

# The Black American Female's Struggle For Assertion

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## Abstract:

Feminism is a counter discourse or a resistant reaction to the patriarchal structures of power that subjugate women's interests, lives, sexuality and all. Political, cultural and sociological factors are intertwined with feminist liberation movements. The purposefully created and domineering social structure and the man woman relationships are hegemonic and at the same time repressive, feminists believe. The struggle against this oppression has been there over centuries and women have attained remarkable progress in their status resulting from organized and unorganized movements. Afro-American feminism is a different and at the same time related liberation movement by the Black women intellectuals of America. It is an intellectual, artistic, philosophical, and activist practice grounded in Black women's lived experiences. Apart from social movements, literature and various art forms became the major weapons of this radical struggle and the results are welcoming and fruitful.

**Key words** - Feminism, Afro-American feminism, Oppression, Black literature, and Art forms

## Aim Of The Article

This article, a critical evaluation of the development and achievements of the Black feminist movement in America, focuses on the trajectory of Afro-American feminist struggle against the social, racial and sexual oppression experienced by the colored female. The researcher's concerns in this area are very high and serious. Being a female academic the researcher has been paying special attention to the hazards experienced by the fellow American Blacks in their historic struggle against all kinds of subjugation. In spite of the fact that many studies have been carried out earlier in this area, this attempt brings to light certain novel aspects of the liberation struggle. The study tries to analyse the real and the genuine factors helped the highly oppressed and harassed female Blacks of America to emerge in the society as humans, individuals and equals.

## Introduction

Feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely instigating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is epitomized by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. This women centered activity was a political and cultural movement aiming at realizing fundamental social reforms in the fields of organization, reproduction, paid labour, education, culture, legislation, politics and economics. The feminist writers were

aware of the position of women in society as one of the disadvantages or inequality compared with that of men. There was also a desire to remove these disadvantages. Throughout the majority of Western history, women were restricted to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men. In medieval Europe, women were denied the right to own property, or to contribute in outside life. At the end of the 19th century in France, they were still compelled to cover their heads in public, and, in parts of Germany, a husband still had the right to sell his wife. Even as late as the early 20th century, women could

neither vote nor hold elective office in Europe and in most of the United States. Women were prevented from conducting business without a male representative, be it father, brother, husband, legal agent, or even son. Married women could not exercise control over their own children without the permission of their husbands. Moreover, women had little or no access to education and were barred from most professions. In some parts of the world surprisingly, such restrictions on women continue today. Afro-American feminism or Black feminism is a development with special concern to the problems of the Black women from oppression. Literary writers and artists organized themselves to fight against the double oppression, from the Whites and from their own male partners, making use of every possible channel, literary forms, music and dance performances along with public protests.

### Review Of Literature

The issues related to feminism and Afro-American feminism have been a very serious matter of discourse for a very long time. Plenty of theoretical books, starting from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and reaching to Maggie Humm's *Feminist Literary Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics* (1986) and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) and literary articles related to the problems of women are being published abundantly. However, this paper is an entirely different one from all the existing studies. It is a critique of the traumatic experience and the bold attempts made by the Black American women to survive in the society as human beings. This study's novelty is that the assertion of Black women in America is mainly through their own art forms rather than organized protest movements.

### Discussion

Feminism arose in England in the seventeenth century itself as conglomeration of precepts and a series of demands by women who saw themselves as a distinct sociological group and one that was completely excluded from the tenets and principles of the new society. The seventeenth century feminists were middle class women who argued their case in explicit relation to the massive changing society that came about with the end of feudalism and the beginning of capitalism. Female intellectuals of the Enlightenment were quick to point out this lack of inclusivity and the

limited scope of reformist rhetoric. Olympe de Gouges, a noted playwright, published "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen" in 1791, declaring women to be not only man's equal but his partner. The following year Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the seminal English-language feminist work, was published in England. Challenging the notion that women exist only to please men, she proposed that women and men be given equal opportunities in education, work, and politics. Women, she wrote, are as naturally rational as men. If they are silly, it is only because society trains them to be irrelevant. Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and the woman is trained to fit into those roles. This means that roles like 'daughter' or 'mother' are not natural but *social* because the woman has to be trained to think, talk, and act in particular ways that suit the role. Feminism explores the cultural dimensions of the woman's material life. Feminist literary-cultural critics assume that cultural texts such as cinema, TV soap opera, music, painting *parallel* and *duplicate* to real-life power struggles between genders. Cultural texts naturalize the oppression of women through their stereotypical representation of women as weak/vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object or a procreating device. However, feminists have taken an entirely different approach to their subjugation. To them basically it is a patriarchal hegemony. The inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men so that they retain power. Religion, family, education, arts, knowledge systems are all social and cultural 'structures' that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality. These structures are effective means of reinforcing male domination because they do not appear oppressive. They retain power because with their ability to persuade, the structures convince the woman that she is destined to be subordinated. Cultural structures are, therefore, ideological: providing a system of beliefs that seek and attain the woman's consent to be subordinated. Feminist theory works to unpack these ideologies of dominance.

