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EMERGENCE OF BLACK FEMINISM

Basma Majid

Ph D Scholar, University of Kashmir , India.

ABSTRACT

Black Feminism emerged out of resistance to the exclusion of race issues from the outline of the modern women's movement. The centre of this thought focused on pertinent issues defining the black female experience that had been earlier disregarded by the women's movement. Black women came together to form their own organizations which focused on lot of issues in their lives. They dealt with several themes, which included the necessity of black feminism's total commitment to the liberation of black women and it's recognition of black women as valuable beings. Black feminist thought included other important tenets like the political awareness of how race, class, and gender work together as oppressive forces. In other words, the basis of black feminist thought consisted of the personal and political awareness of how race, class, and gender work simultaneously as oppressors. These oppressors were interwoven into social structures, and worked together to define the history of the lives of black women.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Black Feminism, Race, Gender.

INTRODUCTION:

The phrase "Women's Liberation" which was first used in the United States in 1964 set out to identify,

expose, and subvert the long standing gender stereotypes that had been used to dominate and subordinate women. Central to the theory of feminism was how terms like "woman," "female," and "feminine" are construed or misconstrued. The pioneer women in the US suffragist movement spoke of and fought for women's rights, using the term 'woman' to signify all women. What they failed to recognize was that their notion of womanhood was modelled on the experiences and problems of a small percentage of females who, like them, were almost exclusively white, middle-class, and relatively well-educated. However, the assumption that middleclass white women's experiences represented all women's experiences was not only made by the

early Suffragists, but continued to shape the ideal of womanhood well into the second wave of the American feminist movement and beyond.

One of the most vocal critics of the women's liberation movement has been the African-American feminist, and intellectual Gloria Jean Watkins (who uses the pseudonym "bell hooks") who argues that the ideal of gender solidarity is built upon an assumption of sameness that is supported by the idea that there exists a common oppression of patriarchy around which women must rally. "The idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (hooks 2000:44). This complexity is especially disclosed in the



lives of black women who must contend with multiple and overlapping forms of oppressions—including oppression by white women, who fail to acknowledge the different struggles confronting women who are not like them.

While feminists talked about the necessity of building a mass based feminist movement, there was no sound foundation on which to structure this movement. The feminist movement was not only structured on a narrow platform, it primarily called attention to issues relevant primarily to white women and thereby completely ignored black women. bell hooks says:

[Black women] needed theory mapping thought and strategy for a mass-based movement, theory that would examine our culture from a feminist standpoint rooted in an understanding of gender, race, and class. (hooks 2000: xii)

Tension arose during the late 1960s and early 1970s as non white women argued that Feminism was predominantly white and middle class, and did not understand and was not concerned with race issues. Neither Civil Rights movement nor Black Nationalist movement confronted the issues that concerned black women specifically; in fact, black women were being systematically ignored by these movements.

Black women could not relate completely to the mainstream Anglo-American feminist movement, although it was self-evident that in some respects white and black feminism were related. Obviously, both criticized the Western culture generally, and the Western canon more particularly, for being patriarchal. Yet, many black women considered the mainstream feminist movement narrow and elitist. bell hooks says:

Every Black person concerned about our collective survival must acknowledge that sexism is a destructive force in Black life that cannot be effectively addressed without an organized political movement to change consciousness, behavior and institutions. What we need is a feminist revolution in Black life. But to have such a revolution, we must first have a feminist movement. Many Black folks do not know what the word feminism means. They may think of it only as something having to do with white women's desire to share equal rights with white men. In reality, feminism is a movement to end all sexism and sexist oppression. The strategies necessary to achieve that end are many. We need to find ways to address the specific forms that sexism takes in our diverse communities. (hooks 1992: 124)

Even though there certainly was something white and black women had in common being women, it was something totally different to be black and female. The double marginalization that was implied by being a black woman called for a feminist theory. Or, as hooks argues:

We are in need of more feminist scholarship which addresses a wide variety of issues in Black life (mothering, Black masculinity, the relationship between gender and homicide, poverty, the crisis of Black womanhood, connections between health and our conceptions of the body, sexuality, media, etc.)—work that could have transformative impact on our future. (hooks 1989:56)

