

## **TO STUDY THE BLACK WOMAN CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY BY BELL HOOKS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Hooks also points out contradictions in the feminism movement and asks for a cohesive movement, although one that addresses the issues of black women. In order to refute the myth that black women as a group were more interested in reducing racism than sexism, hooks renames the problem to demonstrate that black women were equally devoted to ending sexism. She does, however, highlight the slight differences in the challenges of black men, white women, and black males. She claims that while black men and white women desired to share in the benefits of a dominating ideology, black women were fighting a different set of fights. Along with standard feminism concerns, she had to fight against bad stereotyping pushed by the media, as well as the problem of prostitution, to which many black women had to submit in order to earn a livelihood. Furthermore, the black woman's concern for her concerns stemmed from a real and perceived estrangement and "racism" inside the feminist movement itself. All women were also in a new kind of quandary regarding the role they would play — whether to be a docile creature as anticipated or to be forceful. Hooks envisions a society founded on "human" rather than "material" values, rejecting attempts by certain women to utilize feminism for selfish reasons. The value of education is also highlighted, and she references Anna Julia Cooper to support her claim that education may enable women "explore worlds outside the domain of home and family." Thus, hooks' emphasis on feminism, education, and a non-materialistic foundation for society-building is mentioned in her very first work. All of these are themes that she would go on to expand and explore in several of her subsequent works.

**KEY WORDS: Black Woman, Challenging Patriarchy, Bell Hooks, Feminism, Population Oppressed.**

## INTRODUCTION

The title of bell hooks' first book, *Ain't I A Woman*, published in 1981, is significant in that it emphasizes the writer's dual concerns, attempting to continue the tradition of writing the black woman into existence in American culture while also acknowledging the role of her foremothers in writing a herstory of the black woman. The title is based on a statement given by Sojourner Truth, a 19th century black feminist, during a women's rights convention in Ohio in 1852. Truth was responding to a white male's request that women be denied equal rights because they were physically inferior than men. Her main point was that as a woman, she was capable of achieving everything a guy could and more. That, however, does not account for Truth's reaction. As Hooks points out, white women at the convention objected to a black woman speaking on stage and only agreed to Truth taking the stage when the white male delegate made sexist remarks. By using Truth's anguished cry as the title of her first book, hooks pays homage to her 19th century foremother while also setting the stage for drawing a parallel between the position of black women in the 19th century, when they were in a double bind over the issue of voting rights, and the position of black women in the twentieth century, when they found it difficult to choose between a racist feminism on the one hand and a sexist black patriarchy on the other. Thus, there is both continuity and change between hooks and her foremothers in the nineteenth century, with the change being hooks' answers to the new set of material circumstances prevailing in the United States today. Another key reason for summoning the spirit of the nineteenth century was what hooks saw as a softening of the radical edge in black women's attitudes toward their cause, since there were anxieties that their cause would be undercut or completely eclipsed by that of black men and white women. As such, *Ain't I A Woman* might be understood as an attempt to rekindle the revolutionary spirit of black foremothers. It can be interpreted as Hooks' attempt to imbue the spirit of a woman who bravely confronted her critics with unquestionable logic and unflinching correctness. Importantly, it aims to create a sense of continuity in the struggles of black women in America.

The demand for a black women's tradition evolved as a result of the exclusion of black women from the rhetoric of race since "black" sometimes signified black men and from the discourse of feminism because the word "woman" meant white women and not all women. "When black people are talked about, the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about, the focus tends to be on white women," hooks proves clearly in the introduction using parallel sentences.

(7) While this first book examines racism and sexism as interconnected oppressive systems, the subtitle reads "black women and feminism," which is bell hooks' attempt to center the lived experiences of black women rather than simply reacting to the agendas set by either sexist black men or racist white women.

Ain't I A Woman reads like a historiography in that it recounts the socioeconomic causes that led to the introduction of female slaves from Africa to America in what was formerly a system that relied solely on the labor of black males. She describes the horrors of the Middle Passage over the Atlantic for female slaves who were conditioned to be acquiescent by their white masters through a process involving horrible torture, rape, and even the ruthless slaughter of fellow slaves, often on a whim or on the flimsiest of pretexts. Entries in slavers' log books demonstrate that they were purposefully harsh to slaves on board ships in order to "tame" them. Hooks writes that "African females experienced the brunt of this mass brutalization and terrorization not only because they might be abused via their sexuality but also because they were more likely to work intimately with the white family than the black male." (Pp 19-20)

Such a culture of dominance distinguished the early contact between white males and African women, and the impacts of slavery are still felt today, albeit in discreetly disguised ways. While the brutal subjugation of slave women was once the rule of the day, it has been replaced by an equally insidious system of psychological and physical dominance of black women, involving a sophisticated web of creating false images or myths, as well as the physical threat of rape. As Edward Said argued in his key work *Orientalism*, no knowledge is pure because it is always political in nature. In the case of

the black woman, widely disseminated falsehoods about her contributed to the development of a culture of hatred toward the black woman, successfully preventing her connecting with white women. Simultaneously, the black woman's internalization of these myths kept her imprisoned in the web of oppression.

