



An Overview of African-American Feminism

Hamedreza Kohzadi¹, Fatemeh Azizmohammadi²

^{1,2}Department of English Literature, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran
E-mails: ¹hamedreza_kohzadi_usa@yahoo.com, ²F-azizmohammadi@iau-arak.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

Today the body of African American feminist scholarship is vast and located in the social sciences, humanities, and sciences. The terms *African American feminism*, *Black feminism*, and *womanism* all challenge traditional bodies of knowledge, which tend to perceive Black women superficially and in a limited manner. African American feminism - that is, the Black feminist tradition in the U.S, is widely discussed in women's studies classrooms and feminist literature, but it has yet to make significant inroads into popular culture or mass media, even in the one-dimensional manner in which feminism and race are handled. One of the major contributions black feminists have made to feminist theory is to provide the historical and cultural analysis that weaves the various forms of oppression into a coherent theory for action. As racism is not just an issue for African-Americans, feminism is not just a woman's issue. Black feminist theory is not about reforms of the present system that will benefit only the few who can fight their way to the top over the bodies of others, but about the creation of a system that allows full participation by all. Feminism, in all of its diversity, can enlighten, enlarge and empower everyone.

KEYWORDS: African American feminism, Oppression, Racism, Sexism, Black Scholars, Theory.

INTRODUCTION

I would try to show how, where and why black and white women's issues have diverged, often conflicted, and where there are areas of convergence. This focus naturally led me to African-American history, especially to that of the 19th and 20th centuries - first to the period of slavery and the anti-slavery movements; then on to the black liberation movement following the Civil War; through the period of divisiveness between black and white women over the suffrage issue and the anti-lynching movement; and through to the women's movements of the 1960s and the present. On this voyage, I learned about the numerous cooperative efforts between black and white women, and some men, to fight the institution of slavery and to establish schools for black children. I also came to understand the split between black and white women following the Civil War over suffrage as white Suffrage leaders abandoned the fight against racism and their black sisters when they felt the woman's vote was threatened by black men receiving the vote ahead of white women. As this controversy became more and more heated, the inherent racism and classism of the leaders of the white suffrage movement became increasingly more open and virulent. As I read how the women's Suffrage movement pursued its goal (however valid) at the expense of blacks who were experiencing an unprecedented reign of terror perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and others throughout the South, I came to understand the loss of faith of black women in the white women's movement taking seriously issues of paramount concern to them.

It also became clear that the agendas of working women and men -were excluded from the mainstream white women's movement in spite of the earnest efforts of working women- to have them addressed. I well understood what Bell Hooks (1984:3) meant when she called the white women's movement "a case study of narcissism, insensitivity, sentimentality, and self-indulgence." Through the written word, I also began to hear a swelling chorus of voices protesting the tiresomeness of having to educate their white sisters over and over again about the oppression of racism and classism. I then realized that it was neither absurd nor presumptuous but, rather, imperative, that I talk about African-American feminist issues, to try to comprehend racism, classism and sexism in a new way from a different perspective and to attempt to find new ways of putting this understanding into action .

*Corresponding Author: Hamedreza Kohzadi, Department of English Literature, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran. E-mail: hamedreza_kohzadi_usa@yahoo.com

What Does Feminism Mean?

In the US the contemporary feminist movement has popularly been identified with the movement defined by white, middle-class, college educated women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often cited as the first book of what is called the "second wave" of feminism. It was a work around which many white women of this socio-economic class rallied as it expressed their frustrations at being excluded from the positions of privilege and power occupied by white males in American society. It also hit a nerve with women who were rankled by sexism within their families or personal lives. To vastly oversimplify, the goal of feminism became to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which, it was thought, would end discrimination against women on the job, in the home and in all areas of women's lives. Equality of opportunity was the objective, and sexism was the enemy. This often got translated into "men are the enemy," which made many women uneasy and men defensive. In effect, the women's movement seemed to interpret equality of opportunity to mean the achievement of parity - or better - with white, middle or- upper-class men. For a number of reasons, black women did not see this as addressing their concerns.

