

MAPPING INTERSECTIONALITY IN *AIN'T I A WOMAN: BLACK WOMEN AND FEMINISM* BY BELL HOOKS

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Abstract

*Although countless international organizations advocate equal rights for male and female all around the world, the reality in life is absolutely different since most American women crumble under phalocratic oppression. It is even worse for women of African origin. They face at the same time racism, sexism and class oppression. The argument is to highlight the meaning of the concept of intersectionality as developed in *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* by Bell Hooks. The study conducted in the light of black-feminism and eco-feminism unveils that intersectionality sounds in reality as a rebellious denunciation of black women's subjugation.*

Key words: *Intersectionality, feminism, oppression, denunciation*

Résumé

*Bien que la plupart des organisations internationales appellent à un traitement égal pour les deux sexes, la réalité sociale est toute autre. Les femmes subissent une oppression qui est pire pour celles d'origine africaine car elles font face en même temps à trois formes d'oppression que sont le racisme, le classisme et le sexism. L'objectif de cette contribution d'élucider le concept d'intersectionnalité que le vivent les femmes noires américaines, particulièrement, au travers de *Ne Suis e Pas une Femme ? Femmes Noires et Féminisme* de Bell Hooks. L'étude menée à la lumière de théories littéraires que sont le black-féminisme et l'éco-féminisme révèle que l'intersectionnalité se présente en réalité comme une dénonciation de l'injuste assujettissement de la femme noire.*

Mots clés : *Intersectionnalité, féminisme, oppression, dénonciation*

Introduction

Oppression, exclusion, ostracism and poverty run deep in most American women's life. Although most of the international organizations and institutions advocate equal rights for both women and men, the social reality is different. In the whole American society as much as in the internal social classes women are suppressed and compelled to silence on social economic and political issues (Naylor: 1980).

Hence the emergence and development of feminist organizations and activism to confront the wrongs of patriarchy. Feminism is said to be "a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at establishing and defining a state of equal political, economic and social rights for women". Feminist activism confronted social unfairness that was worst for the women of African origin who experienced a triple oppression. Since black's situation was peculiar, the need to face that oppression with determination and self-sacrifice brought about a particular type of feminism: black feminism. Black feminism, emerged from the mainstream of white feminism in order to disparage social injustice and help "black" women cope with their daily plights. But, since all the minority groups in the United States of America experience the same situation, black feminism can be perceived as the mouthpiece for all minorities in the US(Dorlin 2014). And as a social phenomenon, it is just like feminism in general, variously expressed mainly through literature. (Kemp & Squire,1997:4)

Bell Hooks, a famous black American intellectual, scholar, writer, and activist whose writing is under study is an obvious example. Born Gloria Jean Watkins in 1952 in Kentucky in the South, she experienced herself the harshness of segregation that led her to rebellion, becoming Bell Hooks, the name of her great grandmother that will become a symbol of

self-sacrifice in the fight for black women's thriving. As a writer she was prolific, authoring more than thirty books in her lifetime. Her main issue was on black feminine condition in the American society. There are for instance *Talking Black Thinking Feminist, Black Looks: Race and Representation and Feminism is for Everybody, Passionate Politics*, to name but a few of them and mainly *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* that founds the present analysis. The book which is a five-paragraph monograph documents the experiences of black women from the years of slavery, through Black Reconstruction in the late 1860s, to the present.

It remains important to make it clear that "*Ain't I a Woman?*" was originally the title of an historical speech delivered by the great preacher and abolitionist Sojourner Truth on 28-29 may 1951 in Akron, Ohio at the Women's Rights Convention. As former slave, she experienced the miseries of being sold and was cruelly mistreated. Known as one of the most powerful advocates for human rights in the nineteenth century, she spoke out for the rights of African-Americans and women during and after the civil war. "She remains an icon of American progressivism and reform." (Gates & McKay 1997:196-197)

The oppression of the black women in the American society proved special since it focused first on her African origins then on their social status and finally on the sex. They are thus three main current social problems that black American women face daily: racism, sexism and class oppression. These plights are woven together. It is what Crenshaw calls intersectionality¹. (Crenshaw, 2014) As Martinez stated: "the three types of oppression cannot be separated...they are all parts of the system. They are three faces of the same enemy"

¹Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality Identity, and violence against women of color", <http://socialdifference.columbia.edu>. (21/01/14).

