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## Redefining Identity: Resistance to Beauty Standards in Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman"

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**Abstract:** Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" reimagines female identity by rejecting narrow beauty standards and uplifting a model of womanhood rooted in inner power, emotional depth, and self-definition. Through Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation, the poem reflects a speaker who has reached psychological maturity and inner integration. Her insistent refrain, "Phenomenal woman, that's me," expresses a stable selfhood that emerges from confidence and self-awareness rather than external validation. Angelou's portrayal positions the speaker as a woman who is fully aware of her worth, unaffected by societal expectations, and courageous in affirming her identity.

Naomi Wolf's concept of the beauty myth strengthens this reading by exposing how society constructs unrealistic and restrictive standards to discipline women's behaviour. These norms function as cultural pressures that undermine autonomy and shape identity through constant comparison. Angelou's speaker actively resists these forces by refusing to imitate the fragile signs of conventional beauty, symbolised by "breezy feathers." Instead, she grounds her identity in authenticity her natural charisma, warmth, and emotional truth. This resistance transforms the poem into a critique of patriarchal aesthetics, celebrating a broader, more inclusive vision of womanhood rooted in dignity and self-respect.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower adds a significant theoretical dimension, revealing how modern societies regulate bodies through subtle mechanisms of control, including beauty ideals that shape how women should present themselves. Viewed through this biopolitical lens, beauty standards become tools that discipline the female body and identity. In Angelou's poem, the speaker subverts this control by asserting bodily autonomy and refusing to conform to regulated femininity. Her confident walk, compelling presence, and unwavering self-belief challenge the disciplinary gaze that seeks to limit her freedom. Through the combined lenses of psychological self-realisation, cultural resistance to the beauty myth, and defiance of biopolitical power, "Phenomenal Woman" emerges as a powerful celebration of liberated identity and embodied empowerment.

**Keywords:** *Beauty Myth, Biopower, Identity, Resistance, Self-Acceptance, Identity Formation, Body Autonomy, Empowerment*

## Introduction

**M**aya Angelou (1928–2014) remains one of the most influential African American writers whose life and works continue to transform conversations on race, gender, identity, and empowerment. Born in St. Louis and raised in the racially segregated South, Angelou endured childhood trauma, discrimination, and poverty—experiences that later shaped the emotional force of her writing. Her literary career spans poetry, autobiographies, essays, and public speeches, all of which highlight resilience, dignity, and the quest for self-definition. Her literary voice is defined by its deep compassion, emotional honesty, and commitment to social justice. Throughout her career, Angelou used storytelling as a way to reclaim dignity for Black women whose experiences had often been silenced in mainstream American literature. Her works blend personal memory with collective history, showing how individual struggles are shaped by larger forces such as racism, sexism, and class inequality. Angelou’s writing is also marked by a strong belief in the human capacity for healing and transformation.

Whether through her autobiographical series *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or her powerful poems of affirmation, she consistently emphasised courage, self-love, and the importance of claiming one’s voice. Critics widely acknowledge that Angelou’s contribution to American literature lies not only in her artistic achievements but also in her ability to inspire readers to imagine more liberated versions of themselves (National Book Foundation). Angelou’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, including her work with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, strengthened her commitment to creating literature that empowers marginalised voices. Through her eloquent expression and bold portrayals of Black womanhood, Angelou became a cultural symbol of strength and liberation, using her artistry to challenge oppressive structures and affirm personal and collective identity (Spring).

Among her most celebrated works, “Phenomenal Woman” stands out as an iconic poem that boldly confronts and overturns dominant cultural narratives surrounding femininity. Written during a period when mass media played a significant role in constructing unrealistic ideals of beauty, particularly those aligned with Eurocentric and patriarchal values, the poem presents a woman who refuses to be confined by such standards. The poem’s speaker confidently asserts her power not by appealing to conventional beauty but through an inner radiance rooted in self-assurance, emotional clarity, and lived experience. Her refrain, “Phenomenal woman, that’s me,” functions not only as a declaration of pride but also as a challenge to the social gaze that attempts to judge and classify women. The imagery of her stride, her smile, and her presence underscores the idea that her identity is self-fashioned. This reconstruction of femininity transforms the poem into a feminist reclaiming of space in which women, especially Black women, are encouraged to define themselves beyond superficial standards (Paster).

