

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 06**  
**Gender and Race Consciousness in Black Feminism I**

Good morning, dear friends. In this week, we would be looking at the conceptualization of gender and its intersections with race. In the first two modules of this week, we would look at the basic tenets of Black feminism and also its differences with womanism and also try to conceptualize how these differences gradually lead us towards a formulation of intertextuality.

Black feminists wanted to develop a theoretical stance which would be able to address the interdependence of different ideological structures and how they all together push them towards a system of exploitation. In the first module, we would look at these stereotypes in culture and media regarding Black women and also would gradually take up certain key concepts of Black feminism.

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**What is Black Feminism**

- Black women have been excluded from mainstream feminism because of their race, while simultaneously being excluded from black liberation movements because of their gender.
  - Black feminism centres the experiences of Black women, understanding their position in relation to racism, sexism, and classism, as well as other social and political identities.
  - It highlights and engages with many aspects of women's identity, giving them opportunity to talk about being black along with gender inequality.
  - Black feminism opposes hegemonic systems of dominance, and has developed in the context of social injustice sustained in social thought and structures.
- The "outsider-within" status has provided a particular perspective to it, enabling black women to make a creative use of their marginality. Black feminist thought consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women.\*
  - impossible to separate the structure and thematic content of thought from the historical/material conditions shaping lives of its producers

\*Patricia Hill Collins <https://academic.oup.com/hyp/article-abstract/11/6/614/956517/ocq-11.6.14.pdf>

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As we know Black women have been isolated from the mainstream feminism, because of their race and simultaneously, they have been excluded from the systems of power within the liberation movement, because of their gender. So, they have been exploited by race as well as by their own gender.

Black feminism tries to centre the experiences of Black women, understanding their position in relation to these issues of racism, sexism, and classism, as well as their socio-political identities also foraging into the reasons of their economic exploitation. It highlights and engages with many aspects of women's identity, giving them an opportunity to talk about being Black along with their gender inequalities.

We can say that Black feminism tries to systematically oppose those hegemonic systems of dominance which have been developed in the context of social injustice and have been thrown out sustained by social thought and sociological structures. In this regard, we should also be careful to understand what has been termed as an "outsider-within" status by Patricia Hill Collins. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that Black women often persist what can be understood as an "outsider-within" status, which provides a particular perspective to them.


This particular perspective provides Black women a creative use of marginality and Black feminist thought often consists of ideas which have been contributed by such Black women. Black women as slaves had been privy to some of the most intimate aspects of White society. These intimacies were denied to their spouses who also happened to be Black.

While performing their domestic duties, nurturing their other family and taking care of the White children, they also developed some close perspectives, which sometimes were even denied to their masters. Memories of several White children belonging to affluent classes often remember fondly their Black mothers; women who had selflessly taken care of them.

At the same time, we come across certain memories by Black women who also felt some sense of self-affirmation during this role; however, Black women also knew all the time with a certainty that they could never belong to this family and they were initially outsiders. Black feminism as Patricia Hill Collins has suggested has been enriched by such experiences.

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- The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression.
- Maria Stewart (1803-1879) – the first Black American woman to lecture in public on political issues - challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out race, gender, and class oppression as fundamental causes of Black women's poverty.
- In an 1833 speech, she proclaimed, "Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name . . . while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support....We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them" (Richardson 1987,59).




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The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression. As early as 1850's, Maria Stewart had started to talk about the double isolation of women. In her lectures Maria Stewart took up public and political issues, also challenged African-American women to reject the negative image of Black womanhood as a fundamental cause of their own poverty.

In one of the speeches which has become very famous; she draws biblical parallels also. She says that as King Solomon had neither put any nail or hammer to the temple, yet received all the praise; in the same manner, it was the African women who were the foundation of the richness of the white, but they never received any credit for it.

