

Staging Black Woman's Self-empowerment and Black Feminism

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the Black woman's various sufferings and reflects the different challenges that face the Black woman. It also attempts to highlight the stages of Black woman's self-empowerment. The Black woman seeks to empower herself and insists on survival and self-dependence. The Black woman is doubly-oppressed; first, by her race as an African and second, by her gender as a woman. This paper adopts a black feminist approach which explores the Black woman's self-empowerment and her reaction towards the different challenges of racism and sexism.

Keywords: *Black Feminism, Double-Jeopardy, Intersectionality, Self-empowerment, Marginalization, Patriarchy.*

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“And [the black woman] had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.”

Toni Morrison¹

The Black Woman’s Multiple Sufferings

The Black woman has been oppressed by her race, gender and class. Oppression is defined by Marilyn Frye as “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people.” (14). The Black woman is oppressed and reduced. Referring to the multiple oppressions that the Black woman faces, Audre Lorde mentions that “women of color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service” (“The Uses of Anger” 129).

In addition, Oppression is divided into five categories by Iris Marion Young: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. The Black woman suffers from exploitation “through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another” (Young 14), who also suffers from marginalization which is “a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation” (Young 18). In addition, she suffers also from powerlessness that allows persons little opportunity to develop and exercise skills” (Young 21-22) and violence.

Thus, the Black woman has been exploited at labor by the White Americans, in addition to being marginalized and excluded from the

¹ See the essay, “What Black Women Really Think About Women’s Lib,” from Toni Morrison’s, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, (24).

social life. She is powerless as she has not been able to represent her real self, besides being a victim for sexual violence and rape. Violence is defined as “a human rights violation” (Dung 10). The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence against women “as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. (The United Nations General Assembly). Hence, it can be said that violence against the Black woman may include physical, emotional or sexual abuses.

Therefore, the Black woman struggles with job discrimination, inadequate child support, inferior housing, and street violence. As a result of the Black women’s oppression, the Black women intellectuals have used their power in writing in opposition to the White dominating society. They form an independent epistemology that can defend the Black women’s rights and challenge the distorting controlling images that they face.

Being a Black woman is harsh as is invisible to the ‘other’/White society. Anna Julia Cooper describes the position of the Black woman that “she is confronted by a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both” (206). Moreover, Fannie Barrier Williams remarks that “the colored girl...is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term ‘problem’ and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her” (59). Also, Kim McMillo mentions that “The DNA of the Black woman has been etched with the history of enslavement, the use of her body for breeding, her breasts to feed the master’s children, the rape of her body for the pleasure of others, the hiring out of herself to feed her family...”(181). In addition, Katie G. Cannon stresses the suffering that faces the Black woman and

analyzes the status of her in the United States of America. Cannon believes that

[t]hroughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle- a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other, black, exploited, and oppressed. (30)

Through different ages, the Black woman has suffered from oppression; the thing that she inherited from her ancestors. The Black woman has suffered from what is called "Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome" which is defined by Joy DeGruy- Leary in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* as "...a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to the condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of society in which they live are not accessible to them. This, then, is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome" (121). Hence, the Black woman started her life as a slave and continued to be a slave or a second-class citizen like in the United States where suffers from discrimination whether in race, gender or class. Cooper speaks of the Black female as a necessary voice in the healing of past trauma. In "Womanhood A Vital Element," Cooper argues that "Only the Black Woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (644). Therefore, the Black woman had to bear the burden of being a multigenerational traumatic, a black and a woman.

The Black woman has been oppressed through three different dimensions. The first dimension is the economic exploitation of

Black woman. The second political dimension reflects the African woman's exclusion from public rights like voting, etc. The third dimension is the ideological one that mirrors the oppression of controlling images that have stereotyped and have distorted the Black woman for ages.

The exploitation of the Black women's labor has been essential to U.S capitalism. (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 4). The Black women have been treated as "dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery." (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 65). Black woman has been treated like that are assigned to tough work. She is assigned to the domestic work. Collins notes that most of U.S Black women are employed as cooks, laundry workers, nursing home aides, and child-care workers (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 66). The black woman suffers a lot to earn her living. She has to work for her White master and take care of his children. She has to serve and obey her White mistress and be her 'loyal dog'. The Black woman has suffered from the economic dimension of oppression, exemplified in her exploitation at labor.

The second dimension of Black woman's oppression is the political dimension. The Black woman, in the United States has been deprived of her political rights. She has not had the right to vote or to work in the political positions. Collins remarks that "the political dimension of oppression has denied African-American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens. Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African-Americans and women from public office... all substantiate the political subordination of Black women" (*Black Feminist Thought* 4). The Black woman has not had the right to practice her political rights or to participate in any political event. She has been excluded from the political life, the thing that is condemned by the Black feminists and

has pushed them to formulate a theory that is concerned with the lives of the Black women that enables them to gain their rights.