“Phenomenal Woman” remains a groundbreaking poem because it redefines beauty as a form of personal truth rather than a physical commodity. Angelou constructs a speaker who embodies a liberating model of womanhood—one that values authenticity, emotional resilience, and bodily confidence over socially imposed expectations. Instead of presenting beauty as something women must earn or perfect, the poem suggests that it naturally emerges from one’s inner sense of worth. This idea becomes especially powerful when viewed in the context of Black feminist thought, which emphasises reclaiming agency over one’s self-image in a society shaped by racialised and gendered standards of attractiveness. The speaker’s calm certainty about her own value disrupts a culture that constantly evaluates women based on appearance, turning the poem into a manifesto of self-definition. As scholars note, Angelou uses rhythm, repetition, and confident voice to craft a model of empowerment that resonates across generations (Tearle).

A deeper understanding of the poem emerges when it is placed in conversation with three theoretical perspectives: Erik Erikson’s theory of identity formation, Naomi Wolf’s concept of the beauty myth, and Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower. Erikson’s psychosocial theory emphasises that identity develops through stages of growth in which individuals learn to integrate their experiences into a coherent sense of self (McLeod). The speaker in Angelou’s poem exemplifies this psychological maturity, displaying a stable ego identity grounded not in external approval but in inner conviction. Wolf’s beauty myth exposes how modern societies impose unrealistic beauty standards on women as a means of social control, creating insecurities that keep them preoccupied and compliant (Pilcher). Angelou’s speaker disrupts this mechanism by rejecting the value system that equates appearance with worth. Foucault’s concept of biopower further expands this critique by demonstrating how societies regulate bodies through subtle, everyday norms that shape behaviour, desire, and identity (Adams). The speaker’s independence, boldness, and refusal to conform become acts of resistance against these regulatory systems. Together, these theories reveal how “Phenomenal Woman” dismantles psychological, cultural, and biopolitical constraints, thereby asserting a liberated and self-defined model of womanhood.

The poem dismantles conventional assumptions about where identity originates. Angelou ultimately positions identity as an inward force—something constructed through lived experience, emotional clarity, and self-acceptance rather than an external performance shaped by others’ expectations. Erik Erikson explains that people develop a strong identity when they learn to understand themselves and accept their experiences in a balanced way (Cherry). In the poem, the speaker does exactly this. She recognises that society judges her based on beauty, but she refuses to accept those judgments. Instead, she trusts her own feelings and her own sense of worth. Her confidence comes from knowing who she is, not from trying to please others. Because of this inner strength, she can move through the world calmly and proudly. Angelou uses the poem to show that real identity is built

through self-acceptance, personal experience, and emotional clarity. When women define themselves from within, they become strong and unshakeable.

### **Identity Formation and the Power of “Inner Mystery”**

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development emphasises the significance of identity formation in human growth, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood. His fifth stage, identity vs. role confusion, occurs when individuals must explore and integrate various aspects of themselves—beliefs, values, abilities, and social roles—to form a coherent and stable sense of self (Cherry). According to Erikson, the successful resolution of this stage results in a strong, self-aware identity, enabling individuals to navigate life with autonomy, confidence, and resilience. Conversely, failure to achieve this coherence can lead to role confusion, a fragmented sense of self, and dependence on others for validation (McLeod). A key aspect of Erikson’s theory is that identity is not static; it develops through active engagement with social and personal challenges. A mature identity allows an individual to maintain psychological stability and consistency even in the face of societal pressures or conflicting expectations.