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- Patricia Hill Collins, in her quintessential book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2009), explores Black feminist intellectuals and writers, both within academia and outside – drawing from fiction, music, poetry and oral history - for developing an interpretive framework.
- She suggests that the oppression of African-American women has encompassed three interdependent dimensions.
- The first interdependent dimension of oppression of Black women constitutes the “exploitation of Black women’s labour essential to U.S. capitalism – the “iron pots and kettles” symbolizing their long-standing ghettoization in service occupations – represents the economic dimensions of oppression.” (Davis 1981; Marable 1983; Jones 1985; Amott and Matthaehi 1991 as cited by Collins, 6)



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In a quintessential book titled, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* which was published in 2009, Patricia Hill Collins has explored different Black feminist intellectuals and writers, both within academia and also from the outside.

She has drawn from fiction, from music, poetry, as well as oral history. In order to develop an interpretive framework, she suggests that the oppression of African-American women has encompassed three interdependent dimensions. The three dimensions which also happen to be interdependent. The first dimension constitutes the exploitation of Black women’s labour which has been essential to the development of U.S. capitalism.

She terms it as the iron pots and kettles, which symbolizes their long-standing ghettoization in service occupations. It represents the economic dimension of their oppression. If we look at the situation of African-American women, we still find that many of them are still working in low paid sections, which is also considered as a fallout of these slavery days.

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- Second interdependent dimension of Black women's oppression is the fact that the "political dimension of oppression has denied African-American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens."\*
  - Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African-Americans and women from public office, and withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice system all substantiate the political subordination of Black women.
- The third and final interdependent dimension deals with the "controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of U.S. Black women's oppression."\*\*
- These images are attempts to check Black women -- distorted renderings of those behaviors which were seen as threatening to white patriarchy.
  - *Matriarchs*: ridiculing strong mother figures socializing posterity contradict patriarchal notion of family power relations
  - *Sapphires*: ridiculing assertive Black women as aggressive, rude and malicious as they threaten patriarchal understanding of femininity



\*[Banham 1987, Scales 1989, Berry 1994, as cited by Collins, 6]. \*\*[King 1973, D. White 1985, Carby 1987, Morton 1993, as cited by Collins, 7]

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The second dimension of Black women's oppression is related with their political isolation. Patricia Collins terms it as a political dimension of operation as women have been denied rights and privileges routinely which had been extended to White male citizens.

So, forbidding Black women to participate in political processes, not allowing them entry to the public office, withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice system etc. have further cemented the political subordination of Black women. The third and the final interdependent dimension deals with what has been termed by Patricia Collins as controlling images which have been culturally applied to Black women. These images mainly originated during the slave era.

But they attest to that ideological dimension of their oppression. These images are attempts to check Black women. They are, in fact, considered as distorted renderings of those aspects of behaviour, amongst the Black women which were seen as being threatening towards a concept of white patriarchy. For example, the use of certain words which is very popular in different cultural frameworks.


When the word matriarch is used, in the context of African American women, we find that it is an attempt to ridicule their strong mother figure who is trying to socialize posterity of their own race, but then the strong woman is also considered to be against the patriarchal notions of family power relations.

Similarly, when the word sapphire is used in a debilitating context for the Black women, we find that it is used to ridicule assertiveness of Black women. They are suggested as being aggressive, rude, and malicious as they threaten patriarchal understanding of how femininity has to be enacted.

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### The Controlling Images about Black Womanhood

- Realising and employing these controlling images, portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas; helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression.
- The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of these controlling images of Black womanhood. Challenging them has been a core theme in Black feminist thought. (Collins, 76) Moreover, analysing these controlling images reveals how oppressions of gender, race, sexuality, and class intersect.
- Furthermore, since these images are changing and dynamic, each provides a starting point for scrutinizing new forms of control that emerge in a transnational context, one where selling images has increased in importance in the global marketplace. (Collins, 79)



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An understanding of these controlling images reveals how operations of gender, race, sexuality and class intersect. Realising and employing these images, portraying African-American women as stereotypical mommies, or matriarchs, welfare recipients, hot mommas, etc in a way helps justify their own oppression. The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of these controlling images of Black womanhood.

Furthermore, since these images are changing and dynamic, we find that some new images have been added to those which had been received from the slave era, but still the cultural connotations bank on certain stereotypical understanding of Black women. So, since these images are changing and dynamic, each provides a starting point for scrutinizing new forms of control that emerge in a transnational context, one where selling images has increased in importance in the global marketplace.

