Feminists' Fight for Freedom: Perspectives from Plath, Angelou and Kaur

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Introduction: What Lies Ahead

Poetry is a beautiful form of artistic expression that is able to share stories between many time periods, cultures and places. It has the power to connect those who have been oppressed, those who have been wronged, and those who have stories to tell. By finding common themes, analyzing the written words on paper, and looking at the historical context of a poem, we are able to determine the significance a poem/poet had in its time or, vice versa, the influence the time had on the poem/poet. In collaboration with existing literary criticism on the four waves of feminism, I undercover the influence of poetry within the movement, and illustrate a deepening and everlasting connection between female writers and the feminist movement at large. Transcending time and places, Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou, and Rupi Kaur have expressed rejection of patriarchal standards throughout the feminist movement; "The Applicant," "Phenomenal Woman," and "i'm putting the hate down" join together to defy traditional subservient expectations, radiate independent physical self-confidence, and gain psychological freedom through the medium of poetry.

Literature Review: Historical Contexts of the Four Waves of Feminism

Beginning in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York, Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration in an effort to establish the feminist movement. By outlining the movement's ideologies and political strategies, she initiated the change toward gender equality in all personal, social, economic and political arenas. 173 years later, supporters of the feminist movement continue to advocate on behalf of women's rights on the basis of sex, hoping to ultimately achieve gender equality. Exemplified through the four distinct waves of feminism, the continual effort of feminists has remained steadfast, yet their priorities have evolved with generational social issues. Notable authors whose works were rooted in the midst of these gendered shifts reflect the objectives in each wave of feminism.

The first wave of feminism, which focused on increasing opportunities for females, occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Shortly after the Industrial Revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century, women sought more avenues of social and political involvement. With a focus on women suffrage (which was granted in 1920 by the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution), women emerged into social spheres in which they were previously unwelcomed. This urge for increasing liberation can be seen through the infamous works of the English writer, Virginia Woolf. Even though Woolf was an author during the first wave of feminism, she was able to bridge the gap between the first and second wave. As a pioneer of feminist writings during the initial wave of feminism, her texts inspired the movement at large and were specifically the focus of feminist literary critique during the second wave. In one of her more significant texts published in 1929, A Room of One's Own explores the need for social trust and an attainment of resources in order for females to excel in status amongst their male counterparts. As an extended essay taken from Woolf's college lectures, A Room of One's Own asserts that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 6). This speaks to the oppression women creators faced based on gender double

standards. Being constrained by domestic duties and subservient expectations, women were never allocated the financial resources, ideal locations, and time alone to produce creative works. Not only were these gender roles restricting female authors from chasing their passions, but also in a broader outlook, all females were limited to fulfilling social functions of homemaking and motherhood desired by men. In the nineteenth century, society lacked crediting female authors for their dedication and expertise to their subjects despite these challenges; however, in hindsight, feminist critics acknowledge the societal burdens weighing females down. Woolf, herself, was not ignorant nor naive for she asserted that “it would still be decades before women could tell the truth about their bodies;” a daunting declaration for a woman in the twentieth century, yet accurate as can be (Wolf 11-12).

Advancing three decades into the 1960s, feminists such as those who critiqued Woolf’s publications were a part of the second wave of feminism. The second wave of the feminist movement occurred alongside the civil rights movement as minority groups in America took a stand against white patriarchal domination and demanded equality and respect as equal citizens in the country. Professor Martha Rampton from Pacific University claims that the second wave was increasingly theoretical as feminists “began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother” (Rampton). Rampton’s observation is essential when understanding why feminists’ efforts were successful; by rooting arguments such as the distinction between sex and gender in schools of thought – whether that is scientific, theoretical or sociological – feminists gained a credible foundation to act and initiate social change. Feminists adopted the saying, “the personal is political” to fuel the second wave of the movement. Strives toward sexual and reproductive rights for women, as well as the addition of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution in 1972, gave women the political leverage to call out wrongdoings. The second wave expanded its reach to women of color, varying economic status, and developing nations rather than being driven by middle class, Western, cisgender, white women like the first wave. This allowed for the inclusion of intersectional conversations; many activists, authors, speakers, and artists mirrored this diversity, highlighting the accomplishments from various communities.