One of the basic issues that divides feminists is whether they consider the goal to be reform of the present social system or its revolution. And it is on this point that black feminists and the mainstream of the white feminist movement have diverged. Frances Beal (1970), in her essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," is only one of the many black feminists who has criticized the women's movement for its limited focus. She says, "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" (Beal 1970:98). Black women and men, along with other minority groups, understand that equal opportunity with white male power elites is not only out of reach for the majority of the population but also is not going to alter an oppressive system in any significant way. Brought to the American continent as slaves in the 17th century, African women were deprived of every basic human right in order to serve the plantation economy of the American South. Even ' their reproductive, sexual and material prerogatives were appropriated for the benefit of their white masters. This history inexorably impacts the thinking of every black woman's understanding of the connection between sexism, racism and classism. And they know that the ending of slavery has not ended the systematic exploitation of their labor in American society and that the capitalistic system has created a tier" 6f socioeconomic classes which ranks them at the bottom.

Bell Hooks, one of the most eminent and articulate spokespersons of black feminist thought, has pointed out that black feminists are concerned about economic survival and ethnic and racial discrimination as well as sexism, and she faults the mainstream white women's movement for failing to speak to these issues. Speaking of the movement as it took shape in the sixties and as espoused by feminists such as Betty Friedan, Hooks (1-984:4) says, White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of the political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state.

Feminism is not, she says, about dressing for success or becoming a corporate executive or taking skiing vacations or two-career marriages. Furthermore, as long as any group, whether it is black or white males or white females, defines liberation as "gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of .others (ibidem: 15)." Because black women are on the margins of the whole system, Hooks argues, they have a special vantage point from which to criticize the dominant racist, classist and sexist hegemony as well as to imagine and create a system that does not rely on oppression of one segment of population for the benefit of another.

Throughout the history of women's movements in the US there have been women, black and white, who have objected to the limited (however valid) focus on sexism and patriarchy as the cause of women's position in society. Many contemporary feminists came to the women's movement from the civil rights and/or the anti-war movement where they had acquired an understanding of the interrelatedness of various kinds of oppression within the system and how they affect women. In addition, working women of all races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of classism. But, either because racial and class discrimination were not experienced by white, middle-class women or because they themselves were unwilling to give up the privileges accruing to them by virtue of their class and race, the issues of minority and working class women were either ignored or rejected as important targets for feminists. White feminists were eager for black women to join "their" movement and seemed perplexed that they were not eager to do so. Black women, however, were as a group unwilling to ally themselves with white women in opposition to black men who, in spite of their sexist behaviors, were closer in identity to them than white, middle-class women. Various studies have shown that class differences are greater than differences between the sexes within the same class.

Feminism and the Ideology of Individualism

As everyone knows, the "cult of individualism" is especially pronounced in American society. Americans pride themselves on their individual initiative, and this American value is supported by various myths, such as the myth that every American child, regardless of his modest beginnings, can even aspire to become President. And the "self-made millionaire" is a popular American hero. While the ideology of individualism has no doubt been responsible for much American innovation and personal achievement, it, like all ideologies, has its blind spot, and proponents of individualism ignore the unequal access that minorities and working class people have to economic, educational and social opportunities. Bell Hooks (*ibidem*:84) has noted that "The ideology of 'competitive, atomistic liberal individualism' has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle." One of the premises not questioned by early leaders of the white feminist movement was how American women accepted the same materialistic and individualist values as did American men. It simply did not occur to them that women may be just as reluctant as men to struggle for a new society based on new values of mutual respect, cooperation and social responsibilities. The ideology of individualism also was well adapted to the feminist model of the "new woman:" assertive, capable, strong; the leap tall- buildings superwoman image that the movement wished to project, an image that has, incidentally, caused untold grief for women who found they could not live up to it. Another unfortunate consequence has been to re-enforce the myth of the amazonic black woman - strong, nurturing, uncomplaining and all accepting - which has contributed to the acceptance by both whites and black males of the theory of black matriarchy and the myth that the black woman, next to the white male, is the most liberated member of society.

The white women's movement, no doubt unwittingly, has contributed to this myth by highlighting the achievements of exceptional black women as if they were representative of what all black women could aspire to within a reformed system. Phyllis Palmer (1983) in her article "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States," has an interesting discussion about the attraction of white feminists to such black heroic figures as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Basically, she says that the strong black female figure corresponds neatly with the racist-inspired image of the "black mammy," disguising the fact that, as Barbara Smith and others have pointed out, black women have been the recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization. Smith (1985:5) also says, "An ability to cope under the worse conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life."