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### The mammy

- The first controlling image that has been applied to U.S. Black women is that of the mammy. She is the obedient, faithful domestic servant, created to condone the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service. (Collins, 80)
- The image of the mammy- usually big, fat, and cantankerous - represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate Black women's demeanour. By nurturing, loving, and caring for her White children and family better than her own, the mammy portrays the dominant group's perceptions of the perfect Black female relationship to elite White male power.
  - The controlling image of the mammy is sometimes termed as positive to a certain extent, since it focuses on the nurturing aspects of Black women.
  - Several memoirs of whites in US and Britain have mentioned their affection or gratitude for their Black "mothers". Similarly, some accounts of "mammies" talk about their sense of self-affirmation.



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The first image which is often used in popular culture, as well as in literature and media is the image of mammy. She is the obedient, faithful domestic servant, created to condone the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service.


The image of the mammy is reminiscent of the western concept of an African woman usually big, fat, and cantankerous and this image represents the normative yardstick which is used to evaluate Black woman's behaviour. By nurturing, loving, and caring for her White children and family better than her own, the mammy portrays the dominant group's perception of the perfect female relationship towards elite White male power.

The controlling image of a mammy is sometimes termed as positive to a certain extent, as it has mainly focused on the nurturing aspect of a Black woman's personality. As we have discussed earlier, several memoirs of whites in U.S. as well in Britain, fondly remember their Black mothers. Similarly, their accounts of some erstwhile slaves and mammies who talk about a particular sense of self-affirmation while they were taking care of your White family.

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- Patricia Hill Collins suggests that as domestic servants, mammies occupy an "outsider within" status.
  - A close understanding of the rich white elites has demystified the white power for the mammies, and confirmed their understanding of racism
- However, these same Black women knew they could never belong to their white "families." In spite of their involvement, they remained "outsiders".
- Oppositional binaries seldom represent equal relationships, as they are inherently unstable. Black women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of these binaries converge, making them non-agentic and subordinate.
- Also, Black women who internalized the mammy image, potentially became operative conduits for preserving racial oppression as they often transmitted a deferential attitude – they were forced to adopt in their jobs - to their children, abetting a comfort zone towards their assigned place in White power structures.

<https://www.sfu.ca/~decaste/OISE/page2/files/CollinsMammies.pdf>



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This feeling has been termed as outsider within status by Patricia Hill Collins. As these women have understood the demystification which comes with close familiarity. They are still able to contribute rich perspectives towards our understanding of Black feminism. Oppositional binaries never represent equal relationships, as they are inherently unstable. Black women have occupied a position, whereby the inferior half of these binaries converge, making them non-agentic and also subordinate.

Also, those Black women who somehow internalized this image of Mammy, potentially became operative agents rather conduits for preserving racial oppression as they often transmitted a differential attitude amongst their own children also. They were forced to adopt a particular differential attitude. It was perhaps necessary for them to survive in a White power structure, but at the same time, they also passed on this attitude of servility to their children.



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**Scarlet and Mammy**

--A clip from "Gone with the Wind", a 1939 movie, based on 1936 novel by Margaret Mitchell.

-- Also, Donald McCaig has published *Ruth's Journey* (2007), a prequel to the novel. It presents a nuanced and poignant portrayal of the mammy, also giving her a name and a background.

Source: Loew's Inc <https://youtu.be/FFZr20Vw1ss>

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We will share a clip from a movie, "Gone with the Wind"; which is a very famous 1939 movie. It is based on a novel by Margaret Mitchell which was published in 1936. In this clip, we look at the protagonist, Scarlet and the presence of the Mammy is also displayed here. Interestingly, in this novel; though Mammy becomes an important character, the readers never come to know anything about her background.

It was in 2007 that with the permission of the Michelle family, a writer Donald McCaig has published another novel which is titled as *Ruth's Journey*. *Ruth's Journey* is a prequel to the novel. It presents a nuanced and poignant portrayal of the Mammy also giving her a name as well as a background.

Just hold on and suck in.

Mammy here is Miss Scarlett's Vittles.