Intersectionality is a concept coined by the scholar Kimberlé William Crenshaw in 1989. For her, black American women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either racism or sexism, but as a combination of both racism and sexism.

(Martinez, 2003: 41). The argument aims at investigating of the concept of intersectionality as black women experience. The study carried out through the lens of black-feminism and eco-feminism as key methodologies to black feminist studies develops into three main parts, each one dealing with a special aspect of intersectionality, for the sake of clarity. The first one highlights the implication of racial hatred in the American context. The Next step is about the perception and use of the black female sex as the cornerstone of black women subjugation. The last one will focus on the social position that favors black women's rejection.

Constraints rooted in racial bias

Racism stands as an outstanding problem that has been undermining the American society, hurting most minority groups and black American women in particular. That situation makes them have the bigger fish to fry. In fact, because of prejudice linked to their skin color, black Americans and mainly black woman are shut out from the real life of their common country.

To get the scope of the plight undergone by black communities which include black women upon whom the present work focuses, it is important to get acquainted with the nature of racism in the United States of America. Racism in that part of the world was first institutionalized. To institutionalize something is “to make it become part of an organized system, society or culture, so that it is considered normal” (Wehmeier,2006:774). Thus through its different social, economic and political institutions, the American society has set up rules on the basis of racial discrimination (Bell, 1987:102). Those rules, of course, aim at excluding Blacks from the mainstream of American life as Kovel clearly asserts it in this quotation : “Through history, whites have created the

institutions by which black people are forced to live and which force them to live in a certain way, almost invariably so as to foster (...) constellations of unworthy traits".(Kovel, 1970:195)

Numerous officials can be presented as epitomizing racist actions against black people, be they writers or not. Nevertheless, two of them deserve to be revealed in this contribution because of the positions they held in the life of the United States of America at a certain time. They are Moyers and Moynihan, two civil servants in the American executive system in the 1960s. This passage from a critical work in feminist field clearly mentions their racist action against the blacks: "Both Moyers and Moynihan isolate an imagery 'black America' remote from impact by an implicit white America. This distinction evades the issue of racism in the impoverishment of African-Americans."(Frazer,1993:91)

Institutionalized racism is epitomized by the very life of the author herself. Hooks grows up in the South of America, which was characterized by separation of members of different races. First, she attends Black public schools for the majority of her secondary education, which fosters a sense of belonging and positive affirmation. Then, after she attends university, she faces classist and racist problems. Her peers mock her because of her having come from the South. As Cook asserts, "it was this mocking at Stanford that caused her to seriously begin contemplating class differences because for being materially underprivileged at a university where most people (with the exception of workers) are materially privileged provokes such thought" (Cook, 2012: 9). For example, "as Hooks could not afford the travel to home during the first few holiday breaks at Stanford, she stays with the working class 'black women who labored as maids, as secretaries' who she had befriended in order to overcome her feelings of isolation during the semester" (Cook, 2012: 10)

Hooks moreover presents racism as an institutional machine that oppresses Blacks. By pointing out the incoherence and awkwardness of the racist analysis of Moynihan, Bell Hooks expresses her opposition to these attitudes, exposing the scope of racism in the American society. the work of Hooks presents American communities which crumble under racist action(Hooks:1981). Hooks seems therefore to walk in the steps of David Walker, one of the very first African-American writers who strongly fought racism. Here is an excerpt from his *Appeal* about white people's wickedness and greediness: "The whites have always been unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority."(Gates and Mckay, 1997:189). In fact, In her *Ain't I A Woman?black women and feminism*, she details how the lives of black and white women in the USA differ because while white women face only gender discrimination, black women face prejudice based on both their race and their gender.

As it can be noticed, Racism is harshly felt by black Americans especially women who are the ones we are actually interested in herewith as written by Koffi Yssa Désire. In his article entitled "African American Women's Double Oppression in Alice Walker's The *Color Purple*", he states: "From slavery to the present time, life in America has been difficult for black people, mainly women. They were confronted to racism established by the white society which recognized no right belonging to them" (Koffi, 2013:268). Hooks' works also disparage women's sexist exploitation.