The ideological dimension is the third dimension of the Black woman's oppression and is considered to be the most dangerous dimension at all, for its influence not only on the oppressive or the dominating force but on the oppressed as well. Domination involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. Bell Hooks believes that "[a]s subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identity, name their history...as objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (*Talking Back* 42). As a subordinate and inferior group, the black woman has been stereotyped through controlling images that have objectified her and deprived her of representing herself. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes remarks that the "Black women emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white America as 'Mammy' and 'the bad black woman'" (294). The Black woman is negatively stereotyped as lazy, uneducated, poor, tough, primitive, domineering, lustful, submissive and sexual.

According to Carloyn M. West, the black women "were characterized as strong, masculinized, workhouses who labored with black men in the fields or as aggressive women who drove their children and partners away with their overbearing natures" ("Mammy, Jezebel and Their Home Girls" 295). Jennifer Thorington Springer argues that black women "were expected to perform within the narrative of traditional womanhood, which would have called for women to be passive, nurturing, asexual, submissive and lacking sexual agency" (170).

There are many controlling images that are assigned to the black woman and distort her identity. As a form of punishment, Black women have been stereotyped in a variety of negative images. Moreover, Collins remarks that

controlling images applied to Black woman that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of U.S Black women's oppression.... From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African American woman have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (*Black Feminist Thought* 5)

West summarizes the main stereotypes through which the African American woman is portrayed. She states that "[t]hrough history, culture and media, Black women have most often been portrayed in some combinations of three images. They are portrayed as (1) highly maternal, family oriented, and self-sacrificing mammies, (2) as threatening and argumentative Sapphires, and (3) as seductive, sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels" ("Mammy, Sapphire and Their Home Girls" 459).

The Black woman has been stereotyped in three main controlling images which are the images of Mammy, Matriarch, and Jezebel. Collins stresses that "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression" (*Black Feminist Thought* 69). The Black woman has been objectified, distorted, misrepresented and mistreated by the Whites. Hazel Carby believes that the aim of the Black woman stereotyping is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (22). Through those stereotypes, racism, sexism, poverty and injustice are seen normal and inevitable. The Black woman is the victim of the domineering power of the Whites. She has been inferior to both the Whites and

the males who struggle to define her own reality and establish her identity.

The first controlling image through which the Black woman has been stereotyped is the image of Mammy. The Mammy image is an ugly, obese, cow-like figure, submissive to her white master, asexual and obedient servant to her White master and mistress. Collins refers to the Mammy image that

... created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her children and 'family' better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power. (*Black Feminist Thought* 72)

Moreover, Collins describes the Mammy image as "a desexed individual who is obese, dark, and with African features that is unsuitable sexual partner for the White men. (*Black Feminist Thought* 84).

Through the Mammy image, the Whites confirm the inferiority and subordination of the black woman, in addition to stressing the oppositional difference between the ugly, inferior, weak black woman and the beautiful, strong, superior White lady. Therefore, the mammy image is a stereotype that reflects the Black woman's oppression of race, gender, sexuality and class. Describing the physical features of the Mammy stereotype, Barbra Christian states in *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* that

Black in color as well as race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world, her head is perpetually covered with her trademark handkerchief to hide the kinky hair that marks her as ugly. . . . she is strong but this strength is used in the service to her white master. . . . she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother, she is sexless. (12-13)

Christian describes how the stereotype of the Mammy was like. Through the exaggerated expression of the Mammy's "enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world", Christian indicates her role as a breast feeder of her White master's children. She refers to the Mammy's major role of serving the White master and taking care of his children more than hers, which in itself is humiliating for her. In addition, this description shows the stereotype of Mammy as one who is asexual and away from the Western Standards of femininity and beauty. Similarly, Hooks adds in *Ain't I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* that

[I]t isn't difficult to imagine how whites came to create the black Mammy figure. . . . She was first and foremost asexual and consequently she had to be fat (preferably obese); she also had to give the impression of not being clean so she was the wearer of a greasy dirty head rag; her too tight shoes from which emerged her large feet were further confirmation of her bestial cow-like quality. (84)

This exaggerated physical description of the Mammy image asserts the ugliness, submission and inferiority of the Black woman. The Mammy image is always portrayed as a big and fat woman who is neither beautiful nor desirable. Sue. K. Jewell refers to the Mammy image as

[a] dark-skinned, strong-bodied, thick-lipped, obese and ugly, being the favorite servant, the skilled cook or the most devoted housekeeper. She incarnated the perfect mother in the house capable of nurturing white children She was stronger than her man and less feminine than other women . . . wore a drab calico dress and head scarf and lived to serve her master and mistress. Although she treated whites with respect, the mammy was a tyrant in her own family. She dominated her husband and her family. The Mammy stereotype was presented to the public in literature and movies. (41)

Thus, one of the controlling images which depicts the Black woman in the American literature is the ugly, obese, caregiver, the image of the Mammy.

The second controlling image through which the Black woman has been stereotyped is the image of the Matriarch. The image of the Matriarch is the bad black mother in the black homes. She is one who is spending

too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly factor to their children's failure at school. As overly aggressive, unfeminine woman, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands. .. the matriarch represented a failed Mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant. (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. 75)

Collins adds that “[a]ggressive, assertive women are penalized – they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine...” (*Black Feminist Thought* 77).