Erikson’s ideas also help us understand why the speaker in “Phenomenal Woman” appears emotionally balanced and confident. Erikson believed that people with a well-formed identity do not rely on society to tell them who they are; instead, they develop an inner sense of direction that guides their behaviour. This is exactly what we see in Angelou’s poem. The speaker does not compare herself to beauty standards or seek acceptance from others. Instead, she stands firm in her own understanding of herself. This kind of inner strength reflects what Erikson describes as a *secure identity*, where a person knows their worth even when the world tries to define them differently. The speaker’s confidence in her walk, smile, and presence shows that she has reached a stage of psychological maturity in which external judgments cannot disturb her self-belief. In this way, Angelou’s poem becomes an example of how a strong identity protects individuals from social pressure and helps them remain true to themselves (McLeod).

“Phenomenal Woman” offers a literary illustration of Erikson’s concept of a fully realised identity. The speaker in the poem demonstrates psychological maturity by asserting a selfhood that is independent of external validation, beauty standards, or patriarchal expectations (Angelou). The lines “Men themselves have wondered what they see in me. / They try so much, but they can’t touch my inner mystery” reveal that her sense of self is internal and impenetrable; it cannot be measured or diminished by outside perceptions (Angelou). This idea parallels Erikson’s notion that a strong identity is self-determined and resilient, providing inner stability that guides how an individual interacts with the world (McLeod). The speaker’s repeated affirmations, “I’m a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That’s me,” function as verbal reinforcement of her self-conception, reflecting

the psychological integration and internal coherence that Erikson emphasises (Angelou). Through these expressions, Angelou presents a model of identity that is active, deliberate, and empowered rather than passive or externally defined.

The poem also illustrates how identity formation intersects with social expectations and gender norms. In societies where women's value is often reduced to physical appearance or social desirability, the speaker challenges this objectification by anchoring her confidence and charm in her inner qualities rather than in conformity to beauty ideals (Angelou). Her identity, described as an "inner mystery," represents psychological autonomy that protects her from societal pressures and asserts her agency. Erikson's theory suggests that such autonomy is a hallmark of mature identity, where individuals achieve a balance between selfhood and social interaction without losing their core sense of self (McLeod). In the poem, this is reflected in the speaker's ability to command admiration and attention without compromising her internal coherence or allowing external judgments to define her.

The type of identity portrayed in "Phenomenal Woman" can be described as one of inner strength, self-possession, and autonomous confidence. It is a fully realised identity that is internally grounded, resilient, and resistant to social expectations or patriarchal definitions of worth (Angelou; McLeod). The speaker's self-assuredness is not contingent on external approval; instead, it emanates from her awareness of her own values, presence, and capabilities. This aligns with Erikson's claim that a coherent identity provides psychological stability, allowing individuals to navigate life with purpose, integrity, and confidence (McLeod). Angelou's poem demonstrates that identity formation is not only a personal achievement but also a source of empowerment, enabling women to challenge societal norms, assert their agency, and embrace self-defined individuality. By portraying a character whose "inner mystery" remains untouched by societal judgments, Angelou illustrates the transformative potential of identity: it is both a protective psychological structure and a form of empowerment that challenges conventional expectations of femininity (Angelou).

"Phenomenal Woman" exemplifies Erikson's theory of identity formation by presenting a speaker who has achieved self-realisation, internal coherence, and psychological resilience. Her identity is autonomous, confident, and transformative, demonstrating that a mature sense of self is not merely an individual achievement but also a socially and culturally significant act of empowerment. Through this poem, Angelou underscores the importance of internal self-knowledge, asserting that true confidence and personal power originate from within, in line with Erikson's framework of identity development (Angelou; McLeod).