You can take that all that to kitchen, I will not eat a bite.

Yes, and you is going to eat ever mouthful of this.

No. I am not. You put on the dress, because we are late already.

What my lamb going to wear?

That.

No. You are not. You cannot show your bosom before 3 O'clock, I going to speak to your mom about you.

If you say one word to mother, I will not eat a bite.

Well, keep the shawl on the shoulder. I am not aiming for you to get all freckled and the after the buttermilk I done put on you (Refer Time: 15:06) bleaching them freckles. Now miss Scarlet, you come on and be good and eat just a little honey.

No, I am going to have a good time today and do I eating at the barbecue.

If you do not care what folks says about this family, I does. I has told you and told you that is you can always tell a lady by the way does she eat in front of folks like a bird and I am not aim for you to go to Mr. John Wilkess and eat like a figure and gobble like a hog.


Fiddle dee dee. Ashley will told me he liked to see a girl with a healthy appetite.

What gentlemen says what he thinks is two different things and I am not noticed Mr. Ashley ask an for a marry you.

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**The Black matriarch**

- The image of the Black matriarch, although it is a more recent phenomenon, fulfils similar functions in explaining Black women's placement in intersecting oppressions. (Collins, 82)
- The matriarch is a symbol for the mother figure in Black homes instead of in White homes. The image of the matriarch, a bad Black mother, also ties gender ideology to explanations for extreme distributions of wealth that characterize American capitalism; and is sometimes used to explain Black economic disadvantage.
- The constructed image of the matriarch or overly strong Black woman, has also been used to influence Black men's understandings of Black masculinity. Many Black men reject Black women as marital partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than White ones because of Black women being too assertive.



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Another controlling image is that of a Black matriarch, although it is a rather recent phenomena, it fulfils similar functions in explaining Black women's placement in intersecting operations. Matriarch is a symbol of a mother figure in Black homes instead

of the figure of a mother in White homes. The image of the matriarch is based on the wise concept of a bad Black mother.

It also ties gender ideology to explanations for extreme distribution of wealth that characterize the American capitalist society. And this image is also used to explain how and why Blacks are at an economically disadvantages situation. The image of the Black matriarch portrays an overly strong Black woman.

Some critics have pointed out that it has also influenced the way a Black man understands and assimilates his own understanding of masculinity. Some surveys have come out which tell us that some Black men reject Black women as marital partners as they feel that in comparison to White women, they are perhaps too assertive.

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Madea and Cora  
"Me Time"

Madea's Big Happy Family, a 2011 American comedy film, based on Tyler Perry's 2010 play, also banks on stereotypical images.

Source: Tyler Perry Studios <https://youtu.be/xKGdRyV68D0>

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The image of the Black matriarch is also used in contemporary times to project through media a caricature of the Black women. Sometimes in order to enhance the solubility, sometimes under the impression that such cultural stereotypes are more acceptable to the society in general. "Medias Big Happy Family" which is an American comedy film released in 2011 also bangs on similar stereotypical images. This movie is based on Tyler Perry's play.

And I do not know where the hell Cora is at. I been told her I need to go to the store. People always told me I cannot be driving. She knows that I need to go to the store.

That child going to leave you to starved. I told you when you little and a way you were treating her, she is going to leave you to starve to death one day. And now this time.

Shut up bastard.

No, hello.

Cora.

Yeah. Hello Madea yes.

Cora.

Yes ma'am.

Where the hell you at?

I am still at the hair salon.

What the hell are you doing at the hair dress? You have been there 5 hours. Your hair are not, but a inch and a half long. What the hell they are doing to you?

I am coming. I am just trying to. Can I have some me time please.

Hello.

You need some what?

Some me time.

Some what?

Some me time some time for myself.

Cora.

Yes ma'am.

Did I ever asked you for some me time Cora?

No ma'am.

Did I ask you for some me time when I had to get up every 4 hours and cook for you up until the time you were 17 years old.

No ma'am you did not.

Did I ask you for some me time when I had to hit that stripper pole every night trying to bring some money into this house?

(Refer Time: 19:07). Did I ask you for some me time there?

No ma'am no.

