A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Maya Angelou's Identity Poem "When I Think of Myself"

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Abstract

The present study investigates the language of identity poems from a critical stylistic perspective. This study aims to identify the ideological representation of the self within the selected identity poems. The current study follows Jeffries (2010) model of analysis to analyze Maya Angelou's identity/self-poem known as *"When I Think About Myself".* The analysis depends on the use of certain textual-conceptual tools that show the tendency of identity poems to depend mainly on the use of naming and describing as the highest linguistic tools in connection to others. The analysis shows the hidden ideology of discrimination to Black Americans within the American society.

Keywords: identity, poetry, identity/self-poems, critical stylistics, and ideology.

المستخلص

تبحث الدراسة الحالية في لغة قصائد الهوية من منظور أسلوبي نقدي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على التمثيل الأيديولوجي للذات ضمن قصائد الهوية المختارة. تتبع الدراسة الحالية نموذج جيفريز (٢٠١٠) للتحليل لتحليل هوية / قصيدة مايا أنجيلو المعروفة باسم "عندما أفكر في نفسي". يعتمد التحليل على استخدام بعض الأدوات النصية – المفاهيمية التي تُظهر ميل قصائد الهوية للاعتماد بشكل أساسي على استخدام التسمية والوصف كأعلى الأدوات اللغوية فيما يتعلق بالآخرين. يُظهر التحليل الأيديولوجية الخفية للتمييز ضد الأمريكيين السود داخل المجتمع الأمريكي.الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، قصائد الذات، الاسلوبية النقدية، الايديولوجي.

1. Introduction

The study of identity poems, as a genre within literature, is important to researchers nowadays. The identity poems can be defined as "a self-portrait of who you are". Hence, identity poems focus on the concept of inner essence, that is person's beliefs, conflicts, emotions, and differences (How to write an identity poems, 2021).

The poetic language is a very rich and interesting to researchers to analyze. There are many themes can be presented under the umbrella of identity poems, such as, culture and identity, poverty, suppression, and others. Looking at the language of literary poems from a critical stylistic perspective is to show insightful and significant characteristics of the language in the presentation of identity. Thus, the study of critical stylistics is to bridge criticality to stylistic studies. According to Jeffries (2014, p. 417) critical stylistics is "stylistic products that study the ways in which language reflects social meanings." Jeffries model of analysis tries to connect stylistics with critical discourse analysis by using conceptual tools provided for the analysis of the linguistic manifestations of social meanings (Sahan, 2021, p.40).

2. Conflict, Language and Identity

The poetry is a medium to express identity. The language of poetry can indicate the ideology hidden within certain identity. Using poetry can show "who you are" and "what you believe" in a poetic language. The power and conflict in the language of poems is mainly linked to themes, such as *war, identity, sacrifice, death, and folly*. The analysis of poems links conflict and power to show the views of people in relation to war and time. Narrative poems present conflict. The poet tries to introduce the conflict through the use of certain textual and stylistic devices to introduce the adopted ideologies (Archuleta, 2017).

The identity/self-poems are based on different dominant powers that may present the civil unrest. The researcher examines the identity of the poet following various critical stylistic strategies and linguistic tools to manifest the conflicts and struggles the poet undergoes.

3. Model of Analysis

The study of critical stylistics depends mainly on the toolsets presented by Jefferies (2010) as a model of analysis. This model is seen as a comprehensive tool of analysis that fills a gap within the field of critical discourse analysis. Firstly, it provides not only comprehensive tools of analysis but also reasons behind using these tools. Secondly, it explains the cognitive processes within the analysed texts and their ideological structures (Jefferies, 2010, 15). The figure below shows the toolset within the model. These tools are divided into either functional or pragma-semantic ones.

1. *Naming* is seen in text name and describes animate and inanimate elements in a clear way. According to Jefferies (2014, p. 413) naming is seen in "noun choices, modification of nouns, and nominalization".

2. *Representing of actions* depends on the use of transitivity processes.

3. *Negating*, as the tool name suggest, it is connected to the various negating tools such as negative particles, negation of a word through morphology.

