



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. VI, Issue No. XII,
October-2013, ISSN 2230-
7540*

REVIEW ARTICLE

CHIPPING PAINTS OF THE WHITE-WASHED WALL: THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK FEMINISM IN CONTEXT OF THE CANONICAL FEMINIST THEORY

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

Chipping Paints of the White-Washed Wall: The Development of Black Feminism in Context of the Canonical Feminist Theory

Man Singh

Ph. D Junior Research Fellow (English), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute Of Technology, Roorkee

-----X-----

In her path-breaking essay *Towards Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Smith asserts "It is galling that ostensible feminists ... have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness." (Eagleton 123) This dissentious statement comes after Feminist Criticism has dominated our intellectual projects and processes since the 1970s. Current academic trends make it evident that Black American Literature, of the women in particular and more specifically Black feminist Criticism is a hesitantly advancing sub-culture that hardly has been anthologized or acquired critical readership that is not biased or marginalized. Women's literature and literary criticism, denoting white-women's literature or those conforming to the norms of Feminism advocated by the white feminists, have become increasingly academically fashionable the likes of Audre Lorde, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Wells Barnett, Gloria T. Hull or bell hooks whose works have a common essential sensitivity to the their complex life-situation originating out of their combined racial and sexual identity that contextualizes oppression and struggles against oppression. As Smith explains further "The role that criticism plays in making a body of literature recognizable and real hardly needs to be explained here. The necessity for non-hostile and perceptive analysis of works written by persons outside the "mainstream" of white/male cultural rule has been proven by the Black cultural resurgence of the 1960s and 1970s and by the even more recent growth of feminist literary scholarship. For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered." (Eagleton 123)

Interestingly, however, the principles of Feminist Criticism and Feminist movement originally evolved as means to reveal and honour the "basic intentions" of women writers and thinkers i.e. the subversion to the victimization by the all-encompassing and all

determining patriarchy. But evidently, 'the line of colour divide' was detrimental to the Feminist theory, at its genesis, to become a unifying discourse of the women irrespective of the non-sexual hegemonic structures of the society. The Combahee River Collective's *A Black Feminist Statement* claims "Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved with in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement have served to obscure our participation. ... Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for black liberation Many of us were active in the movement (civil rights, black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of black and white men" (ed. Nicholson 64). This perpetrated the establishment of National Black Feminist Organization in 1973, leading to the officiation of the independent Black Feminist School of Thought. This coincided with the Second Wave of Feminism in North America which initiated the Feminist thought of the present decade; the Black, Chicana, Third World feminist groups came into existence: "radical participants in women's movement demanded that women penetrate that isolation and create a space for contact. Anthologies like *Liberation Now!*, *Women's Liberation: Blueprint for Future*, *Class and Feminism*, *Radical Feminism*, *Sisterhood is Powerful* that attempted to address a wide audience of women, an audience that was not exclusively white middle-class, college educated ..." (Hooks 7) This has been hopeful of providing a much needed impetus to the Black Feminist Criticism given the fact that Feminist movement was "in important ways literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature and

saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense the women's movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature..." (Barry 116) Valerie Smith in her *Spit Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape* situates Black Feminism in the feminist discourse not to contextualize it to academic understanding but to meet the needs of explanation in the process of theorization and create its own discourse "Black Feminism, at once imaginative, critical and theoretical, is simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive, reactive and proactive. Historically it has revealed ways in which lives and cultural productions of black women have been overlooked or misinterpreted within Eurocentric and androcentric discourses, yet it aims are not as fully determined by these other modes of inquiry and bodies of literature as this formulation might seem to suggest. Black Feminists seek not only to dismantle the assumptions of dominant cultures, and to recover and reclaim lives and texts of black women, but also to develop methods of analysis for interpreting the ways in which race and gender are inscribed in cultural productions." (Keller, Hirsch 271)

