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Genesis of Black Feminism : Its Causes and Relevance

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Abstract. One of the heated arguments which is focal to feminism is about equality difference in context of race, class, sexuality and ability. Mainstream feminists have often been accused of obscuring these differences in their tendency to universalize their analyses and resolution of the oppression of women. The heterogeneity of feminism in approach, attitude and practice compels an interrogation into the generalizing tendencies of the First and Second Wave Feminism which was monopolised by the middle-class white women who never incorporated the solutions of the problems and bad experiences faced by working class and black women. This led to the genesis of Black Feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The aim of this article is to explore the causes and relevance of the birth of Black Feminism within the mainstream Feminism, the concept of Identity politics and intersectional approach.

Keywords : Black Feminism; bigotry; political identity; intersectionality; racism.

Black Feminism also known as Afro-feminism chiefly outside the United States is a branch of feminism that centres around black women. According to Black feminism, race, gender and class discrimination are all aspects of the same system of hierarchy, which bell hooks (pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins) calls the "imperialist white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy". Due to their inter-dependency, they combine to create something more than experiencing racism and sexism independently. The experience of being a Black Woman, then, cannot be grasped in terms of being Black or of being a woman but must be illuminated through intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality in the context of Black Feminism means that these women having two identities- being black and being female- should be considered independently for their interaction effect, in which intersecting identities deepen, reinforce one another and potentially lead to aggravated forms of inequality to sensitize the issue.

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Research Proposition

This research article is addressed to seek answer of the following research propositions:

* Why Black Feminism emerged as a separate entity from the mainstream Feminism?
* Can Identity Politics be studied as sub-discipline study of Black Feminism?
* Will it open space for the sub-discipline BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) research works or projects?
* Will intersectional approach towards all form of bigotry eliminate injustice and inequalities in all form?
* Will the study of Black Feminism sensitize the issue and bring global awareness?
* Does Black Feminism successfully grapple with essentialist tendencies both within and without its theoretical framework?

Objectives

Following are the objectives of the present research article:

* To create global awareness that Black Feminists insisted on the importance of fighting for the liberation of Black woman globally, rather than for just African-American Women
* To highlight the goals of Black Feminism to achieve justice for women of colour and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) women from developed and developing countries alike
* To bring forward the concept of Identity Politics as Black Feminism recognizes the unique injustices each person faces as a result of their identity
* To reflect on the aim of Black Feminism that applies intersectional approach to all forms of oppression (like racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of bigotry which can intersect to harm and challenge people in individual and distinct ways) and use of this approach to eliminate injustice and inequality in all its forms

Methodology

This paper is based on the secondary data sources, print and electronic media and web based sources. Intensive library work has been carried

out to study various research works published in books and journals worldwide.

Main Thrust

Black Feminism mistrusted the white feminist's stronghold over feminism as theory and practice, underpinning the sticky issue of the white feminist's tendency to treat black feminism as the 'other'. Black feminism strongly demanded an acknowledgement in the diverse feminist concerns, while confronting the stereotypical thought process imposed on them, not only by white people but also by black men. According to Claudia Jones, a Trinidad-born activist.

In the film, radio and press, the Negro woman is not pictured in her real role as bread winner, mother and protector of the family, but as a traditional 'mammy' who puts the care of children and families of others above her own. This traditional stereotype of the Negro Slave mother, which to this day appears in commercial advertisements, must be combated and rejected as a devise of the imperialist to perpetuate that white chauvinist ideology that Negro women are backward, inferior and the natural slaves of others. (Jarrett-Macauley, x)

Black Feminism basically emerged out of a history of activism, engaged in by Maria Stewart (1803-80), Harriet Tubman (1822-1913), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Rosa Parks (1913-2005), etc. Although women of colour had participated in the suffrage movement and strove to expose the linkage between racism and sexism as the means of white male dominance, first-wave feminism is dominated by white, middle-class, educated women. The cult of true womanhood remained hung on the image of women as delicate, fragile, dependent, docile and homely. The material lives of African- American women as workers outside homes, condemned to be a subhuman inferior species, complicate the construction of gender empowerment by Euro-centric models. Sojourner Truth delivered a forceful speech, 'Ain't I a Woman?', in the Women's Convention held in Ohio in 1851, underscoring her 'difference' as an ex-slave black woman and contradicting the model of gender in which Euro-American women both incarcerated and nurtured:

> Nobody ever helps me into carriage, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me!

> Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? …I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Truth Web n.p.)

The National Association of Coloured Women (NACW) was established in 1896 by Black Women with the motto *Lifting As We Climb* to form Negro Women's Club for the first time in America to oppose racial lynching and address issues of civil rights, radical justice against woman suffarage and economic upliftment through job-training, wage equality and child care because the economic resources for the educated Black women in America was far-fetched dream as compared to the affluent white women who discriminated the black women. Moreover, these black women also faced discrimination by the black men in their community too. The association's first President was Mary Church Terrell while other founders were Harriet Tubman, Margaret Murray Washington, Frances Harper and Ida B. Wells.

