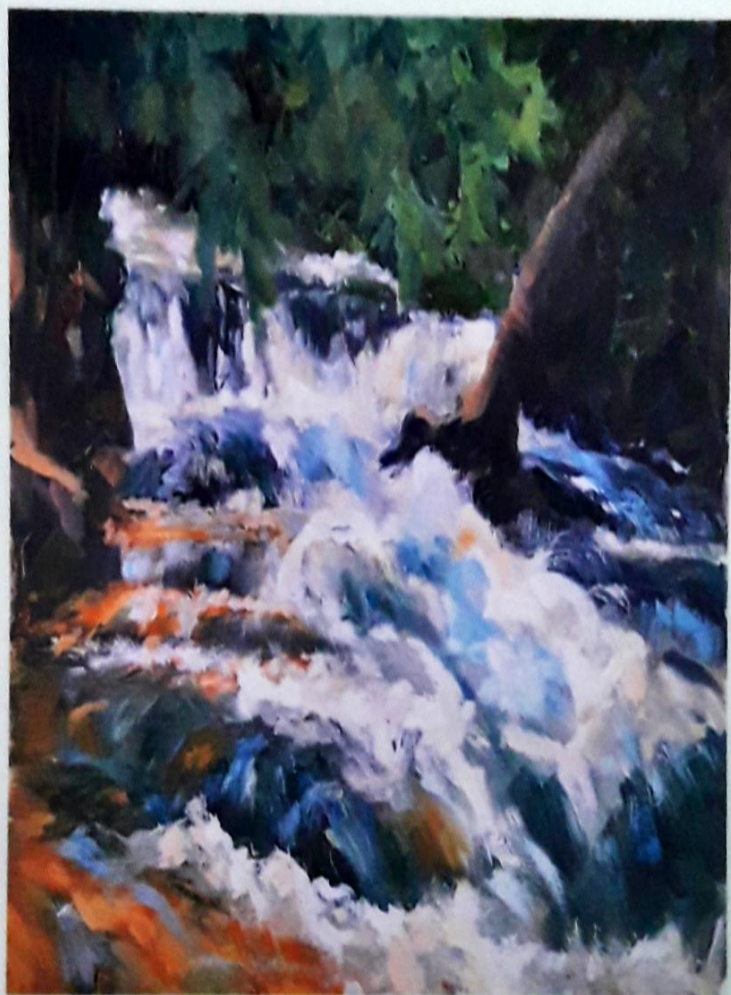


ECHOING CASCADES

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BLACK FEMINISM – A PERVASIVE VIEW

G.VIJAYALEKSHMI

Black Feminism has become a specific category of sense in an eminently literary society. Black Feminism, preoccupied with the questions of Gender and Race, emphasizes black women's unique position as different from both white men and white women because of race, as well as their difference from black men because of gender. For over a century, black women have made a futile effort to be fully included in the "universal" US women's movements only to be rejected and ignored. As a result, they realized that the only solution for them to have some bearing on their own lives was to form their own organizations that catered specially to their requirements and interests. Moreover this is the era in which Black Feminist, literary criticism was really developed to provide black women with their own distinct experiences with regard to Black women's literature. This paper aims at presenting a pervasive view of Black Feminism through the victims of the traumatic world of the black women writers.

'Black Feminism' means the specific feminism advocated by African American Women in the USA, which naturally caters especially to their history, experiences, traditions, culture and needs. Moreover, Black Feminism is not a 'sub-category' of the mainstream white feminism, or White feminism in 'black face', but it's clearly it's own independent theory. Black Feminism did not suddenly appear in the 1970's when there was a claim for its popularity, but a 'black women's movement' had existed already a century earlier and gained popularity, as a result of which, many significant black feminist thinkers emerged during the 1970s. Though voices of concerns poured out in the same year that there were not enough black women in the mainstream feminist movement, and the censure that black women did not have feminist consciousness also arose, it was only during that time the modern foundations of the movement were laid.

Further, it is quite clear that race is one of the Corner stones of Black feminism. So fighting against 'exploitative capitalism' and negative portrayals of black women's sexuality that are based on race, has become the task of Black feminism in order to protect black women's mind and bodies. Moreover, black women's negative experiences of having been oppressed, discriminated against and abused are also the core of Black Feminism. Besides 'Black Feminism' there is also the core slightly different theory called "womanism", which was coined by black women writer Alice Walker. Womanism is often seen as being more closely tied to the concrete historical experiences of black women, but some black women prefer womanism to Black Feminism, for, it is seen as supporting tighter relationships between black women and black men. Both theories - Black Feminism and Womanism - address the significance of black women's history and culture in their activism, as well as urging black women to cherish and love their unique selves, and lastly both acknowledge that black women have a responsibility to fight against domination.

One of the clearest reasons for the growth of the black women's movement of the late 19th century was their exclusion from the public sphere, as well as the discrimination and oppression they faced everyday, and as a result it was crucial for black women to get also their voices heard. In the opinion of Fannie Barrier Williams they have always been the least known and the most ill-favoured class of women in the USA. Four years later the same writer, who was no more optimistic, wrote that whether she lives in the North or in the South, she knows that she will not be valued at all. Another early important black women thinker and activist, Anna Julia Cooper, opined that although black women have to deal with both the race and the woman question, they are nonetheless an ignored issue in both.