All old men up there trying to make a drizzle, because they sure I could not make it rain.

I.

What the hell is me time?

I am just taking care of myself that is what I am doing, getting some me time.

Time for nothing. I am going to store here, I do not need you to buy. I am a grown ass women. I am go to the store myself.

But you cannot go to the store. You are not supposed to be driving. I will be there soon, ok.

Who the hell are you to tell me I cannot drive. If I feel like driving, I am driving?


You cannot drive, you going to (Refer Time: 19:32).

Shut the hell up.

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### The welfare mother

- A third, externally defined, controlling image of Black womanhood is that of the welfare mother. This controlling image is linked to working-class Black women's increasing access to the U.S. welfare state entitlements. (Collins, 86)
- This constitutes a class-specific image established for poor, working-class Black women who make use of the post WW II social welfare benefits to which they are legally entitled.
- Need for this stereotype was not felt as long as Black women were denied social welfare benefits. When they gained better political power and access to state services, the need for this controlling image arose.
- As a matriarch, the welfare mother is labelled as a bad mother. She is portrayed as lazy, content to collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her corrupt values to her children.



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We have looked at two controlling images which are closer to the slave era. The image of the welfare mother is relatively recent, but this is also an externally defined and controlling image of Black womanhood. The welfare mother's image is linked to working class Black women's increasing access to the U.S. welfare state entitlements.

This constitutes a class-specific image, which is established for those poor, working-class Black women who started to have access to those social welfare benefits, which were started after the second world war and to which they were legally entitled. The need of such a stereotypical class base images was not felt till Black women were denied social welfare benefits.

But when they gained better political power and some access to state services, the need of establishing a controlling image in contemporary culture was felt. As a matriarch, the welfare mother is also labelled as bad mother. A mother who is lazy, who is content to collect welfare, shunning work and also passing on her corrupt values to her own children.

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- Collins suggests that this image is an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery, as it provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy.
  - Typically portrayed as an unwed mother, she violates one cardinal tenet of Eurocentric masculinist thought:
    - She is a woman alone. As a result, her treatment reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage only.
- Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African American communities; shifts the focus away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves.
- The image of the welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group's interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers who are seen as producing too many economically unproductive children
  - Given video link provides more information about how this stereotype became a part of cultural memory. <[https://youtu.be/mr\\_8B1zFFY](https://youtu.be/mr_8B1zFFY)>



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Collin suggests that this image is an updated version of the breeder woman image which was created during slavery, as it also provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness the fertility of a Black woman to the needs of a changing political economy. The image of the breeder woman was a necessity of the slave era where every child was an economic asset also.

However, in more recent times we find that the number of participants under a welfare scheme grows and interestingly, it is the Black women who have to share the blame for it. They are typically portrayed through this image as unwed mothers. A person who violates a cardinal tenet of Eurocentric masculinist thought.


She is a woman alone and as a result her treatment reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a woman's true worth as well as financial security should take place only through heterosexual marriages. So, this controlling image of the welfare mother; it stigmatizes her.

It also links her with her own poverty as being its sole agent and therefore, it shifts the focus away from other structural sources of poverty and in a state blames the victim herself. The image of the welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group's interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers who are seen as producing too many economically unproductive children.

And it is this aspect which links this image with the image of the breeder woman, which was produced during the slavery. Here, towards the bottom of this slide a video link is also given. This video would be played towards the end of this discussion. Those of you who are interested in finding out more details about this stereotyped image can look at this video.

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- **The welfare queen:** The politics of welfare gradually became more racialized and sexualized, laying the groundwork for the stereotype of the “welfare queen.” Reagan administration in 1980s, employed it to demonize women on welfare: the stigmatized welfare mother transitioned into the more pernicious image of the welfare queen. (Lubiano 1992 as cited by Collins, 88)
  - Media images increasingly identified and blamed Black women for the deterioration of U.S. interests to mask the effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs - that housed working families, fed children, supported basic public services, and assisted cities in maintaining roads, bridges and basic infrastructure.
- Henceforth, Black women were used as a scapegoat. Thus, the welfare queen image signals efforts to use the situation of working-class Black women as a sign of the nation's deterioration.
  - Welfare became a codeword for race. Came to symbolize the perceived problems within poor black communities—single parenthood, family breakup, and unemployment. The image of the “welfare queen” framed the political discourse about race, class, and gender in modern America.