However, the similarity between the two strands of Feminism ends with their genesis in the patriarchal oppression. Black Feminism is not the White Feminism painted black; evidently, it originates from the exclusionary attitude of white Feminism and thus becomes the tool to expose the racial bias and the consequent discriminatory lacunae in the Traditional Feminism, effectually the White Feminist Movement. "To try to act like our social circumstance is the same would not make sense, even though we have both been victimized by men," says Bell Hooks in *A Conversation About Race and Class* and supported by her white sister Mary Childers who states "Though I certainly don't want to let men off the hook, it is worthwhile to look out for examples of how often an exclusive focus on the male female conflict serves as a distraction from other kinds of conflict." (Keller, Hirsch 63)

In fact, Feminist thought at its genesis may seem programmed to be indifferent, perhaps ignorant of its colored counterpart. Historically, women were kept out of political and intellectual discussions, their epistemology largely based on the patriarchal discourses of being. If Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in the 1870s may be considered the first Feminist text, then it was also the treatise by a white woman to claim her ownership of those issues of existence, hitherto owned by the white men. So Feminism began with the efforts of allowing the women, denoting white women into the arena of politics and political discussion. The 'Blacks' along with the other racially 'inferiors' were invisible in the contexts of power and promises in that given scenario and remained so through the American Civil War in 1860s, and began functioning as a marginal group in spite of consisting of a major part of the American and the whole of African population in the very long drawn and still continuing Black Civil

Liberties Movement. Hence the efforts to erase the racial discriminations and consequent oppressions began with a considerable time gap as also a division in pressure tactics.

This led to a strangely discriminatory cultural frame work where the racial and sexual conflicts though with a similar core pattern of wrecking hegemonic structures acquired two different connotations: black men against white men, because patriarchal norms operated in this racial struggle, positioning the black women as secondary and subordinate to black men in their battle for human rights; and white women against men (which gradually began to include black men as well) given the principles of Feminist theory were functional with respect to racial superiority of the white Feminists. And this situation of identity and existential crisis was termed by Black Feminists as "Double Jeopardy" becomes the major source of the Black Feminist Criticism for academic thought is very explicitly and consistently, influenced by the socio-political thought dominant in the consciousness of a race, nation or humanity for that matter. As in the political scenario, Valerie Smith explains in "black feminist criticism might be seen to have evolved in relation to Afro-Americanists criticism and Anglo-American feminist Criticism. Both Afro-American criticism and Anglo-American feminist Criticism rely on the notion of difference, exploring, respectively, the meanings of social constructions of race and gender. Yet in establishing themselves in opposition to hegemonic culture, Afro-Americanists criticism and Anglo-American feminists depend historically upon totalizing formulations of race on one hand, gender on the other. Male-authored Afro-Americanists' criticism assumed a conception of blackness that concealed its masculinist presuppositions; Anglo or Euro centered feminism relied upon the notion of gender that concealed its presumptions of whiteness. It has fallen to feminists whose work explicitly addresses issues of race, class, sexual preference, and nationality to confront the implications of difference within these modes of oppositional discourse." (Hirsch, Keller 271) It has become both culturally and psychologically imperative of.

This new 'colored' discourse of women may seem to be divisive in nature, even in contradiction to the two other progressive discourses on gender and race. But this critical perspective is the impetus of the development of the more recent discourse lay on the exclusionary aspects of the older discourse. This is evident in the linguistic structures of the critical stances: women, in original feminist theory denotes "white women" with "black" or "third world" used as a to-be-mentioned qualifier; this Adrienne Rich termed "white sopocism". Again "Blacks", a divisive term in itself automatically denotes a secondary standing of the women to the men as in all discourses that are not declared feminists. This lack of linguistic dimensions anticipates the theoretical failure to give voice to the intellectual capacities of 'black women', thus preparing the grounds for own theoretical perspectives.

