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**Third-Wave Feminist Linguistics: A Discursive Approach to  
Female Specific Interests in Maya Angelou's *Gather Together  
in My Name***

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**Abstract**

This paper used the Discursive Approach to Language and Gender studies to examine all-female linguistic choices and how linguistic variation amongst female interlocutors is a representation of each female's individual and cultural identity and feminist ideology. The study revealed that linguistic variability abounds between individual women as well as amongst women as a social group and further showed that each

individual woman's talk-style reflects her linguistic idiolect and translates to her individual feminist ideology. The study also showed that the interactional style of Black American women and the use of their peculiar Black vernacular English called Ebonics identify them as a separate socio-cultural group with a separate feminist ideology different from that of their white counterparts. The study concluded that individual women's linguistic choices and socio-cultural background militates against a universal feminist ideology but rather makes feminism multicultural / pluralist in theory and practice.

**Key Words:** Discursive approach, Ebonics, Multicultural, Pluralist, Third-wave feminist linguistics.

### Introduction

According to Mellor (2010), "Language and Gender has been studied, in diverse ways each reflecting the social milieu of the time". She mentions the four (4) D's as the four ways in which linguists have used in the past 100 years to describe how language portrays gender, namely, the Deficit Approach, Dominance Approach, Difference Approach and Discursive Approach. Each reflecting, how women and men, differ in their use of language at different points in history.

The discursive approach, and the major concern of this study is most recent and advances from binary to multiplicity (Aries, 1970); since it considers how sociological factors such as race, ethnicity, class, education, exposure etc influence how people construct gender (Cameron, 2006, p. 138). Apparently, one could sum it that the discursive approach unlike the difference approach does not depend on sex differentiations alone to determine gender but also through language orientation within a socio-cultural framework. Elizabeth Aries' outright rejection of the tendency to attribute a person's behaviour to some aspects of the person (e.g. gender) without considering the social context seems to be discursive in approach and refers to this tendency as *Fundamental Attribution Error* (1997, p. 92).

She goes further to argue that a study by Tracy and Eiesenberg (1990-1991), found differences in "directness and politeness between black and white women" (p. 94). She therefore opines that, "research has shown that, Gender generally accounts for less than 10 percent (10%) of the variability in social behaviour and more typically accounts for less than 5 percent (5%) that the remaining 90 percent (90%) of the variability in how people interact cannot be accounted for without knowledge of many other aspects of the individuals involved and the situation in which they are embedded" (p. 94). Aries (1997) concludes by advising that, "it is important not to underestimate the significance of other social factors such as race, age, ethnicity, religion, region and sexual orientation on linguistic behaviours." She further declares that, "[even] people of the same-sex have a range of values, attribute and style, not one style; that the

variability that exists within members of the same-sex gets overshadowed by a focus on group (mixed-sex) differences” (p. 95).

Earlier, Coates (1993, p. 196) in her book, *Women, men and language* asserted that, “female speakers are not a homogenous group using a single dialect, women are a part of every social group and one could make a reasonable argument that there is more variation between individual women than between women as a group and men as a group”. It is this variation amongst women as a group that this study is interested in, in order to enunciate how linguistic variability amongst women group translates to ideological variability within female groups, precisely the feminist ideology. In addressing feminist ideology, Helen Chukwuma (2000, p.113) defines feminist theory and practice as “...a diffuse, loosely connected body that is more divided than unified, housing more internal disagreements than unity amongst its adherents than perhaps any other approach to stylistic analysis, and since it claims no ultimate spokes person but many voices, there exist not just one but a variety of feminist ideologies”.

These varieties in feminist ideology are the results of the variability of female linguistic choices as well as the socio cultural background of individual women which therefore validates the idea that, feminism is an aspect of sociological and socio linguistic orientation, since, it is borne out of social relations and therefore multicultural rather than universalist in application. Earlier, Bhasin and Saidkhan (1986) had also made useful observations on the regional and cultural idiosyncrasy of feminism and its relevance to South Asia; they concluded that, “there is no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times.” They submitted that, “feminism is articulated differently in different parts of the world...and by different women depending on their class, background, level of education, consciousness. That the definition */practice* [italics mine] can and does change because it is based on historically, culturally concrete realities and level of consciousness, perception and action.”

Consequently, according to Mellor (2010), “feminism as a gender-based ideology is ephemeral, a moving target and dynamic, subject to change due to cultural and historical dynamism which constructs it.” Today, feminist linguistics has transited from First-wave through Second-wave to Third-wave (there may be a fourth-wave coming) since gender is a moving target. These feminist-waves parallel the four changing D’s to the study of language and gender (and there may also be a fifth D coming).