But after World War-1, the whites were able to reap the benefits of post war economic boom known as *Roaring 20s* and under the Republican administration of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, the non-white communities ruthlessly suffered the nationwide wave of racism, lynching and exploitation. During the depression of the 1930s in America, the non-white communities who were already suffering from segregated residential ghettos, racist police violence and employment discriminations like last-hired, first-hired and lowest-paid, now they were suffering from poverty, homelessness and hunger. Therefore in 1935, Mary McLeod Bethune (African American educator and civil rights activists) and other activists of NACW brought together leaders from 28 Black women's organisations to form the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) with the anticipated goals for advance opportunities and the quality of life for African American women, their families and communities.

In the year 1935 itself, Mary McLeod Bethune was appointed by the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the Director of the Office of Minority Affairs at the National Youth Administration, the first federal entity to be headed by a Black woman. This led to advocation of

non-white voting rights, desegregation and inclusion of African Americans especially Black women in government leadership roles. In 1938, the NCNW organizes a White House Conference to approach for the problems of Negro women and children. Later in 1941, the NCNW becomes the part of the Women's Interest Section of the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations where they advocated for the inclusion of Black Women in the US military. Fighting against the racial discrimination by the white segregationists Black women made their way to the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in the following year when America was fighting in World War-II and five percent of all WAC's were now African American. Yet, Roosevelt had to order the Pentagon brass to accept African American women in late 1944 for the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services (WAVES) by the Navy who adamantly opposed Black women.

During the 1960s and 70s, the Black feminist movement resurfaces from the dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights movement as well as the dominant white feminist movement. The book *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men but Some of Us are Brave (1982)* by Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith which also won the National Institute's Women of Color Award explores the intersectionality of Black women in the context of the Civil Rights movement and the contemporary feminist movement. While the former primarily addressed the oppression of black men, the latter focused on the problems that were specific to white women. The agenda of black feminists was to establish their identity against patriarchy in their culture, and the models established by the main stream feminists. The NBFO (National Black Feminist Organization) was established in 1973, and the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a black, lesbian, socialist, feminist outfit, was founded by Barbara Smith in 1974. They were directed towards addressing the issue of race, gender and homophobia, a fundamental concept of intersectionality which was central to the development of a black feminist consciousness. The Combahee River Collective Statement is credited for the phrase "political identity" in 1977. In 1970, the Third World Women's Alliance published the *Black Women's Manifesto*, which emphasized the distinctiveness of the oppression that black women faced. The manifesto advocated the dismantling of conventional stereotypes assigned to the black woman and acknowledged her distinct identity.

Black feminist criticism challenges the narrow boundaries of the experiential visions as well as the traditional Western models of theory-

building. It steers clear of the "race for theory" and is moored in practice, as "experience" is central to the analysis of the history and culture of African-American women's lives. As bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), the feminist activist and academic, points out that black feminist criticism attempts to extend the dialogue about the nature of black women's experience that began in nineteenth-century America, to move beyond racist and sexist assumptions about the nature of black womanhood. Social scientists such as Patricia Hill Collins, the author of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), insists that experience is crucial in understanding and critiquing the lives of the "raced women".

Thus, the analysis, as a part of the Black feminist project, needed to be predicted on the everyday lives of African-American women. Smith finds the politics of race and the politics of sex interlocked in the works of black women writers. In *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism*, she stresses the necessity of a combination of black feminist criticism and black feminist political movement. Her approach is a radical departure from such earlier works as Mary Helen Washington's *Black-Eyed Susans.* Washington was less concerned with providing any black feminist critical perspective be of obscure and neglected texts by black women writers. Smith, however, laid down certain parameters to evaluate such works:

> The use of Black Women's language and cultural experiences in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black Women. (Smith, 417)

Hazel Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergency of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* revises some of the previous structures established by the forerunners of black feminist criticism, and interrogates the essentialising assumptions made about black feminism. She accentuates the underlying racism in the Suffrage and Temperance movements and analyses the works of black women writers as cultural and political documents forming an intellectual tradition and landmarks.

She also provides an interesting exposition on the revolutionary, subversive potential of women Blues artists. She approves of the fact that racism and sexism are interlocked, but emphasizes the importance of establishing historically specific forms of this interface, "…racisms and sexisms need to be regarded as particular historical practices articulated with each other practices in social formation". (Carby, 18)

Valerie Smith, in *Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the Other,* points out the necessity of destabilizing the centrality or privileging of one category over the other, as practiced by Anglo-American feminists and male African- American critics. Smith mooted in the favour of a flexible and shifting perspective on otherness for black feminists:

> I understand the phrase black feminist theory to refer not only to theory written (or practiced) by black feminists, but also to a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and class in modes of cultural expressions. (Smith, 312)

Smith identifies the "archeological projects" that form the first stage of black feminist criticism. Works such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Washington's *Black-eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women,* and Mari Evans's *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)* fall under this category. The republication of primary texts is a significant contribution to the 'archeological' project- these include, Henry Louis Gates's 1982 edition of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (first published in 1859) and Jean Fagan Yellin's edition of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (first published in 1861). This stage was followed by the stage of textual analysis of the works of black women writers, underscoring their engagement with diverse significant issues such as marginalization, otherness, sexuality, identity-formation, hegemony and counter-discourse and community life. Interventions by mainstream theoretical perspectives such as psychoanalysis (as in the works of the critic, Hortense Spillers) and reader-response theory (by theorists such as Debora McDowell) supplement the project of textual analysis.