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The image of the welfare mother also leads us towards the concept of the welfare queen. As the politics of welfare started to become more radicalized and also sexualized, we find that this stereotypical image has become very common. Media images increasingly identified and blamed Black women for the deterioration of U.S. interests to mask the effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs.


And these welfare programs house working families for children, supported basic public services, etc.. This trend had started as several critiques have pointed out during the Reagan administration in 1980's and it was used to demonize those African-American women who were on welfare.



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**The Black Lady:** The welfare queen was accompanied by another similar, yet class-specific image, that of the “Black lady” (Lubiano 1992, as cited by Collins, 88).

- Since it refers to middle-class, professional Black women who serve as a modern version of the “politics of respectability advanced by the club women,” this image initially comes across as merely a benign one and not a controlling one\*.
  - Portrays women who stayed in school, worked hard, achieved much: an educated Black woman who has given up family life in exchange for a career.
  - Based upon prejudice and negative stereotypes of Black women. Like other stereotypes, it is linked with sexuality; and is a controlling image as it provides a social script about how people can view and treat a Black woman, simultaneously encouraging her to internalize this script.
  - Hence, when looked at together, the welfare queen and the Black lady constitute class-specific versions of a matriarchy thesis whose fundamental goal is to discredit Black women’s full exercise of citizenship rights. (Collins, 89)
- Reverse racism, as if she impinges on White Man’s rights
  - Diversity within commonality: stereotypes address different aspects of positivity as no homogeneous perspective of Black feminism exists.
  - Sexuality of Black women is central to these images.



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The controlling image of the welfare queen is also accompanied by another similar image that of a Black lady. The controlling image of the Black lady is also a class specific image. It portrays a woman who has preferred to stay in school, worked hard, achieved much in terms of her profession.

So, an educated Black woman who has given a family life to pursue her carrier is identified as a Black lady. So, we find that professional Black women are as a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women. This image initially comes across as a benign one and not a controlling one; however, this image is also based on prejudice and negative stereotypes of Black women. Like other stereotypes it is also linked with the sexuality of Black women.

It is a controlling image as it provides a social script about how people can view and treat a Black woman. And simultaneously this cultural image also encourages a woman to internalize this script. Hence, when look together the welfare queen and the Black lady constitute class specific versions of a matriarchy thesis whose fundamental goal is to discredit Black women’s full exercise of citizenship rights, as well as of agency governing one’s own decisions.

The image of the Black lady is also used as an excuse for reverse racism, sometimes people feel that she has impinged on the rights of a White men, because of being


successful in a career. These controlling images sensitize us through this idea that there is certain diversity within commonality.

Within the common experiences of African-American women, we find that a significant diversity exists and these stereotypes address different aspects of positivity as there is no single homogeneous perspective of Black womanhood, but still, we find that it is the concept of sexuality which is central to all these images about Black women.

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**The jezebel, hoochie, or whore:** This controlling image is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood.

- Since efforts to control the sexuality of Black women is positioned at the heart of Black women's oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary "hoochies" portray a deviant Black female sexuality. (Collins, 89)
- The image of the jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were depicted as being, to use Jewelle Gomez's phrasing, "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Clarke et al. 1983, 99 as cited by Collins, 89).
  - Their enforced sexual *aggression* suppressed possibilities of nurturing their own children (Morrison's *A Mercy*), trapped them as milk cows or nannies; a distinct aspect of enslaved Black woman's commodification.
  - It also justified the inherent economic exploitation of slavery, and became a basis of widespread sexual assaults by White men, typically reported by Black slave women. (Davis 1981; D. White 1985 as cited by Collins, 89)



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Because of the centrality of sexuality, we find that the controlling image of the jezebel, hoochie or a whore has become the nexus of such images. Efforts to control the sexuality of Black women are positioned at the heart of Black women's oppression. Historical jezebels and contemporary hoochies portray a deviant sexuality of the Black women.