Angelou also uses the poem to show that identity can be a steady source of emotional protection. When a woman knows who she is, she becomes less affected by society's attempts to control or judge her. This is especially important for women who are constantly pressured to meet

certain beauty standards or behave in limited ways. In the poem, the speaker's confidence works like a shield—she does not feel threatened by others' opinions because her sense of worth comes from within. This reflects Erikson's idea that a well-developed identity helps a person remain strong even when facing criticism or unrealistic expectations. The speaker's calm tone, repeated affirmations, and bold description of her presence show that she has built an identity that cannot be shaken by outside voices. In this way, "Phenomenal Woman" teaches that identity is not only about understanding oneself but also about creating an inner foundation that gives a woman emotional safety, direction, and the freedom to live on her own terms (Cherry).

### **The Beauty Myth as a Mechanism of Social Control**

Naomi Wolf's theory of the beauty myth provides a critical lens through which societal standards of beauty can be understood not simply as aesthetic ideals but as instruments of social regulation. According to Wolf, these cultural norms do more than dictate how women should look; they prescribe how women should behave, think, and engage with the world (Pilcher). The beauty myth functions as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of control, shaping women's self-perception and social participation. Wolf emphasises that "it is always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance," indicating that beauty ideals serve to maintain social hierarchies and patriarchal dominance by constraining women's autonomy and defining their value in terms of compliance with external expectations (Wolf).

Naomi Wolf's concept of the beauty myth highlights how society uses beauty standards to control and limit women rather than merely suggesting what is attractive. These standards pressure women to conform to specific looks, behaviours, and attitudes, making them feel that their value depends on meeting external expectations (Pilcher). By doing so, society reinforces patriarchal power, keeping women focused on appearance instead of personal growth or independence. The beauty myth is especially powerful because it often feels natural or desirable, thereby concealing its function as a form of social control. In "Phenomenal Woman," Angelou challenges this system by presenting a speaker who refuses to define herself according to these narrow ideals. The poem shows that true confidence and self-worth come from within rather than from attempting to meet society's standards of beauty. In this way, Wolf's theory helps us understand how Angelou's work resists cultural pressures, asserting that a woman's power is not determined by her appearance but by her self-awareness, pride, and authenticity (Wolf).

Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" can be read as a direct response to these pervasive societal pressures. The poem presents a speaker who openly rejects conventional standards of beauty and asserts that her power, confidence, and presence originate from within rather than from social approval. The lines "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" exemplify this

resistance. Here, Angelou subverts the notion that beauty is determined solely by physical appearance or adherence to fashionable ideals. The speaker refuses to internalise the beauty myth, demonstrating that her sense of self and allure are rooted in confidence, self-awareness, and individuality (Wolf; Angelou).

The poem highlights how the beauty myth functions as both a psychological and cultural constraint. By positioning beauty as the ultimate measure of women's worth, society subtly regulates behaviour and enforces conformity. Angelou's speaker destabilises this system by asserting that her attractiveness and charm emerge from her internal qualities rather than external validation. Her "phenomenal" presence challenges the cultural narrative that women must be objectified or measured against rigid, unattainable standards (Wolf; Angelou). Through humour, rhythm, and repetition, the poem creates a sense of empowerment and self-assurance, emphasising that confidence and allure are active, self-defined qualities rather than passive attributes bestowed by society.

Furthermore, the speaker's rejection of conventional beauty standards illustrates a feminist assertion of autonomy. By asserting her power and self-definition, she resists the implicit social scripts embedded in the beauty myth, demonstrating that women can reclaim authority over their bodies, appearance, and identities (Wolf). The poem suggests that true attractiveness is inseparable from self-knowledge and psychological agency, challenging the conventional equation of beauty with compliance. Angelou's speaker embodies a type of empowerment that undermines cultural norms, showing that a woman's identity and value are determined internally rather than externally.

Importantly, the poem also critiques the competitive dynamic that the beauty myth fosters among women. By pointing out that "pretty women wonder where my secret lies," the speaker exposes the ways in which societal expectations pit women against one another, creating anxiety and rivalry over appearance (Angelou). Her response—asserting that her "secret" is self-confidence and authenticity—undermines this divisive mechanism. Angelou demonstrates that resistance to the beauty myth involves not only rejecting external pressures but also cultivating solidarity and self-acceptance. This approach aligns with Wolf's argument that women's empowerment requires both a critique of external standards and the development of internal resilience (Wolf).