4. *Equating and contrasting* is seen through the linguistic realization of apposition, parallel structures, relational transitivity processes, or syntactic frames.

5. *Exemplifying and numerating* is seen in the linguistic tools hyponyms or metonyms meaning relations.

6. *Prioritizing* as a textual tool is realized through the use of active and passive sentences.

7. *Implying and assuming* is realized in the use of implicature, presupposition.

8. *Hypothesizing* is realized within a text through the use of different types of modality processes.

9. *Presenting thought and speech of the others* through the presentation of different thoughts and speech.

10.   *Presenting time, space and society* is realized in the text through the use of deixis.

<p align="center">Figure 1: Toolset of Jefferies' Model of Analysis (2010)</p>
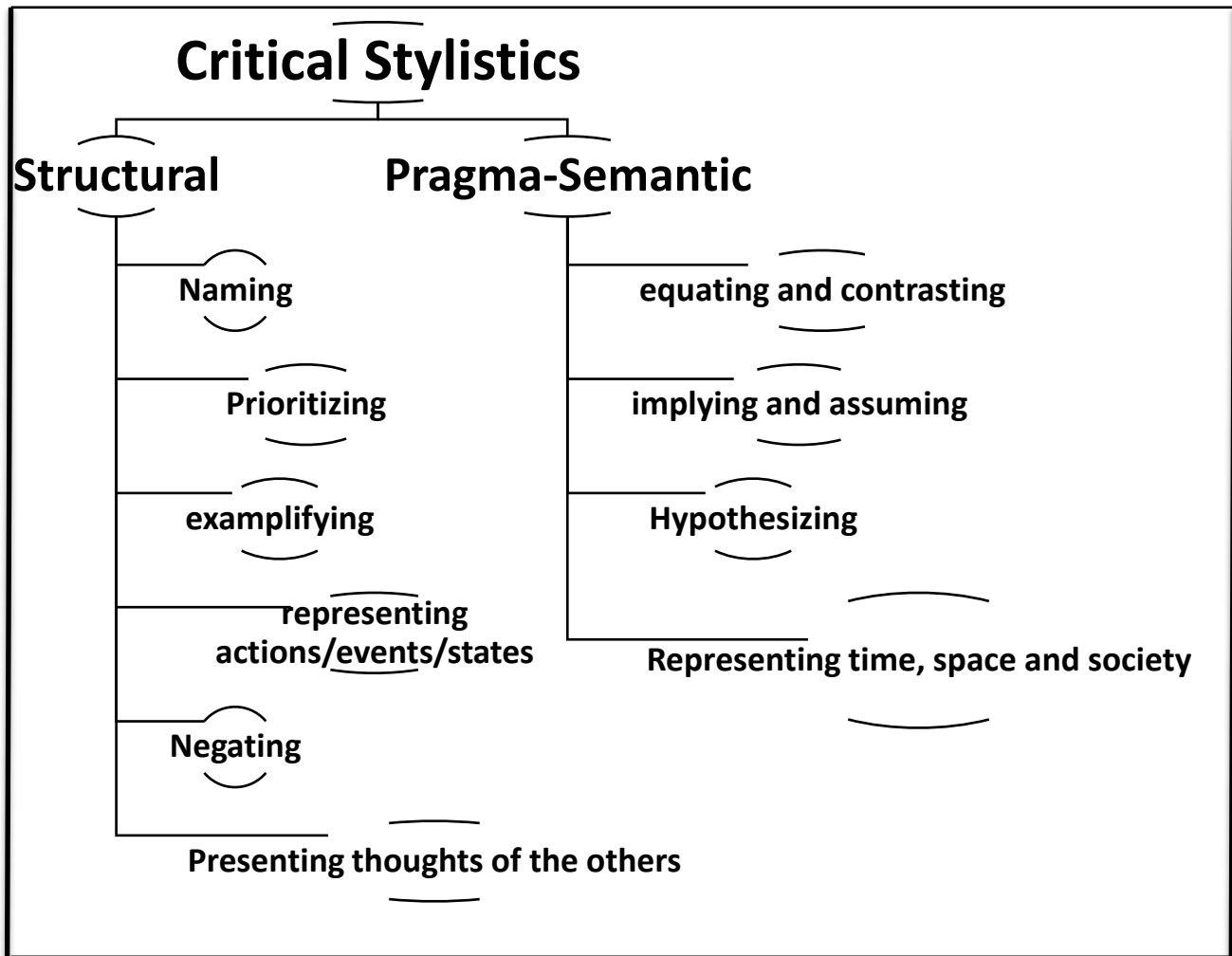
4. Data Selection

