

WOMEN'S VOICES IN MAYA ANGELOU'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

This study reveals tone of the two Maya Angelou's poems. They are entitled Phenomenal Woman and Equality. Revealing tone needs to find out the speakers of the poems. They also convey message for the readers, so that it finds the voice of the poems. This study includes in a qualitative research that does not discuss numerical data. It describes findings of the data used. Conducting this study, the researchers did some procedures; reading the two poems as the data, identifying poems' elements including the speaker, analyzing the tone and the message, and interpreting the data. It applies poetry theory that focuses on the intrinsic elements; tone, speaker, image, and figure of speech. From the procedures conducted, the two poems have different tone, but over all they tend to convey positive tone. Phenomenal Woman brings self-confidence tone of a woman. It has message for people, especially women, not to be embarrassed to what they have. They need care to be respected by others. Then, the second poem, Equality shows dissatisfaction and anger of a woman who experienced inequality in the society. Both poems are conveyed by women as the speakers.

Keywords: poem, tone, speaker, image, Maya Angelou, *Phenomenal Woman*, *Equality*

1. Introduction

Literary work covers three genres; poetry, drama, and prose. One of works considered difficult is poetry or poem. Poetry is one of literary genre that expresses emotions and feelings of the writer, called poet. The emotion and feelings the readers feel are composed in a compact way. As Wordsworth said, poetry is nevertheless the spontaneous overflow of feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. Poetry is written in lines different from prose in paragraph. Although it is in lines, readers may find that it can convey the message. The poets do not use explicit expression in sentences or phrases clearly. But, they use metaphors that represent the emotions and feelings.

In writing a poetry or poem, there is one's voice in it. We often guess it as poet's voice. In fact, we seldom know the poet's life and we do not always need to find out it first. Then, the poets do not always put themselves as persons who deliver the message. They may put someone as the speakers of their messages. Readers can recognize the speakers when they read it whether female or male speaks the texts. We do not know the poet's background of life if we read a poem, but some poems reflect the poet's life. The readers know it from the language they use. Language can represent who speaks the texts.

Not only the speaker may the readers recognize, a poetry or poem expresses tones of the texts. Tone is one important thing in poetry, moreover it can influence the way reading it. Persons who read poetry (loudly) should know the text well, the message and the content, so that they can express what it wants to convey to the listeners. Poetry may express sadness, happiness, doubt, or anger to the subject written in it. These emotions are caught in poetry, and it can represent poet's attitude toward a certain subject or theme, although a poet may put someone else to speak a subject.

Readers may find various topics in poetry from fantasy into reality. Topics that relate to social conditions become a choice for the poets to express their feelings or protest to a certain condition. Women become subject that can be explored from the beauty to the life. This subject is interesting to discuss, because women often get unfair treatment in society. This unfairness happens in public area and domestic area. Women themselves have their own point of view toward their life and the unfairness. Male and female poets write this subject to express their opinion. Male poets who write on women in their works are Bruce Andrew and Charles Bernstein. They mention themselves supporting feminism. For female poets are not surprising in echoing their condition as the topic.

One of female poets who explores woman as the subject in their works is Maya Angelou. She is African-American who became a poet and writer in her young adult. Angelou was born on April 4, 1928 and died on May 28, 2014. She occupied a series of professions from fry cook, sex worker to journalist. She also supported Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and developed the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Then, she decided to be a writer and poet after working a series of occupation. Angelou wrote her personal life in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

that becomes her prominent work. It is known as her autobiography. Not only memoirs she wrote, Angelou also produced poetry. Her poetry entitled *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* was nominated for Pulitzer Prize in 1972. It was published in 1971. This volume contains 38 poems.

Maya Angelou wrote some poetry in volumes. *Gather Together in My Names* is a volume which she wrote when she was seventeen years old and a new mother. Then she wrote *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas*, it is about her tour in Europe. Her travel to Africa she wrote in *Porgy and Bees: The Heart of a Woman* in 1981. But, she did not stop writing in poems and memoirs, she also wrote several books for children and essays in 1990s.

2. Review of Related Literature

This research needs theory and supporting references. It uses poems as the object of this study, especially focusing on voice of the poems. In discussing the voice of poem, it needs to comprehend some terminologies that relate to discussion. Besides discussing the intrinsic elements of poem, message of the poem is also analyzed.

