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A True Voice of African American Female Poets against Gender Discrimination

Abstract: *In this world discriminatory attitude towards men and women have existed for generation and affect the lives and both genders. Gender discrimination has always been a major issue in the society since beginning. It is a kind of practice of granting or denying rights or privileges to a person based on their gender. Colonialism had a major impact on women since they suffered both racial and gender discrimination. All African American women share common experience of being black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. The interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has thus characterized the black women's reality as a situation of struggle- a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive and the other black, exploited, and oppressed. In spite of all the difficulties some black women took pen and wrote not only about racial people but also wrote about gender discrimination.*

Gender discrimination is a discrimination against a person or group on the grounds of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity. In some societies, this practice is very old and acceptable to both genders. Certain religious groups regarded gender discrimination as part of their dogma. Women have been portrayed as the target for such types of discrimination for the most part in history. Females have to face discrimination in the society being the fairer, weaker sex while males are considered strong. It is an important global issue that does not give equal rights to a girl to empower herself. Her opportunities are lessened down with regard to education, social awareness and employment opportunities. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* "One is not born a woman, but one becomes woman" (295). This practice is still in the action in some parts of the different countries.

Colonialism had a major impact on women since they suffered both racial and gender discrimination. Oppression against African American women was differed from discrimination against men. Being black and poor, black women had to face lots of problems in America. They have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism from the white world. These women faced the problems of class, race and gender which discriminated them from the society. Racism, Sexism and Classism created the harrowing conditions for African-Americans in white America. These conditions have adversely affected the lives of blacks in general and African-American women in particular. Black Community had to face atrocities like racism and exploitation, irrespective of sex. Along with racism, sexism scarred the black women both mentally and physically. Sexism refers to the gender bias which exists against women in all patriarchal modes of thinking which subordinate women to men. The patriarchal and endocentric ideologies give women secondary roles and focus on concepts of gender differences which are not natural but manmade. However, black women had to face more problems than black men. Their conditions were more vulnerable in comparison of their male counterpart. Their cause of grievances was greater and their life was full of horrors.

Elizabeth V. Spellman states that “sexism is more fundamental than racism”, namely it is harder to eradicate sexism than to eradicate racism.

Sexism is first form of oppression learned by children.

Sexism is historically prior to racism.

Sexism is the cause of racism.

Sexism is used to justify racism.

Sexism is the model for Racism. (Bell and Blumenfeld 29)

During the reconstruction era, Black women played a heroic role in their struggle for freedom and equality. Some significant names are Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Ella Barker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Daisy bates, Coretta Scott King, Harriet Tubman, Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, Angela Davis.

Despite the legacy of this double standard, lack of equal reward for equal work, marriage, family organization, and the paucity of women’s education, black women like black men took pen in hand. The literary history of Black American women poets had a beginning in the work of Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley and Harper and their sister poets.

Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883) was perhaps the most prominent among black women orators of the 19th Century. She is best known for her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” which she delivered at a woman’s rights conference in Akron, Ohio, in 1851. She was the only women speaker among all the speakers.

In her speech, she attacked the idea of women being the “weaker sex” and said that men should not be afraid of women having equal rights to them. It became a classic women’s rights speech. This speech has been adapted into the poetic form by Erlene Stetson, and its title remains a cry for oppressed women everywhere.

Ain’t I a woman?

Look at me

Look at my arm!

I have plowed and planted

and gathered into barns

and no man could head me...

And Ain't I a woman

.....

A woman can't have as much rights as a man

cause Christ wasn't a woman

Where did your Christ come from?

From God and a woman! (8-14, 26-29) (Linthwaite 129)

Mid-nineteenth century novelist Frances E.W. Harper (1825-1911) was a teacher, poet, and civil rights activist. She used her education to fight for freedom and righteousness of African American people. In her poem, “A Double Standard”, Harper writes about the complexities of gender, sex, and the social standards. In this poem, she writes about exactly what the poem is titled as “A Double Standard”. Men and women are so closely related when it comes to simply being human, and yet, women tend to be chastising more harshly.

Crime has no sex and yet today

I wear the brand of shame;

Whilst he amid the gay and proud

Still bears an honored name.

Can you blame me if I've learned to think

Your hate of vice a sham,
When you so coldly crushed me down
And then excused the man? (25-32) (Bloom 106)

The “respect for womanhood” theme is also evident in Harper’s “Vashti”. While such poem as “Vashti” and “A Double Standard” help to advance the women’s right cause, in her other poems she points out the significant roles that she feels both black and white women must play in the black liberation struggle.

And then came the next generation of Margaret Walker, Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, and more. In the 1960s, black women poets Significant voices like Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, Carolyn Rodgers, Fabio June Jordon, Audre Lorde, Rita Dove, Mari Evans came forward and raised revolutionary voice against injustice in the society. Even some of the Black women writers such as Nikki Giovanni, June Jordon, Audre Lorde and Rita Dove introduced political writing. Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Jayne Cortez blasted the issues of racism and sexism boldly in their poems.

Giovanni did not rebel against, merely, racial discrimination and injustice, but also she rejected woman’s dependence and urged her to assert her own identity. She grew in the period when women had no rights and opportunities as compare to men because she was not only a woman but a black woman. Her Poem “All I Gotta to do” is a nicely written poem on the pathetic condition of women. It seems that someone sailing a sea of emotions on a raft.

Angelou’s three poems, “Still I Rise”, “Phenomenal Woman”, and “Weekend Glory” show her power as a powerless Black African-American woman. Although it has different ideas about Black power, the three poems contain the speaker’s confidence and strong personality as a powerless Black African-American woman.

All African American women share common experience of being black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. They had to fight on many fronts—against white patriarchy, against white women’s racism and against sexism of black men. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristics and themes will be prominent in black women's stand point.

Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American women have “possessed the spirit of independence, have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity” (Steady 87).

These women writers including Margaret Walker, Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and many more paved the way for the African American literary tradition . They wrote at a time when the culture of turbulent new country was not well established and when female writers were not encouraged. Most important, they wrote during the darkest time of black history, while they were suffering personal hardships and tragedies.

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