Initiating these conversations in the second wave of the feminist movement was Betty Friedan, an influential author, feminist, and founder of the National Organization for Women. The Feminist Mystique, published by Friedan in 1963, explored the idea that women could gain satisfaction outside of their traditional gender roles; the phrase “feminist mystique” shifted the dominant belief away from the idea that women could only gain social fulfillment through housework, sexual passivity, and child rearing alone (Friedan). By delegitimizing this assumption, Friedan opened the door for women to explore other facets of their identity. Previously, they were labeled as homemaker, wife or mother and were restricted to abide by these expectations to accomplish their social responsibility. However, The Feminist Mystique sparked the realization that performing these roles was not done to satiate women’s dreams and ambitions, but instead to satisfy men’s expectations. Women started looking for fulfillment through educational attainment, political involvement, career aspirations, and sexual agency, explained thoroughly by Germaine Greer.

With the second wave being centered on women’s sexual agency, The Female Eunuch by Australian author, Germaine Greer, became an essential contribution to the feminist movement. Written in 1970 during the height of the second wave, Greer argues that traditional patriarchal standards established by men suppress women’s sexuality, rendering them eunuchs (Greer). The culmination of historical norms of femininity, expectations for a nuclear family, unrealistic standards of beauty desired by men, and modern consumerist behavior limit a woman’s perception of self, therefore, restraining her to solely fulfill social functions of motherhood. Greer proposes that women can escape these restrictions through a revolution, similar to what was seen through the

actions of radical feminists during the 1960s. As Professor Rampton explains, a radical New York group called Redstockings protested against the 1968 Miss America pageant–a main patron of female beauty standards. The Redstockings trashed oppressive feminine artifacts including bras, high heels and false eyelashes as acts of rebellion against the repressive patriarchy (Rampton). However, Greer cautions feminists that such harsh rebellions could unintentionally have the opposite effect than desired, contributing to the cycle of oppression instead of ending it: “Bras are a ludicrous invention, but if you make bralessness a rule, you’re subjecting yourself to yet another repression” (Weinraub). It is more meaningful for women to educate themselves about body acceptance, menstrual cycles, and sexual agency for “a library is a place where you can lose your innocence without losing your virginity” (Greer). Because the patriarchy thrives off of women’s ignorance and obedience, one of the most effective ways for women to disrupt these systems of power is for women to be educated and express agency when it comes to their sexuality and reproductive rights.

According to feminist and author, Naomi Wolf, “In the two decades of radical action that followed the rebirth of feminism in the early 1970s, Western women gained the legal and reproductive rights, pursued higher education, entered the trades and the professions, and overturned ancient and revered beliefs about social role” (9). Yet, despite the heaping progress towards gender equality, women were still not fully liberated. Thus, the third wave of feminism was born in the mid-90s. With the concentration being on destabilizing historical social constructs, feminists worked to dismantle the stereotypes of body image, broaden the spectrums of genders and sexualities, and create a new non-heteronormative narrative (Rampton). Women were encouraged to readopt feminine artifacts and express their femininity to signify empowerment. The idea that beauty can complement the brain seemed radical, but in actuality, a woman’s appearance should have never discredited her intelligence. Naomi Wolf supported this notion when she coined the term “the beauty myth.” The Beauty Myth, published in 1990, states that there is a societal hierarchy based on culturally imposed physical standards where women compete for resources men have appropriated for themselves (Wolf 12). This belief about beauty, created during the Industrial Revolution, is the oldest, strongest, and most restrictive feminine ideology still in place. Wolf claims that “the beauty myth” is the last system that keeps male dominance intact; if women can redefine physical standards for themselves, then women will gain social control within the patriarchal institutions of power (Wolf 12).

The most current ripple of the feminist movement arguably launched in 2012 with the advancement of technology in the twenty-first century. This fourth wave addresses heavy topics surrounding sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture. The emergence of internet platforms have created a plethora of new issues for feminists to tackle, but it also provides a more widespread means of connecting minority communities across the world through social media. If used correctly, the Internet has the potential to be very beneficial to social and political movements. For example, the #MeToo movement, which began in 2006 and was rekindled in 2017, illustrates how a simple hashtag can unite survivors of sexual assault and harassment in empathy and solidarity. This hashtag of injustice visibly shows the millions of women wronged by the effects of toxic masculinity and patriarchal ideologies. As Naomi Wolf so beautifully says, “Middle class western women must now be weakened psychologically because we are stronger materially” (16). Addressing the psychological trauma stemming from toxic environments and acts of violence is a newfound priority for modern-day feminists. Psychological freedom obtained by prioritizing mental health is a key component toward achieving gender equality.