Poetry

Poetry is one of literary genre that is written in a compact way. Poetry is different from other literary genre; prose and drama. The difference is not only from the form, but it also needs to read slowly, carefully, and attentively. It may not find in prose and drama. Poetry offers emotion, reflection, thought, and feeling called narrow room. From poetry, readers may think, it also reflects and instructs the readers from the text written.

Poetry not only composes words and thoughts, but it also contains music that we may find in rhyme and rhythms to intensify emotional effect. As Nemerov said, poetry evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm (www.britannica.com/art/poetry). Sound and rhythm in poem are important in creating meaning.

Tone

Tone is an expression in poetry that portrays the attitude of the poet toward a message he/she writes. In poetry, we will not see the poet's face nor listen to his/her voice, but we can guess his/her attitude from the text written. As readers, we do not really know the poet's attitude toward a subject or theme, but we feel when we read the subject or theme. So, what is tone? According to Gioia, tone is not an attitude; it is whatever in the poem makes an attitude clear to us: the choice of certain words instead of others, the picking out of certain details (2003:20). Analyzing poem's tone needs not only to listen to what a subject is being said, but also how it is being said.

Speaker

Poetry contains person who speaks the subject. It is called speaker or the person in the poem as one of the most important aspects in poetry. This person asks readers to communicate about the subject or theme. The speaker in poem is not always the poet. He/she may write a subject in different point of view. A writer may use other persona to discuss a theme, the poet wants to use different perspective from the theme he/she writes. The voice does not always represent the author himself / herself individually.

Image

Poetry is a description of situation that is written in language. The description expresses impression of the speaker that conveys it. It contains image which suggests readers to imagine the situation described. A poetry or poem can be compared to a picture. As Sidney defined poetry is a speaking picture – with this end – to teach, and delight.

Image that is used in conveying an experience or situation is based on human senses. There are five senses; sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. An image that shows human sight is called visual image. Auditory image delivers sound heard or produced. Human touch includes in tactile image. Gustatory image conveys taste that human senses. And the last, olfactory is an image that delivers the smell.

The image can be in a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or entire poem. All kinds of image can be written to help readers understanding the experience portrayed. A reader much more understands a written situation or experience, if it contains complete images that may help him/her feeling it.

Figure of Speech

One of poetry characteristics is full of comparison. The comparison occurs in the two different things that the readers do not realize the similarities before. Comparing two different things is called figure of speech. Figure of speech is used to freshness or to emphasize. A poet may use connotation of words.

3. Methodology

This study is an analytical qualitative research. The research will describe the voice in poems written by Maya Angelou. This study does not relate and count any numerical data. It exposes the findings relate to the category.

This research conducted some procedures to achieve the objective of the study. The procedures are first, reading the poems written by Maya Angelou, second indentifying tone and speaker, and interpreting the poems relating to women's voice.

The data are collected from Maya Angelou's selected poems. Because Angelou wrote many poems, the researchers only focused on three of hers. The data are collected from her three poems entitled (1), (2), and (3). The data are taken from internet website downloaded.

This study analyzed data from Maya Angelou's poems. The study used words, phrases and sentences of the poems to analyze. They will be categorized based on the problems found.

4. Result and Discussion

This research discusses two selected poems written by Maya Angelou. First poem is entitled *Phenomenal Woman* and the second one is *Equality*. *Phenomenal Woman* tells a woman who feels proud of herself, because she thinks different from others. This poem consists of six stanzas that each stanza contains various lines. It also includes free verse poem. The title depicts specialty of a woman from her own point of view.

4.1 The Tone of *Phenomenal Woman*

Firstly, discussing *Phenomenal Woman* tone needs to reveal each stanza. It expresses different mode of tone that changes from one situation into another one. Although the difference does not make significant development, it is important to elaborate each of them. Start from the first stanza, it contains:

Pretty woman 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.
 I say,
 It's in the reach of my arm,
 The span of my hips,
 The stride of my step,
 The curl of my lips.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

The first stanza reveals a woman satisfaction. She considers herself satisfied not from her physical appearance that makes beautiful women curious. She knows that what she does and has as described as her images are not in beauty standards. Angelou wrote the images clearly that she is not beautiful in second line 'But I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size'. It shows that she is not slim and beautiful but it makes pretty women jealous. This conditions are supported in the sixth to eighth lines: 'The span of my hips', 'The stride of my step', and 'The curl of my lips'. All images do not represent a beauty of a woman. She does not look like an ideal woman physically and she realizes it. A model will walk in long step as she does and she should have slim hips, but she does not. The third and fourth lines state her realization; 'But when I start to tell them,' and 'They think I'm telling lies'.