Moreover, the matriarch represents “the sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates Black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as Black patriarchs. She refuses to be passive and thus is stigmatized” (84). The matriarch is a negative image that distorts the Black woman either in or outside America. It is an image that has haunted the Black women for ages.

The third controlling image through which the Black woman has been stereotyped is the image of Jezebel who is a hypersexual prostitute mulatto girl that is more beautiful than Mammy and Matriarch. Collins remarks that “the jezebel, whore, or ‘hoochie’ is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood... historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black female sexuality” (*Black Feminist Thought* 81). Jezebel is seductive, hypersexual and satisfies her sexual desires with the white men. Kenneth W Goings notes that “[t]he traditional Jezebel was a light skinned, slender Mulatto girl with long straight hair and small features this stereotype was immensely attractive to white males. The creation of the hyper-sexual seductress” (67). Moreover, Briana McKoy writes that Jezebel “uses sex to draw men in for money and other destructive reasons. Usually found to have lighter skin, she was attractive to slave masters, in comparison to the female slaves with darker skin” (131). Collins believes that “presenting black women as bitches is designed to defeminize and demonize them” (*Black Sexual Politics* 123). Accordingly, Jezebel is a character that is a bitch, seeking sex with the white men. Referring to Jezebel stereotype, Madhumita Purkayastha states that:

Jezebel is seen as a sexual mulatto African American girl. The prostitute is another predominant image of black women both in society and literature whose sexual prowess, insatiable sexual hunger, libido and absence of morality bracketed her as the Black Bitch. She was ever available to satisfy the sexual lust of the

white master and supposedly enjoyed the experience of ill-disguised rape. The labels of 'Jezebel' and 'Black Bitch' have thus cast black women in the shadow of moral degradation and depravity. (27)

It can therefore be said that stereotyping the Black woman as a sexual Jezebel sheds light on the virtue of the white lady, strengthens the immorality of the Black woman, and deepens her inferiority to the white ladies. Stereotyping the Black woman as a prostitute who traces the white men and asks for satisfying her sexual desire is one of the controlling images that distorts the real image of the Black woman and that is refused and challenged by the Black feminists.

This misrepresentation of the Black woman has led the Black feminists to condemn this distortion of the real image of the Black woman and to reflect her real identity. As the Black women recognize her duality and begin to fight the negative stereotypes that have negatively defined them. They aim at reclaiming and defending their identity in addition to empowering themselves.

Hence, resisting the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression, deconstructing the controlling images of the Black woman and constructing social realities of her are of the core themes of Black feminism.

In addition, the Black woman has suffered from double-patriarchy or / double jeopardy. The word 'patriarchy' "literally means the rule of the father or the 'patriarch', and originally it was used to describe a specific type of 'male-dominated family' ... Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin 3). Moreover, Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy "as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (20). Under patriarchy, the woman is inferior to

man who is deprived of her rights. She is neglected, subordinated and dominated by man.

Thus, Patriarchy is defined as “the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development. Despite differences in levels of domination the broad principles remain the same, i.e., men are in control... It refers to the male domination both in public and private spheres... Patriarchal society gives absolute priority to men and to some extent limits women’s human rights also...” (Sultana 1). Hence, it can be inferred that patriarchy is a male-dominated system. It is worth mentioning that woman suffers from patriarchy but the Black woman, in particular suffers from what is called ‘double-patriarchy’. According to Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, Double-patriarchy is “a critical theory that highlights the issues of race, gender and class that inhabit the experience of Black woman... it is a system under which sexism, the weapon of patriarchal power and its various manifestations, politically, socially and economically oppress women twice over” (161-162). The colored women suffer a lot of difficulties to live in a patriarchal community not only because they are female but likewise because they have black skin. They have to endure all the violence and discriminating behaviors of both white men and women. In addition to the colored women also suffer at the hands of black men. (Tanritanir 26). The Black woman is doubly oppressed, first; by her race, and second; by her gender.

Double jeopardy is defined as the dual discrimination of racism and sexism that the Black women face. Frances M. Beale remarks that “[a]s Blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the traditional burden of having to cope with White and Black men” (Deborah King 46). The Black woman was economically exploited by the system and physically assaulted. She has suffered from distortion and from her double struggle; for being both: black and

woman. Frances M. Beal mentions in “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” that the Black woman’s

physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the White colonizer, she has suffered the worse kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the White woman’s maid and wet nurse for White offspring while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine your own household, and to be powerless to reserve this syndrome. (112)

The Black woman has not only suffered from her dual identity of what is called ‘Double Jeopardy’ for being black and woman but she has also suffered from multiple and various forms of oppressions. She has suffered from race, gender and class oppression. She has struggled with her ‘intersectionality’.

The Black woman has suffered from ‘intersectionality’. It is term that was coined by Kimberle’ Crenshaw in 1989, referring to “the intersection between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power...” (Davis 68). Intersectionality “emphasizes the ‘multidimensionality’ of oppressed people’s lived experiences and recognizes how various types of oppression frequently coexist and intensify one another” (Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics” 139). Moreover, Kimberle’ Crenshaw argues in “Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color” that intersectionality “focuses on “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black

women's experiences" (1244). The Black woman has suffered from her race, for being black and also suffers from her gender, for being a woman in addition to her suffering from being in a lower class than her White counterpart. Moreover, Judith Stacey argues in "Is Academic Feminism an Oxymoron?" that "gender never operates uniformly or in isolation from race, nationality, sexuality, class, or any other powerful axis of identity and power" (1193). Therefore, the Black woman has struggled with the interlocking oppressions of race, gender and class.