As illustrated with the four waves of the feminist movement, gender equality is an ongoing battle that strives to correct the injustices against women in many sectors of life. In an article titled, “Poetry, Feminism, and the Public Sphere,” Kathleen Crown explains how poetry has been a vital medium within the feminist movement to

convey personal anecdotes and social implications. Through the perspective of female poets, we are able to answer how such a lyrical, aesthetic and private medium is related to political and social contexts. Since the 1960s, poetry has provided historical models for understanding the public domain through "reflecting and reconfiguring the feminist movement's agendas for social and cultural transformation" (Crown 645). Crown notes that it is difficult to "...balance the ideals of identity politics with efforts to create a multicultural, multiethnic feminism that can speak across and between competing affiliations and hybrid locations," yet through my upcoming analysis of three poems by three different authors varying in age, race, and geography, I exemplify the power of poetry (645). This paper will analyze how female poets, specifically Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou, and Rupi Kaur, have used poetry as a medium to defy traditional gender roles, express an independent physical self-confidence and gain psychological freedom.

Sylvia Plath: "The Applicant"

Sylvia Plath, known for her contributions to confessional poetry, highlights the injustices of gender roles and psychiatric care throughout her poems. Born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, Plath did not lead an easy life as "feminists portrayed Plath as a woman driven to madness by a domineering father, an unfaithful husband, and the demands that motherhood made on her genius" (Sylvia Plath). Despite a troubled relationship with her authoritarian father, Plath dealt with feelings of betrayal when he died at the age of eight. Additionally, Plath's relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes, created strain on her mental health for he was unfaithful in their marriage and Plath wrote of physical and psychological abuse. On top of the stressors from her interpersonal relationships, Plath battled mental illness. Suffering from manic depression and bipolar disorder, Plath describes in a journal entry dated June 20, 1958: "It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it" (Sylvia Plath). These internal demons overwhelmed her mental state, resulting in three suicide attempts, the third of which was successful. At the young age of 30, Sylvia Plath died from inhaling gas from a kitchen oven. According to the Poetry Foundation, many "feminist critics in particular tended to see in Plath's suicide a repudiation of the expectations placed upon women in the 1960s" (Sylvia Plath). Some of Plath's most significant works were published posthumously taken from personal journal entries or letters to her psychiatrist. Therefore, it can be interpreted that while Plath did not intend to influence the social conversation around gender, her words and ideas thematically illustrate female oppression. Understanding Plath's relational and mental health backgrounds within the grander picture of the first couple waves of feminism is a crucial lens to incorporate when analyzing Plath's poems.

Sylvia Plath's poem, "The Applicant," marries the themes of consumerism and gender roles to illustrate defiance against the patriarchy; her depiction of a subservient wife as a commodity reinforces the inflexible female image that served as the basis of social change for the feminist movement. Published in 1962 on the brink of the second wave of feminism, Plath uses a satirical and sarcastic approach to make a mockery of the subservient expectations for wives and homemakers. The poem begins by setting the scene in the first stanza with the speaker acting as the salesperson and a man as the interviewee. Plath confirmed this in an interview saying, "the speaker is an executive, a sort of exacting super-salesman. He wants to be sure the applicant for his marvelous product really needs it and will treat it right" (Sylvia Plath). A woman, a potential wife and homemaker, is the "marvelous product" or commodity to be had. The salesperson initially builds skepticism of the applicant by asking, "are you our sort of person?" (1). He questions whether the applicant has any prosthetic parts or disabilities such as "a brace or a hook" (4) that would immobilize him. As the salesperson continues to assess the applicant's characteristics in the second stanza, he confirms that nothing is missing and questions their need for a crutch: "how can we give you a thing?" (7). Despite a seemingly complete

applicant, the salesperson continues on with the pitch: “open your hand. / Empty? Empty. Here is a hand” (9-10) which signifies a woman’s hand. According to Marsha Bryant in her article, “Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising,” Plath explores the larger social picture that explains consumer culture while negotiating gender and domesticity (25). The speaker in this introduction reveals that consumerism constantly creates and exploits superficial needs in order to encourage the consumption of products – the consumer being the applicant/man and the product being the wife.

