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Intersecting Race, Gender, and Power in Black Feminism

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Abstract

This research article assesses how race, gender, and power operate together in shaping the experiences of Black women in American society. Race, gender, class, and intersectionality in Black feminism have been widely discussed; however, the multidimensional role of power within this movement has remained insufficiently focused. Employing a qualitative interpretive approach, this study analyzes foundational Black feminist texts by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and other Black feminist thinkers. It examines how Black women have been marginalized both by mainstream feminism, which often neglects race, and by male-centered Black liberation movements, which often overlook gender-based oppression. The article also explores storytelling, personal experience, and self-definition as important sources of knowledge production and resistance. It argues that Black feminist thought understands power not only as structural, cultural, discursive, and institutional domination but also as a means of resistance, identity formation, and social transformation. By foregrounding the central role of power, this article highlights the continuing significance of Black American feminist thought in addressing contemporary inequalities and imagining more inclusive forms of justice.

Keywords: black Feminism, intersectionality, race and gender, power structures, social justice

Intersecting Race, Gender, and Power in Black Feminism

Black feminist thought, as both an intellectual tradition and a movement of resistance, offers a critical lens to examine how race, gender, class, and power intersect in shaping the experiences of Black women in America. In this regard, Black feminist thought, serving as a reaction to oppression, fosters a powerful tradition of self-definition, knowledge production, resistance, and social transformation.

Patricia Hill Collins argues that Black women's lived experiences contribute to the rise of Black feminist thought. He further asserts that their constant struggle plays a fundamental role in producing alternative knowledge against dominant systems of power. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw, introducing the concept of intersectionality, highlights that race, gender, class, and other social entities come into play to produce complex and overlapping forms of oppression. These theoretical perspectives provide an important foundation for examining the internal relation between race, gender, and power in Black women's lives. Black feminists argue that power is multidimensional and works across different levels of society to sustain domination. This study focuses on the structural, discursive, and social dimensions of power. Structurally, it prevails over social institutions such as law, education, labor, family, and politics. Discursively, it circulates through language, stereotypes, and cultural images. Socially, it works through everyday relations of authority, exclusion, resistance, and identity formation. More precisely, it creates knowledge and social truths for bolstering white middle-class and patriarchal perspectives, marginalizing Black women's experiences.

Review of Literature

Black American feminist thought has drawn critical attention from various scholars who have approached it from different theoretical, historical, legal, and literary perspectives. This review categorizes critics into three broad groups who focus on race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, law, and power. The first group consists of foundational Black feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde. Collins (1991) discusses the interconnection of oppression through the concept of the matrix of domination, showing how race, gender, class, and sexuality operate together within systems of power. Her work presents the structural organization of oppression. Along the same lines, bell hooks (1989) explores patriarchal domination, racial subjugation, and the transformative possibilities of feminist practice. Collins emphasizes the structural dimension of oppression, whereas hooks associates feminism with political practice. He stresses the need to challenge

domination in everyday life, culture, and consciousness. Angela Davis (1981) links Black feminist thought to the history of slavery, labor, captivity, and resistance, demonstrating that the oppression of Black women must be understood through both racial capitalism and gendered exploitation. Audre Lorde (1984) foregrounds the importance of difference, arguing that difference should not be seen as a source of division but as a creative and political resource. These foundational thinkers assert that lived experience, historical struggle, resistance, and collective awareness develop a framework of knowledge to foster Black feminist thought.

The second group includes scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Dorothy Roberts, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, who interpret Black feminist thought through the perspectives of intersectionality, law, social policy, and historical power. Crenshaw (1989) develops the theory of intersectionality to show how race and gender operate together in producing overlapping forms of oppression that are often ignored by both antiracist and feminist frameworks. Crenshaw's contribution is especially significant because she exposes the limits of single-axis analysis, where Black women's experiences disappear when race and gender are studied separately. Higginbotham (1993) explains the idea of the politics of respectability, showing how Black women negotiated power, morality, race, and gender within restrictive social frameworks. Crenshaw focuses on legal invisibility and Higginbotham on historical strategies of self-representation and community discipline under racial oppression. Roberts (1997) examines the intersection of race, gender, law, reproductive rights, and social policy, revealing how Black women's bodies have been regulated by legal and medical institutions. These scholars expose the multi-dimensional aspects of power as it is embedded in law, policy, medicine, and public institutions. The third group of critics, including Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, and Valerie Smith, examines the narrative, cultural, and literary dimensions of Black feminism. Christian (1987) highlights storytelling as a valid and powerful form of theory rooted in community knowledge. Her argument challenges the dominance of abstract Western theory by showing that Black women's narratives themselves produce critical knowledge. Carby (1987) argues that race and patriarchy shape dominant representations of Black womanhood, particularly in literary and cultural discourse. Smith (1998) examines Black feminist themes through literature and cultural production, showing how texts become sites of resistance, identity formation, and political critique. Collins, hooks, Crenshaw, Higginbotham, and Roberts emphasize social, political, and institutional structures, whereas Christian, Carby, and Smith demonstrate that literature and culture are key sites where power is produced and contested.