The present research paper focuses on the study of identity poems of Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou's poems are selected for the following criteria: firstly, the genre of the poems that focuses on the presentation of the self and the difficulties the poet faces due to several civil unrest many black Americans had undergone. Secondly, the time criterion is taken into consideration in the selection of the analysed poems. All the selected poems are published within the period of 1970's and the beginning of the 80's. This period is selected to indicate the identity struggles and conflicts poet faced in the representation of her identity. Finally, the black-American conflict is considered in the selection of the data and the presentation of their identity is presented within the autobiographical poems of the poet.

5. Data of Analysis

The current section is concerned with the analysis of the selected poems. The analysis of each poem will be divided into two parts (i.e., structural and pragma-semantic analysis) connected to critical analysis of the identity poems and the implied ideology. The analysis is qualitative and quantitative in nature. The following sub-sections present the analysis of each poem according to the adopted model of critical stylistic analysis:

5.1 Qualitative Analysis of the Poem "When I Think About Myself" (1971)

When I think about myself,
I almost laugh myself to death,
My life has been one great big joke,
A dance that's walked
A song that's spoke,
I laugh so hard I almost choke
When I think about myself.
Sixty years in these folks' world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.
Too proud to bend
Too poor to break,
I laugh until my stomach ache,
When I think about myself.
My folks can make me split my side,
I laughed so hard I nearly died,
The tales they tell, sound just like lying,
They grow the fruit,
But eat the rind,
I laugh until I start to crying,
When I think about my folks

The analysis of the above poem is divided into two parts according to the structural and pragma-semantic analysis:

- **Structural analysis**

  1. Naming and Describing:

  My life has been one great big joke,
  A dance that's walked
  A song that's spoke,(L:3-5)
  The child I works for calls me girl
  I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake(L:9-10)
  I laugh until my stomach ache,
  When I think about myself.(L:13)
  My folks can make me split my side,(L:15)
  They grow the fruit,
  But eat the rind,
  I laugh until I start to crying,
  When I think about my folks.(L:18-21)

  According to the above extracts taken from the poem, the analysis of these extracts is confronted with the ideological representation of the self in relation to oppression through the use of different images. The use of various noun choices like "ma'am", "working's sake", "stomach ache", and "joke" is mainly to indicate the darkness of her situation and her people's situation as black Americans. The belittlement of as slaves in the hand of white people which ironically lead to a child degraded her by calling her "a girl". Hence, the ideological representation of identity is represented through themes of oppression and control.

  2. Representing Actions/Events/States

  This section of analysis is concerned with transitivity processes. The analysis of identity poems and the representation of the self are presented by the use of different processes to transfer the ideological implications. The analysis of these processes follows Simpson's transitivity model within Jeffries' (2010) model of critical stylistics.

- **Mental Process**

  *When I **think** about myself,*
  *I almost **laugh** myself to death,(L:1-2),(L6-7),(L:13-14), (L:17),(L:21-22).*

  The examples presented above depend on the use of different verbs connected to mental process, such as the verb *think* and *laugh*. The above instances indicate the ideological implications of the poet in the

representation of her identity/self. The poet presents her thinking about the self and how this thinking would lead her to laugh about her situation as a black woman in a much oppressed white society.

- **Material Process**

The child I works for calls me girl (L:9).
My folks can make me split my side,(L:15).
They **grow** the fruit,
But **eat** the rind, (L:18-19).

The above extracts of material processes, such as *work, make, grow*, and *eat* are used by the poet intentionally. These processes are used to signify the actions and events black American may undergo. The use of the verb "work" signifies the action of humiliating acts of whites against her, and these actions of humiliating may also come from children that try to belittle her (i.e., calling her a girl). The use of verbs like "grow" and "eat" expresses the images of exploitation. Reinforcing the idea of mistreatment and taking advantage of the Blacks in the white society.