The Double-Whammy of the Black Mammy Myth

From various sectors, the myth of the strong black woman has been perpetrated, and in the 1960s Daniel Moynihan lent popular support to it in his report on the black family in which he described the black family as matriarchal, basing his theory on the statistic that 25% of black families had female heads of household. One of the many repercussions of this distortion was that it deflected the cause of the problems of the black family away from the economic and social system and onto the black woman who was portrayed as domineering, castrating and the cause of the black man's low self-esteem. Many black men, too, bought this analysis and blamed black women for their problems which exacerbated the conflict between black men and women. This was a prime example of blaming the victim. The many implications of Moynihan's report and the counter-arguments can be read in the literature of African-American feminists, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) edited by Toni Cade, being only one. Moynihan conveniently ignores such systemic causes of the problems of the black family as the high rate of unemployment, especially among black males, which contributes to the breakup of families and the lack of opportunity for black men and women to marry and form family units in the first place. Sociologist Robert Staples (1986:6-7) researched the problem of why there is a reduced pool of eligible black men for black women as marriage partners and found at least a dozen reasons:

1. Almost 50% of black working age males fail to meet the minimum prerequisite for marriage of gainful and regular employment;
2. Black males in the armed services are often out of circulation because they are frequently stationed in foreign posts and on isolated military bases. Additionally, black veterans have a higher rate of unemployment even than civilian black males, thus accounting for their higher re-enlistment rate;
3. College-educated black males have an unemployment rate four times greater than their white college-educated peers;
4. Among employed black males, one in three will be unemployed in any given year;
5. Black men are more likely than either black females or whites to be committed to mental institutions. Mental distress caused by racism is a contributing factor to mental illness among blacks;
6. The rate of drug and alcohol abuse is greater among blacks than whites, especially among black males. It is estimated that as many as one-third of young black males in the

inner city have a serious drug problem; 7. Black men have a much higher rate of incarceration than white males or women - 46% of federal and state prison populations are made up of black males though blacks comprise only 12% of the population (Ladner 1986:15); 8. The infant mortality rate of black males is higher than that of black females; 9. The mortality rate of young black males through homicide, accidents, suicide, drug overdoses and war casualties is considerably higher than that of white males; 10. The black male homosexual population is greater than that of black females; 11. A greater number of black men than black women form interracial partnerships; 12. College-educated black women are further disadvantaged in finding a mate if they want to marry someone with a comparable educational background because college-educated men may marry younger women with less education than theirs.

Almost one-third of college-educated black women remain unmarried past the age of thirty. Educational opportunities for black males have been further handicapped by the change from an industrial to a service-based economy. High tech jobs have gone to better educated whites, and the bottom-end jobs have helped blacks little as they carry few benefits or advancement opportunities. All of these factors have contributed to the greater overall poverty of black families with female-headed households suffering the worst. Among black families with a female head of- the-household, 54% were poor in 1984 compared with 17% for two-parent households. Over 66% of all black children living in a household headed by a female were poor in 1984 (ibidem: 1986:16). However, as Judy Claude (1986:21) points out in her article on the "feminization of poverty" theory as it applies to black women, two out of three blacks living in female-headed households were already poor before a change put them into a female-headed household. Many Third World men, in addition to blaming Third World women for their problems, have felt threatened by women's organizations and have tried to maintain what positions of power they had by reinforcing fears and myths about the women's movement, arguing that the women's movement was irrelevant to women of color as could be seen by their lack of representation in it.

Barbara Smith (1985:5) has listed five myths that have been used by Third World men to "divert Black women from our own freedom:" 1. The myth that black women are already liberated; 2. The myth that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront; 3. The myth that feminism is nothing but man-hating; 4. The myth that women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns and people of color need to deal with the "larger struggle;" 5. The myth that "those feminists are nothing but Lesbians."

Regarding the myth of the liberated black woman, as many writers have illustrated, the black woman in American society has the fewest choices and is the lowest paid, being the triple victim of racism, classism and sexism. To the charge that racism should be her only concern, Smith (ibidem:6) says, "A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppressions, but instead demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third World women's lives." Waiting until racism is ended before tackling sexism which cuts across all racial, national, age, religious, ethnic and class groups would mean waiting a "long, long time." To the accusation that feminism implies man-hunting, Smith and others have repeatedly denounced this claim. "It is only sane," she counters, "for us to try to change that treatment by every means possible." With all of the violence against women in society, the problem seems much more to be one of woman-hating. For example, one in three American women will be raped in her lifetime, if the current trend continues (ibidem).

As far as women's issues being narrow and apolitical, Smith asks how a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic, heterosexual oppression as well as imperialism, anti-Semitism, militarism and all other kinds of oppression - against the young, the old, the physically handicapped, etc., can be called "narrow?" And, to the charge that feminism implies lesbianism, this fear merely exposes the homophobia in society and the ignorance of both feminism and lesbianism. "Feminism is a political movement, and many lesbians are not feminists" while some are.

Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement

In addition to the myths perpetrated about black women that have sought to undermine their participation in a woman's movement and the white feminists' rejection of issues of paramount concern to minority and working class women, the Civil Rights movement also highlighted sexist discrimination as it affected black women. Many black women have written about their banishment to the kitchen and the clerical corps by black male civil rights leaders who also discouraged them from using birth control because they decided that the black woman's role was to produce more black children for "the cause." Adding insult to injury, many black civil rights leaders rejected black women and took white women as lovers, causing great enmity both between black women and men and women of both groups. Historically, since the days of slavery, the white woman - sometimes even more than the white man - has been responsible for the mistreatment of black women; thus, to find herself in competition with white women for the only men usually available to her as partners severely damaged any fragile chance for a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between black and white feminists. The building of trust between minority and majority women is essential for any significant solidarity between the various women's organizations.

Black Feminism and Capitalism

In her books and articles, Angela Davis gives many examples of linkages between women's and men's oppression and the system of capitalism. The poor and the working class have been additionally hurt by the unprecedented increase in the military budget of the Reagan administration which also drastically reduced human service programs (Staples 1986:4). "Since 1980, the military budget has literally doubled while non-military programs have been slashed by almost \$100 billion" (Davis and Davis 1986:39). In 1985, the proposed addition to the military budget for the next ' five years was \$2 trillion . To try to comprehend \$2 trillion, Davis says that it would take \$3 million spent every day for the past 2,000 years to equal this amount. "In 1985, the Pentagon spent nearly \$1 billion a day, which amounts to \$41 million an hour or \$700,000 a minute" (ibidem). This, when less than one-half of all black pre-school children were receiving immunizations against polio, diphtheria, tetanus, and smallpox. This is only one of the many examples of the cutbacks in human services that adversely affect the health and welfare of black, other minority and white low-income groups. There is little wonder, then, that black feminists have been unable to rally around a feminist platform that excludes class and race as co-equal women's issues. VI. Black Feminism: Not for Black Women Only As mentioned earlier, many feminists got their first political education through the civil rights movement where the connections between racism, classism and sexism were obvious to anyone with a modicum of awareness. Whereas other groups of activities might have been able to segment these forms of oppression because racism and classism were outside their own sphere of experience, that was not the case for those involved with civil rights struggles.

One of the most troubling issues for me is how the breach of trust that has developed historically and culturally between multi-ethnic women can be healed. As a feminist, I know I must first have confidence in my own ability to ' change the racist and classist (and sexist) attitudes which are the legacy of my white-dominated, capitalistic and patriarchal society before I can ever expect society to change. Black feminist writings, I have found, are one tool for helping to do that. The idea that racism is an issue for minorities only is blatantly false. Nor should the responsibility for educating majority men and women be left to minority spokespersons. Bell Hooks observed that Southern white women have understood the connection between racism and classism better than women from other parts of the country, and, while she does not expand on this point, I agree with her because, regardless of one's politics, it would be virtually impossible for any Southern woman to be indifferent to race and class; the inherent privileges of whites with the attendant denial of privileges to blacks along with a rigid class structure are the most salient features of Southern history and culture.

Nor could any Southern woman fail to apprehend the sexist ideology that pervades the south. Many a sin has been committed in the name of protecting southern white womanhood, the most horrendous being the lynching of thousands of black men in the post-Civil War years. There is also the somewhat humorous image of the helpless southern belle who is, however, masterful at manipulation and deceit. She is a well-known figure in southern literature. For Southern women involved in the various human rights movements, it was inevitable that they would come to understand how race, class and gender were interrelated factors contributing to women's inequality. Even' though their analysis of how the system actually worked may have been incomplete, the attempt to synthesize these issues into a coherent theory about oppression was always there.

In the early part of the women's movement, "Sisterhood" was the watchword; however, as serious divisions became more and more apparent, many feminists began to " 'question the validity of this ideology. Many felt the differences were irreconcilable, but Bell Hooks and other feminists have urged women not to abandon "Sisterhood" as a goal. Society cannot be transformed, she says, unless women can eliminate the barriers that separate them - and this can only be done by confronting sexist, racist, classist and other prejudices. Otherwise, the concept of "Sisterhood" becomes very shallow bonding. Bonding on the basis of shared strengths and resources should be encouraged, Hooks says, rather than on a common feeling of being a victim. Furthermore, there can be no such bonding between multi-ethnic women until white supremacy is understood and attacked by white women.