From the early times to the present day feminist activities underwent radical changes in their efforts to address their issues. Thus the various stages of protest have been marked as different waves. The very earnest efforts of the notable feminist writers, namely Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Simone de Beauvoir etc. helped reasonably to assert women's role in the society and to question their subjugation.

When the movement flourished and established in the postcolonial times, feminism began to take up many social, biological and religious problems. Apart from employment and wage discrimination feminists started to raise issues like sexism, racism and ethnic issues. Thus focus on the traumatic life of the poor black women in America began to become a major discourse. The black movement in America is generally called as Afro-American feminism.

Afro-American feminism or in other words black feminism is a protest against the silencing of the societally denigrated categories of women in America. Black feminism is a philosophy that based on the idea that Black women are inherently valuable and their liberation is a necessity, not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because their need as human persons for autonomy. It is the voice, individual and collective, personal and political answer to those Whites who thought that Black women were inherently inferior. Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African-American women's intellectual tradition. While clear discontinuities in this tradition exist—the ideas of Maria W. Stewart and her successors are the thematic basis of this liberation movement.

African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Ellen Kuzwayo have used their voices to raise important issues that affect Black African women. Like the work of Maria W. Stewart and that of other Black women transnationally, African-American women's intellectual work has aimed to foster Black women's activism. The vast majority of African-American women was brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression. Oppression describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States.

But the relationship of feminism to African American women always posed greater challenges. White feminists defined gender as the principal source of their exclusion from full participation in American life; Black women were forced to confront the interplay between racism and sexism and to figure out how to make Black men think about gender issues while making white women think about racial issues. Such issues were addressed by Black feminists including Michele Wallace, Mary Ann Weathers, Bell Hooks, Alice

Walker, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins and Bettina Aptheker.

A Black feminist lens in the United States was first employed by Black women to make sense of how white supremacy and patriarchy interacted to inform the particular experiences of enslaved Black women. Black activists and intellectuals formed organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Black feminism rose to prominence in the 1960s, as the civil rights movement excluded women from leadership positions, and the mainstream feminist movement largely focused its agenda on issues that predominately impacted middle-class White women. From the 1970s to 1980s Black feminists formed groups that addressed the role of Black women in Black Nationalism, gay liberation, and second-wave feminism. The 1990s brought Black feminism into the mainstream. Black feminist theories reached a wider audience in the 2010s as a result of social-media advocacy.

Proponents of Black feminism argue that Black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways than White women. In the early 21st century, the tag *white feminist* gained currency to criticize feminists who avoid issues of Intersectionality. Critics of Black feminism argue that divisions along the lines of race or gender weaken the strength of the overall feminist and anti-racist movements. Among the notions that evolved out of the Black feminist movement are Alice Walker's womanism, which emphasized the degree of the oppression Black women faced when compared to White women and, for her, encompassed the solidarity of humanity and historical revisionism with an increased focus on Black women.

The Afro-American feminist movement is in fact, a great struggle for existence, survival and self-definition. Literary movements, different art forms and social protests were effectively used as powerful weapons in their war against this organized suppression. The leading Blacks in America actually tried to be familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor in order to fight against them. While trying to establish their identity, the Blacks acted skillfully by hiding their self-defined stand point. As Ella Surrey, an elderly Black woman domestic summarizes the energy needed for it: "We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives – one for them and one for ourselves" (Gwaltney 238). What Patricia Hill

Collins noticed in the fight for recognition is that “the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women’s stand point remains a core theme in Black feminist thought”(99).

When literary writings like *The Color Purple* were filmed, the African – American women found it as an opportunity to stop as passive consumers and to turn as strong-willed resisters from the roles of defenseless victims. In this challenging endeavour they expressed their unfathomable pain, injustices suffered and the horror of slavery. Fannie Barrier Williams a Black educator noticed a remarkable change in the behavior of the oppressed Blacks. According to her, the Black woman now has become “irrepressible. She is insulted, but she holds up her head; she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect . . . . The most interesting girl of this country is the colored girl” (151).