Black women writes such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks and Maya Angelou have effectively represented black women at the center of highly contested ideologies of race, class and gender. Marginality as an agency of resistance and repression is an iterative theme in the works of bell hooks. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,* hooks is forceful in her condemnation of racism, classism and sexism, while analyzing popular culture and consumerism. Although not wholly convinced by the idea of 'sisterhood' forwarded by some white feminists, black feminists, however, do not advocate separatism. As Audre Lorde points out :

> By and large…, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore the differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist. (Lorde, 282)

The universalist models of feminist struggle and strategies are not always valid for black women's experiences and realities. For instance, Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class,* has exposed the discrimination in the compulsory sterilization programme inflicted on the coloured women in the 1970s, while the white women aborted children due to unplanned pregnancies:

> The abortion rights activists of the early 1970s should have examined the history of their movement….They might have understood how important it was to undo the racist deeds of their predecessors, who had advocated birth control as well as compulsory sterilization as a means of eliminating the 'unfit' sectors of the population. (Davis, 361)

The community plays a major role in the black woman's experience as is manifest in her literature. Stanlie James refers to the unique practice of 'other mothering', in which nurturing and caring activities, usually associated with biological mothering are transformed into larger social practices with socio-political implications. It engages

nurturing as vital means of addressing specific needs resulting from concrete social, political and economic inequities.

Breaking the ongoing notions of the Feminist movement in America, Alice Walker rooted the term 'womanist' in her 'Preface' to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1983)*. She coined this term because by this time the term feminism was creating controversies that few feminists take men as enemies and try to take equality shift to superiority. In addition to this, feminists tend to exclude black women leading to the loss of the true value and sense of feminism. She tries to justify that feminism is not bad in itself, it's a struggle towards equality and womanism aims at equality too. It does not preclude men; they are an integral part of a black woman's life as her children, husband or lover. 'Womanism' is committed to the "…survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female". (Walker, xi)

Alice states that womanism is just a darker shade of feminism 'Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender'. She defines the term womanism as a form of feminism that highlights women's natural contribution to society, as a subset of feminism which can also be called as black feminism, Africana feminism or intersectional feminism. She sensitizes the issue that how can we fight for gender equality when we have two separate groups. To make gender equality a reality, women should unite together regardless of the fact that whether she is black or white, brown or grey, tall or short, young or old. Some white women tend to oppress black women and expect equal treatment from men. They are themselves not promoting equality and are expecting equality in return. Inclusion of the black women in the movement will balance the equation feminism=Womanism=equality. What matters is that all women work together to fight inequality and oppression and make sure not a single person in this world gets excluded, not for his/her gender, race, colour or any other reason because we all are human.

Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* underlines the presence of matrilineage in female creativity; the stories, gardens, quilts and other creations by black female artists bear traces of the experiences and traditions of their mothers and grandmothers who were deprived of creative expression by the historical circumstances of oppression and dehumanization. Traditionally, the family has been regarded as a site for discrimination against women, but for black women,

the family can be a site of resistance and agency. This is mainly because women are often the sole breadwinners in black families, thereby enjoying a degree of autonomy not experienced by their white counterparts.

In 2019, the National Museum of African American History and Culture hosted a public program, "Is Womanist to Feminist as Purple is to Lavender? African American Women Writers and Scholars discuss Feminism." The programme was featured guest scholars Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Dr. Treva Lindsay and poet/performers Holly Bass and Venus Thrash.

Conclusion

It is however, undeniable that black feminism has, to a considerable degree, succeeded in subverting hierarchies and dismantling stereotypes, but it still remains a site of conflicts between ideal models and real social conditions. Black womanhood is infused with a unique consciousness of a 'double bind', of oppression and liberation, but also occupies the intersectional position between race, class and gender conflicts. Though slavery was abolished, slaves were freed as a result of the Civil War, and civil rights were granted through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the US constitution, blacks never really received the benefits. Black Americans in the South were denied the right to vote, segregated from public facilities, exploited and abused. In the North too, blacks faced discrimination, disenfranchisement and subordination. Despite the fact that the Supreme Court had ruled in favour of desegregation in public schools in the Brown vs. Board of Education Case, black Americans were denied adequate access to educational institutions. The identity politics gave them the names like mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger, let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment they received indicated how little value has been placed upon their lives during four centuries of bondage in Western Hemisphere. Then the reaction of the black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than black woman by the possibility that black feminists might organize around their own needs they realized that they might not only lose valuable and hard-working allies in their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing black women. Accusations that black feminism divides the black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous black women's movement.

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