

## **Bell hooks on Gender, Racism, Sexism and Capitalism : A Study with the Perspective of Feminism and Black Feminism**

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**Abstract.** Bell Hooks, a radical feminist, expanded the concept of feminism outside the confines of middle-class, white families with her scholarship. She used a lowercase spelling of her name and intended for it to draw attention away from her identity as a solitary figure and toward the important concepts she wrote about. Love is a transformational power, and she highlighted that this has been the foundation of every significant social justice movement. She was a vociferous advocate for the depiction of Black culture in music, movies, and other artistic endeavours. Her work addressed love, race, class, gender, art, history, sexuality, mass, media and feminism. In addition to providing fresh insight into politics and society from a racist and patriarchal perspective, bell hooks' interdisciplinary and transgressive thought, theoretical critique, and transnational perspective also discuss "living political discourse," which challenges the current political climate and empowers us to "speak the unspeakable."

**Keywords :** Feminism; social justice; love and race; class and gender; art and history; patriarchy; Black culture; political discourse.

The proposed paper is a humble attempt to investigate into the space, freedom, rights and social justice provided to women in bell hooks's works. bell hooks was a Radical feminist, with her work, had pushed the idea of feminism beyond the realms of middle-class, white families. Gloria Jean Watkins is, her real name and bell hooks is her pen name. She chose this name, and styled it in lower-case, in an effort to focus attention on the substantive ideas within her writing, rather than her identity as an isolated individual. To situate those ideas, bell hooks drew on academic scholarship and popular culture as well as her relevant personal perspectives, especially as a Black woman living in America, as an educator and activist and as the first in her family to gain a university education. Her work mostly spoke about the struggles of Black working-class women that hardly found their place in the upper-class feminist movement. She emphasized that every great movement for social

justice has been grounded in love as a transformative force. According to her, 'Feminism' is to focus on the fact that to be 'feminist' in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression. Hooks was always vocal about the representation of the Black culture in music, films and the field of art. She also held strong views on rap music and its roots, which majorly stems from the control exerted on Black people inside their homes and on the streets. Hooks views on patriarchy and masculinity were also deemed controversial. However, with her ferocious commitments and beliefs, she had once said, "I want my work to be about healing". So supposedly her writings are associated with tons of social critique. In fact, if women cannot express themselves freely, boldly, and loudly, they do not encounter any conflict as they do not frighten any social or political establishment nor do they cross the boundaries of self-expression. The establishment gets unnerved when they start speaking the truth and may demand a change too not only in their status but also in the social perception about women.

Starting in 1981 with her book *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, Ms. hooks, who insisted on using all lowercase letters in her name, argued that feminism's claim to speak for all women had pushed the unique experiences of working-class. According to bell hooks, 'Womanhood' could not be reduced to a singular experience, but had to be considered within a framework encompassing race and class. She called for a new form of feminism, one that recognized differences and inequalities among women as a way of creating a new.

Hooks's appeal was the sheer diversity of her interests. Her work, across some 40 books, encompassed literary criticism, children's fiction, self-help, memoir and poetry, and it tackled not just subjects like education, capitalism and American history but also love and friendship. She published numerous scholarly articles, appeared in documentary films, and participated in public lecture. Her work addressed love, race, class, gender, art, history, sexuality, mass, media and feminism.

The social and cultural phenomena of gender is used to examine the roles and behaviors that men and women play in society. Gender issues revolve around the experiences of men and women who belong to a particular society and have certain roles to play in that community. Since it is commonly believed that gender issues exclusively affect women,

the interaction between men and women has received the majority of attention. The focus was on how women have historically been at a disadvantage as well as the social, political, and economic structures of society. We may all agree that examining the relationships between some of these categories aids in our understanding of the true gender relations in our society, even when we are unable to fully verify the claims on a consensus of the theories or methodologies that underpin gender relations. As a result, when we discuss the oppression of women, we are discussing the intersection of various categories to create multiple oppressions that impede the advancement of women in society. The guys also live in this similar culture. The fact that we are only considering oppression from the perspective of women and ignoring the experiences of males will amount to a mistake in judgment.