These critics ground Black American feminist thought in oppression, resistance, identity, and social transformation, though existing scholarship often treats intersectionality, history, law, and literary representation separately. The concept of power itself often remains scattered across these discussions rather than being examined as a multidimensional construct. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by analyzing power as structural, discursive, institutional, cultural, and resistant within Black feminist thought.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the interplay between race, gender, and power dynamics within the context of Black American feminist thought. More specifically, it uses qualitative, interpretive, and hermeneutic research design because the study is theoretical and textual in nature. It is based on the close reading, thematic analysis, and critical interpretation of selected Black feminist texts. The analysis involves a careful interpretation and evaluation of key theoretical works by prominent Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.

These texts have been selected because they provide foundational and influential discussions of race, gender, class, sexuality, oppression, resistance, and power. Collins is famous for her concept of the matrix of domination; hooks for her critique of patriarchy and domination; Davis for her historical analysis of slavery, labor, and Black women's resistance; Lorde for her emphasis on difference and self-expression; and Crenshaw for her theory of intersectionality.

The research uses feminist theory, intersectionality, and critical perspectives to interpret the way various mechanisms of oppression operate at the same time instead of operating separately. Intersectionality is used as the main theoretical framework because it explains how race, gender, class, and sexuality operate together. This framework is suitable for the present study because Black women's experiences cannot be fully understood through race alone or gender alone. Their oppression emerges from overlapping systems of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and cultural marginalization. The secondary data consists of journal articles, books, critical essays, and academic publications that support and contextualize the main arguments. The study gives priority to sources that directly address Black feminism, intersectionality, power, identity, cultural representation, legal structures, and social inequality.

The analytical tools used in this study include close reading, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis. Discourse analysis is expanded to study how language, representation,

ideology, and dominant knowledge systems shape the social understanding of Black womanhood. Thematic analysis is carried out to identify recurring themes such as oppression, self-definition, resistance, identity, intersectionality, institutional domination, cultural representation, and empowerment. Despite the prominence of Black feminist thought in examining intersecting oppressions, there remains a gap in the analysis of power as a multidimensional force operating across personal, cultural, and institutional levels.

Discussion

Double Exclusion

Black Feminist Thought in America came into being as an answer to the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. Too frequently, the terms "black" and "man" were interchangeable, while the terms "woman" and "white woman" were synonymous. Consequently, black women became an invisible minority whose needs went unmet. As one example, consider the premise that racism does more damage to black males than black females because "the real tragedy of racism lies in its destruction of manhood." This reflects not only the affirmation of masculinity under patriarchal terms but also the neglect of human rights to wholeness and freedom, which applies to men and women alike.

Role of Gender, Patriarchy, and Power

It is necessary to make it clear that not all Black men are sexist. According to hooks (1989), "during the Black Liberation Movement in the 1960s, black men overemphasize[d] white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a means of accounting for their rejection of interracial sex" (p. 85). This observation exposes the contradictory nature of liberation politics. On the one hand, it opposes racial domination; on the other, it still advocates for gender domination. Baraka (1966) states:

And so this separation [of black men and women] is the cause of our need for self-consciousness, and eventual healing. But we must erase the separateness by providing ourselves with healthy African identities. By embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only of the divine complement the black woman is for her man. For instance, we do not believe in the 'equality' of men and women. We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals . . . Nature has not provided thus. (p. 134)

Baraka insists that men and women are unequal by nature. This is an attitude that he considers healthy and worthy of promotion to other black men and women. Not only are men and women different, he says, but there is no reciprocity in their relationship to each other; hence, a black man is not "for" his woman as a black woman is "for" her man. The Black

feminist perspective assigns Black Women supportive roles, rejecting their full subjectivity. It also shows how patriarchal power can operate through cultural and political language.

Black Women who participated in the Black Feminist Movement during the 1960s often met with racism. In most women's movement writings, the experiences of white middle-class women were described as universal "women's experiences," largely ignoring the differences between black and white women's experiences due to race and class.