When Crenshaw was asked in an interview with Ira Madison III about the cause of naming the term 'intersectionality' and about the meaning of this term, she replied:

When I first used the term to capture the experience that black women were facing in employment when they were being discriminated against not just as women and not just as black people, but as black women, you know, specifically. I was confronting the fact that judges just didn't seem to understand that discrimination on the basis of race didn't just include experiences that black men faced, but also included women and gender discrimination didn't just address the ways the white women experienced it, but also, you know, the ways women who were not white experiences... I'm explaining to you like a seven-year-old. You, going through this intersection and you got racism, and you got sexism, and you happened to encounter both of these at the same time as these black plaintiffs are? Then, you've experienced an injury. So, that was the point. (2020, www.spotify.com)

Crenshaw explains the term 'intersectionality' and argues that the Black woman experiences multiple forms of oppression because of

her race and her gender. She refers to the multifaced discrimination that the Black woman is exposed to. The Black woman is racially discriminated with the White woman and is also sexually discriminated with the Black and the White male. She has to fight all the forms of oppression that face her and empowers herself as well.

Moreover, Lola Okolosie defines intersectionality as a “concern with the ways in which the social categories of gender, ability, age, race, sexuality, nationality and class symbiotically reinforce one another to produce marginalized subjects” (108). The result of the intersecting oppressions is a marginalized subject whether racially, sexually or relating to class. That’s why, the Black woman is considered to be a marginalized subject in the American society. She has been racially, and sexually oppressed. Jennifer C. Nash mentions that intersectionality as the “subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality, [and] has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity” (2). Intersectionality is condemned and opposed by the Black feminists who have theorized the different lived experiences of the multiply-marginalized, the multi-layered identities of the Black woman.

Moreover, Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* that “U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women’s consciousness, the ‘inside’ ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality...” (98). The Black women feminists take the responsibility of searching in the Black woman’s self, defining her realistically and transcending all of the obstacles that face her in addition to empowering her.

Referring to the dilemma of ‘intersectionality’ that the Black woman faces, Barbra Smith mentions in *Home Girls: A Black*

Feminist Anthology that the Black woman has suffered from “the simultaneity of oppression” (xxxiv). Smith describes what the Black woman really feels. She suffers from a simultaneous chain of oppressions, beginning with her race and connected to her gender and combined with her class. Moreover, the Combahee River Collective- a group of Black feminists call for the Black women’s rights since 1970 and struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression- mentions in their statement:

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess anyone of these types of privilege have. (n.p)

Hence, the Black woman is multiply- marginalized as she has suffered from many forms of oppressions. She has struggled with her race, gender and class. The Combahee River Collective continues that:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. (n.p)

The Black woman's multiple forms of oppression shape her hybrid identity and form her difficult experiences that have led to the formation of an independent epistemology that focuses mainly on the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. The Combahee River Collective mentions that "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women...We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women" (7). It can be said that the Black woman had to fight against two different fronts; the White woman front- to be equal with her White counterpart and not to be her slave- and the male front- whether Black or White- to be equal with him in the civil rights. Shanice Jones Cameron notes:

Black/African American women are often silenced and ignored in conversations about race and gender. Black male voices are privileged when interrogating racist discourse, and White female perspectives are privileged when deconstructing sexism. Few individuals consult African American women who may offer the most valuable insight into these complex issues (39).

Hence, the Black woman had to be here to convey her dilemma of having both; the racial and the sexist issues.

The Feminist Movement's Exclusion of the Black Woman

The word 'feminist' "comes from the Latin word 'femina' which means woman or anything related to women" (Rahmani 62). Thus, feminism focuses on the woman's issues and her fight against sexism and patriarchy. Generally, the feminist movement calls for the woman's rights. However, the Black woman has been marginalized and has been excluded from the White Western feminist movement. She has been unrepresented in the mainstream

feminist movement. Cameron mentions in her thesis *Woke Af: Black Feminism and The Read* that

Since its inception, feminism centered on White women and simultaneously disregarded and silenced women of other races and cultural backgrounds. All women have faced varying degrees of oppression in the United States, but White women dominated their Black counterparts dating back to slavery when White women were mistresses to enslaved African women. (8)

Throughout the ages, the White feminist women have intentionally silenced the Black woman and have not heard nor have represented her. Moreover, Deborah King advocates that

Within organizations, most twentieth-century black women encounter myriad experiences that deny their reality. In some instances, it is the absence of materials, information, speeches, readings, or persons representing black women. When present at all, women of color are underrepresented and have marginal and subordinate roles. (59)

The Black woman has been absent in the Western feminist movement. Thus, it can be inferred that the inattentiveness of the White feminist movement to the Black woman's suffering and her needs has led to the foundation of another form of feminism; an epistemology that represents the Black woman's experiences, sufferings and real self.