Hooks, in a way, attempts to deconstruct the mythologizing of black women, revealing why such mythologizing arose in the first place, the political roles it served, and how such myths continue to circulate in modern-day America, largely to the damage of the black woman's interests. As part of such an activity, hooks conducts a criticism of existing scholarship on black life, with a focus on black women, debunks a number of misconceptions, and reveals the underlying errors and contradictions found in portrayals of black life in America. The blame placed on black women for what has been called the "de-masculinization of black men" is prominent among the misconceptions hooks debunks and which are repeated by biased historians. (P 46) According to proponents of this theory, women performed a dominant role in the black household, robbing the black man of his manhood. Hooks debunks the myth by demonstrating how such an interpretation not only misinterprets facts but also diverts attention away from the brutality of slavery, which was a far more realistic cause for black men feeling "outraged" at not being able to reap the "products of their labor." Hooks goes on to describe how the black woman suffered at the hands of sexist males - both white and black - as well as white women who were generally bigoted. All of this is accompanied by a colonization of black women's minds to adopt sexist and racist views. Bell hooks' purpose is to highlight weaknesses in mainstream epistemologies while critically seeking to construct a black women's heritage. Her depiction of black women is sympathetic but not uncritical, as evidenced by the following excerpt-

**“By completely accepting the female role as defined by patriarchy, enslaved black women embraced and upheld an oppressive sexist social order and became (alongwith their white sisters) both accomplices in the crimes perpetrated against womenand the victims of those crimes”. (P 49)**

Hooks speaks of black women refusing to work in the fields when slavery ended because they wanted to be deemed womanly like their white counterparts. What the attitude implies is that not working outside the home is a proof of feminine virtue.

Part of Bell Hooks' aim is also to raise consciousness or awareness of significant social and economic issues among the downtrodden, mainly the black woman. As part of this exercise, she writes on the dominant myths that circulate about black women and how they serve to sustain white patriarchal rule in America while also eliminating any threat to such rule. She claims that unfavorable depictions of black women as Aunt Jemimas, Sapphires, and Jezebels continue to circulate in the media to this day, and that such stereotyping is a continuation of the colonial mindset to keep the colonized subjects in check. She also criticizes the black matriarch image, which provides black women a sense of importance by conforming to an image of what the white master would want the black woman to be – an image that not only serves his interests but also undermines black women's resistance efforts. hooks says,

“Once black women are deluded and imagine that we have power that we don't really possess, the possibility that we might organize collectively against sexist-racist oppression is reduced.” (P 81)

This image is consistent with Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), which asserts that the state regulates citizens' thinking through the intricate working of schools, religious institutions, and the media. The ISA is linked to the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA), which include courts, police, and prisons. Hooks contends that devaluing black women ensures that white men do not readily marry black women, avoiding racial mixing and thus blocking any danger to white patriarchal power.

Hooks weaves a personal touch into her narrative by citing a class on Black Women in which black women students discuss their fear of white men's sexual approaches while dismissing the same when it comes from black men. Hooks sees both types of men's overtures as stemming from a sexist urge and categorically opposes them. Hooks the

teacher is at work here- she encourages her students to think about their lived experiences as black women and how they deal with sexism across races. She so extends on the traditional classroom's role in thinking about uncomfortable, but necessary, problems, thereby broadening the scope of education to include matters affecting the daily lives of black women. Her emphasis in criticizing all groups of people, including black women, demonstrates her intention to get to the bottom of a problem without taking sides when it is unjustified. Everything is scrutinized via the critical thinking lens. Another aspect of hooks' works is the use of personal testimony while exploring larger issues. The proclivity to use testimony to personalize larger political and social issues —

How they affect the lives of individuals from traditionally oppressed groups is a prevalent thread in the works of prominent black feminists such as Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins. This trait is also more prominent in Hooks' later works.