Part of the overwhelming frustration black women felt within the Women's Movement was at white feminists' unwillingness to admit to their racism. However, Black feminism does not question the concept of feminist coalition. It raises a voice for recognizing racial difference, class privilege, and power inequality within feminist politics.

Not only did some white feminists refuse to acknowledge their ability to oppress women of color, but some claimed that white women had always been anti-racist. hooks (1989) points out, "there is little historical evidence to document Rich's assertion that white women as a collective group or white women's rights advocates are part of an anti-racist tradition" (p. 65). Every women's movement in the United States has been built on a racist foundation: women's suffrage for white women, the abolition of slavery for the fortification of white society, the temperance movement for the moral uplifting of white society. None of these movements was for black liberation or racial equality; rather, they sprang from a desire to strengthen white society's morals or to uplift the place of white women in that society.

Faced with the sexism of black men and the racism of white women, black women in their respective movements had two choices: they could remain in the movements and try to educate non-black or non-female comrades about their needs, or they could form a movement of their own. Lorde (1984) notes:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear it is the task of women of Color to educate white women-in the face of tremendous resistance-as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival (p. 112).

Lorde thus stresses the need to establish a theory of both resistance and self-preservation to strengthen Black feminism. In light of these facts, the women decided to forge their own movement, the Black Feminist Movement.

Quest for an Independent Black Feminist Movement

Building a Black Feminist Movement was not an easy task. Despite the need for such a movement, there were few black women in the early 1970s who were willing to identify themselves as feminists. They must fight against racism and sexism within their communities and feminist domains.

Smith (1983) articulates the reservations of many black women about a black feminist movement: “The Black woman is already liberated; Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront; Feminism is nothing but man-hating; Women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns. People of color need to deal with the “larger struggle;” Those feminists are nothing but Lesbians” (p. 78). These myths illustrate long-held misconceptions about black women, including the belief that the extraordinary strength black women have shown in the face of tremendous oppression reveals their liberation. In fact, this “freedom” -working outside the home, supporting the family economically as well as emotionally, and heading the household--has been thrust upon black women. Women of all races, classes, nationalities, religions, and ethnicities are sexually oppressed; black women are no exception. Upon further examination, the other myths prove to be false. Racism and sexism must be confronted at the same time. The central insights of Black feminist thought asserts that gender and race separately cannot Black women’s oppression.

To wait for one to end before working on the other reflects an incomplete understanding of the way racism and sexism, as forms of oppression, work to perpetuate each other. Black feminism struggles against institutionalized, systematic oppression rather than against a certain group of people, be they white men or men of color.

Womanism, Self-Definition and Collective Survival

Having decided to form a movement of their own, black women needed to define the goals of the Black Feminist Movement and to determine its focus. Several authors have put forth definitions of the Black Feminist Movement. Walker connects womanism with Black women’s identity, creativity, and survival. Walker coined the term “Womanist” to describe the Black Feminist Movement. Walker (1983) writes:

Womanist 1. From womanish (opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A Black feminist or feminist of color . . . usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one . . . Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural

counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength . . . Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not separatist, except periodically, for health. (p. 56)

In addition, Walker (1983) supplements her definition saying, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (p. 58). Noteworthy are the emphases on self-determination, appreciation for all aspects of womanhood, and the commitment to the survival of both men and women. This definition is both affirming and challenging, for it commends a woman's stretching of her personal boundaries while at the same time calling on women to maintain their connections to the rest of humanity. Womanism redefines community, focusing on Black women's dignity and agency. It was important for black feminism to address the ways that racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism all worked to perpetuate each other. Black women needed to develop a critical, feminist consciousness and begin a dialogue that directly addressed their experiences and connected them to a larger political system.

Multidimensional Dynamics of Power

The specific issues worked on in the Black Feminist Movement, according to Smith (1983), "reproductive rights, sterilization abuse, equal access to abortion, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled, violence against women, rape, battering, sexual harassment, welfare rights, lesbian and gay rights, aging, police brutality, labor organizing, anti-imperialist struggles, anti-racist organizing, nuclear disarmament, and preserving the environment" (p. 96). Black feminism goes beyond identity politics and highlights the multidimensional nature of power that operates at multiple layers of society.