The image of the jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were often depicted as being sexually aggressive wet nurses. The sexual aggression was enforced on them. It was an image which was associated with them because of their own circumstances. They were trapped in the families of White during slavery as milk cows or nannies.

This treatment of Black woman as a milk cow is very effectively portrayed by Toni Morrison in a novel *A Mercy*. It is also a distinct aspect of enslaved Black woman's commodification. It also justified the inherent economic exploitation of slavery and

became a basis of widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women.

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- The *hoochie* is referred to as such by Black men as well.
- In the context of a gender-specific, heterosexual, and White normality, the jezebel or hoochie is transformed into a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality. (Collins, 91)
- Deviant female heterosexuality is typified by the “hot mommas” of Black womanhood, as opposed to normal female heterosexuality, which is expressed via the cult of true White womanhood. (Collins, 91)
- Since the jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it quickly becomes an easy step to imagine her as a “freak”. Furthermore, if she is a freak, her sexual partners as well become stigmatized. (Collins, 91)
  - Henceforth, these prevalent images of Black womanhood embody elite White male interests in defining Black women’s sexuality and fertility.



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The hoochie is referred to in the same context by Black men also. In the context of gender specific and heterosexual White normality, the jezebel or hoochie is transformed into a racialized gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality. Deviant female heterosexuality is also typified by the idea of hot mommas which is also related with Black womanhood conventionally.

As opposed to normal female heterosexuality which is expressed through the cult of true White womanhood. Since the jezebel or a hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetite is at best appropriate and at worst insatiable, it quickly becomes an easy step to imagine her as a freak. Further, if she is a freak, her sexual partners also become a stigmatized. So, these prevalent images of Black womanhood embody elite White male interest in defining Black women sexuality and fertility.

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### Standards of Beauty and the Black Women: Colour and Hair Texture

- Yamilex Bencosme suggests that the Eurocentric beauty standard plays a huge role in Black women's perception of self-identity and their own beauty.
- Social pressure of adopting a more Eurocentric (reflective of European descent—such as long, straight hair) look begins at an early age through socialization.
- Black females often have their hair straightened, relaxed, or chemically altered because of the societal pressures that remind them that their hair in its natural state is not acceptable or presentable in society. <https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/v09/iss1/11/>
- “Good hair” is defined as hair that minimizes African ancestry and is more reflective of a European, Native, or Asian ancestry within the Black individual. It is usually wavy or straight in texture, and long.
- The controlling images of Black women are not simply grafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the *other* persists.



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We find that such a stereotyped images have also impacted Black women's self-identification. Their own concept of what has to be termed as beauty is impacted by racial segregation, commodification and subordination. Bencosme suggested that Eurocentric beauty standard plays a huge role in their perception of self-identity and their perceptions about their own beauty.

The social perceptions of adopting a more Eurocentric look begins at a very early age through socialization, through social organizations such as a school and church etc. So, Black women sometimes try to have their hair straightened relaxed or chemically altered, because they want to confirm to a more presentable social standard.

However, good hair or a skin tone or any other body shape which is preferable is always culturally coated. The controlling images of Black women are not grafted over existing social institutions, but they are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the *other* continues.

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- Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.
- African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another.
  - Adherence to the Euro American beauty standard has had, and continues to have, devastating effects upon African American women
- Beauty is subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class. Because of this, "beauty is an elusive commodity" (Saltzberg and Chrisler 1997, 135) and definitions of beauty vary among cultures and historical periods.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4317206.pdf>
- Black women's views of, and experiences with, their hair highlight the complex relationships among race, gender, sexuality, and beauty.



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Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin white women is considered to be the epitome of beauty, but her imagination is not possible without the Other. A Black woman with African features of darker skin, broad nose, full lips, and kinky hair for example.

So, African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty, which are used by their society, by White men, White women, Black men and also painfully one another. So, beauty is subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class and because of this, beauty becomes an elusive commodity and definitions of beauty vary among cultural historical periods also.

