

The Self-Esteem of Black Women in America: The Contribution to bell hooks

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Abstract - The present paper attempts to explore and analyse the self-esteem of black women in America through the writings of American black feminist bell hooks. It also looks at the historical accounts that became responsible for the lack of self-esteem in American black women. It throws light upon the negative portrayals of black women and societal stereotypes leading to their trauma and violence experiences.

Keywords - Self-Esteem, Black Women, bell hooks, America

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INTRODUCTION

Bell hooks was one of the leading black feminists in America, known for her writings in different areas: children, love, educational pedagogy, poetries, healing, feminism, Arts, and so on. She recently died on 25th December 2021. Her real name was Gloria Jean Watkins, but she has written all her books and articles with a pen name that, is bell hooks. She wanted to dedicate her writings to the great-grandmother, bell blair hooks. Moreover, she wanted to be known for her writings, not by her name. Hence, she picked up the pseudonym and used it in all her writings. She writes, "Even though I am sometimes dizzy and quite frivolous, I was afraid then that this name would take me over, become my identity before I could make it what I wanted it to be. I welcomed the chance to choose and use another name"(hooks 2015b, 269–70). bell hooks writes her name in lowercase letters as she strongly believes in engaging in and contributing through her writings and activism rather than giving importance to her name. By writing her name in lowercase letters, she also intended to reflect the marginality.

Bell hooks has tried to locate the background in which black women delved into the lack of self-esteem. The slavery system, the civil war, racism, and segregation policies were reminders that black women had to suffer from social and political exclusion that instilled great dissatisfaction and relative deprivation. It not only created self-hate, but they also lacked confidence in terms of beauty, worth, capabilities, creativity, culture, heritage, and so on. It has impacted their lives at large.

When we look at the history of America as a nation, we find that slavery as a curse took place since

America was a British Colony. Enslaved people were brought from Africa to America for cash crops like cotton and tobacco and to work in factories. Black women were tortured inhumanly during the slave ships. They were raped and molested, and they had to face a lot of insults and humiliation during the journey and afterwards. One incident has been shared by bell hooks when a baby was thrown away from the ship by her own mother, on the instruction given by a white guard because that baby was crying. There are so many incidents full of cruelty and torture, which reflect that they were constant sexual abuse at the hands of white enslavers. Most of the time, they have stripped off their clothes, raped, and beaten up. bell hooks critically remarks that "Black female slaves moving freely about the decks were a ready target for any white male who might choose to physically abuse and torment them" (hooks 2015a, 25). Their harassment and sexual exploitation were not limited to the slave trade only. It continued even after they entered American land as enslaved people. They were not only working outside the house, but they also had to finish the household chores. They were raped and molested while working as maids in the houses of white masters and mistresses. bell hooks argues, "white male slaveowners created a body of myths to discredit the contributions of black females; one such myth was the notion that they were all masculinized sub-human creatures"(hooks 2015a, 69). bell hooks asserts that white enslavers had devalued the capabilities of black women and associated their potential with masculinity. But this could be the best example to eradicate sexism.

Though the slavery system was officially ended in 1865 by the 13th amendment, black women were still facing the impact of racism and, later on,

segregation policies like Jim Crow Laws. On the one hand, they were struggling with racism, and on the other, they were dealing with patriarchy which was, in bell hooks' words, an 'institutionalized sexism.' In Civil Rights Movement, only black men received media attention, whereas black women were neglected while leading the movement by men of their community and media as well. bell hooks describes, "The role played by poor and lower-class black females like Epsie Worthy, who did not receive public acclaim because they were not of the acceptable class status, is acknowledged. For example, one black female was deemed unfit because she was young, angry, poor, and lived with her alcoholic father" (hooks 1995, 164).

Bell hooks states that the subjugation and denigration of black women for a long period has impacted their psychology, and hence, they look at themselves as inferior to whites, men and women. She discusses at length how black women can improve their self-worth by healing the past and coming out of anger and rage. Increasing self-worth is not at all an easy task. It takes a lot of time and procedure to heal and gain confidence.

First, it is crucial to understand the concept of self-esteem, mental healing and its process. It has been said, "Self-esteem is reported to have a significant impact on important life outcomes during adolescence and adulthood. There is a clear connection between higher self-esteem and positive outcomes" (Nguyen et al. 2019). bell hooks provides a broad lens to analyse and observe the concept of self-recovery by increasing self-esteem. bell hooks states that "without a core foundation of healthy self-esteem we cannot practice self-love" (hooks 2004, 19). To her, race is not the only factor that affects the notion of self-esteem. She explicates that violence is the real cause behind low self-esteem, whether it is emotional or arises due to dominating culture, which has become part of black lives. She states that racism, sexism and classism play a crucial role in exercising violence on individual and community levels, and that makes it a normal thing. She explicates that the black liberation struggle also includes mental health care, which has not been considered an integral part of it. She writes, "When we study the psychohistory of African Americans, it becomes apparent that the foundation of the shaky self-esteem that assaults our sensibilities is rooted in the experience of traumatic violence" (hooks 2004, 21).

bell hooks says that the stereotypes that are prevalent in society mark as the oppressive force for black women. They are portrayed as 'whore', 'ugly', and fatty women, and hence, they are incapable of the fight against structural subjugation. It fills them with the inferiority complex that they are not according to the standards set by the ruling class. She gives the example of beauty standardisations that women with long straight hair and fair skin can come under the category of 'beautiful'. It is not only depicted in Hollywood movies; it is practised in society at large. It is not only the reflection of patriarchy but also a

significant cause of self-hatred black women suffer from. They are reminded in their everyday lives that black skin is a matter of shame and their natural hair cannot be appreciated because they are curly or not up to the standard of mainstream society. She argumentatively mentions that "The black female body is the site where white supremacist thinking about beauty and blackness is reinscribed again and again" (hooks 2004, 47).

Rape of black women is another burning issue causing psychological trauma they face in society. According to bell hooks, such sexual violence has deliberately remained silent, and no one talks about the seriousness victims face in their day-to-day lives. Cases like rape give rise to another trauma which later on takes place as 'post-traumatic stress disorder.' She says that novels that narrate stories on rape cases can increase the 'secondary trauma' for those who are the victim of it. It creates a barrier to developing self-esteem. She contends, "Throughout our history in the United States rape, both real and metaphorical, has been a ruling narrative in black female life, distorting healthy self-esteem in relation to our bodies and sexuality" (hooks 2004, 28–29).

She contextualises shame in the form of addiction, which has become a part of black lives. She explicates that the use of drugs is increasing among Afro-Americans. Scholars give the reason for poverty and unemployment, but very few are interested in describing the impact of drug addiction on the lives of black people at large. She writes, "addiction is damaging and self-destructive. It is the anti-thesis of all that is needed to have healthy self-esteem" (hooks 2004, 138). She discusses at length the overcoming of low self-esteem by developing critical consciousness, which is the core of delving deep into the healing process and later on moving towards positive self-esteem. Critical consciousness brings us closer to the real picture of existence. It interrogates and investigates the self, and that forms the basis for self-esteem.

Thus, bell hooks exposes the significant causes that are affecting the psychological well-being of black women. On the one hand, she throws light on the historical background, which reinforces the low-self esteem among black women. On the other, she advises black women to go through the healing process so that the required confidence can be achieved and they can bring positive self-esteem.

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