The images in the first stanza depict her self-confidence. She does not feel embarrassed and inferior to what she has. The images of the woman represent a disproportional woman. The images focus on physical appearance of the woman. But, she does not mind having them. She feels confidence on what she has. Moreover, she declares herself as a phenomenal woman as stated in the last line of first stanza. In the first stanza, she admits it in front of pretty women.

The second stanza still depicts her self-confidence on her physical appearance. The lines of this stanza perform images of the woman. Then, a metaphor reflects what she feels as an admiration toward her.

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.
 I say,
 It's the fire in my eyes,
 And the flash of my teeth,
 The swing in my waist,
 And the joy in my feet.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.

Here, the stanza reflects different condition that she admits her specialty when she is in front of men. In front of men, she does not expose her major physical appearance, but she uses minor attraction of hers. Eyes, teeth, waist, and feet become men's enjoyment on the woman. Those are composed in images that show each its characteristics. Angelou wrote two of the images in metaphorical style; 'It's the fire in my eyes'. The word 'the fire' means spirit of hers that shows her eagerness. Then 'And the flash of my teeth' implies her smile. It indicates her good behavior, kind to others. The woman feels confidence on herself as the men come around her as Angelou stated in 'Then they swarm around me,' and 'A hive of honey bees'. The lines portray comparison between men and bees. It is the metaphor. Once again, she declares herself as a woman phenomenally.

The stanza three is a transition from the first two stanzas into the last two stanzas. It does not depict any images of the woman. It only reveals her statement about her identity as a phenomenal woman.

Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

Although it does not mention anything that makes her special, it still shows her self-confidence. Revealing by ourselves who we are is not an easy action, it needs bravery and confidence. These characters of the woman emerge in this stanza. She is no doubt to say who she is.

Her specialty causes some people disbelieve to what she has, but she still trusts on herself. The fourth stanza shows her confidence:

Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery.
 When I try to show them,
 They say they still can't see.
 I say,
 It's in the arch of my back,
 The sun of my smile,
 The ride of my breast,
 The grace of my style.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

The form of the fourth stanza is the same as the first stanza, although they are not composed in the same lines. The first stanza consists of thirteen lines (13) and the fourth stanza has sixteen lines (16). In the stanzas, Angelou divides it into four parts; (1) disbelief of people, (2) her effort to show her specialty, (3) showing her outstanding, and (4) her statement on self-confidence. The first part found in five lines of the fourth stanza shows men disbelief to what

she has as she called it inner mystery. She does not stop to men actions. She shows her eagerness to make sure the men. 'When I try to show them,' implies her eagerness from the word 'try'. Still disbelieve to her, she does the next step by showing her specialty. Angelou exposes them as images of this poem. The images of her back, smile, breast, and grace. The woman has good self-confidence by stating in the positive ways, especially her smile with 'the sun', and her style with 'the grace'. The sun and the grace have positive meanings. Sun has light to shine. It implies she may give contribution to others. Grace has good quality, because she is polite and honest. But, the ride of breast shows her sexual attractiveness as a woman. Then, the last part of this stanza states her self-confidence as stated in the first stanza. As a whole, this stanza clearly presents the tone in self-confident of the speaker.

The last stanza of *Phenomenal Woman* is also consistent in showing a woman's self-confidence. It also exposes her confidence on her parts of body. But, the stanza reveals her reason why she is so confident.

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.

Image dominates this stanza revealing the tone. Each image points to the woman self-confidence. It starts from the second line 'Just why my head's not bowed'. This line implies a self-confidence of the woman to carry herself. She has no doubt to face in front of her. It will be different if she bows her head. Bowing head means distrust to herself. Then, the next lines describe that she does not need exaggerate her action to attract others. She behaves as a woman should. In line 5 and 6 she expects others to be proud of her. Here, she cannot insist people to what she has. But, she still believes in herself. She does not need to speak up what she has, people can see them by themselves. She does not have what beautiful women have in physical appearance, but she has care. Care is the answer that makes her confident. Her behavior and attitude show her caring; they way she speaks is in a good way. She shows her tenderness. Caring makes her special, so that she says explicitly as a woman phenomenally. She realizes what a woman should have to make her special and respected is care.