Wolf's beauty myth provides a powerful framework for understanding the systemic control of women's bodies and behaviour. Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" exemplifies resistance to this control by portraying a speaker whose beauty, charm, and empowerment stem from self-knowledge, confidence, and internal authority. Through her poetry, Angelou critiques the artificiality of cultural beauty norms while offering a vision of empowerment rooted in autonomy, self-definition, and resilience. The speaker's identity, independence, and confidence illustrate that true power arises from

internal mastery rather than societal approval, highlighting how literature can illuminate and challenge structures of social control (Wolf; Angelou).

### **Biopower and the Regulation of Women's Bodies**

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower provides a complementary lens through which societies regulate individual bodies, behaviours, and social roles through subtle and pervasive mechanisms of control. Unlike traditional forms of power that rely on coercion or force, biopower operates by normalising behaviours, establishing social norms, and shaping the ways individuals present themselves and interact with others (Adams). Through institutions, culture, and everyday practices, biopower governs populations, encouraging conformity while maintaining social hierarchies and control. In the context of women, biopower functions by disciplining their bodies and behaviours to align with societal expectations, often enforcing ideals of beauty, decorum, and femininity.

Foucault's concept of biopower also demonstrates that society regulates individuals not only through rules or laws but by shaping their everyday habits, choices, and self-image. This form of power is often invisible, working through culture, institutions, and social expectations to guide how individuals behave and think (qtd. in Pylypa). For women, biopower is especially visible in how society imposes standards of beauty, manners, and femininity, encouraging conformity to socially approved roles. These pressures are subtle but constant, influencing how women carry themselves, dress, and even perceive their own bodies. In "Phenomenal Woman," Angelou's speaker resists this control by asserting her confidence and pride regardless of societal expectations. She refuses to allow external pressures to dictate her value or identity, demonstrating that personal power emerges from self-knowledge and inner conviction. By highlighting this resistance, the poem illustrates how individuals can challenge the ways biopower shapes behaviour and redefine their own sense of freedom and worth (Adams).

Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" illustrates resistance to this subtle yet pervasive form of control. The poem's speaker embodies autonomy over her body, behaviour, and self-presentation, refusing to conform to social prescriptions. The lines "Men themselves have wondered/ What they see in me/ They try so much, but they can't touch/ My inner mystery" reveal that her identity, charm, and confidence are internally generated, making them inaccessible to external regulation. By asserting an "inner mystery," the speaker destabilises the normative gaze imposed by biopower, demonstrating that women can maintain agency and self-determination even in the face of cultural pressures that seek to define and regulate them (Angelou; Adams).

The relationship between biopower and Wolf's concept of the beauty myth is particularly illuminating. While the beauty myth exposes how society regulates women's behaviour and self-esteem through unattainable standards of beauty (Wolf), Foucault's theory situates this regulation

within a broader mechanism of social governance. Biopower explains how cultural expectations, institutions, and social norms work collectively to discipline bodies and maintain conformity, ensuring that individuals internalise societal rules without the need for overt force (qtd. in Pylypa 23). Together, these frameworks reveal that women's bodies and identities are continually shaped by subtle cultural rules designed to maintain social hierarchies.

In "Phenomenal Woman," Angelou challenges both of these forms of control. Her speaker locates power in self-confidence, inner pride, and authenticity, refusing to be defined by society's expectations of beauty or behaviour. The poem illustrates that true empowerment emerges from internal strength rather than compliance with externally imposed norms, highlighting the possibility of resisting cultural and institutional pressures simultaneously.

