

Feminism, Black and White

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Key Words : Feminism mystique, Black women, White feminist movement

Feminism, Black Feminism and White Feminism have often been talked about and discussed. Here in this article, I am trying to explore the relation and contradictions between them. Socio-cultural aspects that led to the White Feminist Movement, Black Women's non-alliance to it and consequently the Black Feminist Movement and its perspective.

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" (page-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.

How to cite this Article: Karanwal, Bindu (2015). Feminism, Black and White. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 2 (9&10) : 331-334.

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 of socio-economic 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 the 60's movement failed to address these issues. Speaking of the movement as it took shape in the sixties and as espoused by feminists such as Betty Friedan, Hooks in her book *Feminist Theory: Margin to Center* (1984) 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 their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state."(page-4)

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 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 Movement where they had acquired an understanding of the interrelated-ness 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.

Another premise not questioned by early leaders of the white feminist movement was how American woman 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, an image that the movement wished to project that has, incidentally, caused untold grief for women who found they could not live up to it.

One more consequence of this is that the myth of black woman- strong, nurturing, uncomplaining, and all accepting- was reinforced and both whites and black males have willingly accepted this concluding that the black woman, next to the white male, is the most liberated member of the society. The truth on the contrary is that the black woman in American society has the fewest choices and is the lowest paid, being the triple victim of racism, classism and sexism. Barbara Smith her book, *Women of Color: Our Stories* (1985) says, "a Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppressions, but instead demonstrates the simultaneity of oppression 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 time.

Black feminism :

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, 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.

All inclusive black feminism :

Many feminists got their first political education through the civil rights movement where the connections between racism, classism and sexism were obvious to establish. 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.

The idea that racism is an issue for minorities only is misleading and 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, 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. 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.

One of the major contributions black feminists have made to feminist theory is to provide the

historical and cultural analysis that weaves the various form of oppression into a coherent theory of action . As racism is not just an issue for African-Americans, feminism is not just a women'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.

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