1.2 The Tone of *Equality*

Maya Angelou's *Equality* reflects an anger of a woman who experiences an inequality. This poem expresses optimism of an oppressed woman. It uses conversation of the oppressed and the oppressor. The speaker mentions the oppressor as 'you'. It does not only contain optimism, but it also shares her anger and dissatisfaction.

Equality consists of eight stanzas. All stanza have various lines starting the first stanza has eight line. In the first stanza the tone reveals anger of a woman. The speaker feels ignored, although she tries hard to be seen and heard.

You declare you see me dimly
 through a glass which will not shine,
 though I stand before you boldly,
 trim in rank and marking time.
 You do own to hear me faintly
 As a whisper out of range,
 While my drums beat out the message
 And the rhythms never change.

Feeling ignored of the speaker can be known from the images and simile found in this stanza. The first line to the fourth line describe her being ignored by 'you'. They are categorized as visual image. The descriptor 'dimly' and 'trim' create the ignored sense toward the speaker. The fifth and sixth lines depict her dissatisfaction of being human who is not admitted the existence. Then, the simile compares between 'you do own to hear me faintly' and 'a whisper out of range'. It implies what she says is not heard clearly.

This first stanza also describes her effort to make her message heard. Here, Angelou chose the word 'drums' as an auditory image. Using drum makes sense the instrument sounds loudly. The sense of loudness of this instrument is supported by using verb 'beat out'. It shows her hard effort to gain her wish.

The speaker feels annoying to what she gets. She shares what the opponent says about her. The word choice 'wanton' and 'shadow' create meaning for her inferior. The word 'wanton' has negative meaning for women. She feels disgraced to the attribute given by 'you'. The third stanza writes:

You announce my ways are wanton,
That I fly from man to man,
But if I'm just a shadow to you,
Could you ever understand?

This stanza contains visual image, shadow. People cannot see the figure clearly, if it is only shadow that has no color, black only. Describing the speaker as a shadow, she feels inferior. There is anger in the last line. She wants the second person to comprehend her position

Stanza four consists of four lines. The first two lines describe her memory on sad condition of hers. These lines use 'we' that means the second person (you) also involve in the events; history and past, written as follows:

We have lived a painful history,
We know the shameful past,
But I keep on marching forward,
And you keep on coming last.

There is anger after she experienced bad and embarrassed events. But, she still fights to get what she wants stated in the next stanza, equality. The word 'marching' in line 3 is metaphor that implies fighting or struggling. She wants her freedom.

In the sixth stanza, the tone of anger and being annoyed dominate it. The speaker feels annoyed because there is no respond from the oppressor. The oppressor does not care to what happened to her. The visual image 'blinder and vision, and 'padding and ear' lead the tone to lack of caring.

Take the blinders from our vision,
Take the padding from your ears,
And confess you've heard me crying,
And admit you've seen my tears.

Line one and two imply her annoyed to the oppressor. She knows that they see and hear the event. The sadness is conveyed by the auditory and visual images from the descriptors; crying and tears. They know she cries.

The optimism rises in the seventh stanza. Forcing the energy to achieve freedom and equality is reflected in this stanza.

Hear the tempo so compelling,
Hear the blood throb in my veins.
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,
And the rhythms never change.

The auditory images from the descriptor 'hear' describe the spirit to gain equality and freedom. The tactile image emerges in line two from the phrase 'throb in my veins'. Line three and four also show auditory images. The images described in stanza seven support creating optimism tone of the speaker.

4.2 The Speakers of Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

A poet wrote a poem will not always use herself / himself as a person who conveys the message. She / he may put someone else to speak up the content of the poem. The person intended conveying the message is called the speaker. The speaker can be known from the pronoun written in the text.

Maya Angelou wrote two poems entitled *Phenomenal Woman* and *Equality*. She uses women as the speakers of them. But, it cannot say that Angelou herself who conveys the message of the poem. She puts various characteristics of women in her works.

