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## Black Women's Location in Mainstream Feminist Movement and Black Nationalist Discourse of 1970s

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### ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to explore the position of black woman in the context of mainstream Feminist Movement and Black Nationalist discourse of 1970s. It argues that the term 'woman' as used in mainstream feminist discourse fails to refer to the issues concerning black woman and highlights the gendered definition of 'black' in Black Nationalist discourse. Black feminists by emphasizing their major departures from the two major movements of the period argue for a need for redefinition of 'Black Womanhood'.

**Keywords-** Feminism, Black Nationalism, Gender, Race, Black Womanhood

The paper attempts to explore the ways in which feminist politics concerning black women was both enhanced and restrained by the mainstream Feminist Movement and Black Nationalist discourse of 1970s. During the decade, black women's literature was conceived in a cultural milieu powerfully dominated by Black Nationalist ideology. Also, the number of black women who became politically active during the time was unprecedented in history. Though Black Nationalism was one of the dominant ideologies reflected in their works but it was not the only one. The cracks and internal inconsistencies within Black Nationalist discourse, particularly visible in their construction of Black Womanhood created space for an alternative redefinition.

This redefinition was partially abetted by and most importantly, articulated against the mainstream feminist movement of the 1970s. Black women's cause was greatly catalyzed by the close political affinities of Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Movement. Mainstream feminism's revaluation of conventional conception

of white femininity provided a powerful momentum to black feminists to review their identities.

The Black Feminist Movement makes it abundantly clear that the word 'woman' as used in mainstream feminism cannot refer both to black and white women. As Toni Morrison in 'What the Black Women Think about Women's Lib,' ironically comments that the difference between the bathroom signs 'White Ladies' and 'Colored Women' seems to her apt. The term 'Ladies' connotes white middle class softness, feebleness and dependence in contrast to the strong competence of black women. Toni Morrison implied that this contrary conception of femininity itself explicates the inability of black and white women to resist patriarchy as 'sisters' in oppression (72).

The reluctance of black feminists in joining the mainstream feminism owes its suspicion to this 'lady/woman' opposition. Most black women could not empathize with white women's vision of employment as a means of liberation from oppressive domesticity. Historically, black women have been working as labourer due to necessity and not as a choice. Their experience of oppression at

the labour market did not correspond with white women's definition of employment as liberating.

Moreover, the white feminists groups attacked family structure as the dominant patriarchal institution that perpetuated women's suppression. However, for many of the black women, due to historical, emotional and economical reasons, family structure continued to remain a significant priority. They could not unequivocally identify with white feminists' argument for sexual liberation. The racist patriarchal ideology so as to maintain the status quo of white women has always stereotyped black women as the promiscuous woman with low morals. The role of wife and mother often provided them a safeguard against sexual exploitation and gained them a social respectability which white women found so suffocating.

The black feminists of 1970s argued that the new definition of black womanhood cannot be defined or demanded on their behalf by white women or black men. If black womanhood has to find its true identity, it has to come from the consciousness of black women only. The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group in 1974 acknowledged the debt that Black Feminism owes to mainstream white Feminism and the Black Nationalist discourse, but also emphasized its differences from the both. Gloria Anzaldua, a member of the group states "It was our experience of disillusionment within these liberation movements that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist unlike white women and anti-sexist unlike that of black and white men" (265). Black women were not the subject in either of these movements. Their segregation from the two liberationist movements is very well expressed in the phrase "all the women are white, all the blacks are men", which is also the title of a famous black feminist anthology.

The Black Feminism not only prompts a comprehension of the racial underlining of the term 'woman' in the mainstream feminists' discourse but it also highlights the gendered definition of 'black' in Black Nationalist discourse. Michele Wallace has labelled the 1960s as the masculine decade and has controversially described the Black Nationalist

Movement as a vehicle for 'Black Macho'. Variety of strategies had been adopted during Black Nationalist Movement for appropriating black men as true subjects of Black Nationalist discourse and resultant marginalization of black women. The Black Nationalism integrated many features of the existing government discourse on black family, mainly the infamous Moynihan Report of 1965. The analysis of the points of intersection of Black Nationalist and white administrative discourses exposes the patriarchal nature of the Black Nationalist Movement which claimed to be representing uniformly all blacks.

According to Moynihan Report, black men are the greatest victims of racial discrimination. The leaders of Black Nationalist Movement not only reiterated this belief but also portrayed black women as the primary reason for black men's economic and social sterilization. The Moynihan Report also signified black women as the prevailing force which hampered social and economic progress of black men. According to the report, "The pathology of ghetto blacks derived from the deviant matriarchal structure of the black family... The black male's natural tendency to exercise his masculinity was inhibited by the stronger social and economic position of black women" (75).

Though initially Black Nationalists deplored the Moynihan Report but later several of them conformed to its ideology regarding black matriarchy. They argued that historically, the white oppressor has pitted male against female and forced and seduced the female to take on his values and through her emasculated and controlled the man. Correspondingly, Eldridge Cleaver argued that the black woman was white man's apt companion in suppression of black man.

The matriarchy myth divided the Black Nationalist discourse along gender issues and allied black men with white men in their united upholding of patriarchal family structure. As bell hooks has argued, "By shifting responsibility for the unemployment of black men onto black women and away from themselves, white racist oppressors were able to establish a bond of solidarity with black men based on mutual sexism" (79).

Conceivably, in an endeavour to restrict the supposed power of the matriarch, several Black Nationalist organisations charted down severely limited roles for the black women in the movement. Amiri Baraka defended patriarchy as a natural phenomenon and advocated return to conventional African patriarchal gender roles. Such arguments justified the marginalisation of black women in the movement. Black women were designated to subsidiary functions such as preparing the coffee or handling telephone and enquiries while the black men occupied the dominant political positions and formulated the policies.

Apart from the secretarial works and supporting black men's endeavour, the other prime responsibility of black women was to produce future black male warriors who will fight the Revolution. In classifying the black woman's status as the principal economic provider for her family as 'matriarchal', and in opposing this usurpation of male privilege, Black Nationalist discourse sanctioned the gendered division of labour and the articulation of masculine and feminine identities which correspond with white middle class familial ideology.

Thus, an analysis of location of black women in mainstream Feminist Movement and the dominant Black Nationalist Movement discloses an ironic return to white middle class patriarchal values in a seemingly liberationist, gender-neutral racial discourse. This construction of black womanhood not only stood in contradictory opposition to Black Nationalists' assertion of completely different ideology from white middle class but also the claim of enhancing a new, revolutionary, gender-neutral black consciousness.

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