Hooks then discusses the "imperialism of patriarchy," or the institution of patriarchy and its attendant misogynistic mindset that impedes the creation of a really just and free social order in America. As previously stated, hooks does not relieve black men of sexist attitudes toward women. Hooks asserts that black male sexism existed even before slavery and then delves into the sexist views of male black leaders throughout the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The top brass of the black male leadership during the movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Amiri Baraka, and Malcolm X, are accused of supporting patriarchy. Hooks' works have been dominated by her exploration of the paradoxes in prevalent attitudes about women in general, and black women in particular. Another myth she considers is Moynihan's "emasculatation" theory, which was initially criticized by black males but later accepted as accurate to suit their own interests by allowing them to regard black women as "symbolic castrators" of black men, supporting their misogynistic beliefs. The apparent higher position granted to black women in the Nation of Islam is also scrutinized. Hooks contends that women were expected to be more submissive in Islam, and that the religion's dress code, which entailed covering most of a woman's body, made black men look at their female counterparts with some degree of

respect—respect that had previously been lacking because black men, along with white men, had imbibed negative stereotypical images of black women as sexually depraved and a temptress. Thus, hooks applies critical pedagogy to expose paradoxes that continue to oppress black women and place them in a lower social class. The issue of sexism in religion is also addressed in greater depth in her feminism books.

Hooks examines literary works by black male writers to discover patterns of male hatred towards black women, in accord with mainstream feminism's ideas. She provides the example of a playwright who sledgehammers a black woman actor to death during a performance, exposing the depths of black men's woman-hating nature. We can observe connections between the Self and Other dichotomy at work here as well. During colonial periods, the colonizer painstakingly developed an image of the Other in order to subjugate and reconcile with the colonized. Mostly a reservoir of negative attributes, this description of the Other also served as a definition of the Self, often in highly favorable terms through implication. Furthermore, the colonizer was at ease with a particular image of the Other that posed no challenge to the current system of social and economic exploitation. In a remarkable reversal of this strategy, black males came to regard the black woman as the other and desired to see her as submissive in order to maintain their sense of superiority. White males were comfortable embracing the matriarch image of the black woman in colonial America. Similarly, black men who joined the Nation of Islam were content with women's subordination. A mental construct or image can never faithfully reflect people as groups or individuals, and is simply that - a construction that serves the interests of the more powerful sections while keeping vast sections in a state of delusion, effectively containing any thoughts of resistance in the subjugated sections.

Hooks examines the historical layering of issues of hostility between white women and black women in the chapter "Racism and Feminism." Sojourner Truth was first denied the right to speak at the Ohio convention by white ladies because she was black. Hooks debunks the illusion of a unified women's movement, claiming that racism in the feminist movement alienated many black women and other women of color. Hooks cuts through

the hypocrisy of white women by stating that the former have always had greater privileges than black women, and these privileges are frequently obtained by subordinating the interests of the latter. In the United States' stratified society, black women were at the bottom, with white males holding the position of privilege, followed by white women, and then black men. Hooks, in keeping with her goal of being a critical thinker, accuses white women, black men, and even some black women of being involved in an oppressive system in which black women bear the brunt of racist and sexist victimization.

## CONCLUSION

Hooks creates great role models for black males as well as black women. Her own father is portrayed with ambiguity—at times as a figure of patriarchal power, at others as a critical thinker. While she has a rebellious streak while writing about her father in texts on feminism and education, she accepts her father for all of his shortcomings and failings. Her ambivalence is explained in part by her perception of how her father's early actions may have been inspired by sexist and racist ideology that believed that girls, particularly black girls, ought to recognize their position in society and behave appropriately. Despite this, she admires her father for being a black scholar and critical thinker.

Hooks' concern with the black male in relation to love is clear in her description of her father and other public male characters who embody a type of masculinity that is unsuitable for love. The dominant image of black masculinity was that of the "emotionally shut-down" black male (42) which, as hooks points out, is not conducive to receiving and giving love. Part of the problem, she argues, stems from the function of religion, which previously taught love, being usurped by the media, which promotes unrealistic and bad ideals of love. The emphasis on black males' emotional well-being demonstrates hooks' broadening of concerns beyond feminism to encompass challenges confronting black men. She eventually exhorts white men and women to alter their minds and abandon sexist and patriarchal ideas. Thus, hooks' vision broadens: from her vantage point as a black and working-class woman primarily concerned with the condition of

black women, she looks at more fundamental factors affecting the emotional and material lives of all people in America and suggests individual and collective resistance and coping strategies. In the context of love, she suggests alternatives to stereotyped forms of conduct by providing instances of good and progressive images of males. She has, of course, offered a model for male behavior in her parenting article, which includes the male parent providing care and nourishment to the child. She advocates for the abolition of old conditioning and the development of new positive, gratifying, and democratic forms of conduct and thought. Hooks asserts, calling for a return to spirituality regardless of religious convictions, and thus choosing life and love over death: "Our faith and our destiny as believers necessitate that we choose love." That choice must be validated by altering our perceptions of ourselves and others, as well as the pictures we choose to represent our world and endorse and value. When we choose life, black cannot signify death." (54)

