

The Politics of Black Womanhood in African Literature

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In the *Color Purple* Alice Walker creates the character of Celie, a Black adolescent girl who is sexually abused by her stepfather. Writing letters to God and forming supportive relationships with other Black women help Celie find her own voice, and her voice enables her to transcend the fear and silence of her childhood. By creating Celie and giving her the language to tell of her sexual abuse, Walker adds Celie's voice to muted growing discussion pf the sexual politics of Black womanhood. But when it comes to other important issues concerning women's sexuality Black women have found it almost impossible to say what has happened.

As Evelyn Hammonds points out, "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision: as a "Void" or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible and invisible, where black women's bodies are already colonized". In response to this portrayal, Black women have been silent. One important factor that contributes to these long standing silences both among African American women and within Black feminist thought lies in Black women's lack of access to positions of power in social institutions. Those who control the schools, news media, churches, and government suppress Black woman's collective voice. Dominant groups are the ones who construct Black women as : the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black woman as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white".

Critical scholarship also has approached Black women's sexuality through its own set of assumptions. Within Black women's communities generally and Black studies scholarship in particular, Black women's sexuality is either ignored or included primarily in relation to African American men's issues. In Black critical contexts where Black women struggle to get gender oppression recognized as important , theoretical analyses of Black community. Women's studies scholarship demonstrate a predilection for placing Black women in comparative frameworks.

Black women have been discouraged from analysing and speaking out a host of topics. Paul Giddings identifies another important factor, namely, the “last taboo” of disclosing “not only a gender but a sexual discourse, unmediated by the question of racism”. Within this taboo, to talk of white racist constructions of Black women’s sexuality is acceptable. But developing analysis of sexuality that implicate Black men is not to violate norms of racial solidarity that counsel Black women always to put our own needs. Taking sides against the self requires that certain elements of Black women’s sexuality can be examined, namely those that do not challenge a race discourse that historically has privileged the experiences of African American men. The cost is that other elements remain off limits. Rape, incest, misogyny in Black cultural practices, and other painful topics that might implicate Black men remain taboo.

Another factor influencing Black women’s silence concerns the potential benefits of remaining silent. During early twentieth century club movement, White women were much more successful in advancing analyses of intraracial gender relations and sexuality than were Black women. In a context of virulent racism, public disclosure could leave Black men and women. White women vulnerable to increased sexual violence at the hands of White men. White women who forwarded a gendered analyses faced no such fears. In situation such as these, where regulating Black women’s bodies benefited system of race, class and gender alike, protecting the safe spaces for Black women’s self definitions often required public silences about seemingly provocative topics.

The convergence of all these factors, the suppression of Black women’s voice by dominant groups, Black women’s struggle to work within the confines of norms of racial solidarity, and the seeming protections offered by a culture of dissemblance and influence another factor of shaping the patterns of silence. In general, Black women have been reluctant to acknowledge the valuable contributions of Black Lesbian Feminist theory in reconceptualising Black women’s sexuality. Since early 1980s, Black theorists and activists have identified homophobia and the toll it takes on African American women as an important topic for Black feminist thought.

“The oppression that affects Black people, female and male, is pervasive, constant, and not abstract. Some of us die from it”, argues Barbara Smith. Despite the increasing Visibility of Black lesbians as parents, as academics, within history and who have publicly come out. African American have tried to ignore homosexuality generally and have avoided serious analyses of homophobia, within African American communities. Black feminist thought has not taken full advantage of this important source of Black feminist theory. As the issue of the Black community, Barbara Smith suggest one compelling reason, “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that black women have . None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, Maintaining the “straightness” is our last resort”. In the same way that White feminists identify with their victimization as women ignore the privilege that racism grants them, and that Black men decry racism yet see sexism as being less objectionable, heterosexual African American women may perceive their own race and gender oppression yet that can best be seen through the outsider within standpoint available in Black community.