4.2.1 The Speaker of *Phenomenal Woman*

The first poem analyzed entitled *Phenomenal Woman* obviously states a woman as the speaker. In all stanzas, Angelou mentions woman repeatedly. It is no doubt that the speaker of *Phenomenal Woman* is a woman. A woman declares herself as phenomenal one. In each stanza she states:

I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

The speaker of the poem is conveyed by the first speaker. It uses first pronoun 'I' and 'me' to represent a woman. Angelou uses anaphora to present her speaker, a phenomenal woman.

4.2.2 The Speaker of *Equality*

The second poem of Maya Angelou analyzed is *Equality*. This poem also uses the first speaker. It is known from the pronoun use, 'I', 'me' and 'my'. The pronouns are found in the first stanza in line 1, 3, and 5. Stanza 2, 5, and 8 are anaphora that mention the first speaker. Then, stanza 3 mentions the first speaker in line 1, 2 and 3. Stanza 4 states the speaker in line 3. Stanza 6 mentions the first speaker in line 3 and 4. Finally, stanza 7 mentions it in line 2 and 3.

The identity of the speaker is a woman revealed in stanza 2. This stanza describes 'you' disgraces the speaker as wanton. It also explains the meaning of wanton to state a woman as the speaker in line 2.

You announce my ways are wanton,
That I fly from man to man,

So, the speaker of Maya Angelou's *Equality* is a woman who speaks up what she experiences in a society. The society disrespects and ignores her. The speaker is a woman who comes from minority. She lives in oppression from the majority.

4.3 The Messages of Maya Angelou's Selected Poems

Maya Angelou wrote many poems that share her experience as a woman and an African-American considered as minority. It would be hard for her to conduct her life in the middle of majority. In this study, two Maya Angelou's poems entitled *Phenomenal Woman* and *Equality* are analyzed.

4.3.1 The Message of *Phenomenal Woman*

Phenomenal Woman shares a woman experience in living in a society. The speaker of the poem is a woman. She urges others not only women, but also men to have self-confidence. She believes the confidence does not emerge from what we have in physical appearance. It is a problem that she faces. Society considers someone's quality from physical appearance, so that the speaker exposes all body parts she has. Exposing her body parts is to show other that it is not important for her having proportional body. The body parts of hers do not indicate an ideal figure. The figure causes pretty women and men disbelieve to her. They thought it is possible for her to declare herself as a phenomenal woman. A phenomenal woman can be meant a woman who has specialty.

The specialty women should have is not in their body. Not all women are created perfectly in physical appearance. They still have another important thing that society can see. It is care. Caring is one important side or factor women should keep. They cannot show all her perfect body all the time. It may decrease one day.

4.3.2 The Message of *Equality*

Maya Angelou wrote *Equality* by using a woman as the speaker to convey the message. It may contain about a woman who experienced double oppression. She experienced oppression as a woman and also as minority. It depicts her struggle to live in the society that never considers her. They give predicate to her in negative stigma.

As a woman, she never gives up to achieve freedom and equality. Freedom and equality are two precious things for her to live comfortably. She always struggles her wish day and night

5. Conclusion

This study draws conclusion on the analysis of the two Maya Angelou's poems. The first is *Phenomenal Woman*.

1. This poem contains self-confidence tone from beginning to the end of the poem. All stanzas reflect self-confidence of a woman. Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman* shows constant tone. The tone is supported by the images used in this poem.
2. Maya Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman* uses a woman as the speaker. It is also the first speaker, because it applies pronoun 'I', 'me', and 'my' which are written in all stanzas.
3. *Phenomenal Woman* asserts women to behave as a good person who always cares others. It does not matter if women do not have proportional body as society considers. The importance of being special woman is care.

The second poem analyzed from Maya Angelou's work is *Equality*.

1. The tone of *Equality* expresses anger, dissatisfaction, and optimism. In one stanza contains two different tones in separated lines. In lines 2, 5, and 8 contain optimism of gaining equality and freedom.
2. The speaker of *Equality* is a woman who experienced harassment and inequality whether she is a woman or a group member of minority.
3. This poem delivers a message for the readers to be brave and struggle for achieving freedom and equality. It is not only for minority group, but also for women.

6. Suggestion

After conducting this study, the researchers suggest to use poetry or poem in teaching students characters. It may help students feel experience of others. Feeling experience should be delivered intensively. Students should read closely, not loudly.

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