In the third and fourth stanza, the relationship of the man and wife mirrors the relationship of a consumer and product. Plath describes the couple interlocked, hand in hand. However, the woman’s hand not only fills the man’s hand, but also she will complete any subservient duties asked by the man: “do whatever you tell it” (13). It is important to acknowledge Plath’s word choice when referring to the woman as “it.” Plath has de-personified the hand, detaching it from the body and objectifying the woman as a product in the process. The salesperson goes on to ask the applicant: “Will you marry it? / It is guaranteed” (14-15). By conceptualizing “guaranteed,” a direct comparison can be deduced between the wife and a product on the market. As most advertisers persuade consumers that there is a money back guarantee if they are not happy with their product, the salesperson is guaranteeing the applicant’s satisfaction with the wife and their conformity to the husband’s requests. To heighten the interest of the applicant, the salesperson describes the woman as codependent of the man in the relationship, as when death comes, she will “dissolve of sorrow” (17). This reliance on a husband is what men desired in the early twentieth century and what perpetuated oppressive ideologies such as that of Greer’s female eunuch. Greer writes in The Female Eunuch, “The cage door had been opened but the canary had refused to fly out. The conclusion was that the cage door ought never to have been opened because canaries are made for captivity; the suggestion of an alternative had only confused and saddened them” (2). This comparison of women to a caged canary is accurate as Plath illustrates a woman’s heavy compliance to domestic servitude for the applicant. In the instance of the applicant’s future death and the woman’s subsequent freedom, the woman, who was conditioned over a lifetime to be a female eunuch, never discovered her free will; hence, she felt lost and broken without a man to serve.

An emphasis on factors of the patriarchal narrative is further elaborated as Plath explores themes of masculinity and female innocence in the fifth and sixth stanzas of “The Applicant.” When the salesperson notices the applicant’s need for clothing, they suggest a “black and stiff” suit (21). This suit so clearly represents a metaphor of masculinity for it is “waterproof, shatterproof, proof” (23). Additionally, this suit of masculinity serves as a prerequisite to be considered as an applicant for a wife because it is these very ideologies of toxic masculinity that confine men to perpetuate gender roles for both themselves and women. The role of masculinity that depicts strength and toughness lasts a lifetime in our society; once a boy accepts manhood, he will never be able to abandon societal expectations for “they’ll bury you in it” (25). The salesperson proposes a solution, or “ticket” (27), for the emptiness in the applicant’s head as they call upon a woman: “Come here, sweetie, out of the closet” (28). By referring to the woman as “sweetie,” they are reducing her to a status of a child or girl. Also, by hiding her in the closet, it shows how society constrains women until they are needed to serve others. This physical restraint reinforces Woolf’s argument that women need a room of their own, both literally and metaphorically; a room of one’s own represents a space of liberty where women can enact the courage to make decisions for the betterment of them. Evidently, in “The Applicant,” the woman being sold as a commodity is not granted this space but rather confined to a closet and only allowed out when called upon. Stanza six concludes with describing the woman as “naked as paper to start” (30); this thorough and continuous depiction of the woman as innocent, new and untouched reinforces the male desire for female virginity. Often tied with religious beliefs but also used as an excuse to constrict women’s sexual freedom,