And the consequences of the lacking a, if not canonical, but at least an anthologized creative stance creates a sense of dangerous vulnerability as brought forth by Smith: "Two recent works by white women, Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers* and Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination*, evidence the same racist flaw. Moers includes the names of four Black and one Puertorriquena writer in her seventy pages of bibliographical notes and does not deal at all with Third World women in the body of her book. Spacks refers to a comparison between Negroes (*sic*) and women in Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* under the index entry "blacks, women and." "Black Boy (Wright)" is the preceding entry. Nothing follows. Again there is absolutely no recognition that Black and female identity ever coexist, specifically in a group of Black women writers. Perhaps one can assume that these women do not know who Black women writers are, that like most Americans they have little opportunity to learn about them. Perhaps. Their ignorance seems suspiciously selective, however, particularly in the light of the dozens of truly obscure white women writers they are able to unearth. Spacks was herself employed at Wellesley College at the same time that Alice Walker was there teaching one of the first courses on Black women writers in the country." (Eagleton 124) Even the blindness of the black male critics are remarkable as is apparent in a recent interview by "the notoriously misogynist writer Ishmael Reed" who "comments in is way upon the low sales of his newest novel: ... but the book only sold 8000 copies. I don't mind giving out the figure: 8000. Maybe if I was one of those young female Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can do no wrong.... But come on, I think I could have sold 8000 copies by myself. The politics of the situation of Black women are glaringly illuminated by this statement. Neither Read nor his white male interviewer has the slightest compunction about attacking Black women in print. They need not fear widespread public denunciation since Reed's statement is in perfect agreement with the values of a society that hates Black people, women, and Black women. Finally the two of them feel free to base their actions on the premise that Black women are powerless to alter either their political or their cultural oppression." (Eagleton 125)

In such circumstances, Black Feminist Criticism is the necessity of the hour, though the attacks on it, like, lacking sufficient grounds of theorization, incapable of handling the male-dominated or the white (Euro – American) originated academic contexts or not being any theory at all and hence altogether collapsing its school of criticism. Ironically, validation was to be bestowed upon the very powers they have fought against. And even now there remains contentions of teaching a course on Black feminism alone as most Black female scholars right from Lorde to Gloria T. Hull and the more recent bell hooks would agree.

Yet not withstanding all odds, "the ways in which ...women of color addresses issues of identity and writing become of major importance in critical reality" (Davies 56) The history of Black feminist criticism in the literary sense of the term begins in the early 1990s with Hazel Carby *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist, Racemen: The Body and Soul of Race, Nation and Masculinity, and Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* provides a feminist critique of definitions of black masculinity and the idea of the "race man" in black political and cultural thought. Cathy Cohen *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader. The Boundaries of Blackness* and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought- Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* and numerous essays by Angela Davis have made landmark contributions to black feminist cultural history and literary theory. bell hooks considered "the most prolific, most anthologized black feminist theorist and cultural critic on the contemporary scene" enriched this school of criticism with *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* as did Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*; Smith writes, "The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a black feminist understanding of political reality and one of the most significant ideological contributions of black feminist thought." In 1980, together with Audre Lorde, Smith founded the first publishing collective by women of color, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. In 1982 Barbara Smith co-edited the first black women's studies anthology, *All Women Are White, All Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. In her most recent book, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*, Smith explores why black feminism is, according to Smith, politically invisible. This book brings together two decades of literary criticism and political thought about gender, race, sexuality, power, and social change. In *"How Did Feminism Get to Be All White: A Conversation Between Jane Mansbridge and Barbara Smith"*, published in *The American Prospect* Smith asserts that "in the academy, it is now possible to teach both graduate and undergraduate courses focusing on black and other women of color, and to write dissertations in a variety of disciplines that address issues important to black women. At least scholars in women's studies, history, the social sciences, psychology, and literature are all far more attuned to black women's experiences than they were 20 years ago." In more recent times, this critical tradition has been continued by Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop. Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* offers an important insight into ancient traditions of womanhood beyond white female understandings. If Amadiume's *Male Daughters. Female Husbands* and Susheila Nasta's *Motherlands. Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* provide cultural

groundings and pretexts and analyses for questions being debated in the West that have to do with accepted definitions of gender.