It could even be maintained that Black Feminism is founded on this unique position, because historically black women established their clubs, groups and later feminist organizations as they felt that they did not belong to, nor were they accepted in White women's movements. If at all they were accepted, they soon realized that their unique problems were usually ignored, for it was assumed that what applied to white women's

needs and experiences would also automatically apply to those of the black women. Thus, this 'uniqueness' signifies that black women, being different from their ethnic minorities in the USA, are racially and culturally different from white women there. As a result, not only their blackness, but their womanhood also is a significant mark of their uniqueness. This uniqueness has often been considered a positive aspect, in the sense, that historically African American women have been able to turn the negative features and experiences, such as oppression and racism into something positive. In other words, because they are unique, they could rely on, and support one another and fight together for their common good.

As black women have been toiling for white women and are being oppressed even by the other oppressed black men, they are described as 'a slave of the slaves' – in this case by white women and black men. Here, not only have they had to battle for and with black men for their liberty and rights, but they have also confronted with the obstacles of their own gender. Thus, this is one way in which the unique position of black women defines their place in the US society where they are 'uniquely' oppressed. Most of the African American women share with one another the centuries old long history as the oppressed, first as slaves and then the struggles experienced during segregation upto their contemporary efforts. Thus, creating the 'presence of the past' by keeping the history of black women and their past struggles afresh, seems to be the principal motive of black feminists, as otherwise it may be forgotten.

It's of course worth mentioning that during the first black women's activism movement in the late 19th century, black women intellectuals clearly defined themselves apart from the poorer, lower-class, immoral black women, who were mostly from the rural south. In fact, they regarded them as hierarchically lower and their attitude towards them was often benevolent and elitist. For instance, the education offered to the lower class women in school is of the kind catering to the needs of those people for whom it was established. Hence there was a definite class bias in the benevolent attempts to elevate the womanhood. Moreover, in the past, the class difference has often been marked by a colour line among African Americans. Negroes had long back set up the colour lines

which rule their society to a great extent where the skin colour defines black women's place in the marriage market – if a black woman had a lighter skin tone, she had better opportunity to raise her hierarchy by marrying a wealthy black man, despite her poor background and humble origin. But now a days class lines do not follow any sort of colour line or geographical line in the African American society, because today many of the economically richest Blacks come from the entertainment and sports world, in which the colour of skin or one's place of birth is not the measure of success.

The early black women intellectuals did not recoil from criticizing the whole society and white men in particular. For, the moral destruction of the southern black girls were mainly caused by the southern white men's sexual oppression of them and by the age old double standards that still governed. For instance, black girls were treated as the rightful prey of the white gentlemen in the south and that neither the public sentiment nor law came to their rescue. One important task of Black feminism, in the modern era, is to confront white racism as well as black male patriarchy. However, the biggest culprit for the sometimes unhealthy relations between black women and black men is the white society and white men and women who historically abused and oppressed them.

Black feminists invariably assert that Black feminism is not anti-male. Historically speaking, black men did not dominate black women during slavery, as White men dominated White women. Because both were ruled by whites. This fact bears testimony to the truth that the contemporary power relations between black women and black men emerged only after slavery when freed slaves began to follow the white way of living, where gender roles and hierarchy were clearly defined. Moreover, when the white men dominated and oppressed the African American society and subjugated the black men to the extent of witnessing the sexual abuse of black women by white men, it increased the powerlessness of the black male, which is the reason for black men to abuse black women and to feel empowered. As Toni Morrison states, for a long time black men have been able to vent their anger solely on black women, and not their master whom they could not beat.

Another important issue in Black feminism is the black women's balancing between fighting racism and sexism, which has sometimes even ended up in the questioning of black feminist's race loyalty. But majority of black feminists are of the opinion that Black feminism is a construct of both these aspects – Black feminists and especially womanists address not only the issues and needs of black women, but they take into account issues affecting the black community and black men also. Consequently, black women themselves have very often consciously or unconsciously chosen battling for the benefit of the blacks as a group rather than for the issues concerning them alone. Further, they have put forth 'Black liberation' prior to 'black women's liberation'. For instance, in the versions of the critics like Robinson and Williams, even during slavery, black women consciously let white men use and abuse them sexually in order to save the lives of the black men dear to them. since the age of slavery, it has become a myth that black women will sacrifice themselves for the good of the Black race and black men.

There is also the feeling of lawful possession among black women about black women's literature, no matter how un-academic it may sound. Though black feminists want the works of black women writers to be recognized and studied outside the black community, some of them still have conflicting feelings about white women entering their territory. For, in the past, few people outside the black community had been truly interested in it. Moreover, many black women intellectuals have a sense of being exploited and call it 'a commodification of Black womanhood'. It's also painful to note that black women have usually been seen as the 'other' in contrast to the norm of the white women. In the 19th century the ideal White womanhood was seen as virtuous, asexual, fragile and obedient. Whereas the black woman had to embody the opposite negative characteristics like want of piety and purity.

This analysis of Black feminism drives home the truth that the African American women with their distinct experiences and problems transcend racial and global limits. Though the occurrence of many of their issues are due to the controlling images and stereotypes perpetrated in both white and black tradition, there are still on the background larger issues, fates, and feelings that speak to all women, regardless of race,

nationality or social class. Yet there is a gleam of positivity in the prominent role played by the black woman in the Black power movement, for, 'Black is now beautiful' whereas in the past many black women felt frustrated towards the Black power movements. The study of Black feminism indeed helps us realize that the issues affecting them in the USA can also be applied to women's issues in global context.

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