The Black woman has intentionally been marginalized in the mainstream feminist movement. Rowland Chukwuemeka Amaefula mentions that the White feminist movement is "citing the white woman's negligence of the intersection between racism and

femaleness which yields a double oppression for Afro-American women” (291). In addition, Bell Hooks maintains that

19th century White feminists vehemently opposed uniting with Black women and protested African American female activists speaking at their conventions... [who] did not want to associate with African American women because they considered Black women “impure” based on racist and sexist stereotypes... White women continued to demonstrate their commitment to White supremacy and prioritized industrial reform. (Cameron 9)

Moreover, Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka states that “by the middle of the 1980s, women of colour begin to question the basis of mainstream feminist theory, the domination of the feminist movement by white women, the omission of the experience and works of women of colour in feminist theories and critical analysis...” (161). White feminists have purposefully ignored the Black women’s suffering, have encouraged White supremacy and have deepened the racial treatment of the Black woman which in itself a discriminatory behavior towards the Black woman. They “universalized a perspective that was limited to White middle-class women of the developed world” (Arya 558). Rina Arya states that “[m]any of these non-White women, especially in the developing world, were not economically and socially privileged and had to contend with struggles for survival, such as addressing the basic needs of their children for food and shelter. In contrast, White women of the second-wave movement were focused on issues of fulfilment” (558). It can be argued that the second wave of feminism focuses on the needs of the White woman only and neglects the basic rights and the needs of the Black woman.

The Black woman has become marginalized in both; the White feminist movement and the Black civil rights movements. She has

become doubly excluded and doubly oppressed. She has neither been central to both movements. She is not represented in both movements. She has to fight both; racism and sexism. Audre Lorde states in “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” that “As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause: with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism” (52). Besides her fight against intersectionality, the Black woman has to fight alone bravely two different battles; racism and sexism.

According to Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* that:

Women’s Studies . . . focused almost exclusively upon the lives of white women. Black Studies, which was much too often male-dominated, also ignored Black women. . . . Because of white women’s racism and Black men’s sexism, there was no room in either area for a serious consideration of the lives of Black women. And even when they have considered Black women, white women usually have not had the capacity to analyze racial politics and Black culture, and Black men have remained blind or resistant to the implications of sexual politics in Black women’s lives. (Hull et al x–xxi).

The Black woman has suffered from neglect, exclusion and oppression. Thus, the Black woman’s multiple suffering has become crystal clear.

The Beginning of Black Feminism

Oppression needs strong resistance to overcome it. There are two types of resistance; the individual resistance and the collective

one. The individual resistance is undertaken by one person only whereas the collective resistance is undertaken by a group of people. Tamara Fakhoury states that “unlike resistance performed as an individual, which one undertakes independently from others, collective acts of resistance are collaborative; they depend on strategic joint action to achieve their goal...” (73). As a form of resistance to all of the multiple oppressions that face the Black woman, the Black women intellectuals had to fight collectively all the forms of oppression that face them, which is considered to be a collective resistance. They formed the Black feminist theory.

Hence, the Black woman finds herself fight alone all the forms of oppression and needs to be represented and to be heard. She seeks to reach racial and gender equality and to gain her civil rights like her White Counterpart and the White or Black male. Elaine Showalter explores that the black woman, in relation to her white counterpart, is “the Other Woman, the silenced partner” who must revolt against “the sexism of black literary history” and against “the racism of feminist literary history” (214). Therefore, forming a new epistemology that concerns the Black woman’s lived experiences away from the for-Whites-only ideology has become a need. Demita Frazier mentions that “[i]t became important for us to establish what we considered to be our Black feminist theory . . . We wanted to speak in our own voice as Black feminists.” (Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor 128). As a reaction towards the Black woman’s suffering and her multiple forms of oppression, the Black women create a theory that is distinguished from the Western feminist theory; the Black feminist theory. The term; ‘the Black feminist’ is:

introduced from America, which embraced both black and female concerns. We were very much part of the burgeoning black women’s cultural movement of the eighties and often engaged in debates about the historical exclusion of Black women from the

women's movement. 'Black Feminist' as a term seemed most appropriate at that time (Goodman "Bernardine Evaristo on Theatre of Black Women" 132).

Because of the Black woman's exclusion from the White feminist movement, "countless numbers of black women activists developed a distinctly feminist consciousness that gave them an agency to strive for empowerment on their own terms. Collectively, their feminism was more expansive than the agenda put forth by white women, in that specific social, economic, and political issues facing African American communities ..." (Ula Y. Taylor 18). The Black woman's experiences and her harsh conditions-whether in or outside America- are the Black feminists' main concerns. The Black feminist movement pictures the everyday Black woman. Black women intellectuals

are engaged in the struggle to reconceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism as it applies to African-American women. Central to this enterprise is reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition [...] Reclaiming this tradition involves discovering, reinterpreting, and in many cases analyzing for the first time the works of Black women intellectuals... (*Black Feminist Thought* 12).

