

#for M.A. semester 4 'American Literature'

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Black Feminism

Black feminism holds the view that *sexism* and *racism* are bound together. This being bound situation is called *intersectionality*. Black feminism as a concept and movement came into being because the black feminists felt that the feminist movement led by white women did not address the experiences, agonies, sufferings and other serious issues of the black women. National Black Women Organization was formed in 1973. Alice Walker used the word 'womanism' in 1979. 'Womanism' is a black feminist theory, meaning 'a black feminist or a feminist of colour.'

The experiences of black men gave rise to a particular understanding of their (black women's) position in relation to sexism, class operation and racism. The feminist movement was started in England, France, America and various places with the notion that women wear suffer us at the hands of the male dominated society which is basically 'sexist', 'discrimination on the basis of gender' and equal right/opportunity was demanded but the case of black women was quite different. They had to suffer because they were women and more because they were black. Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989 to describe the experiences of women as being women and also being black. Crenshaw argued that each concept *being black* and *being female* should be considered independently while understanding that intersecting identities compound upon and reinforce each other.

Black feminism became prominent in the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement which was dominated by white women who restricted their movement only for the welfare of the white women. From 1970s to 1980s black feminists formed separate groups and raised the issues of black women by propounding the theories as black nationalism and gay liberation. Anita Hill brought black feminism into mainstream.

Black feminists are of the opinion that the situations of the black women are different from those of the situations of the white women. Although the issues of black women were raised in the 1960s and 1970s with more prominence, they were brought to the notice of the world by Sojourner Truth's famous speech 'Ain't I a Woman?' delivered in

1851 at women's convention in Akron, Ohio. Truth discussed in detail how feminism so far only impacted the white women and the issues of black women remained unnoticed or neglected. Other notable scholars who highlighted the issues of black women were Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Anna Julia Cooper and Janie Crawford.

Black Feminism can be studied under different heads-(1) post-slavery period to 1920s.

Activists like Sojourner Truth and others highlighted the issues of black women and underlined the ideas / principles that later on became the basis/foundation stone of black women. One of the key issues was suffrage. Black women needed suffrage as a form of protection whereas for white women it was a means of education. (2)1920s -

1960s - Civil Rights activism paved the way for black women to join the Communist Party, that talked of and promised to provide equality ignoring race, gender and class.

Esther V. Cooper and Claudia Jones wrote their research thesis that dealt with domestic as well as social, religious and financial issues of black women.

(3) 1960s - 1970s - Black feminism acquired political and social recognition and women's feelings, demanded liberation from every kind of suffering / slavery and their writings portraying their concerns were given space.

Bell Hooks in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* published in 1982 wrote that the male dominated society had forgotten the black women and their issues and experiences were often ignored and dismissed. They were forced to maintain silence. Racist and Sexist socialization had conditioned their minds in such a way that they devalued femaleness and accepted race as the only relevant label of identification. Sexist oppression was universal but in addition to sexist oppression black women had to face harsher and more brutal reality of racism. Black women needed to get rid of racism first because they were taught to submit and accept sexual inferiority and to be silent not only before man but also to white women. So 'mainstream feminism' had no meaning to them at all if they were not made free from racism.

Black women were deprived of every basic human right in America where they were brought from Africa as slaves to serve the plantation economy of the American south. Even their reproduction, sexual and material prerogatives were appropriated for the benefit of their white masters. Even after the slavery ended in America, black women's exploitation did not end and the capitalistic system created a tier of socio-economic

issues and put them at the bottom. They were put on the margins of the whole system. Racial and class discrimination was not felt by white middle class women so the black women were not willing to join hands with white women rather they initiated their own movement. Anna Cooper encouraged black women to participate in women's rights movement and in the struggle for racial equality, which would benefit all black people (women and men).

The impulse of the black women to fight sexism and racism made them form National Black Feminist Organization. Two more factors were also of utmost importance- poverty and slavery. These factors made them fight their battle. They redefined the notion of self definition (integral to mainstream feminism) and included ethnic and cultural factors. This self definition also included tracing their roots in African- American history and culture.

Language became an important force in redefining one's self. Many black writers use Black English because they believe that the best way to express themselves is through their own language which can describe their experiences. And through language they can spread their messages far and wide.

The notion of motherhood was also redefined by Black women. This redefinition included the context of racism to the context of patriarchy because even after international slave trade was abolished, the slave holding class forced black women to beget as many children as possible to do the field work. They were treated as breeders rather than mothers. Girls of the age of 12 to 14 were forced to give birth to children. Black women created their literary history. They did not like to be defined by the literary history of white women.