Hooks' opinions about power relations are consistent with those of radical and black feminist feminists, although they diverge from those of bourgeoisie women. While the latter group simply want accommodation within the existing power structure, the idea of a system in which one group dominates other groups is repugnant to hooks, whose approach to the issue is to abolish power structures as they currently exist. Hooks challenges the premise that women have different values than men, claiming that women may be just as power hungry as males and calling for a societal reform centered on a new set of principles. This means rejecting the truths propagated by dominant groups in society who attribute negative characteristics to the Other, which are then internalized by the Other, resulting to feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. The Other, in this case black and working-class women, might address this issue by rejecting these labels and leaning on their inner strength to generate sentiments of self-worth. Furthermore, hooks dispels the misconception that women lack power by providing examples of how, via simple interventions, women may organize to fight their exploitation. As a result, she is supporting a more just, rational, and holistic understanding of power than previous ideas on the subject. Such thinking distinguishes Hooks' writing, as she appears to propose a

return to pre-colonial African modes of existence, which had a value system centered on collaboration and a communal focus. She also looks to guys who do not fit the stereotypical image of a patriarch as role models for the type of men she would like to see more of in society. Her insistence that men do not fit the stereotype of a patriarch and that women do not become surrogate men opens up new possibilities — what she advocates is the development of a society based on a new kind of individual in which sex, race, and class divisions are obliterated and a more equitable basis for cooperation and coexistence is explored.

Hooks also criticizes prevailing work conceptualizations for failing to account for working-class women's job experiences. While middle-class white women saw employment as economic independence from men, the working-class woman who had to work outside the home to support her family could not identify with such romanticized concepts of her experience, which she described as "exploitative and dehumanizing" (98). Such a conception alienated poor women, who saw that such a movement ignored their problems. Instead, Hooks encourages all women to learn to respect their work without seeking approval from men or adhering to ideals of work that do not correspond to their reality. In the domestic domain, Hooks argues for abandoning traditional concepts of sex-defined duties in favor of greater involvement of children, both male and female, in completing household labor as a means of lowering stress and creating "a healthy feeling of autonomy" (104) in particular for male children. Thus, we can see that nothing escapes Hooks' notice as she examines both macro and micro variables affecting the lives of women living on the outskirts of society. While capitalism is blamed for women's continued poverty and degradation, at the individual level, the impoverished woman works in a self-defeating manner by imbibing negative ideals of self-worth. Hooks specifically encourages women to challenge themselves in order to make a positive difference in their life. Rather of consenting to a situation of perpetual exploitation, Hooks proposes interventions as a means of empowering women to make a change in their circumstances. Contrary to popular belief, she empowers women by empowering them to take responsibility of their lives and begin making a difference in their current

position. The revolution she advocates must therefore take place on two levels: the political and the interpersonal. She advocates for a radical reordering of society based on new principles, as well as mental de-conditioning in order to unlearn racism, sexism, and classism. While examining the extrinsic obstacles that impede the financial and psychological lives of impoverished women, Hooks also places a certain amount of responsibility in the hands of the person to change her fate. As a critical thinker, she works to raise the oppressed classes' consciousness and make them aware of bigger social and political concerns and how they affect their lives. Hooks' notion of a utopia for poor black women considers the "current conjuncture" and offers "serious alternatives." (Weeks)

Hooks favors the democratization of basic literacy skills as well as higher order critical thinking ability to further her stated goal of empowering disadvantaged women and ensuring that they, too, reap the advantages of feminist thinking. In this way, she is broadening the scope of feminism to encompass women of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds. Hooks makes a compelling case for academicians to bridge the gap between the academy and the outside world, emphasizing the importance of making theory accessible to all women. Ivory tower academics whose reasoning is riddled with jargon will be ineffective in communicating their message to all women. Hooks believes that there is a need to develop strategies to popularize feminist ideas through "word of mouth" (111), a "mass outreach" (112) program in every part of the United States, and developing the skill of delivering complex ideas in simple terms in order to draw more women into the feminist fold. Hooks contends that the lack of easy access to feminist ideas leads to a schism between theory and practice — a schism that can be avoided if academic feminists made theory easy to understand without dumbing it down, and if women of color shed their anti-intellectual stance by incorporating theory into their real-life feminism activism. Hooks is thus calling for an united feminism, although one that takes into account the prevalent contradictions and problematic approaches to the topic and sees no need for a divide between theory and praxis. Hooks leans largely on the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who taught a group of sugarcane workers to read and write in 45 days

so that they could vote — basic reading being a necessity for voting at the time. Freire also insisted on praxis, which was a blend of reflection and action; hooks advocate a similar situation in the United States and intervene to avoid an unnecessary divide between theory and grassroots movement. She encourages all participants in the feminist project to let go of preconceived notions that prevent them from presenting a united front.

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