women were expected to stay celibate until marriage; they were only to give themselves up to their husbands. Yet another example of the many ways patriarchal ideologies prevented female liberation, this expectation to save yourself for marriage was most sturdily inflicted upon women by men, and not vice versa.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the salesperson makes his final pitch to the applicant by stressing the need to secure a wife to be successful. The wife is described as an asset because she will appreciate overtime: “in twenty-five years she’ll be silver, / In fifty, gold” (31-32). Once again, Plath is playing with the theme of consumerism; knowing the importance American society places on the consumption of goods for financial gain, Plath depicts a wife as more desirable by alluding to her financial value and worth in the long run. As Naomi Wolf reminds us in The Beauty Myth, “women always suffer from beauty” (3). The priority for financial profit over the well-being of humans creates a dangerous cycle in which the profits of advertisers whose very ad dollars drive the media, in turn, create the ideals of beauty and gender roles. These cyclical effects are inescapable for those considered the product or commodity, specifically women who are forced to compromise their freedom and values to uphold patriarchal standards. The ideals in place to please men continue as the salesperson describes the woman as “a living doll” who can sew, cook and talk (33). Using the comparison of a doll encompasses every stereotypical expectation of a woman. Even Germaine Greer uses this comparison to portray the stereotypical ideals of beauty: “to her belongs all that is beautiful, even the word beauty itself… she is a doll” (Wolf 12). The object of desire – a doll – is helpless and still, mechanical and controllable by its owner. The opportunity to accept this asset is the applicant’s “last resort” (39), meaning a wife is needed to live a decent life. Pushing to “marry it, marry it, marry it” (40), the salesperson commands the applicant to conform to the pressures in society and domesticize a woman. The applicant’s lack of choice in the matter, though minimal, is seemingly great when compared to the woman’s silence in the narrative. Plath never allows the woman to voice her input or opinion further strengthening the meaning behind the feminist mystique. Rather, the outstanding implication from the applicant (representative of men) and the salesperson (representative of society) is that women gain fulfillment by adhering to the gender roles that benefit the patriarchy.

Despite Plath personally succumbing to the pressures placed on females in the mid twentieth century, she is still able to contribute to the feminist movement decades later with the voice that speaks through her poems, evident by the themes in “The Applicant.” Her work published after her death is able to resonate and inspire many women in similar positions. In an article titled, “Sylvia Plath’s War Metaphors or How Female Confessional Poetry Changed Public Perception of Women’s Personal Identity,” Daniella Moldoveanu explains that Plath’s “impulse to mythicize her figure resides in the utopian side of the subject - the need for linguistic escape into another dimension of self, free from socially constructed and prejudice related boundaries” (193). Plath, who experienced strife from the gender roles emplaced by male figures in her life, expressed her perspective, frustrations, and desires through her poetry. Although “The Applicant” is more indicative of the reality she experienced as a woman in the 1900s, Plath dreamt of an idealistic future for her female characters that would slowly come to fruition as the feminist movement progressed.

Maya Angelou: “Phenomenal Woman”

Maya Angelou first handedly contributed the second wave of the feminist movement. Comparing Angelou to Plath, there are some overlapping commonalities between their backgrounds, but also some stark differences in their experiences. Maya Angelou was born four years prior to Plath in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri – though her works are more relevant for she outlived Plath, dying only recently in 2014. Similar to Plath, Angelou was the victim of male predation. While Plath suffered from physical abuse in her marriage, Angelou experienced

sexual assault at a much younger age of seven. Raped by her mother's boyfriend, Angelou became mute for the following five years; it wasn't until her idol, Mrs. Flowers emphasized the importance of words that Angelou was encouraged to claim her voice again (Maya Angelou). A love for literature followed, along with many other multifaceted talents including singing, dancing, acting, composing, directing, writing, editing and advocating.

Emerging into womanhood during a major period of social unrest and change, Angelou was able to be at the forefront of intellectual discourse intersecting race and gender. While Naomi Wolf claims in The Beauty Myth that the feminist movement was losing steam in the period of the "evil eighties" (2), Angelou was not an activist who retreated; rather, she preserved through the quietness of the movement to amplify the voices of marginalized identities. Her own identity as a black woman in America, experiencing the civil rights movement and feminist movement simultaneously, serves as an underlying theme in most of her work. English Professor, Dr. Tara Hembrough, at Southeastern Oklahoma State University highlights the work of black authors in her article, "Writing as an Act of Self-Embodiment: Hurston, Moody, and Angelou Combat Systemic Racial and Sexual Oppression." While Maya Angelou is only one of three authors she writes of, her conclusive findings on the value of black women's voices amongst a Caucasian patriarchal society stand true. As will be analyzed in "Phenomenal Woman," Dr. Tara notes, "Angelou provides instances of racial and sexual inequity related to physicality" (Hembrough). Through her autobiographical pieces, Angelou has composed her own history defined by dignity and truth.