Differences need not spell division, and acceptance of one's own complicity in an unjust system need not produce defensiveness or guilt that would only be counterproductive. Hooks points out that it is important for women of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds to learn one another's cultural codes. Sometimes what is acceptable to one culture may be unacceptable to another. For example, the cultural code of white women says direct confrontation and loudness should be avoided as it connotes anger and hostility whereas blacks may interpret such behavior as playful teasing and/or an affectionate expression of the pleasure of being together. Many blacks were raised in families where members spoke loudly to one another. In some cultures, it is silence and quietness that are interpreted as signs of hostility and aggression. "By learning one another's cultural codes and respecting our differences," Hooks (1984:57) says, women can develop a sense of community and "Sisterhood." "Respecting diversity does not mean

uniformity or sameness." As an anthropologist as well as a librarian, understand something of the subtlety of cultural codes and how natural it is to accept our own as "right" while rejecting those which make us feel uncomfortable as "wrong." But, as cultural codes are learned, they can also be unlearned, or at least enlarged to accommodate alternative ways of being and seeing. Not an easy task. It requires a willingness to look hard at one's own involvement in perpetuating an unjust system without becoming paralyzed. Action, not breast-beating, is what brings about real change and coalition-building.

In *Passionate Politics* Charlotte Bunch (1987:94-102) gives concrete examples of how middleclass women need to examine their own class biases and behaviors in order to understand how they contribute to inter-class friction. Without dialogue and self-analysis, middle and working-class women will continue to misunderstand and mistrust one another and thereby contribute inadvertently to further perpetuation of the white patriarchal, capitalistic system at the expense of all. As Bunch says, one need not try to eradicate one's middle-class privileges by pursuing a path of downward mobility which is simply another form of middle-class arrogance. Rather, she says, the skills, education, and economic advantages one has accrued by virtue of the position into which she was born can be shared and used to empower other women and to radicalize social institutions. There can be no dogmatic formula for what is "politically correct." Each woman in her own uniqueness must explore ways of using her particular combination of talents and assets within the context of her own life.

CONCLUSION

My thinking, reading and pondering on this topic did not begin with the preparation for this paper; nor does it end now. However this seminar has provided me with a unique multi-ethnic, multicultural experience which has deepened my own understanding and commitment to radical feminism. One of the major contributions black feminists have made to feminist theory is to provide the historical and cultural analysis that weaves the various forms of oppression into a coherent theory for action. As racism is not just an issue for African-Americans, feminism is not just a woman's issue. Black feminist theory is not about reforms of the present system that will benefit only the few who can fight their way to the top over the bodies of others, but about the creation of a system that allows full participation by all. Feminism, in all of its diversity, can enlighten, enlarge and empower everyone.

REFERENCES

1. Allen, J. L. 1984. "Male Sex Roles and Epithets for Minority Women in America." *Sex Roles* 11:43-50.
2. Beal, Frances. 1970. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." In Cade: 90-100.
3. Beverly, Creigs C. and Howard J. Stanback. 1986. "The Black Underclass: Theory and Reality." *The Black Scholar* 7:24-32.
4. "Black Women and Feminism" [Symposium]. 1985. *The Black Scholar* 16:2-55.
5. Bunch, Charlotte'. 1987. *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action*. New York: St. Martin's.
6. Burnham, Linda. 1985 . *The Black Scholar* 16:14-31.
7. Cade, Toni. 1970. Editor. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: Signet.
8. Chisholm, Shirley. 1983. "Racism and Antifeminism." *The Black Scholar* 12:2-7.
9. Claude, Judy. 1986. "Poverty Patterns for Black Men and Women." *The Black Scholar* 12:2-11.
10. Davis, Angela. 1971. "Reflections of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Black Scholar* 3:2-21.
11. Davis, Angela and Fania Davis. 1986. "The Black Family and the Crisis of Capitalism." *The Black Scholar* 17:5:33-40.
12. Dill, Bonnie Thornton. 1983. "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood." *Feminist Studies* 9:1:131-150.
13. Dougherty, Molly Crocker. 1978 . *Becoming' a Woman in Rural Black Culture*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston.
14. Friedan, Betty. 1963 . *The Feminine Mystique*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
15. Giddings, Paula. 1984. *When and where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow.
16. Gould, Carol. 1976. Editor. *Women and Philosophy: Toward*