The Black feminists seek to establish a self-defined collective identity for the Black women that expresses the experiences of the Black woman, reflects the real self of the Black woman and defends it against the White racial society. Bell Hooks argues that "there is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black 'essence' and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle" (Birt 50).

It can be argued that the Black feminist theory came to light in the twentieth century. It is stated in “The Combahee River Collective Statement” that

[a] Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s... In 1973, Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). It was founded by Florynce Kennedy in 1973. It addressed the multiplicity of issues that faced African American women. It crucially embraced the contradictions and complexities of identity by bringing not simply gender but race, ethnicity and class into discussions about what it means to be a woman. (n.p)

In addition, a group of Black women has formed an alliance and has called it ‘the Black Women Alliance’ (BWA) that has also targeted the needs of the Black woman and has expressed her needs. The Black Women Alliance has three main goals. It:

first, dispel the myth of the Black Matriarchy...second, reevaluate the oppression of Black women in slavery, particularly as it was seen as being less degrading, horrifying, and barbaric than the treatment of Black men...and third, redefine Black women’s role in the revolutionary struggle in terms of Black nationalism, by disallowing Black women’s selves to be defined by Black men within the struggle. (Springer, *Living for the Revolution* 47-51)

Like any other Black feminist group, the Black Women Alliance (BWA) seeks to destroy the fake stereotypes that have

distorted the Black woman's real image for ages. It also seeks to fight all the forms of the Black woman's oppression and to reflect her suffering. It aims at defining and empowering herself to be the only controller of her own life and not to be controlled or overwhelmed by others.

Besides the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and the Black Women Alliance (BWA), there is the Combahee River Collective- a movement founded by Beverly Smith, Barbra Smith and Demita Frazier in 1975- who state:

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time, we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression... The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives ... we realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us...As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face... ("The Combahee River Collective Statement" n.p.)

As it is previously mentioned, the Combahee River Collective has focused on abuse, violence against the Black woman, abortion rights, battered women and rape. It believes that the Black feminist theory is the only movement through which the Black woman can define herself and gain her rights.

It can be said that there are different groups that call themselves 'Black feminists' who agreed on one clear agenda that defends the Black woman's rights and attempts to reflect her suffering in addition to empowering her. The National Black Feminist group, the Black Women's Alliance and the Combahee River collective are among these groups. Black feminism makes the multilayered identity of the Black woman and her multidimensional oppression its main priority. It focuses on evaluating the Black woman and guaranteeing her a safe life that enables her to transcend any obstacles that face her and to empower herself.

Black Feminism as a Theory

Black Feminism helps Black woman to relieve and escape the pain of being black, female and poor. Black feminism is defined by Deborah King as "an active commitment to struggling against the multiple and simultaneous oppressions that Black women face and is articulated through the perspectives of an African American woman's cultural heritage" (Stanlie M. James 4). Moreover, Collins states that "Black feminist thought consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women... Black women possess a unique standpoint on, or perspective of, their experiences..." ("Learning from the Outsider Within" 16). Black feminism concerns the Black woman's lives; the thing that distinguishes it from the White mainstream feminism. According to Audre Lorde, "Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface. Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black" ("Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface" 60). Thus, Black feminism focuses only on the issues that influence the Black woman's daily life.

The Black feminists give voice to the unvoiced, weak, Black women. As Collins emphasizes that "emergent women have found that one way of surviving the everyday disrespect and outright

assaults that accompany controlling images is to ‘turn it out’. This is the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action” (*Black Feminist Thought* 96). The Black feminists refuse the controlling images that have distorted the Black woman and attempt to create a new identity for themselves and to ‘turn it out’. They face all of the forms of oppression that face the Black woman, reflect and condemn her suffering and empower her. In addition, Bettina Antoinette Judd argues that Black feminism reflects the “traumas, memories, hauntings, as well as the multidimensional experiences of the Black woman” for “being both Black and woman... These multidimensional experiences are made most evident in Black women’s creative work...” also the “Black women’s everyday experiences and everyday resistance are a part of their feminist thinking and activism” (30). The main idea and can be considered the only concern of the Black feminists is the Black woman’s life which is full of sufferings, bad experiences and struggles. They focus on and reflect her daily sufferings and her insistence on survival and empowerment in their work.

Black feminism is rich with many themes that are concerned with the lived experiences of Black woman, her different sufferings and her rights. Collins believes that Black feminism is about “U.S. Black women’s experiences as well as those of women of African descent transnationally” who “have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (*Black Feminist Thought* 251).

