



Embracing Marginality; A Reading of Maya Angelo's 'Phenomenal Woman'

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Abstract— *Literature of the Oppressed is replete with exercises in subjectivity. The present paper is an attempt to read Maya Angelo's 'Phenomenal Woman' in the background of theories on gender, body and gaze and examine how Angelo alters the aforesaid theoretical canons and embraces marginality. As Angelo embraces her marginality, she celebrates 'I'ness of her soul and in the process records the way she experiences her body and how others perceive her body.*

Keywords— *Beauty, Body, Dualisms, Narratives, Women as Object, Subjectivity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Each time a woman stands up for herself... she stands up for all women"(qtd in Good Reads). *Phenomenal Woman* appears in Part I of Maya Angelo's anthology of poetry "And Still I Rise". In calling herself Phenomenal, Angelo recognises her body as a site of meaning. Echoing Umberto Eco's concept of body as a communication machine, Angelo discloses that her secret lies in her body. The reach of her arms, the span of her hips, the stride of her step, the curl of her lips turn her phenomenal.

II. THE BODY

Discourses on beauty centre on the white, pretty women as the ideal. Narratives are replete with tales of men in search of or enamoured by a white, pretty woman. Women as the object of desire have seldom been recorded in terms other than white. Breaking free of this binary of pretty/ugly; pretty being white and black being ugly, and the stereotype of body being defined in terms of colour, Angelo says the fire of her eyes, the flash of her teeth, the swing of her waist, the joy in her feet, compel men to fall down on their knees and swarm round her like "a hive of honey bees" (Angelo 3). In the process Angelo reconceptualises figures of speech and narratives on beauty. As pointed by Nehamas in *Only a Promise of*

Happiness "Beautiful things don't stand aloof, but direct our attention" (qtd in *Take Away the Takeaway*, Senachal).

Women, as Beauvoir states in 'The Second Sex' "Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words... discovers the meaning of the words pretty and ugly; she soon knows that to be pleased is to be pretty as a picture; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales" (qtd. in "Feminist Perspectives on Body"). Maya Angelo sets down her contempt of the stereotype of being looked as the 'other' by pretty women, when she says "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies. I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size. But when I start to tell them, they think I'm telling lies" (Angelo 3) Maya Angelo reinvents, proclaims her subjectivity and establishes an "oppositional discourse" (Pienaar and Bekker) by the way she carries her body.

Digressing from Beauvoir's account of the way in which "women live their bodies in an objectified way, internalizing the gaze and producing their bodies as objects for others"(qtd in *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*), Angelo says:

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.

They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery. (Angelo 4)

Angelo distorts the Freudian notion of 'uncanny' where Freud theorize the gaze "as a phallic activity linked to a sadistic mastery of the object. As long as the master's *Scopophilia*(love of looking) is satisfied, his domination is secure. For Freud, as for other western Philosophers, the woman becomes a mirror for his own masculinity" (Geetha and Sarulatha 3).

She erases the tag of being the other, as she preserves her "inner mystery" (Angelo 4); denying men a scope to exercise their control. She speaks of herself and represents her presence as she maps her "inner mystery". She claims, it, lies in the arch of her back, the sun of her smile, the ride of her breasts and the grace of her style thus making a shift from being an object to a subject exercising her agency.

Dismantling the cultural expectations imposed on her through her body Maya Angelo celebrates her Black American identity:

Now you understand
 Just why my head's not bowed.
 I don't shout or jump about
 Or have to talk real loud.
 When you see me passing,
 It ought to make you proud.
 I say,
 It's in the click of my heels,
 The bend of my hair,
 the palm of my hand,
 The need for my care.
 'Cause I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me. (Angelo 4)

III. CONCLUSION

Angelou reverses hierarchies, undermines dualisms and thus recognises her marginal status. Marginality is a shadow line which blurs when one is successfully able to assert their agency in the 'power centres' of culture.

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