Sex-based oppression

Another major and crucial social problem that black American women face in their living environment is sexism. As far as sexism is concerned, it is next to racism the worst situation that most black American women experience. Women's

subordination is even seen as a natural and divine fact as explained by Zannou Adiele. she writes:

Women naturally were having a body, mind and a temper that couldn't match men's own and were then doomed by all evidence to be rightly dominated. They tried to prove this, with the Bible, by saying that since Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs, women were and after image creation, a God given gift to men which would have become of no use when left on their own.(Zannou,2015:252)

Sexism which can also be called gender discrimination is a prejudice, a discrimination based on a given person's sex. It may originate in traditional stereotypes or sex roles, and includes the belief that one person's sex is superior or inferior to another one's. Sexism is clearly felt as the feeling and manifestation by men of the so-called superiority of their sex over the one of black women. It is black American women's sexual alienation which can also be called sexual slavery. So alienation steals black women's real identity and leaves them without reference. It spreads over various aspects that are exploited by Hooks. There is for instance rape which is an issue of a particular importance that is sometimes related to race is defined as follow:

Rape is when someone uses his powers, manipulations or force to intimidate, exploit, degrade or controls another. Rape has been used as a weapon in wars, in racial violence and in everyday life. Rape dismisses a person's dignity and their human rights to safety, choice and consent. Rape is a crime.(brssc.org, 2014)

Reading this approach of rape, one understands easily the scope of the trouble the black American women undergo in the

male-dominated society because of their sex. Rape is used by men just to express their superiority over women. Since men seem to be tougher physically than most women, some men take advantage of that physical strength over women through rape. Rape as a social issue in Bell Hooks' book is deeply analyzed by some critics. Laura E. Tanner even focuses on the feeling of the reader when reading rape. For her, the pain of the woman being raped is so deep that even the reader feels it(Taner,1993:85).

Rape is furthermore for some men, means of appeasing their sexual appetite compulsorily and without any effort. Gloria Naylor calls them: "Human male with an erection to validate" (Naylor, 1980:170) This kind of men needs no agreement with the woman before having sexual intercourse with her. Hooks carries on the tradition that Sojourner Truth started in her speech delivered in 1851 about sexual exploitation. She juxtaposes four main ways that black women are brutalized and oppressed. According to Hooks, these ways are rape, then come flogging, reproduction and idealization of white womanhood. She traces back black women's rape to the slavery times. Hooks depicts the case of rape of black women as an institution of control, for maintaining order and ensuring the obedience of black women. She claims that; Black women's encounter with violent rape often occurred on the slave ships, which brought them from Africa to America. On these ships rape was used as a method of torture in order to subdue African women. They were considered to be available for any member of the crew who might wish to abuse them. The lot of the black woman did not improve once she reached the plantations. Again she was the target of physical and sexual abuse by owners, sons and overseers who frequently used rape or the threat of it to ensure the submission of black women (Hooks,1981:18). Women are also subject to sexual objectification.

Objectification, for Nussbaum is the seeing and/or treating a person as an object; it involves treating one thing as

another: one is treating as an object what in fact is not an object, but a human being (Nussbaum 1995, 256–7) Objectification is treating a person, usually a woman as an object. Sexual objectification is when a person is viewed primarily in term of sexual appeal or as a source of sexual gratification. (Joy:2013) Thus, the black American woman stops appearing as a normal human being to be seen as a sexual object that men can use as they please. In Mackinnon's words, all women all around the world live under the shadow of the threat of sexual assault. The consequence is that many of them will live with the threat of sexual abuse. This is an excerpt of her analysis:

All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water. Given the statistical realities, all women live all the time under the shadow of the threat of sexual abuse. The question is, what can life as a woman mean, what can sex mean, to targeted survivors in a rape culture? Given the statistical realities, much of the women's sexual lives will occur under post-traumatic Stress .(Mackinnon, 1997:356)

She clearly demonstrates that sexual objectification is a worldwide phenomenon among women. But since black women are marginalized, their case might be a bit particular and it is what attracts our attention. This objectification covers two main aspects: the ownership and the denial of autonomy.