The core themes of the Black feminist theory are “work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism ... that rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination” (*Black Feminist Thought* 251). Moreover, Ana Kocić Stanković states that “Rape, violence and sexual abuse have been common themes in both African American (women’s) literature and black feminism, given

the socio-historical circumstances from the earliest periods of American history...” (976). Furthermore, Dina Abd El Naby Mohamed writes that “The revolt against the social and cultural traditions ... the removal of old constructions, as womanhood and motherhood laid on women’s lives, the desire to feel comparatively freer from sex-determined roles and choosing the appropriate sexual relationship are the prime objectives of Black feminism” (1). Moreover, Collins summarizes the main themes of the Black feminist theory:

Taken together, the three key themes in Black feminist thought- the meaning of self- definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of redefining culture- have made significant contributions to the task of clarifying a Black women’s standpoint of and for Black women. (“Learning from the Outsider Within” 24)

The Black feminist theory “rejects the double patriarchy that African women have collectively been subjected to in various socio-political, economic and aesthetic constructs... [in addition to] depicting and celebrating their historical, cultural and aesthetic specificity... and rejecting the stereotypical images that have oppressed and subordinated them” (Ajayi-Soyinka 165). Deborah King sums up the Black feminist ideology which

declares the visibility of Black women. It acknowledges the fact that two innate and inerasable traits, being both black and female, constitute our especial status in American society. It also asserts self-determination as essential. Black women are empowered with the right to interpret our reality and define our objectives... it challenges the interstructure of the oppression of racism, sexism, and classism ... it is in confrontation with multiple jeopardy that Black

women define and sustain a multiple consciousness essential for our liberation, of which feminist consciousness is an integral part... finally it presumes an image of black woman as powerful, independent subjects. (72)

Thus, Black feminist epistemology makes the Black woman her first priority, beginning with her generational trauma- a trauma that she was born with- to the racial and sexual struggles that face her throughout her life. She bears the burden for being both a black and a woman. The Black feminist theory plays a very important role in raising the collective consciousness of the Black woman and in defining herself, in addition to empowering her. This consciousness is reflected in all the forms of art, whether; literature, music, or essays. The Black women's works reflect the inner lives and the different harsh experiences of the Black woman. Collins argues in her book; *The Black Feminist Thought* that “[a] historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the purpose of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different” (9). Collins refers to the Black women's different literary works, through which they can condemn oppression, defend and reflect themselves in addition to empowering themselves. Their “creative and life affirming work also taps into Black women's inner lives” (Judd 38). Black feminism attempts to picture the victimized Black woman and her multiple oppressions in addition to presenting her as strong, beautiful and independent. Stanlie M. James mentions that “Black Feminism views women as strong, creative, active, intelligent, independent, productive, and sexual beings who have the unquestioned right to self-determination and self -development.” (23). The Black women have carved their own feminism that

expresses their real various identities. They have formed an empowering theory for themselves.

Black Woman's Empowerment

The core theme and the main target of the Black feminist theory is empowering the Black woman. Empowerment is “about self-worth and the respect of rights as well as the possibility for women to have choices and to control their lives” (Labadi 136). To be powerful, the Black woman should first know her self- value and should have the ability to live the way that she aspires to. She has to be able to control her life by herself without being dominated or controlled by others. She can move forward, succeed and achieve her dreams. Describing the empowered woman, Digumarti Bhaskara Rao and Digumarti Pushpa Latha argue that

[t]he empowered woman understands that she is a human being and can control her own life... she appreciates her strengths and weakness and seeks self-improvement... she can lead and serve as a positive role model for other women. the empowered woman is aware of her rights as a citizen and protects them actively. nurtures herself...she wants everybody to understand that, as a human being, she is entitled to happiness in the same way that others are. She has a zest for life... (73)

The Black woman is able to be free, responsible for her choices and can make decisions of her own. She should be the only controller of her life. She should be strong enough to face life and to live the life that she deserves and aspires to.

It can be argued that the Black woman's empowerment is the main goal of the Black feminist theory. Collins writes in “Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas” that “Black feminism's immediate concern in the United States was to empower African

American women through critical analyses of how mutually constructing systems of oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality framed the social issues and social inequalities that Black women faced” (8-9).

To empower the Black woman, there should be a high self-consciousness and knowledge with the rights that she should gain. The Black woman should be aware of herself and her value in the society. Collins states that “African American women’s empowerment required knowledge projects that were up to the task of contesting both racism and sexism...” (“Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas” 7). The Black woman needs to be racially equal to her White counterpart and sexually equal to the man. She needs to create a new strong identity for herself.

The first step in creating a new identity of the Black woman and empowering her is resistance and survival. Collins points out that “resisting by doing something that is ‘not expected’ couldn’t have occurred without Black women’s long-standing rejection of mummies, matriarchs, and other controlling images. When combined, these individual acts of resistance suggest that a distinctive, collective Black women’s consciousness exists...” (*Black Feminist Thought* 98). By creating a collective self-defined consciousness, the Black women are able to express themselves, to survive and thus to be empowered. Hence, “the voices of these African American women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, group-derived Black woman’s standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to U.S Black women’s survival” (98). It is noteworthy that Self-definition, self-valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, and self-change and personal empowerment are essential in Black woman’s survival and empowerment.