Therefore, out of this marginalization black women established their own terms and ideologies, the black feminist movement. Black feminism was created in order to focus on the specific issues that affect and shape the lives of black women. The black feminist discourse of the 1970s made abundantly clear that the word woman as used in the discourse of the Women's Liberation movement could not possibly encompass both black and white women. Toni Morrison, in her essay "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib," remarked that the difference between the bathroom signs "White Ladies" and "Colored Women" seemed to her "an eminently satisfactory one." 'Ladies' signified the white middle-class female's softness, helplessness, and inactivity, as

opposed to the tough, capable independence of black “women” (Dubey 1994:15). Morrison implied that these opposed notions of femininity largely explained the inability of black and white women to find common cause as “sisters” in oppression. So the Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women’s Movement. It aimed at meeting the needs of black women who felt they were being sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement and racially oppressed in the Women’s Movement.

Black feminists too explored and articulated questions related to gender differences and patriarchal oppression. They especially foregrounded the fact that black women were victims of racial as well as gender oppression. bell hooks says, “By calling attention to interlocking systems of domination – sex, race, and class – black women...acknowledge the diversity and complexity of female experience, of [their] relationship to power and domination” (hooks 1989: 21). Black feminist’s struggle to end patriarchal domination was of primary importance to women not because it was the foundation of all other oppressive structures but because it was a form of domination most encountered in everyday life. The basic tenet of Black Feminism, thus, was to raise and maintain the consciousness among black women of a double oppression, one because of their black skin and the other because of their being female. Black feminists exposed the limitations of a white feminist perspective to fully comprehend the black female experience, for it failed to take into account the racial experience of black women. Francis Beale in her essay “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female”, vehemently declared that “any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women’s struggle” (Bambara 1970: 112). It foregrounded the fact that the history of black oppression mainly emphasized the oppression of black man, disregarding that of the black woman. In this regard bell hooks remarks:

Oppression of black men during slavery has been described as demasculinization for the same reason that virtually no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery. Underlying both tendencies is the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than those of women and that what matters most among the experiences of men is their ability to assert themselves patriarchally. (hooks 1981: 21-22)

The writing by black women writers addresses the collective experience of black women. As Mary Helen Washington says:

Obviously we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways, for continuing on in the old way is impossible... The making of a literary history in which black women are fully represented is a search for full vision to create a circle where now we have but a segment. (Gates, Jr. 1990:1)

Black women writers and theorists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, to name a few, have been in the forefront of this enterprise. Their writing aims at reclaiming and defining the black feminine identity, achieving self-realization and sexual awareness. Anna Julia Cooper was one of the earliest of black women who advocated social equality for black women. Her book of essays, *A Voice from the South* (1892) is considered to be one of the founding texts of the black feminist movement. In this text, Cooper argues eloquently for the recognition of the black women’s voice, and offers an explicit challenge to the black male authors:

One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black woman . . . The “other side” has not been represented by one who “live there.” And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately

tell the weight and fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America . . . [just] as our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot quite put themselves in the dark man's place neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman.

(Gates, Jr. 1990: 1)

Since Cooper's claim of the especial authority of the black woman's voice, and her explicit challenge to black male authors, black women's writing has come a long way to establish itself as an important genre of writing. Since the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Toni Cade Bambara's anthology, *The Black Woman*, black women writers have made their mark in the African American literary tradition.

Black Feminism builds on the serious omissions inherent in Western feminism that fails to acknowledge the intersection of race with gender and class to produce black women's experience. Furthermore, Western feminist theorists blindly assume that their methodologies and theoretical systems can adequately account for the experience of 'all women.' Black feminism attempts to rectify the shortcomings of Western feminism by emphasizing the unique character of black women's experience; it encourages a realistic representation of these experiences. Black feminists have always been keenly aware of the impact of race, class, and gender oppression upon their lives. Since slavery, black women have struggled individually and in groups, spontaneously and in formal organizations to eradicate the multiple injustices that they and their communities faced and continue to face.

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