The female Black protesters gradually began to understand that there exists a distinctive, collective Black women’s consciousness. It was very much evident in the motivating speeches made by Maria Stewart. Stewart was a women’s right activist and lecturer. In the early 1830s, when no woman, black or white, dared to address an audience from a public platform, she delivered four powerful speeches in Boston. Stewart’s advice was great inspiration to the young black women: “Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties” (Richardson 30).

Attaining a self-defined consciousness was the greatest achievement of the subjugated, slave like, sexually exploited Black women. Literature and other art forms were freely used for this propaganda. The Afro-Americans initially protested against sexist oppression, but to their chagrin, they found the fellow White women were hardly supporting them and dismissed it as a problem of the coloured women alone. However, the Blacks themselves were not united in fixing their goals. As Patricia Hill Collins states, “survival depended on sticking together” (101), the succeeding movements began to concentrate on unity among themselves and fixing new agendum. The formation of Black women’s community groups as mothers, daughters, sisters and friends to one another is a milestone in this movement. Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) depicts the influence of Black mothers upon their daughters. Thus the later movements were plural and multifaceted, unimaginable to the earlier ones. Along with other goals, the empowerment of the blacks on a mental,

spiritual and economic ground became the prime concern.

Literary texts constitute an important mechanism by which the unequal power relations are naturalized. Thus, women, particularly Black women were used to be presented as seductress and the sacrificing mother. Literary cultures, therefore, play an important role in the socialization of the power structures. This is to be changed through literature itself, the Black feminist writers felt. They naturally needed a change. The transformation of silence into language and action as an act of self-revelation and self-affirmation was found in many literary writings like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. How a Black woman can suppress other women is the theme of *Zami* (1982) an autobiography by Audre Lorde.

Demand for respect has become an illustrious concern in the later writings of the Black feminists. In a society in which no one is obligated to respect African-American women, they themselves have long admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others. The right to be Black and respected pervaded their writings and communications among Black women. Alice Walker herself raised this point:

Please remember, especially in these times of group-think and the right-on chorus that no person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into this world. (*In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* 36)

The Afro-American women have noticed that for their liberation, economic growth is also essential. They are oppressed by the Whites and also by their own Black men. Overcoming these hazards was not an easy task. In their journey toward personal empowerment, “no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self”(Collins 118-119), they felt. This recognition is very much evident in the writings of Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange where the characters write or speak freely and without fear and this new approach helps the Black women to come together.

Art forms, particularly, music turned out be a weapon for the Black feminists in their fight for liberation and equality. Emancipation and empowerment became possible through vociferous and rhythmic expression of identity. Demand for respect has become the major issue of a variety of blue singers. The blue singer Aretha Franklin is in fact, a paragon of this vehement

musical protest. Her rendition of the song "Respect" is very powerful and highly influencing:

What you want? Baby I got it.

What you need? You know I Got it.

All I'm asking for is a little respect when you come home. (115)

The blues sung by the Black women became a journey from victimization to a free mind. "Art is special", remarks Angela Davis, "because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge" (200).

The ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity are reinterpreted and represented in the ways of the Black women through their musical performances. As Patricia Hill Collins points out:

The songs themselves were originally sung in small communities, where boundaries distinguishing singer from audience, call from response, and thought from action were fluid and permeable. . . . The songs can be seen as poetry, as expressions of ordinary Black women rearticulated through Black oral traditions. The lyrics sung by many of the Black women blues singers challenge the extremely defined controlling images used to justify Black women's objectification as the Other. (106)

Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama" is an apt example of the redefinition of black beauty:

Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk

Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk

But the cow that's black and ugly has often got the sweetest milk. (Harrison 69)

Thus, Black women have tried to achieve their goal; liberation from sexual, racial and gender oppression, through every form of art; music, speeches or writing and the success is to a certain extent remarkable.

## Conclusion

The post-modern or post-colonial Black feminist movement is in many ways a journey toward self-assertion and self-empowerment. Even the cultural differences among the various struggle groups have been transformed into a homogenous cultural relativism. To address the major issues like racism, classism and sexism the Blues tradition played a major role. Again it is worth to quote Patricia Collins: "Blues was not just entertainment – it is a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of working-class Black life in America" (105). It has become transcending and transforming, pervasive and

penetrating. The war against oppression has turned out be aesthetic and political. The two-century old liberation struggle of the American Black women, including the antislavery and women's rights movements, could create an impact on society to be a listener of the Black voice. The Afro-American Blacks had been silenced and ostracized by the powerful White community and their own male community. The historical struggles against the bitter experience at home, at work and even in the cultural domain have not fully achieved the goals, but have opened a new and separate space in the society for this dark colored, energetic and enthusiastic feminine race.

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