- **Verbal Process**

I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.(L10).
The tales they tell, sound just like lying. (L:17)

The above lines are illustration of verbalization processes. The use of verbs, such as *say* and *tell* is to enhance reader's virtual auditory sense towards certain images. The use of the verb "say" in the above extract represents the identity of the poet as subordinate to others (i.e., Whites). The use of the verb "tell" expresses the mental image of the tales white people present as lies.

3. Presenting others' speech and thought

The study of critical discourse analysis concerning this section depends on different linguistic tools, such as narrative reported speech, indirect speech or direct speech. These tools present various verbalization processes, like say, tell, speak, or shout to highlight certain thoughts or ideologies. The selected poem has used the direct speech act as in the following example:

"I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake."

The use of the verb "say" is to indicate the directly quoted literal wordings of the speaker. These words show the kind of expressions black American uses daily to show respect to the Whites in order to keep their jobs.

- **Pragma-Semantic Analysis:**

1. Hypothesizing

The use of modality within texts has certain ideological implications. According to Halliday (1985) "Modality helps in presenting ideas hypothetically and the receptor is left to believe or disbelieve".

The formal aspects of hypothesizing can be represented in a variety of forms:
I. Modal auxiliary verbs: will/ would/ shall/ should/ can/ could/ may/ might/ must/ ought to/ dare/ need.
II. Lexical verbs: think, suppose, wish, hope,..
III. Modal adverbs: probably, maybe, definitely, of course,…
IV. Modal adjectives: probable, possible, sure, definite, certain, obligatory, forbidden,..
V. Conditional constructions: (if….then…)

The textual triggers listed above are categorized to epistemic, boulomaic, or deontic to signify doubt/certainty, desire or obligation respectively.

The selected data of analysis shows the use of the model auxiliary "can" that indicates the ability of how her people that shares the common ground as black American make her laugh when she thought about them, the laugh that breaks up darkness with joy.

2. Equating and Contrasting

Texts usually have certain elements that indicate equality and sameness as well as the difference and opposition between elements within a clause (Sahan, 202, p. 166). There are different textual tools that present equating and contrast, such as synonyms, antonyms, metaphor, simile, and others. These textual triggers help in the presentation of the ideology hidden within the identity poems which help in the representation of the identity through the text producers of certain worldview of equating and contrasting.

"The tales they tell, sound just like lying"

"I laugh until I start to crying"

The use of simile in the word "like" to represent the stories white people tell about their justice is just mere lies. The second example expresses the use of antonyms to express the contrast of emotions when the poet

thinks about her life as a black American is compared to sarcastic situations which expresses contrasted poles between laughing and crying.

3. Presenting Time, Space, and Society

This part of analysis depends on the use of different types of deixis, such as person deixis, temporal deixis, space deixis, and society deixis.

- Place deixis is presented with certain expressions such as *adverbs* (here, there), *demonstratives* (this, these, that, those), adverbials -often prepositional- structures like (on the right, opposite, further up the road)
- Time: *verb tense, adverbs* (then, now), *demonstratives* (this, these, that, those), *time adverbials* (later, tomorrow, next, soon).
- Social titles: *titles* (Mr, Mrs, Dr), *address forms* (nicknames, formal names, first names).
- Person deixis: personal pronouns (I, we, you...)

*"When **I** think about myself,*
***I** almost laugh myself to death,"* (Person deixis)
*"**I** laugh until my stomach ache,*
*When **I** think about myself."* (Person deixis)
 *"The child I works for calls me **girl***
*I say "Yes **ma'am**" for working's sake"*(Society deixis)
*"**I** laughed so hard **I** nearly died,*
*The tales **they** tell, sound just like lying,*
***They** grow the fruit,*
But eat the rind,
***I** laugh until **I** start to crying,*
*When **I** think about my folks"*

The poet in her biographical poem depends on the use of two types of deixis: person and social deixis. The former is used to indicate the thoughts and fragmented self. whereas the latter is concerned with the use of social deixis like titles such as "Ma'am", and "girl" to indicate the social ranking between black and whites in the use of certain titles to address black Americans as subordinate in society.