The basis of intersectionality as a theory was the oppression and domination of Black women in the community. The American system of that era flourished by fostering inequality throughout our society. The claim made was that “the intersectionality framework emphasizes the qualitative differences among different intersectional positions, such that the Black woman is doubly disadvantaged compared to the Black man, due to a simple accumulation of disadvantage”. The goal of intersectionality is to comprehend the ways in which many oppressive forces combine to maintain social exclusion and inequality. It also examines the ways in which historical and contemporary systems of discrimination, such as capitalism and colonialism, interact with variables such as socioeconomic status, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and status. Intersectionality provided us with a new yardstick by which to assess oppression in society, and shield described its primary goals as follows :

- \* It offered a vocabulary, if not a solution, to the obvious problem that discussing gender cannot take place without taking into account other aspects of social structure and social identity that influence how gender functions and is understood. The most evident, ubiquitous, and seemingly unchangeable in the United States are social class and race.
- \* The proliferating characteristics that form and determine social identities seem to have a broadly applicable descriptive solution in

intersectionality. Not only is gender, color, and class important, but age, ability, and sexual orientation are as well.

The concept of intersectionality has revolutionized the discourse and application of gender. As a concept, intersectionality explains gender relations by closely examining the intersections of oppressive elements and the ways in which they impact individuals inside our society. Any nation's development must take gender relations into account. It is a method of examining the ways in which societal norms and power structures affect the possibilities and lives of various groups of men and women, both individually and collectively. Gloria Jean Watkins, writing under the pen name Bell Blair Hooks (written in small caps at all times), expressed her disdain for the then-common feminist portrayal of black women's actual circumstances in the introduction to her debut book *Ain't I a Woman* (1981). She asserted that all Black people are men and all White women are White. It served as one of the catalysts for an analytical and political movement by Black and other feminists and social scientists to define women as either "black" or "white," creating distinctions based on sex, race, and class. It was evident that white feminists were setting a standard for treatment that should be greater for white women than for black women. If we are to make any progress in a society like our, gender relations are crucial. Good gender relations are also determined by our long-standing customs, conventions, and rules of conduct. Our economic, political, legal, and social structures—which include labor markets and political systems—also contribute to varying degrees of gender inequality in our society. These are the elements that affect how gender results are determined in relation to regional cultures. Understanding how these elements combine to create oppressive networks around us can help put an end to the ongoing internal gender battles. Hooks's demands for a decidedly feminist approach that takes into account both men's and women's concerns have been unwavering.

### **Gender**

According to Andrew Heywood, gender is a cultural concept that describes the various roles that society assigns to men and women. He went on to say that stereotypical ideas of "masculinity" and "femininity" are usually used to enforce gender distinctions. It was noted by Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born but becomes a woman"<sup>21</sup>. In other words, a person's sexual orientation does not determine who they are; rather, a person's

sexual orientation is shaped by the role they play in society. “Gender is the process of embodiment which results from the repeated performance of acts of gendering,” (Butler, 5) according to Judith Butler’s 1990 argument. Butler made the novel suggestion, “Action and speech—behavior in which universal characteristics and tendencies are demonstrated or acted out—are what define gender”. Butler specifically states that gender is formatively created and not an underlying essence or nature of which gendered is the product. Rather, gender is a sequence of acts whose repeated application gives the impression that an underlying Nature exists.

Gender encompasses the roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities that are socially formed for girls, women, boys, men, and individuals with varied gender identities. It affects how individuals behave and interact, how they see themselves and one another, and how power and resources are distributed in society. Gender is defined as “a socially constructed norm and ideologies which determine the behavior and actions of men and women” in the 2012 World Development Report (WDR). Gaining an understanding of these gender relations and the power dynamics underlying them is essential to comprehending how people distribute and access resources, how capable they are of making decisions, and how social development and political processes impact men and women, boys and girls. Gender identity is not fixed, existing on a continuum and subject to change over time. It is not limited to a binary (boy/man, girl/woman). The roles people play, the expectations placed on them, how they interact with others, and the many ways that gender is institutionalized in society all reflect the wide range of ways that individuals and groups perceive, understand, and express gender. The performative nature of gender implies that an individual’s choice of gender is influenced by the confluence of their identities. Butler (2006) stressed the “performatively constituted” nature of gender in *Gender Trouble* (34). Gender is therefore an action that needs to be taken. The “stylized repetition of acts” (191), she continued, is what defines gender. What is repeated over an extended length of time. One can identify as “male” or “female” in these ways. As a result, the male gender appears to be influencing and clearly dominating the female gender over time and through repeated actions. This is what gave rise to feminist struggles and gender inequality.

