

# From Molds to Metamorphosis: The Evolution of Female Identity in Literature and Culture

In a society dominated by oppressive beauty standards and rigid expectations, Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" and Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" stand as potent testamentations to the trials and tribulations women face. Both poems unravel the intricate tapestry of womanhood, shining a light on the pressures exerted by societal norms and the inherent strength that women harness to defy and redefine these expectations. In the juxtaposition of Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" and Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll", a narrative emerges, showcasing not only the oppressive societal expectations placed upon women but also the inherent power of feminine resistance. This duality, reflecting both the restrictive molds and the celebration of self, reveals the continuous evolution of female identity amidst external pressures.

Throughout history, dolls have always held a mirror to the times they come from, acting as repositories of cultural norms and values. The iconic Barbie, launched by Mattel in 1959, encapsulates a myriad of social and cultural messages about femininity. Barbie's proportions, if translated to a real woman, would be anatomically impossible. This skewed physical representation not only underscores society's unrealistic expectations but also imprints upon young minds a myopic view of 'perfection.' Additionally, in the early years, Barbie was predominantly portrayed in stereotypical roles, often reflecting occupations and lifestyles traditionally deemed appropriate for women in mid-20th century America. However, as society

evolved, so did Barbie, eventually adopting diverse careers, backgrounds, and stories, showcasing a gradual shift in societal norms.

Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" pulsates with a self-assured energy. She describes herself not in the stereotypically fragile or delicate terms often associated with femininity but as "Phenomenal", robust and brimming with confidence. Her lines, "I walk into a room, Just as cool as you please," and "I'm a woman, Phenomenally" (Angelou, lines 13, 29), defy the norms, showcasing the power of self-acceptance and genuine self-awareness. Critic Clare Hanson's research on the embodiment of self-worth in literature suggests that Angelou's poem is "a celebratory exploration of the self, which does not merely challenge but overturns societal norms" (Hanson, 78).

Piercy's "Barbie Doll", on the other hand, is a stark contrast in its portrayal of a girl's journey through life, continuously chastised for not fitting into the mold of the 'perfect' woman. The girl in the poem is presented as possessing strong qualities, "healthy, tested intelligent" (Piercy, line 4), but is demeaned by a singular comment about her "big nose and fat legs" (Piercy, line 6). The societal pressure for physical perfection becomes tragically evident when the poem concludes with the girl's demise and the cynical commentary, "To every woman a happy ending" (Piercy, line 25). Sara Mills, in her book *Discourses of Difference*, highlights how "the language around women, particularly in literature, tends to encapsulate them within societal standards, often to detrimental effects" (Mills, 115).

In a world where commodification of female beauty is rampant, while both poems tackle the theme of societal expectations, their approaches, conclusions, and contrasts differ dramatically. Angelou uplifts and celebrates womanhood, while Piercy presents a cautionary tale of its perils in a judgmental society. However, both poems intersect at the crux of resistance. Through her exuberant self-expression, Angelou's protagonist resists societal norms by embracing her uniqueness. Similarly, though in a more somber tone, Piercy's character becomes a symbol of resistance by highlighting the tragic consequences of oppressive societal norms. While Barbie might represent a commercially crafted ideal, Angelou's words exude authenticity. Barbie, as a cultural artifact, offers insights into the packaged, commodified notions of beauty, with its evolution over the years reflecting society's grudging steps toward inclusivity. Meanwhile, "Phenomenal Woman" celebrates every woman's unique essence, advocating for self-acceptance in a world rife with comparison. Angelou's poem thus becomes a powerful tool in decolonizing minds from preset standards, advocating for a broader, more inclusive definition of beauty.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." This sentiment resonates with the core message of both poems. In "Phenomenal Woman", the protagonist's rejection of stereotypical beauty standards showcases the strength of the internal self, a concept supported by Kimberlé Crenshaw's research on intersectionality, which examines how various identities intersect and mold an individual's experiences. Crenshaw notes, "Women, particularly those of color, often navigate spaces crafted by societal expectations, and their resistance becomes an act of reclamation" (Crenshaw, 202).

This resistance and reclamation of the self is essential to understanding the collective message of Angelou and Piercy. While societal pressures persist, these poems underscore the importance of self-awareness, resistance, and the reclaiming of narratives that have long been dominated by external perspectives.

Going back to a modern lens from today, the 2023 "Barbie" movie serves as an insightful commentary on the dynamics of power, identity, and cultural narratives. Drawing connections to the broader discourse surrounding gender norms, cultural hegemony, and power dynamics in the real world, the film becomes more than just a tale of dolls in a fictional realm. The portrayal of Barbie's existential crisis mirrors the struggles many individuals face in contemporary society when grappling with societal expectations and their own self-worth. The exploration of Barbie and Ken's challenges in the real world further underscores the stark differences between constructed realities, like Barbieland, and the complexities of human existence. Through their experiences, viewers are invited to reflect on the stories they've been told and the roles they've been conditioned to play, questioning the status quo and challenging normative frameworks. Similarly, the Kens' flawed attempt at establishing a patriarchy in Barbieland can be seen as a reflection of real-world systems that are often built on fragile foundations of dominance rather than understanding and collaboration. The film's emphasis on narrative and ideological hegemony sheds light on the ways in which societies are held together, not by brute force alone, but by shared beliefs and stories that give meaning and purpose to their inhabitants. In essence, "Barbie" is a microcosm of our society, raising pertinent questions about who gets to shape cultural narratives, the repercussions of blind adherence to hegemonic ideologies, and the transformative power of collective action. It prompts viewers to not only revel in the fantastical

adventures of Barbie and Ken but also to critically engage with the ideologies presented, drawing parallels to their own lives and the world around them.

Across diverse media, from Angelou's soulful lyrics in “Phenomenal Woman” to the somber tones of Piercy's “Barbie Doll,” and from the evolution of the physical Barbie doll to its cinematic portrayal in the 2023 "Barbie" movie, a common thread emerges: the tension between external societal constructs and the resilient spirit of the individual. Angelou's celebratory assertion of individuality contrasts sharply with Piercy's poignant exploration of societal pressures, yet both poems underscore the challenges and triumphs of navigating femininity in a world of stringent norms. The physical Barbie doll, once a symbol of impossible beauty standards, has seen a transformative journey, mirroring society's gradual shift towards a more inclusive perspective. This evolution culminates in the "Barbie" movie, where the intersection of identity, societal expectations, and self-worth are further examined. These varied narratives, taken together, spotlight the multifaceted experience of womanhood — a dance of resistance, conformity, and self-empowerment amidst ever-shifting cultural landscapes.

In conclusion, Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman” and Marge Piercy’s “Barbie Doll” are intricate explorations into the complexities of womanhood, the pressures of societal expectations, and the indomitable spirit of feminine resistance. Drawing from both literature and academic research, it becomes evident that the journey of womanhood is not merely about conforming or rebelling, but about redefining boundaries and asserting one's identity in the labyrinth of societal norms. The interplay between commercial representations and literary assertions creates a dynamic tapestry of female identity narratives. Over time, both Barbie and

the sentiments expressed in "Phenomenal Woman" have contributed to shaping and reflecting societal views on femininity. While one started as a reflection of society's constraints, the other acted as a beacon of empowerment. Together, they encapsulate the ongoing journey of female identity—a journey from societal molds to unabashed self-expression. In the midst of societal pressures, both explicit and implicit, the journey of female identity reveals a profound metamorphosis — a movement from imposed constraints to a celebration of authenticity, reminding us that while molds can shape, they cannot confine the spirit of womanhood.

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