



Exploring Intersectional Feminism in the Writings of bell hooks

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ABSTRACT

Feminism began as a Western concept. Western feminism evolved in America and Europe however it does not apply to women globally. bell hooks asserts the theory that feminism is for everybody. She defines feminism as, “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” in her seminal work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (12). Women worldwide experience subjugation through varied forms such as sexual exploitation, lack of education and employment, objectification and racism. There was a clear demarcation between the white and coloured women’s subjugation. For coloured women race and class difference was also a major form of subjugation. The paper examines the ways in which the white and coloured women experienced forms of exploitation through the lens of the black writer bell hooks. Intersectional Feminism critiques feminist movements for prioritizing the experiences of white women while ignoring the coloured women’s experiences. It seeks to shed light on the overlapping as well as exclusive forms of challenges faced by marginalized and coloured women. The paper further attempts to show this intersectional feminism as evident in the theories given by hooks in her works.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Intersectional Feminism, Oppression, Coloured Women

Feminism as a movement began around the nineteenth century in America and Europe. It initially started with women realising that they were not granted any right to vote till the late nineteenth century. Women’s suffrage movement later turned to feminist movement which included broader aspects not just the right to vote. The first wave of Feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman* (1792), one of the pioneer texts on feminism. Wollstonecraft states that women should be educated as an educated woman will prove better companion for the man and a better mother for his children. In the words of Wollstonecraft, “my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge, for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice” (Wollstonecraft 4). It took almost hundred years for women to gain the suffrage right, the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 allowed all adult women over twenty-one to vote. The second wave of feminism began in the late twentieth century with the publication of some seminal texts such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1929). Friedan explained that when men left for world war, the women got employment in their place and later when men returned from the war, the women were expected to leave their jobs and stay home performing feminine duties. Friedan used statistics and interviews to illustrate these women’s frustrations while they were trapped in the domestic life. She argued that women could have both a career as well as a family life together. Simone de Beauvoir epoch making statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (*The Second Sex* 293) is still relevant. Beauvoir argues that gender is a social construct and women were treated as the other by men. By the end of the twentieth century women across the globe started associating themselves with feminism. For white women the main issue raised during the feminist movement was exploitation based on gender and the treatment as an inferior sex. This domain neglected the issues faced by coloured women who were exploited in various ways not just gender but race, class and culture. Such issues were addressed by Black feminist like bell hooks.

The third wave of feminism can be characterised by an increased awareness of overlapping categories, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation. Intersectionality highlights how systems of oppression, such as race,

gender, and class, intersect and compound inequality. Kimberle Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as a framework for understanding how overlapping oppressions. The idea of Intersectional feminism developed from intersectionality. Intersectional feminists reject the idea that all women experience oppression and gender inequality in homogenous ways. It suggests that the universality of women's oppression based on experiences of the white western women is diabolical and erroneous. Western feminist discourse often assumes a universal category of woman, erasing the diversity of experiences among women based on class, race, and culture. Crenshaw highlights that this oversimplification leads to the exclusion of women of color, whose experiences are shaped by the interlocking dynamics of race. bell hooks shared similar views through her feminist theories. The white feminists wished solidarity across borders based on the assumption that all women face same kin of oppression. bell hooks suggested that effective solidarity requires recognizing privilege and power imbalances between white and coloured women. The white women failed to recognise the differences in the form of oppression faced by them and the coloured women. This was criticised by theorists like hooks. hooks pointed out that the most visible form of discrimination which was evident in the feminist movements was that of class. The privileged class women were able to make their concerns as the main issues as they attracted public and media attention. hooks also critiqued texts written by the white feminist thinkers such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). hooks states that Friedan identified "the problem that has no name" as the dissatisfaction females felt about being trapped in the homes as housewives, while not realising that it was only the issue for a small number of well-educated upper-class women. She claimed that the poor women who worked for long hours along with doing chores, would have called and having the right to stay home a kind of freedom and not bondage. In her work, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), hooks observes, "Within the institutionalized race, sex, class social system in our society black females were clearly at the bottom of the economic totem pole. Initially, well-educated white women from working-class backgrounds were more visible than black females of all classes in feminist movement" (40). hooks talked about the interlocking webs of oppression even before the term intersectional feminism was discovered. She condemns the white feminists who ignored the existence of all poor and non-white women. hooks underscores that, "masses of women were concerned about economic survival, ethnic and racial discrimination, etc." (*Feminist Theory* 2). hooks notes that several women did not participate in the feminist movement as they felt it was white women's liberation movement which favoured racism. She states, "Other women from exploited and oppressed ethnic groups dismiss the term because they do not wish to be perceived as supporting a racist movement; feminism is often equated with white women's rights effort" (*Feminist Theory* 23). hooks explained that the black males were denied of the right to vote and equal treatment, thus it became even more difficult for black women to fight for their rights. She pointed this issue in her work *Ain't I a Woman*, "Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice" (17). She highlights that being black and female is more oppressive than just being a female. She criticized the gender difference, "Manhood was manhood precisely because it could not be told what to do" (*Wounds of Passion* 165). She refers to patriarchy as another way of naming the institutionalized sexism. bell hooks tries to emphasise that sexism, the root cause of patriarchy, is institutionalised. It can be seen in all forms of social institutions, be it family, educational system, religion, laws and so on. hooks observes that in college there no books written by black or women writers were taught. hooks mentioned that the higher educational institutions also supported racism and manipulated the students to accept it. She questions this attitude, "...professors systematically denied us truth, teaching us to accept racial polarity in the form of white supremacy and sexual polarity in the form of male dominance" (*Ain't I a Woman* 164). As a student hooks raised her voice against this hypocrisy of white people. She states, "When we challenged professors who taught no books by women, it was not because we did not like those professors (we often did); rightly, we wanted an end to gender biases in the classroom and in the curriculum" (*Feminism is for Everybody* 15).

hooks' feminist writings have been celebrated for their holistic, interrelated approach to race, gender, and class. Her theories help in understanding how power operates in a society where both black and white live together and resists the marginalisation of black women. She encourages the collaboration between women from diverse socio-cultural and class to address shared and unique forms of oppression. In this way, she incorporates the intersectional feminism in her works. To conclude, hooks explores the interlocking webs of oppressions which include gender, race and class through her feminist works.

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