The significant differences among White women and Black men that left African American women scrambling to find ways to avoid, “taking sides against the self”. White American women routinely viewed the

hearings as a landmark event that placed the largely hidden issue of sexual harassments on the national agenda. Black viewed the event through the lens of racial solidarity whereby Hill's testimony violated Black "Family Secrets" about abusive Black men. African American men and women, The integrity of Hill's claim became erased by her transgression of airing "dirty laundry" in public.

African American women found themselves caught in the middle, with issues of sexuality on public display. For many, Anita Hill's dilemma had a familiar ring. For one, images of row of affluent White men sitting in smacked of pervasive silencing by dominant groups. Throwing in her lot with White women seemed foolish, because discourses of gender had long ignored the special circumstances of Black women, Because she had to live with the consequences of sexual harassment. The code of silence mandated by racial solidarity also had not served Anita Hill well. No place appeared to exist for Anita Hill's story, because long standing silences on Black women's sexuality had failed to provide one.

In order to explore how social construction of Black women's patterns established by Black feminist thought is to construct the social activities of Black women's patterns influenced by Black feminist are such as of work, family, controlling images and other core theme of Black feminism. Much of this work contextualize analyse of Black women's sexuality within structural power relations. Treating race, class, gender and sexuality less as personal attributes and more as systems of domination in which individuals construct unique identities.

Black feminists analyses routinely identify multiple oppressions as important to the study of Black women's sexualities. For example, Black feminist thinkers have to investigate how harassment as a specific form of sexual violence is embedded in intersecting oppression of race, gender and class. The contextualization of power relation generates a particular kind of socio- construct argument, one that views Black women's struggle is constructed within an historically specific matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions. In understanding these Black feminist contextualization , it may be more appropriate to speak of the sexual politics of Black womanhood which linked in constructing Black women's sexualities.

Black women continue to deal with the legacy of the sexual violence visits on African American generally and with the history as collective victims. One effect lies in the treatment of victims. Such women are twice victimized by the harassment in which they are kept under slavery. But they are victimized again by family members, community residents, and social institutions such as criminal justice systems which somehow believe that violence are responsible for their own victimization. Even though current statistics indicate that Black women are more likely to be victimized than White women, Black women are less likely to report their suppression, likely to have their cases come to trial, less likely to have their trails result in convictions and most disturbing less likely to seek counselling and other support services.

Another effect of this legacy of sexual violence concerns the significance of Black women's continued silence concerning their violence. But Black women's silence about their violence obscures an important issue that most Black women are ill-treated by Black men. Black men have internalized the controlling images applied to Black women. These beliefs allow them to ignore Black women's violence by other Black men, their own culpability in fostering Black women.

The existence of Black feminist thought suggests another path to the universal truths that might accompany the “truthful identity”. Black women’s subjectivity in the centre of analyse and examine the interdependence of the everyday, taken for granted knowledge shared by African American women as a group which have specialized knowledge produced by Black women intellectuals and the social conditions shaping both types of thoughts. They also strengthen their social condition to examine their condition of sustain.

Black women’s group location in intersecting oppressions produced commonalities among individuals African American women. At the same time, common experiences may predispose Black women to develop distinctive group consciousness will develop among all women to be articulated by the group. The presence of Black women’s collective wisdom challenges two prevailing interpretations of the consciousness of oppressed groups. This collective wisdom on how to survive as Black women constituted a distinctive Black women’s stand point on gender specific patterns of racial segregation and its accompanying economic penalties.

Black women empowerment involves revitalizing Black feminism as a social justice project organized around the dual goals of empowering text. Black feminist thought’s emphasis on the interplay between Black women’s oppression and Black women’s activism presents the matrix of domination and its interrelated domains of power as responsive to human agency. The existence of Black feminist thought suggest that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how the situation may appear to be. Viewing the world as one in the making raises the issue of individuals responsibility for bringing about change for Black community.

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