Reflecting the progress and intentions of the second wave of feminism, Maya Angelou's poem, "Phenomenal Woman," drifts away from the discussion of domestic gender roles that was pervasive during the first wave and shifts toward the conversation on physical characteristics that comprise black women's beauty. Whereas Plath conforms to the gender roles expected of women to make her point of a female's need for liberation in "The Applicant," Angelou outright claims power through her confident demeanor in "Phenomenal Woman." Originally published in 1978 in Cosmopolitan magazine, and later published in her collection of four poems of the same name, "Phenomenal Woman" initiated the inclusion of diversified beauty representation that was absent from both literature and the media prior. The poem begins by setting the scene of social standards, introducing the audience to the "pretty women" who seek to discover the secret to Angelou's self-confidence (1). It is imperative to note that Angelou writes this poem in first person; the choice to use herself as the subject increases realism behind the narrative. Because Angelou is not speaking of an abstract character, she is able to better relate to her readers, especially young black girls who long for similar looking idols. Despite not fitting into societal beauty standards typically seen in "fashion model's size" (2), Angelou radiates beauty in many of her other features. She depicts herself as a phenomenal woman because of the "reach of my arms" (6), "span of my hips" (7), "stride of my step" (8), and "curl of my lips" (9). These physical characteristics illustrate African American features, implying that black women who choose to embrace themselves in their skin can exude confidence. Referencing Naomi Wolf again, she argues that while there are pluralities in beauty myths today (with diversified races, genders, sexualities, body sizes, etc. that comprise identities), prior to the 1990s, African American features and dark skin were not commonly seen as the face of the movement (6). Angelou's courageousness in asserting features of her identity in poetry amongst a subject that has historically promoted white representation proves her ambitions to change the narrative. Now, Angelou led the script writing; she declares, "I'm a woman / Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me" (10-13). She will continue to repeat these four lines at the end of each remaining stanza, reinforcing the fact that she, as a black woman, has the ability to determine her own self-worth and deem herself remarkable.

Moving into the second stanza, Angelou introduces her counterparts: men. Yet, she paints them in a non-dominant light. As Angelou "walk[s] into a room," men are honored and amazed by her confident presence, arguably even shocked, for they are not used to seeing a minority enter a majority arena with such conviction. Angelou interestingly flips the hegemonic narrative; similar to how Plath illustrates a man's reliance on a woman's services to be successful, Angelou emphasizes men's appreciation and praise of her: "the fellows stand or fall down on their knees. / Then they swarm around me, / a hive of honey bees" (17-20). In this stanza, she precedes her declaration of phenomenal self by listing internal sources of happiness. The passion from "the fire in my eyes" (22), the attitude from "the swing in my waist" (23), and the merriment from "the joy in my feet" (24) join together to cultivate self-confidence. Past experiences have taught Angelou to not trust a man or patriarchal systems because they have betrayed her (illustrated by her dad's abandonment), abused her (exemplified by her sexual predator), and disappointed her (symbolized by the institutional injustices against minorities). In spite of these persistent challenges, Angelou's self-assurance prevails. Like the "pretty women" (1), men can't understand her "inner mystery," for when she tries "to show them, / they say they still can't see" (33-35). Men are virtually blind to the oppression they have caused through the patriarchal ideologies that have traditionally defined beauty based on scripted expectations of a woman's submissiveness, economic reliance, and male pleasure –also known as the beauty myth. Therefore, it is a novel visual for men to see beauty sourced from female confidence rather than conformity to male expectations.

"Phenomenal Woman" concludes equally as strongly as it opened refusing to surrender to the pressures in a white male dominated society. Alluding to slavery, she states, "Now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed" (45-46). A subtle and humble confidence is revealed through her refusal to "shout or jump about / Or have to talk real loud" (47-48); Angelou proves that you do not need to be the loudest in the room to gain respect for yourself and from others. After explaining in the three previous stanzas how she is phenomenal in her life, she inspires the audience to follow in her footsteps: "When you see me passing, / It ought to make you proud" (49-50). Here, what Angelou meant by "you" can be interpreted in a variety of ways: possibly she is referring to Mrs. Flowers, the woman who inspired her to use her voice as a weapon, or African American women, who as a community are continually oppressed by systemic racism and injustices, or females from past, present, and future feminist movements who advocate in response to being marginalized by the patriarchy.