Interestingly, Third-wave feminist linguistics, a form of anti-essentialist analysis which challenges Second-wave feminist linguistics analysis of the language of women and men as homogeneous groups (Mills, 2013), corresponds with the fourth D, the discursive approach, which takes into consideration multiplicity rather than binary factors in the reading of gender. The discursive approach appreciates individuality

rather than the First-wave universal feminist theory or even the Second-wave binary divisions of male and female into two-cultures which parallel the *Difference approach*, the third *D*, which celebrates women's style as a group. As an extension of the difference approach, the discursive approach has grown beyond 'difference' towards a multiplicity of individual women's style.

Concerning, Second and Third-wave feminist linguistics, Mills (2013) says:

I contrast Second and Third wave feminist linguistics, broadly speaking, Second-wave feminism focusing on the language of women as a subordinated group and Third-wave feminism challenging the homogeneity of women as a group and focusing instead on localized studies. Third-wave feminism is best seen as a development from Second-wave feminism which nevertheless depends on the basic framework of Second-wave feminism for its theoretical integrity.

Sara Mills is of the opinion that Third-wave feminist linguistics does not assume that women are a homogeneous grouping; in fact, it stresses the diversity of women's speech." She concludes that, "Third-wave feminist linguistics *which parallels the Discursive Approach to Language and Gender Studies* [italics mine] is more concerned with variability and resistance than on making global statements about the condition of women in relation to language use."

More so, Cameron (2006) a linguist within the 'Discursive' field of language and gender studies, demonstrated, (from a feminist perspective) how versions of gender stereotypes can change according to responses to shifts in the economic climate. She shows that how these shifts are interpreted and by whom influences the reproduction of patriarchal ideology. Her essay demonstrates how the 'Discursive approach' considers sociological factors with the study of Language and Gender.

### **Thematic Concerns as Discursive Features in Maya Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name*.**

The title of the book is taken from the Bible but conveys how one black female survived in the white dominated society of post war, America (World War II) and speaks for all black females.

#### **Individuality and Communal**

Rita sometimes called Marguerite who is the narrative persona speaks out for herself in a white dominated world, she claims:

I knew how things should be done. And if I know, well didn't that mean there were legions of black women in other parts of the world who knew also? (*Gather together*, p. 72)

The use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ makes the speaker individualistic and idiosyncratic. The persona sees herself as an individual woman who is well aware of self with identity and therefore uses the weapon of self awareness and assertion against her white counterpart. When she says “legions of black women in other parts of the world”, she sees these women as individuals with different identities and different voices and not a homogenous group. Rita denies any form of homogeneity and solidarity between the white woman and herself when she says “I would prove to the idle white women... (p. 72). Rita’s individuality and identity stands out as female and black as she is opposed to white and everything about whiteness. She celebrates her black heritage, wisdom and other black women in her life. Thus, Rita as black sees herself as belonging to a separate women’s group different from the white woman’s, hence, her decision to prove herself to the idle white woman. Rita’s volubility portrays distance and power differential between the white women and herself.

### **Career and Economic Independence**

In *Gather together*, Rita goes from job to job to prove her hard work as against the white woman’s idleness. She declares, “I was neither timid nor afraid” (p.166); thereby doing power or dominance and therefore goes all out to challenge all forms of formidable obstacles placed upon her by race, sex and class. Her specific linguistic strategy matches her specific interest, as she declares, “I considered myself mature and adult enough for responsibility” (p.167), hence, “I had been a cook, waitress, Madame, bus girl why not a dancer (p. 96). She is a career woman who seeks economic independence as opposed to her white counterpart whom she considers an idle meddler.

### **Marriage, Children and Family**

Rita believes in marriage, children and family. She desires, “I looked forward to a husband who would love me” (p. 120) and “I’d have another child, a girl” (p. 120). She desires marriage and motherhood as an African. Her female voice speaks Womanism, a complementary and compatible relationship with her male counterpart and not separatist tendencies. Her feminist ideology is therefore different from the white woman’s feminist ideology, which invariably makes the movement quite personal, individualistic and pluralist since each woman speaks with a different voice, interest, style and strategy.

### **Linguistic Choices as Discursive Features in *Gather Together in My Name***

#### **Parallel Structures**

Angelou uses parallel structures to add emphasis and force to the point makes, such that the point made in the first part of the parallel syntactic structure is contradicted in the subsequent one forcefully to emphasize the writer’s position. The writer says:

We had lived through a major war.

Can we make it through a minor peace? (p.3)

This informs the reader about the writer's racial social background, as she doubts whether the Blacks and Whites could ever live together peacefully. In this society, war is magnified while peace is insignificant. Another example is given below:

I wasn't buying things  
I was buying time (p.19)

The above parallel structure by the speaker emphasizes her relationship with the opposite sex (Curly, in particular) as she considers the time she spends with him to be of more value to her than the things she presents to him. It also emphasizes the parallel lives of the Blacks/White who never had anything in common.