Remarkably, Black Feminist Criticism as it progresses has proven itself to be more inclusive rather than reflecting just a part of the social reality by opening the vistas of academic liberation for other colored women like Brown or Hispanic or Chicana Feminists, Third-world Feminists (like *Third World and the Politics of Feminism*), or specifically Muslim women or Arab Feminists (*Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminists* is a case in point) or voices of confused sexuality for whom the canonical and categorical nature of Feminist Theory had not much space.

In fact, it also looks forward to clearing newer vistas of White Feminist thought which had acquired the abstruseness of decades of academic writing as it occurs with all theoretical discourses by challenging its solidifying perspectives. This in a way also liberates the Feminism or to use the qualifier White Feminism from the dominations of patriarchal academic bondages. Rather, White and Colored Feminists can come together in a common intellectual platform that will challenge the gender-centric biases that still dominate our cognitive and intellectual existence. This is one of the central concerns of the Black American Women's Movement in its most political structure: to include and to be included rather than support or execute exclusion in any form. Concurrently, "In addressing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund in 1971, Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of sharecroppers and a civil rights activist in Mississippi, commented on the special plight and role of black women over 350 years: "You know I work for the liberation of all people because when I liberate myself, I'm liberating other people ... her [the white woman's] freedom is shackled in chains to mine, and she realizes for the first time that she is not free until I am free." The necessity of addressing all oppressions is one of the hallmarks of black feminist thought." (King 67) Hence, in the given academic culture the Black Feminist Criticism seems to work towards a more inclusive Feminist thought with referential points that allow us to be inclusive of difference while also appreciating similarities of experience in the lives of all women. It will not be precocious to conjecture at this point of accumulation of the knowledge of human existence that the essence of womanhood is universal; to appease anti-essentialists, it may be said that there is a certain commonality in the way and vision of life in the given circumstances for every woman ever since the society as we know it came into existence. This leads to a sort of a critical expanse which profits all discourses to a longer period of validity. "... critical relationality asserts the specificity of the other, but works together and from each other in a generalized purpose of resistance and domination. Critical relationality, then moves beyond singularity or sameness to varied interactions, transgressions and articulations. Critical Relationality becomes a way in which other theoretical positions interact relationally in

one's critical consciousness. Critical Rationality moves beyond a singular monochromatic approach to any work to a complexly integrated and relational theoretic; it allows the situation of a text in its own context but provides an ability to understand and relate it to a range of other dimensions of thought. Critical Rationality is then inherently migrated" (Davies 56) In the context of Black Feminism, therefore "Critical Rationality is not interruptive or a series of interruptions as in Marxism/ Feminism or race/ class or gender/ ethnicity formulations, nor does it embrace the hierarchy embedded in subalternization. Rather it argues for the synchronic, multiple articulated discourses, which operate braid like or web like as a series of strands are woven." (Davies 56)

Black Feminist Criticism thus, creates the ground for that contemporary critical thought and also resultant historical perspectives which can be drawn from the entire texture of life and not merely from it lighter or fairer side, or for that matter the stronger one. This leads to the epistemic truth of the ontological situation of the half the section of the humanity, brought altogether. As Mary Childers puts it that "representation of all black women as poor and uneducated is that of the number of poor and uneducated white women in this country is often not acknowledged- to the detriment of both groups and collective sense of reality." (Hirsch, Keller 61) The origin and development of Black Feminist Criticism in the context of traditional Feminist thought, hence revolves on the whole causality of the Feminist movement and thus must come into existence in order to preserve the integrity of its core.

REFERENCES

- Davies, Carole Boyce, *Black Women, Writing And Identity*. New York. Routledge.1994.
- Eagleton Mary. *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. Massachusetts. Blackwell Publishing. 1995.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Keller, Evelyn, Fox. *Conflicts in Feminism*. Routledge. London.1990.
- King Deborah k. *Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology* Source: Signs, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 42-72 The University of Chicago Press, Chicago (Autumn, 1988)
- Nicholson, Linda. *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. New York. Routledge.1997.