5.2. The Quantitative Analysis of the Poem "When I Think of Myself" (1971)

The last part of analysis is devoted to the presentation of the quantitative analysis. The table and figure below will show the statistical distribution and means of the analysed linguistic tools:

Table 1: *The Statistical Distribution of Textual Tools in the Poem "When I Think of Myself"*

Linguistic Tools	Frequency	Percentages
Naming	14	35.9%
Representing events/actions	8	20.5%
Presenting others' speech and thought	1	2.6%
Hypothesizing	1	2.6%
Equating and Contrasting	2	5.1%
Presenting time, space, society	13	33.3%
total	39	100%

Figure 2: *The Statistical Means of Textual tools in the Poem "When I Think of Myself"*
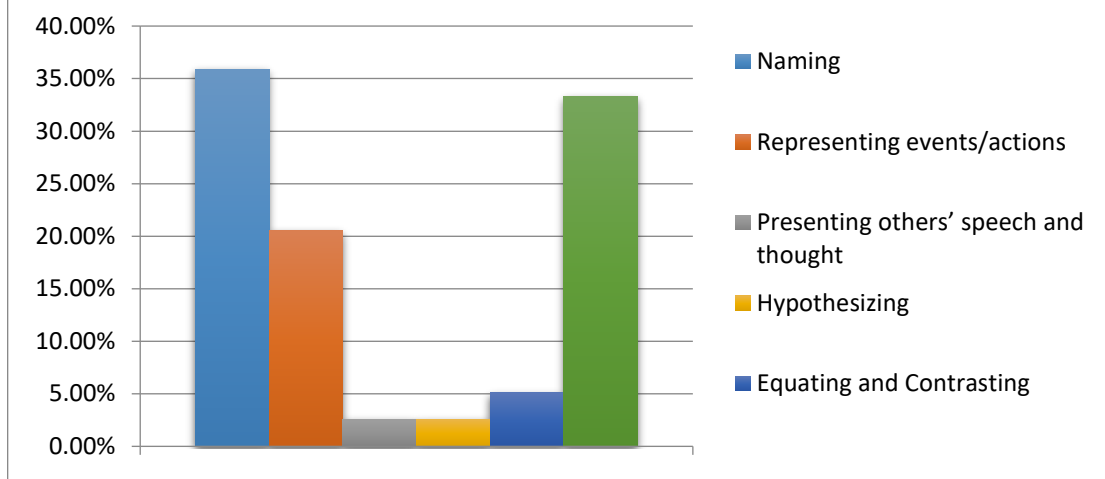
The above table and figure shows the tendency of the poet is to use "naming and describing" as the highest in relation to other types (14/35.9%). The second frequently used type is "representing time, space, society". These two types are highly used for their ideological representation of the different social circumstances connected to the representation of Black Americans vs. White Americans. Other types like "hypothesizing", "Equating and contrasting", and "representing others' speech and thought" is the least used types in the analysed poem.

6. Results

The analysis of the selected poem qualitatively and quantitatively shows the tendency to use certain textual tools than the others:

1. The writer depends on the use of naming and describing for its ideological implications hidden within the use of certain names as a reference to Black Americans.

2. The writer uses presenting time, space, and society, concentrating specifically on the use of person and social deixis to emphasize the differences within society between Black and White Americans.

3. Equating and contrasting and hypothesizing are the least used types within the poem. The poet presents the contrast between ideas only two times, whereas hypothesizing and presenting others' speech are used only once within the poem.

4. The poem shows the lack of use of prioritizing, negating, assuming, and exemplifying. The poem depends on the use of clear statements to represent her situation as Black American for that reason the poet did not use any of these types.

7. Conclusion

Identity poems are important type of poems since they are loaded with hidden ideologies, political and social stances that represent the self as individual /group at the same time. The analysis following Jeffries approach of critical stylistics (2010) shows the reflection of certain ideologies, such as belittling of the other, identity of the Black Americans, and discrimination within society.

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