To establish an ownership means that objects become the property of somebody else than themselves. Ownership is treating the object as something that is owned by another and can be bought or sold (Martha, 1995). So black American women are not treated as human beings with their rights but as objects owned by men. Therefore, they are obliged to behave the way men please.

Black women are also denied any autonomy as an expression of oppression. Nussbaum Martha defines the denial of autonomy as treating the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination. black American women are presented as depending completely on men. Any action they have to take is controlled, since women have no personal autonomy and self-determination. The objectification of the black women combined with the denial of any autonomy to direct their own lives raise the issue of the right to life for black women as human beings.

Black women also face brutality. Black women are brutalized by their parents for violating family instructions; anything that takes their parents aback. They are furthermore case-hardened in the hands of men at home as well as on the street. Whether in serious circumstances or not, they are brutalized and sometimes the most dehumanizing way since men are physically tougher than they are. The oppression of black women and their mistreatment in the hands of their own husbands is a serious concern.

Black women's restrictions in Hooks' work rise to sexual inclination too. Thus, for men and even some women, only heterosexual relations are admitted. Homosexuality is strictly forbidden. Homosexuality is the fact for a person to have sexual relations with another person of the same sex. It turns the women who practice it into lesbians and that is either despised or firmly forbidden to black women. Thus women are sexually guided and thus face sexual constraints since they are not free to indulge in the kind of sexual trend they really affectionate (Adrienne Rich 1997:332). So for Rich, women are heterosexual not because they like it as their favorite sexual practice but rather because they are forced to do so. Sexist oppression is summarized by Olga Kenyon like this: "In male-dominated societies, man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite."(Kenyon, 1991:8) Black women as discussed by Hooks also face classism.

Structural class inequity

There are three major circles of reality in the American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it is a small circle, narrow space in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America.(Wade-Gale, 1984:34)

This assertion of Gloria Wade-Gayle can perfectly fit the position of black women in the monograph of Bell Hooks. Class oppression or classism is the third major social plight black women experience in the American society. Although less studied by most researchers than racism and sexism, class oppression is also a significant social problem since it determines one's position inside his/her society “Classism can be defined as the systematic oppression of one group by another based on the economic distinction or more accurately one's position within the system of production and distribution”.(Yamato, 1995:10)

This excerpt clearly illustrates what classism is and as a feminist who mainly focuses on black women's problems within the American society, Bells Hooks reflects on it in her book *Ain't a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. She stipulates that “white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third and finally black women last” (Hooks1981: 52). Bell Hooks presents in fact

classism as an informal social system, invented by white and rich people to exclude and reject people of black skin color above all women who most of the time, are jobless and consequently without enough resources to enjoy life the way they really should. Black women are thus marginalized because of their social position and consequently, bell the cat(Christian,1980).

Marginalization stands indeed as the most observable characteristic of the oppression of the black American as sub-class people. Black women are therefore treated separately from the others since they are seen as socially low-class citizens. Their marginalization, though very commonplace, can first be analyzed on the psychological and economic standpoint, then on the social one.

The uppermost exploitation is made on the mind of the black American women in order to keep them down and make them believe whatever could be good for the wellbeing, the timelessness and the advancement of the leading class. It is the idealization of white womanhood. In so doing, as Hooks demonstrates, Black women are in the doldrums. They are so demoralized that even hope for better days is not inherent in their mindset as Olga Kenyon explains as follows: “They stumbled blindly through their lives: Creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused in pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope” (Kenyon, 1991:68).

Thus, black American women are at sea. They are so confused that some of them forget about their own human value and this lack of new perspectives leads them to despair. That moral exploitation which keeps black American women hollow, and reduces their ability to resist, renders them more vulnerable to any kind of exploitation such as economic domination.