The poem demonstrates how biopower extends beyond the regulation of physical appearance to encompass behavioural and psychological discipline. Societal norms frequently dictate how women should act, speak, and even feel about themselves, promoting internalised self-surveillance and limiting personal autonomy (qtd. in Pylypa 23). Angelou's speaker subverts this mechanism by showing that empowerment, confidence, and personal presence are grounded in self-knowledge and internal coherence rather than external approval. Her autonomy represents an act of resistance against the subtle forms of discipline imposed by biopower, illustrating that control over one's identity and body can function as a form of liberation.

In this way, Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" becomes both a celebration of individual agency and a critique of societal control. The poem underscores that although cultural norms, beauty ideals, and social expectations attempt to shape women's bodies and behaviours, empowerment emerges when women assert self-defined identity and confidence (Angelou; Wolf; qtd. in Pylypa 23). By reclaiming authority over her body, presence, and "inner mystery," the speaker exemplifies how resistance to biopower is possible through self-awareness, autonomy, and self-affirmation. The poem thus bridges psychological, cultural, and political dimensions, demonstrating that identity formation and empowerment are acts of defiance against the subtle but pervasive forces of social regulation.

### **Identity, Beauty Myths, and Social Control in Angelou**

Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" is a poetic affirmation of female empowerment, celebrating an identity that is independent of conventional beauty standards. The poem redefines womanhood by presenting a speaker whose self-worth derives from qualities beyond physical appearance. When examined through the lenses of Erikson's psychosocial theory, Wolf's concept of the beauty myth, and Foucault's notion of biopower, the poem reveals the complex interplay between individual identity, societal expectations, and mechanisms of social control. The repeated refrain, "Phenomenal woman, that's me," is more than a declaration of confidence; it is an assertion of

autonomy resisting external pressures that attempt to define and constrain women's identities (Angelou). Angelou's poem celebrates a form of empowerment that emerges from knowing and valuing oneself. The speaker demonstrates that true strength and confidence are grounded not in others' perceptions but in her own understanding of her worth. From Erikson's perspective, this reflects a fully developed identity in which self-awareness and emotional stability enable independence from societal approval (McLeod). Through the lens of Wolf's beauty myth, the poem challenges the pressures women face to conform to unrealistic standards of appearance and behaviour (Wolf). Foucault's concept of biopower further explains how such expectations function as subtle forms of control over women's bodies and actions (Adams). By asserting her own value, the speaker resists both cultural and institutional pressures, demonstrating that empowerment originates from within. In this way, "Phenomenal Woman" not only affirms personal confidence but also critiques the social systems that attempt to limit it.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development provides a crucial framework for understanding the psychological depth of Angelou's poem. According to Erikson, identity formation is a fundamental task of human development, requiring the integration of personal values, beliefs, and experiences into a coherent self-concept (Cherry). This coherence allows individuals to maintain stability and confidence in the face of external pressures. In the poem, the speaker demonstrates such psychological coherence by grounding her identity in personal qualities—confidence, charm, and presence—rather than socially prescribed standards of beauty. The line, "It's the fire in my eyes, and the flash of my teeth," reflects this inward focus, suggesting that her power emanates from personality and vitality rather than physical conformity (Angelou). By celebrating her uniqueness, the speaker exemplifies Erikson's idea that identity is established through internal clarity and self-acceptance, resisting confusion and fragmentation imposed by societal norms (Cherry; Angelou).

Naomi Wolf's concept of the beauty myth further illuminates the cultural pressures against which the speaker asserts her identity. Wolf argues that modern society constructs and enforces unrealistic standards of beauty as a method of controlling women's self-perception and behaviour (Wolf). These standards function as invisible mechanisms of oppression, dictating what is considered desirable, acceptable, or valuable. Angelou's poem confronts these pressures by presenting a speaker who refuses to conform, demonstrating that identity and self-worth are independent of society's judgments. The line, "I walk into a room just as cool as you please," signals the speaker's resistance to societal scrutiny and external evaluation. By embracing her inner qualities, she challenges the cultural narrative that beauty alone defines a woman's value, showing that personal empowerment emerges from self-recognition rather than social approval (Wolf; Angelou).