The Politics of Representation

Many black feminist critics view that the construction of black womanhood in America is based on the crisis of black manhood. White supremacy has constructed patriarchal and racialized masculinity. It is this crisis that helps us understand Walker's representation of black women in her work. Sizemore (1973) argues that the root cause of the Black man's crisis dates from the period of slavery and persists in Black male consciousness: ". . . the Black man wants to be like the white man. There is only one destiny, and it is white" (p. 8). Under slavery, the major instruments of white oppression of black men were economic, sexual, and racial. The black male slave, being property of whites, could not get material control over his family, a chief mark of white manhood. White slave masters sexually oppressed black men by torturing them in almost emasculating ways and raping their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Davis (1981) explains that "White supremacists' use of these economic and sexual tools of emasculation . . . have compelled Black men to

compensate by pursuing sexual conquest and material acquisition as the chief sources of manhood” (pp. 12–13). Because of racial barriers, the black male’s desire for self-actualization has become even more serious than that of white men seeking to follow the patriarchal ideal (hooks, 1989, p. 96). The impact of the crisis of black manhood on the perception of black women is complex. This study focuses on ideological forces that construct the figures of black mother and black wife vis-à-vis the black male quest for self-actualization.

Controlling Images: Mammy, Matriarch, and Jezebel

Black feminist thought constructs both negative and positive images of black motherhood under white capitalist patriarchy. In relation to black manhood, a negative image has been given to black mothers through the black mammy stereotype, which Collins (1991) says: “represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all black women’s behavior” (p. 71). Collins claims that controlling images act as ideological tools to justify Black women’s subordination.

Collins (1991) adds: “By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite male power” (p. 70). The mammy image, therefore, shows how power works through representation. It teaches society to value Black women when they serve others, especially white families, while devaluing their own needs, families, and desires.

For black youth aspiring to manhood, the impact is negative at least in two ways: first, the mammy privileges white children over him, depriving him of the maternal nurturing necessary to launch him on the path to self-actualization; second, from the white household, she learns white racist values with which she infects her own home in the black community (Collins, 1991, p. 125). This construct, according to Collins (1991), derives largely from Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 government-sponsored study of the black family undertaken during the “War on Poverty” launched by the Johnson administration (p. 71). Moynihan’s study underscores that, as primary wage-earners in their families, black mothers spend too much time away from home and fail to provide proper guidance for their children. Collins (1991) observes, “From an elite white male standpoint, the matriarch is essentially a failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to African American women who dared violate the image of the submissive, hard-working servant” (p. 73). She further observes, “The Moynihan Report cited black matriarchy as the primary reason for a supposed absence of patriarchy in the black family and resulting African American cultural inferiority” (p. 75). The matriarch

stereotype reveals how both white institutions and some Black nationalist discourses circulated patriarchal ideology to discipline Black women who resisted submissive femininity.

As King (1988) writes, “Notwithstanding the refutation of the stereotypes, the black woman still bears the brunt of the negatives associated with such images” (p. 16). These negatives have been leveled against Black women by Black and White males alike. Reflecting on the 1960s nationalist movement, Murray (as cited in Collins, 1991) observes that “the Black militant’s cry for the retrieval of Black manhood suggests an acceptance of this stereotype, an association of masculinity with male dominance, and a tendency to treat the values of self-reliance and independence as purely masculine traits” (p. 86). Indeed, the image of the castrating black matriarch is so widespread that it prompts black nationalists like Haki Madhubuti to analyze black misogyny: “The fear of women that exists among many black men runs deep and often goes unspoken. This fear is cultural” (as cited in hooks, 1989, p. 109). As hooks (1989) further notes that “Even though individual black nationalists like Haki Madhubuti speak against sexism, progressive Afrocentric thinking does not have the impact that the old guard [internalized white supremacist patriarchal] message has” (p. 107). The thought of black matriarchy thesis embedded in culture, however, has an adverse impact upon black women. It brings both white and black oppressions of black women beyond as well as within the black community. Black women gain power through different sources, such as racial, gendered, cultural, and institutional systems.

Gilkes (1983) points out that “the public depiction of Black women as unfeminine, castrating matriarchs came at precisely the same moment that the [middle-class white female-dominated] feminist movement was advancing its public critique of American patriarchy” (p. 296). Moynihan’s thesis served the socio-political and economic agenda of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy against white as well as black women. Collins (1991) observes that “The image of the Black matriarch emerged at that time [1960s] as a powerful symbol of what can go wrong if white patriarchal power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine” (p. 75). Collins (1991) remarks that “maintaining the mythical norm of the financially independent, white middle-class family organized around a monogamous heterosexual couple requires stigmatized African American families as being deviant, and a primary source of this assumed deviancy stems from allegations about Black male sexuality” (p. 165). The arguments of Collins (1991) and Gilkes (1983), particularly their critique of

Black women as castrating black matriarchs, demonstrate how such images contribute to gender oppression across racial lines.