Classism is originally economic since it is any attitude or practice “which subordinates people to income, occupation, education and/or their economic conditions” (Langout and all,2006:150). Thus, black American women constitute a sub-

category of human beings in their own society. So they are ostracized for their lack of economic power. Because of poverty, black American women have to find out odd jobs in order to be able to provide not only their own needs but also those of their families. Moreover, they work very hard, most of the time six days out of seven just for a poor pay. Hooks underlines this as follows:

“As black women were forced to work in low grade manual labor they were masculinized women who lacked the standards of womanhood. Black women were cast in a negative light. The casting of this image of the black female in sociological bold relief is both consistent and logical in racist terms, for the so called black matriarch is a kind of folk character largely fashioned by whites out of half-truths and lies about the involuntary conditions of black women (Hooks, 1981: 72).

The economic exclusion of black American women has immediate and obvious drawbacks on their social position since one's social conditions are most the time the reflection of the economic power. Thus, they live in deplorable and inhuman conditions, which reflect their poverty.

Class discrimination is moreover symbolized by black women's marginalization within the American society from the early slavery times till today mostly seen through the position of black women on plantations in the author's work. Hooks' concern about this aspect of classism is mostly backed up and highlighted through the narration of some American female novelists. The confinement of black women in Brewster Place and the title of the first novel *the Women of Brewster Place* is eloquent enough about this issue. The said novel even if it presents some furtive men, is entirely about black women's suffering in a ghetto. This marginalization of black American

women is also discussed by the famous feminist novelist Toni Morrison in her novel *Song of Solomon* (Morrison, 1978). Pilate is a black American woman, sister of the moneybag Macon Dead II. But because of her material poverty, she is rejected by her own brother who even resents her presence in his neighborhood. She is thus a rebus of her society just because she is moneyless. Black American women's classification is thus due to their poverty which in turn, is created by a whole system around them. It keeps them in the position of ever-assisted persons.

As a matter of facts, Class oppression depresses black American women as much as racism and sexism. They are thus the last ones when categorizing American people on the American land. Class oppression has thus unfortunately been among the very first troubles of the black women (Gates & Mackay, 1997:2018). According to Gates, even racism and sexism came into being long after classism. Sexism and racism have just taken over with the virulence of their consequences. Class oppression puts black women at the very bottom of the American society. That classism favors black women's exclusion from the mainstream of the American society. They are confined in townships, in poorly paid jobs and undergo exploitation. In a word they are on a thin ice.

Conclusion

Like a cakewalk, Bell Hooks makes a deep and severe depiction of many social problems that crush black American women on their homeland. The plot as generated by a black feminist, exploits them in her book not one in turn but as a single phenomenon called intersectionality. Still, for the sake of clarity we evolved on a case-by-case basis. As we tried to put it bluntly, she disparages racism, both as a deplorable social institution and as a daily social phenomenon, which obviously has deplorable drawbacks on the Blacks mainly on black women . Another

important point is sexism. Hooks' writing explores sexual oppression also known as sexual slavery. She reveals thus sexual conventions and any attitude that favors sexism; shedding thus light on rape and the denial of free sexual tendency. Black women's objectification and men's brutality are also depicted as means of domination of the men over women. Hooks' book also deals with class oppression that is said to have preceded the other plights into being. Thus, the economic domination that favors the emergence and the existence of different social classes is demonstrated. Black American women's economic powerlessness is also unveiled. That economic fragility logically leads to social difficulties such as unemployment, lack of personal fulfillment, marginalization and lack of social mobility. As Michele Wallace explains it in "Variation on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity", the black woman was seen as useless, negligible, nothing, invisible, and a void. Black women's plights related to race, sex, and class can be summarized in the following sentence extracted from *the Color Purple*: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam he say, you nothing at all". (Walker 1982:209).

As a whole, intersectionality also called triple oppression in Bell Hooks works reads as a protest before the injustice, subjugation and oppression black women face, putting them in a tight corner as highlighted in this excerpt. Inspired, though sometimes disappointed, by movements of color people, of blacks in the United States, of liberation struggles of "underdeveloped" nations, some American women began to seek themselves as women and to protest the truncated definition of women in the society(Gates 1990:47). This research exposes the limitations of intersectionality in relation to Black women, in the pursuit of a more just and balanced social order.

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