### **Binary Opposition**

Angelou's linguistic choices is bifurcated as it represents all sorts of binary oppositions rising typically from her binary social environment of Whites and Blacks, the American south steeped in racial opposition where whites were opposed to Blacks. Thus her belief that:

Life is deduced as a series of opposites: black /white, up / down, life / death, rich / poor, love / hate, happy/sad, and no mitigating areas in between. It followed crime / punishment (p. 55)

As a result, the Blacks and Whites were never compatible as there was segregation amongst them. They had separate towns and secret societies.

The railroad tracks ... separated white town from black town. (p. 72)

White segregated secret society versus Improved Benevolent and protective Order of Elks of the World. (p. 118)

More so, **WITTY SAYINGS** such as "anything worth having is worth working for" (p.24) and "anything worth doing is worth doing well" (p. 81) emphasize women's career empowerment which Angelou's mother advises her to embrace.

### **Use of Adjectives and Figurative Language**

Angelou's descriptive power is superb as she uses adjectives that befit the nouns she describes. Examples are: sharp-tongued lawyer (p. 109), keen-eyed scientist (p.109), cool-hand surgeon (p.109), unrevenged slavery (p.77), luckless fate (p.77) low-down bastard (p.16) and low-life bastard (p.16). Likewise, her figurative language is vivid as her images are drawn from within her local environment which makes her work interesting and fresh. Her similes are rare and innovative.

Examples:

Those military heroes of a few months earlier...began to be seen hanging on the ghetto corners

like forgotten laundry left on a backyard fence (p.3).

I was young and crazy as a road lizard (p.12).

My taste was as new as my interest (p. 18).

Like a tree or river, I merely responded to the winds and the tides (p.23).

I was as cool as a fountain inside (p.77).

Inhabitants scurried like rodents in the sewers and gutters of the world (p. 181).

Angelou's **Exaggeration/Hyperbole** creates humour and shows the courage, boldness and resilience of the writer, as she claims:

I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young (p.3), I had the arrow proof vest of adult confidence (p.3)

Other figures of speech like synecdoche, metaphor and personification also portray Angelou's innovative play on words as she is able to use language associatively beyond their literary meanings.

**Synecdoche:** You'll make a million with each leg and a zillion with your nose (p. 94)

**Metaphor:** The life of the underworld was truly a rat race (p.181)

#### **Personification**

Jobs were begging for workers (p.4);

the big house we lived in began to die (p.4);

the bird kingdom must be petrified (p.13);

the sun's strength was weakened by my pleasure (p.77);

Arrogance and stupidity nudged me out of the little café and back on the white hot clay (p. 75)

In addition, Angelou's use of Black vernacular English called Ebonics is not just for the purpose of delineating low status characters but to symbolize in-group solidarity, and to communicate their black feminist ideology called Womanism which is quite different from that of her white counterpart. Hence, her use of Ebonics is a weapon for black cultural distinction, assertion and preservation against white superiority. This manifests in her use of double negatives, contractions, and coinages as shown below:

**Preponderant Use of Double Negatives:** Few examples are: didn't never (p. 144); didn't want nothing (p.4)

**Contractions** found in the text are mainly in the form of syncope: Examples are: I'd (p.136) I'm (p.136), Ma'am (p.54) ain't (p.54), We'd (p.49), don't (p.36), hadn't (p.23).

**Coinages** are mainly compound words: Examples are:

Never-could-have happened (p.63)  
Yes-sirring and no-sirring (p.70)  
Thirtyish (p. 159)  
Slow-speaking, right-thinking (P.61)  
Go-to-meeting clothes (p.37) etc  
Other slangs are as follows  
Tricks (p.47) means whores prostitutes  
Better (p.66) means seniors  
White girl (p.143) means cocaine  
screwing (p.142) Means sexual intercourse  
goddam (p.10) means Damn  
Flowers / monthlies (p.39) means menstrual circle  
Momma /mamma (p.66) means Mother  
Poppa / Papa (p.70) means father  
Jew (p.64) means Junior  
Grifa (p.43) means cigarette.

All these Black vernacular English are to capture the speech orality of the writer realized through the character to enforce the writer's assertion of her black tradition as well as her feminist ideology.

### Conclusion

The main strength of the discursive approach is its flexibility, and its movement away from binary and towards multiplicity. The approach looks at how gender is constructed through language within a socio-cultural framework, and no longer the subject of sex differentials, are the channels through which gender is discussed. Hence, Rita's language and linguistic choices identifies her as a black woman who celebrates her culture, ideas and norms for women, which are quite different from those of the white woman. Consequently, differences in feminist preoccupation as well as variation in feminist practice and ideology, stems from differences in sociological factors like race, religion, values, attributes, exposure, attributes, class, status, style, etc. that influence gender identity and ideology.

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