman sexuality.

EXPRESSIVE STUDY ON MAYA ANGELOU'S "WOMAN ME", "PHENOMENAL WOMAN" AND "SEVEN WOMEN'S BLESSED ASSURANCE"

Young Maya Angelou was evidently nothing like the women described in "Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman" and "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance". While the woman described in "Phenomenal Woman" has physical characteristics that would match Maya's, she is very different emotionally compared to young Maya Angelou. The aspects that make Angelou different from these women are the women's self-assurance about themselves, their sexuality and their strength.

While the women in her poems are very confident about themselves physically, emotionally and sexually, Angelou was the complete opposite. Ever since she was a young girl, she had suffered from insecurities. Other than the emotional insecurities resulting from her parents' divorce, Angelou also developed insecurities about her physical appearance. She believed that she was ugly and had always dreamed of being a pretty, white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Angelou's insecurities about her physical appearance grew even bigger in her adolescence. However, Angelou describes the women in her poems in very different condition. Not only have they accepted their physical traits, they are also proud of the way they look. They embrace what they have and even make it their strong point.

Growing up without a father's figure drove Angelou to crave for a husband and a happy family. This craving resulted in her falling very easily in love, also her being vulnerable and easily deceived. Maya also had always had a strong desire of being accepted by a man and she would go to long extent to prove that she is worth enough. She forced herself into being a housewife, she was willing to marry someone she did not love (and she knew as well the man only wanted sex and food from her), she even became a prostitute for her boyfriend. On the contrary, the women in her poems are very strong, confident women who do not need acceptance from other people.

CONCLUSION

"Woman Me", "Phenomenal Woman" and "Seven Women's Blessed Assurance" are poems about women of impressive values. In

these poems, Angelou displays the idea that woman sexuality is glorious and celebrated. Describing each woman magnificently, these poems are hymns of woman's beauty, which can be found in every part of every woman.

Through these poems, Angelou explains that woman sexuality, in its various intensity, has several aspects of sources. Of course, physical and sexual appeal of a woman play a part in exuding the sense of sexuality, but each woman has different shape of body and face. Even though the society has maintained standards of ideal body and look, every woman is beautiful in her own way. When a woman accepts and embraces herself, regardless of what has been set by the society, she will retain her pride and self-confidence. It will become her strength, along with her innate feminine nature.

However, those women in her poems are manifestations of what Angelou was not, before she grew and accept herself. Through her poems, Angelou represents the idea of sexuality completely the opposite of what she was like in her younger years. The values Angelou pours into the poems are attained, after a lot of difficulties and sufferings, from the experiences she has been through, which have also taught her a great deal of lesson about being a woman that stands on her own feet.

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