**Sexism**

A kind of prejudice against individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity is called sexism. Sexism is the term for when individuals start to distinguish between the rights, treatment, and other considerations that a male child should receive and those that a female child should receive. Men typically believe that they are better than women and should be treated as superior beings because of this. This is unfair treatment, and it ought to be strongly discouraged. It's easy to track this prejudice back through time, and it's important to remember that it was a decision taken by men, for which women continue to bear the consequences today. The most ancient kind of oppression is still sexism. hooks (1981), observing this, stated:

Sexism is just as prominent as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of black women when looking back at the experience of black female slaves. The foundation of the American social structure was built by racial imperialism and institutionalized sexism, or patriarchy. Black women who were held as slaves suffered greatly as a result of sexism, which was ingrained in the social and political structure that white colonists carried with them from their native Europe. (hooks, 7-8)

One of the cultural legacies left by white colonial rulers in African societies was sexism. When the inequalities between a male and female slave began to be displayed, they brought it with them. Even when they left, the differences persisted, deeply ingraining an institutionalized patriarchy in our culture. Women are viewed as inferior to men. This explains in part why social inequality persists in our culture to this day. Hooks calls for a new definition of feminism in *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*. This new definition would combat sexist oppression and exploitation in addition to fighting for gender equality, without ignoring other forms of oppression like racism, classism, imperialism, and others. Through interlocking webs of oppression, all of these types of oppression are linked to and dependent upon one another. This demonstrates how sexism, as a tool of oppression, introduces

additional forms of oppression such as the ones stated above and does not exist in isolation. According to T. Biana (2020), “hooks offers a framework for assessing culture that begins with the experience of the black working class and asks everyone to consider common representations and images through interrogation techniques like oppositional gazing. This framework shows how different oppressions are interconnected and crossing borders”. (1-2)

As a result, these representations support dominance structures and are driven by them. “Her notion of interlocking webs of oppression is connected to “intersectionality,” an important conceptualization in today’s feminist circles,” (5) Hazel said in her next statement. When someone calls herself a feminist, they should not avoid talking about intersectionality.

### **Racism**

The everyday material world of the socially constructed black and ethnicized woman is a place where regulatory discursive power and privilege are “performed” or exercised. This is made visible by experience, as shared by black ethnicized female oral histories, autobiographies, historical diaries, and photographs. To illustrate the processes of “being and becoming” a gendered and racialized subject of academic and educational discourse, I draw in this study on such customized “embodied” narratives. It is hard for postcolonial women of color to avoid the body and the ways it is constructed and reconstructed in the course of navigating our everyday corporeal social circumstances. Some of bell hooks’s observations on the nature of racism based on her 30 years of teaching in America are :

- \* When most Americans think of racism, they associate it with the Klan and skinhead Nazis. However, racism in America generally isn’t like that.
- \* Regardless of ethnicity, the majority of Americans have been socialized to believe and behave in a way that upholds the discriminatory structure of our culture. Similar to the African American mother who straightens her hair and then can’t understand why her daughter aspires to be white.
- \* The idea that racism is innate and difficult to overcome is a component of racism.

- \* “Learned helplessness” : Although the majority of White Americans act as though they are above race, they are aware that racism still exists in America.
- \* Most white people are aware of how racist America still is. Asking them what color and sex they would prefer to be reborn and why would be an easy way to demonstrate that. Their unease when discussing race is another indication of it. Why are they so uneasy if racism is so dead?
- \* Racism persists not because ignorance exists (racism is well acknowledged on an intellectual level), but rather because Americans are accustomed to deceiving themselves so much that cognition does not always translate into action. Because they yearn for racism to disappear, they are unable to distinguish between reality and wishful thinking, leading them to believe that it has.
- \* Few white people are required to listen to a Black person for longer than thirty minutes due to the extreme racial segregation in American society.
- \* They encounter black people who have been “reconfigured to the greater good of whiteness,” including maids, Oprah, other students, and citizens of the nations they travel to. It is believed that they are there to assist White people! As in Jack Kerouac’s statement, “I could not find enough ecstasy in the best the white world had to offer.” Should these black individuals voice their opinions, they are, “playing the race card”. The primary means by which white people discount black reports of racism is in this way. All it is is an ad hominem that is racist. That’s the reason a white person speaking against racism can say the exact same things and still be taken seriously. Black people do not have the same right to express their opinions regarding racism as do white peoples.
- \* White people believe they are so superior to Black people that they even believe they have a deeper understanding of racism.
- \* Racism is most prevalent among White people who believe it to be dead.