Foucault's notion of biopower extends this analysis by highlighting how societal norms and institutions regulate bodies and behaviours to maintain control over populations (Adams). Biopower operates through subtle monitoring, evaluation, and regulation of individuals, often without explicit coercion. In the context of Angelou's poem, beauty standards can be understood as a manifestation of biopower, shaping how women perceive and present themselves in accordance with cultural expectations. The speaker, however, resists this form of regulation by asserting an identity that cannot be measured or disciplined according to social norms. Her selfhood demonstrates both psychological autonomy and bodily agency, revealing the tension between individual freedom and the societal mechanisms that seek to contain it (Adams; Angelou).

The poem's repeated use of personal pronouns and first-person narration underscores the speaker's ownership of her identity. By continually emphasising "I" and "me," Angelou reinforces the autonomy of the self in a world where societal pressures often attempt to marginalise or define women according to externally imposed standards. The lines "It's in the reach of my arms/ the span of my hips/ the stride of my step" link physical presence with internal confidence, illustrating how self-assured behaviour resists the controlling influence of the beauty myth and biopower. Here, Angelou demonstrates that identity is not simply a psychological construct but also a lived experience enacted through bodily presence and self-expression (Angelou; Cherry; Adams).

Angelou's poem also presents an implicit critique of the intersection between cultural norms and gendered expectations. While society attempts to define women's worth through external markers—appearance, fashion, and physical attractiveness—the poem offers a vision of identity rooted in intrinsic qualities. In doing so, the speaker challenges patriarchal structures and cultural practices that rely on the policing of women's bodies. This aligns with Wolf's argument that beauty standards function as a form of social control, perpetuating dependency and undermining self-determination. Angelou's speaker rejects these norms, asserting that authenticity, presence, and confidence are far more valuable than societal approval (Wolf; Angelou).

The integration of Erikson, Wolf, and Foucault highlights the multidimensional nature of the poem's message. Psychologically, the speaker exemplifies Erikson's notion of a coherent identity capable of withstanding external pressures. Culturally, she challenges Wolf's beauty myth, demonstrating that self-worth is not dependent on societal definitions. Socially and politically, she subverts Foucault's mechanisms of biopower, resisting the subtle forms of discipline and regulation that govern women's bodies. Through these intersecting frameworks, "Phenomenal Woman" presents a holistic vision of identity—one that is internally grounded, culturally aware, and socially autonomous (Cherry; Wolf; Adams; Angelou).

The poem also emphasises that empowerment is a continuous process rather than a fixed state. Angelou's speaker shows that women can actively resist social and cultural pressures by embracing inner strength and self-awareness. Psychologically, this reflects Erikson's idea that a secure identity provides resilience against criticism and societal expectations (Cherry). Culturally, the speaker rejects the limitations imposed by the beauty myth, demonstrating that worth is not measured by appearance or conformity (Wolf). From a social perspective, she defies the subtle control described by Foucault's concept of biopower, refusing to allow institutions or norms to dictate how she moves, speaks, or presents herself (Adams). By combining these layers of resistance, the poem offers a model of identity that is personal, socially conscious, and politically significant. Angelou encourages women to recognise that their power emerges from self-definition, demonstrating that confidence and autonomy are both deeply internal and outwardly expressed. In doing so, "Phenomenal Woman" becomes a guide for navigating societal pressures while remaining true to oneself.

Finally, the poem encourages broader reflection on empowerment and resistance. By disengaging from standards imposed by society and institutions, women reclaim not only psychological clarity but also the freedom to define their own lives. Angelou's speaker demonstrates that identity is performative yet authentic, expressed through both action and self-perception. This approach offers a model for contemporary women navigating societal pressures, highlighting that true empowerment emerges when inner strength is recognised as more significant than external validation. Angelou's work, therefore, is not only a celebration of confidence but also a strategic resistance against cultural, psychological, and social mechanisms that seek to limit autonomy (Angelou; Cherry; Wolf; Adams).