Overall, "Phenomenal Woman" demonstrates one example of Angelou's contribution to defying beauty standards in the second wave of the feminist movement. She epitomizes opposition to the classic beauty myth that Wolf so densely describes by ignoring arbitrary standards and embracing all features that constitute her identity. In hindsight, it can even be argued that "Phenomenal Woman" took a radical feminist approach for Angelou's beauty assertions came prior to Wolf's definition of "the beauty myth." Although published during the second wave, Angelou's work set precedent for the third and fourth waves. The implications of Angelou's work still resonate today. In 2014, Michelle Obama's excerpt at the memorial service for Maya Angelou encompasses the power of Angelou's words:

> "The first time I read 'Phenomenal Woman' I was struck by how she celebrated black women's beauty like no one had ever dared to before. Our curves, our stride, our strength, our grace… Maya Angelou spoke to the essence of black women but she also graced us with an anthem for all women, a call for all of us to embrace our God-given beauty" (Shrayber).

Angelou had the dauntless ability to enter new territory of literature and activism in order to defend the rights of minorities. Her ideals that were molded during the second wave of the feminist movement shaped her poetry;

despite the movement's progress into the fourth wave with varying goals, Angelou's work still instills confidence in female readers today.

Rupi Kaur: "i'm putting the hate down"

Currently, we are in the midst of the fourth wave of feminism centered on rape culture, body neutrality and mental health. Contemporary poets have emerged during this new wave of feminism including the gifted confessional poet, Rupi Kaur. Born in India and raised in Canada, Rupi Kaur is a 28-year-old poet, illustrator and author whose short visual poetry gained traction with a following on social media platforms. Kaur exemplifies how the advancement of technology can benefit artists who wish to share their work and stories with a widespread audience. Rising to fame in 2014 with her first collection of poems Milk and Honey, Kaur's newest collection titled home body touches on the intimate journey through her past, present and future. A victim of sexual assault herself, she documents in the four sections of her book – mind, heart, rest, awake – the personal power that results from syncing your mind and body. She states, "after feeling disconnected for so long, my mind and body are finally coming back to each other" (Kaur). As Naomi Wolf predicted in The Beauty Myth, the fourth wave of feminism would consist of discovering psychological freedom within oneself that has been weakened by the demeaning actions and implications of the patriarchy. After noting the obstacles, she faced and overcame in her life including molestation, rape, anxiety, depression, and other traumas, Kaur concludes in the first section of home body:

> "i'm tired of being disappointed
> in the home that keeps me alive
> i'm exhausted by the energy it takes
> to hate myself
> - i'm putting the hate down" (47).

Rupi Kaur so beautifully takes readers into her mind, letting them see a glimpse of her thoughts, fears and worries. She reflects the goals of all four waves of feminism – the ability to demand space in a room of her own to create her works of poetry, the refusal to only gain fulfillment through domestic subservience, the appreciation for her body, and ultimately, the recognition of self-love instead of hate. The vulnerability Kaur expresses through admitting her traumas and striving for growth represents where the feminist movement is going: women are beginning to fully disregard societal labels, norms, and expectations that inhibit their personal dreams and goals. As the fourth wave of feminism continues (and surely, there will be more waves to come), feminist literary critics will continue to analyze the works of female poets to better understand their contributions to social change.

Conclusion: Why Any of This Matters

In conclusion, poetry is a historical model that documents social change and political movements through personal anecdotes and artistic expression. The feminist movement, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing today, has fluctuated with the emergence of generational social issues. As illustrated by Virginia Woolf during the first wave, Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer during the second wave, and Naomi Wolf during the third wave, feminist authors use their platforms in literature to advocate for gender equality. These notable authors build a theoretical foundation to the feminist movement in their books that are then used to encourage audiences to take action. Similarly, poetry accounts for the changes throughout the feminist movement. Reflected in Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant," she creates defiance to the traditional gender roles of domesticity by undermining men's ability to be successful on their own. Building upon Plath's work, Maya Angelou radiates an independent self-confidence in her body by deeming herself a "Phenomenal Woman."

Lastly, in “i’m putting the hate down,” Rupi Kaur tackles the effects of sexual assault and mental trauma as she works to gain psychological freedom from the oppressors in her life. While these authors have made substantial contributions towards gender equality, women and men are still not viewed as equals in all aspects of life. Therefore, we must remind one another of the progress we have made since the movement began and hold one another accountable for areas that need improvement as we advance forward. Without a doubt, up and coming female poets will continue the legacy of Plath, Angelou and Kaur in their efforts to achieve true liberation.

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