The negativity ascribed to the black female derives from the dominant culture's representation of her since the slavery era as the antithesis of desirable white femininity. As Collins (1991) explains, "Blue-eyed, blond, thin, white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other-- Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (p. 79). In contrast to the bourgeois cultured white woman, the black woman was constructed as socially unrefined, sexually animalistic, unclean, and impure. Black feminists have labeled the racist stereotype of the sexually aggressive Black woman as the Jezebel (Collins, 1991, p. 77) or the "depreciated sex object" (Collins, 1991, p. 17). The Jezebel stereotype turns representation into social control by portraying Black women as inherently sexually available and thereby justifying their sexual exploitation.

Collins (1991) further notes that "Black 'whores' make white 'virgins' possible" (p. 176). Black feminist critics also emphasize that this construct continues to govern representations of Black women by both Black and white male authors (hooks, 1989, p. 62). Under white capitalist patriarchy, the chief mark of manhood is to possess a culturally desirable feminine icon. Given the image historically attached to black women, Sizemore (1993) observes that "white women are preferred by all men" (p. 4) and notes the significant number of prominent black men who have married white women (p. 8). Consequently, as Collins (1991) writes, ". . . African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to externally defined [white] standards of beauty- standards applied to us by White men, White women, Black men, and most painfully, one another" (p. 80). The ideology of Black female physical and moral deficiency, which justifies black women's degradation, is thus internalized and perpetuated by blacks as well as whites, male and female.

Politics of Sexuality and Patriarchal Power

As hooks (1989) notes, the Black male, to become a man in America, need not hold a steady job, own property, or be the head of a household; "he was a man simply because he had a penis. Furthermore, his ability to use that penis in the arena of sexual conquest could bring him as much status as being a wage earner and provider" (p. 94). In some prominent representations of Black masculinity, for example, by Robert Staples, George Jackson, and Amiri Baraka, the sexual exploitation of Black women is further justified as a response to Black male rage at the emasculating Black matriarch (hooks, 1989, p. 97). As hooks (1989) further writes, "Although the attitudes expressed by Baraka and Jackson appear dated, they have retained their ideological currency among Black men through time" (p. 99). The figure

of Mother Africa may appear positive, but Black feminist analysis shows that even idealized images can become restrictive if they define Black women mainly through motherhood, sacrifice, or service to racial regeneration.

Archetypally, the mother symbolizes origins or is connected to one's heritage and racial regeneration. Christian (as cited in Collins, 1991) observes that "There is no doubt that motherhood is for most African people symbolic of creativity and continuity" (p. 4). This symbolism, Collins (1991) explains, "transfers to the African American context where actual, surrogate, and potential black mothers are credited with racial uplift and nurturing black community development" (p. 6). In embracing a black Madonna, the black man embraces his own cultural origins. The oppressive effects of this gender ideology are particularly evident in the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1960s, which, according to Sizemore (1973), "is characterized by extremely dichotomous thinking regarding black women" (p. 5). Sizemore (1973) further states that "implicit in Elijah Muhammad's Message to the Blackman in America is the warning that women are evil and given to sin. . . . Muhammad perpetrates the untruth that black women make higher salaries than black men, and he denigrates the black woman by seeing her as immoral and ignorant" (p. 6). As Baraka (as cited in Sizemore, 1973) writes, "Nature has made woman submissive--she must submit to man's creation in order for it to exist" (p. 7). Given this influential African-American male value system, representations of Black wives as "naturally" submissive- self-effacing, and unquestioningly devoted to their husbands can create a powerful sexism, an oppressive gender ideology intensified by socio-economic inequities under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Conclusion

Black Feminist Thought emerges as a vital intellectual and political response to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality experienced by African-American women. Confronted by sexism within Black Liberation movements and racism within mainstream feminism, Black women forged an autonomous theoretical framework centered on lived experience, self-definition, and collective empowerment. By challenging patriarchal, racist, and capitalist ideologies, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes power and knowledge from the standpoint of the marginalized. This study concludes that power in Black feminist thought is multidimensional, operating through institutions, stereotypes, knowledge, and language, and everyday relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Therefore, Black feminist thought remains relevant today because it transforms power from a mechanism of domination into a means of resistance, self-definition, coalition-building, and social change.

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