## Conclusion

In "Phenomenal Woman," Maya Angelou constructs a vision of identity that is both psychologically grounded and culturally resistant, offering a radical redefinition of womanhood that challenges dominant social norms. Through the lens of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, the speaker embodies a mature, self-assured identity, having successfully resolved the stage of identity vs. role confusion. Erikson emphasises that this stage is pivotal for achieving a coherent sense of self, allowing individuals to navigate the world with confidence while remaining true to their inner values (McLeod). Angelou's speaker exemplifies this resolution: her repeated refrain of being "phenomenal" signals not merely pride but the completion of a personal process of self-definition, demonstrating an internal stability unaffected by external judgment or societal expectations.

At the same time, the poem engages with broader social structures that regulate women's bodies and behaviours. Naomi Wolf's concept of the beauty myth highlights how cultural narratives impose unattainable beauty standards on women, transforming appearance into a tool of social control

(Wolf). Wolf argues that this myth functions to constrain women's agency, ensuring that their value is measured according to conformity rather than individuality. Angelou's speaker resists these pressures decisively; she refuses to measure her worth according to conventional standards of beauty or charm. Instead, she reclaims beauty as an expression of personal confidence, inner strength, and dignity, demonstrating that authentic selfhood transcends socially imposed ideals.

Foucault's concept of biopower further illuminates the significance of this resistance. Biopower, as Foucault explains, operates through subtle, systemic mechanisms that regulate populations, bodies, and behaviours, shaping norms and controlling conduct without overt coercion (qtd. in Pylypa). In the context of Angelou's poem, biopower can be observed in the societal expectations that dictate how women should look, act, and present themselves, turning their bodies into instruments of cultural conformity. The speaker's defiance represents an act of reclaiming autonomy: by asserting her identity on her own terms, she rejects the subtle yet pervasive control these norms attempt to impose. Her celebration of physicality, charm, and presence becomes an act of liberation—a refusal to allow societal institutions to define her sense of self.

The interplay of these theoretical perspectives—Erikson's psychological development, Wolf's critique of the beauty myth, and Foucault's concept of biopower—demonstrates how “Phenomenal Woman” situates identity as something self-authored rather than socially imposed. The speaker's power lies not only in her self-recognition but also in her conscious decision to resist external judgments or ideological pressures. By centring her own perception of self-worth, the poem underscores the political dimension of personal identity: to define oneself independently is to challenge mechanisms of control operating at both interpersonal and societal levels. Angelou's insistence on her own “phenomenal” quality is thus both a personal affirmation and a cultural statement, bridging the psychological and the political.

Moreover, Angelou's poem highlights the interconnectedness of psychological integrity and social empowerment. The speaker's internal coherence—the outcome of Erikson's psychosocial development—is inseparable from her engagement with the external world, where norms, expectations, and forms of biopower attempt to impose limitations. In resisting these forces, she models a form of identity that is resilient, autonomous, and self-determined. Her achievement is therefore dual: she attains psychological wholeness while simultaneously asserting agency in a society structured to confine women. The poem, in this sense, functions as both a celebration of the individual spirit and a critique of societal constraints, demonstrating that personal empowerment and cultural resistance are mutually reinforcing.

“Phenomenal Woman” transcends poetic celebration to become a feminist manifesto. It insists that identity, beauty, and self-worth are not granted by social approval but reclaimed through autonomy, self-awareness, and courage. Angelou demonstrates that true empowerment emerges from the alignment of inner psychological development with a conscious challenge to oppressive cultural norms. By integrating Erikson’s theory of identity formation, Wolf’s concept of the beauty myth, and Foucault’s notion of biopower, the poem reveals that self-definition is a multidimensional act involving the negotiation of internal values, personal confidence, and societal pressures. Angelou’s speaker thus embodies a form of womanhood that is phenomenal not because it conforms, but because it resists, showing that the reclamation of identity and beauty is an essential, transformative, and deeply personal act (McLeod; Wolf; qtd. in Pylypa; Angelou).

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