- \* White folks are malleable. if they so choose. She's witnessed it. To do this, they must educate themselves about racism and eradicate it from their own thoughts and behaviors, just like everyone else.

### **Capitalism**

Bell hooks's extensive collection of historical and theoretical analysis on the Black and women's movements is a priceless resource for reevaluating the theory and history of social movements from the 1960s to the present, as well as the development of Black studies, gender studies, and cultural studies from their inception to their academic institutionalization. She defined these as "interlocking systems" of dominance and power, oppression and exploitation, and power relations that she later defined as a "transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." This concept serves as a sophisticated yet instantly identifiable approach to researching American politics and society from a cross-cultural standpoint. It makes it possible to observe historically the divisions along racial and class lines that run through feminism as well as the patriarchal and class lines that run through African American families and communities, indicating and upholding the "US imperialist economic domination" on a worldwide scale. Her transgressive and multidisciplinary ideas is encapsulated in the concept of the "transnational white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy." In order to present a "feminism for everybody," accessible beyond national, academic, and corporate languages, bell hooks' work challenges the national and international boundaries of academic disciplines and of the cultural marketplace. This sixth issue of USAbroad seeks to celebrate the significance and impact of bell hooks' work. Maria Nadotti, the first Italian translator of bell hooks, reconstructs the publishing history of bell hooks in Italy from this transnational perspective, highlighting the connection between her works and the history of the nation in which they are published and, consequently, the transformation of the readers they are meant for. Only in the last seven years has her name and several important ideas from her philosophy come back to the forefront, following a few translations into Italian at the close of the twentieth century.

Certain subjects that appeared futuristic in Italy a century ago, like the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and classism, have increasingly gained clarity and support in society. This new and immigrant Italy was coming to terms with its own language and theoretical standards. It was no more a white country made up exclusively of prosperous, working-

class men who were unwilling to hide the rest of the population. Bell hooks at last came into contact with the “public,” and her writings also served as a resource for political practice in Italy.

Bell hooks associated resistance with revolution as opposed to reform. To guarantee that feminism did not get entrenched in the “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” revolution had to coexist with it. The 1970s women’s movement was largely unsuccessful because it operated within the confines of a dominant societal structure that pushed both men and women to prioritize achieving their personal goals over bringing about a meaningful change for the whole. Bell hooks, confronting this failure, conceived of the Black woman as unique—shaped historically by capitalism and slavery, culturally by sexism and patriarchy, and socially by race and racism—capable of confronting racist capitalistic patriarchy and discovering in feminism not a path toward reform but a path toward revolution.

At Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, in 2002, hooks delivered her graduating speech. The subject of her lecture caused some controversy. She said in her speech that inhabitants in “every imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal nation on the planet” are being taught “to care more for tomorrow than today.” Hooks made the decision to focus on the various social evils, like institutionalized injustice and violence. She faced criticism and resentment for her decision, but it reflected the spirit of a woman who understood that confronting injustice is always vital even when it’s not always convenient or simple.

To conclude, we may say that, with her theoretical critique, transnational perspective on gender and culture, and interdisciplinary and transgressive thought, bell hooks not only shed new light on politics and society, from the racist and patriarchal foundation of American democracy to the rise of neo-conservatism and neoliberalism, but she also advocates “living political discourse” that questions our current political climate and empowers us to “speak the unspeakable.” She promotes the alliance of the sexes in the struggle against the society that has imposed a class hierarchy on them. It’s only through learning to love more that they will be able to stop hating more. A society free from racism, misogyny, homophobia, imperialism, and exploitation ought to be our shared dream. In light of the possibility that the “shared space and feeling” will serve as a location of “common ground” and possible transformation, Hooks

celebrates this ideal state as an essential communal goal rather than writing it off as an impractical fantasy. People of all races, classes, and genders must embrace it in order to experience true political freedom, as hooks states : “We cannot effectively resist domination if our efforts to create meaningful, lasting personal and social change are not grounded in a love ethic. (hooks, 9)

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