Self-definition is essential in Black woman's survival as it is the base through which the Black woman can depend on herself. Collins believes that "when Black women's very survival is at stake, creating independent, self-definitions becomes essential to that survival... Black women have stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind" (*Black Feminist Thought* 112). The affirmation of self is a prominent theme in the Black feminist theory. The self here does not only mean the Black woman's self but also the broader self, the black self; whether male or female which creates a deeper understanding of the self. Claudia Tate remarks that "we must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there's a larger self. There's a 'self' of black people" (134). Through a self-defined consciousness, the controlling images of the Black women are challenged. Collins refers to the importance of self-definition as one form of Black woman's survival:

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define themselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (*Black Feminist Thought* 114)

The Black woman has rejected the distorting images that have haunted and have distorted the Black woman for ages. She has refused to be objectified any more by the Whites. Collins states in "Learning from the Outsider Within" that "When Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for granted

assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyze reality are entitled to do so...” (17)

The Black woman seeks not only to define herself but to question and refuse the distorting dominating power of the Whites as well. Through self-naming, self- defining, and knowing their self-worth, the Black women can be powerful enough to choose and to decide what they can do. Therefore, they have the ability to refuse what is oppressed upon them and reflect their real, strong and confident identity.

Moreover, the Black feminists stress the significance of self-valuation and respect in Black woman’s survival. The Black woman knows her worth very well and has a high self-esteem. She demands respect from the ‘Other’, whether; from Black males or from the White society. Claudia Tate states that “women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self- esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves” (xxiii). Also, Collins mentions in “Learning from the Outsider Within” that “Black women’s self-valuation challenges the content of externally- defined controlling images” (18). Black woman’s real self-valuation enables her to be more powerful and to refuse the controlling images that have distorted her for ages. Collins adds that “... the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance. For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival...” (*Black Feminist Thought* 100). Self-valuation for the Black woman is not a luxury but it is a necessary for her freedom, survival and empowerment. Thus, Black woman’s respect and her self-valuation are basic in empowering her.

In addition, self-reliance and independence are among the ways of Black woman’s survival and empowerment. Marilyn Richardson

refers to self-reliance as a means of survival that “we have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore, the world thinks we know nothing... possess the spirit of independence... possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted: sue for your rights and privileges...” (38). Also, Mary Shadd Cary argues that “self-reliance is the true road to independence” (Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” 1061). Both of Cary and Richardson encourage the Black woman to be strong enough to face life alone and be able to depend on herself. Self-dependence is not a means of survival but a means of strength as well.

The final way of survival and the one that certainly leads to empowerment is self-change. Self-change is a result of a self-defined consciousness. Collins in *The Black Feminist Thought* asserts that the Black women with a changed consciousness can foster their collective empowerment. “[a] changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their lives” (117). Moreover, Tate stresses the significance of change and its main role in survival and empowerment as she states that “we’ve got to live in the real world. If we don’t like the world where we’re living in, change it. And if we can’t change it, we change ourselves. We can do something” (68). The change in the Black woman’s consciousness and self is in itself empowering. The Black woman’s self is important as without her self-definition and self-reliance, she cannot reach her own empowerment. Collins points out that “the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuation lies within the individual woman herself. An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice” (*Black Feminist Thought* 119).

Hence, Black woman’s empowerment has passed through four main phases. It first begins with the phase of self-definition. Second, it passes through the phase of self-evaluation, then the phase of self-reliance and finally the self-change. Referring to the significance of

consciousness and knowledge for empowerment, Collins points out that

African-American women and others like us become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and formal educational ways of knowing that foster our humanity. When Black women value our self-definitions, participate in Black women's domestic and transnational activist traditions... and invoke Black feminist epistemologies as central to our worldviews, we empower ourselves. (*Black Feminist Thought* 289)

Moreover, Richardson refers to the relation between consciousness, knowledge and empowerment, "... Until we begin to promote and patronize each other... Do you ask, what can we do? Unite and build a store of your own..." (38). Raising the Black woman's consciousness and her knowledge are very essential components for her empowerment which is a core theme of the Black feminist theory. Thus, the Black feminists seek to raise the Black woman's consciousness, to resist and to challenge the various struggles that the Black woman suffers from in addition to empowering her.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the Black woman's various and deep sufferings. The Black woman suffers from patriarchy, double-jeopardy, intersectionality, stereotyping, marginalization and inferiority. However, the Black feminists refuse and resist what the Black woman suffers from. They also seek to empower the Black woman that raise her consciousness and defend her real identity, showing her self-assertion, self-dependence, self-consciousness and self-empowerment. They faithfully fight to empower her and theorize the stages of her self-empowerment that are self-definition,

self-evaluation, self-reliance and self-change. The Black feminists fight for the Black woman's rights and raise her self-consciousness in addition to empowering her.

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ملخص:

يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على مظاهر المعاناة المتعددة للمرأة السوداء ، كما انه يعكس التحديات المختلفة التي تواجهها، ويبرز مراحل تمكين الذات للمرأة السوداء، حيث تسعى المرأة السوداء الى تمكين نفسها وتصر على البقاء وعلى الاعتماد على ذاتها. فهي تعد مضطهدة مرتين؛ أولاً، لعرقها، حيث انها افريقية الأصل. ثانياً، لنوعها و لكونها امرأة. يتبنى هذا البحث منهج النسوية السوداء؛ حيث أنه يبحث تمكين الذات للمرأة السوداء ورد فعلها ضد التحديات المختلفة مثل التمييز العنصري والتمييز الجنسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية السوداء، الخطر المزوج، الظلم المتداخل، تمكين الذات، التهميش، المجتمع الأبوي.