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**Music**

- Social institutions controlled by White males led African-American women to resort to literature, music, and daily conversations as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness. (Collins, 270)
- A part of the primary safe spaces. They are: Black women's relationships with one another, mentoring, cultural codes of music and poetry.
  - Safe spaces are "social spaces where Black women speak freely" (Collins, 2000, p. 100). Provide opportunities for self-definitions and resist objectification.
- The blues are particularly important for constructing safe spaces and identities for black women.
  - Originating out of the back and forth call of slaves working in the fields, it gives voice to the voiceless.
  - It was born out of misery but simultaneously gave birth to hope. This hope wasn't simply expressed in words, but it was more powerfully felt in the rhythm and collectivity that made slave-work less arduous.
  - Later providing an outlet in the "race markets".



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We have looked at several controlling images which have survived the days of slavery and also some of these images have been added to the cultural context by more contemporary social developments. We should also take into consideration the positive legacy of the Black women. Social institutions were controlled by White males and it led African-American women to resort to certain ways which could be termed as safe spaces.


The idea of safe spaces is having those social spaces where they could speak freely, where they could have opportunities for self-definitions and were able to resist objectification. So, these primary safe spaces which have been listed by Patricia Collins are Black women's relationships with one another mentoring, as well as cultural codes of music and poetry. The blues as a music form are particularly important for constructing safe spaces and identities for Black women.

It had originated out of the back-and-forth call of slaves who had to work in the fields trying to give a voice to the voiceless. It was born out of misery, but at the same time, it also gave birth to certain hope this hope was not exactly expressed in words, but it was more powerfully felt in the rhythm and also the collectivity of this rhythm which made the work less arduous. Later on, of course, it became an outlet in the race markets if we can use this phrase.

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- Blues was quintessential to the legitimization of music as part of Black identity; since it was not solely a form of entertainment, it was a way of solidifying community and later commenting on the social fabric of working-class Black life in America. (Collins, 116)
  - The spirituals and the work songs confirm that the individual concerns of black people expressed through music during slavery centered on a collective desire for an end to the system that enslaved them.
- This does not mean there was an absence of sexual meanings in the music produced by African-American slaves. It means that slave music--both religious and secular--was quintessentially collective music. It was collectively performed and it gave expression to the community's yearning for freedom.\*
- Spirituals, jazz, blues, R&B, and progressive hip-hop all form part of a "continuum of struggle which is at once aesthetic and political (p. 201 as cited by Collins, 115)

\*<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/d/davis-blues.html>




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Blues were quintessential to the legitimization of music as a part of their own identity; it was never a sole form of entertainment. It was a way of solidifying community and later commenting on the social fabric or working-class Black life in America. The spirituals, as well as the work songs that form the individual concerns of Black people were expressed through music and they also centered on a collective desire for the end of the system.

The presence of the sexual meanings in the blues is always felt; however, the slave music whether it is religious or secular, was also quintessentially collective. It was performed collectively and it also give expression to the communities yearning for freedom. So, the spirituals, jazz, blues, R&B, and progressive hip-hop, all form a part of a continuum of struggle which is at once is the dead end political.

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- Moreover, blues has occupied an important place in Black women's music to express Black women's self-definition.
- The songs can be regarded as poetry, as expressions of regular Black women restated through Black oral traditions.
- The lyrics sung by many of the Black women blues singers defy the externally defined controlling images used to justify Black women's objectification.
- These blues singers thus sang their songs – which were often laced with sexually explicit themes – in a complicated context of class, race, and gender politics. (Collins, 118)
- The works of renowned Black women blues singers also advocate the importance of self-reliance and agency for African-American women. (Collins, 128)



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Therefore, blues has occupied an important place in Black women's music. The song can be regarded as poetry is expressions of their true identity which is restated through their oral traditions. The lyrics defy the externally defined controlling images which have been used to justify their objectification.

The original African-American women who were the blues singers sang their songs which were often laced with sexually explicit themes in a complicated context of class, race and gender politics. Their work also advocated the importance of self-reliance and agency for their own people.



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### Hip-hop feminism

- Another important trend in Black feminism is hip-hop feminism. The term was coined by Joan Morgan in her book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (1999).
- Feminists like Morgan and Kristal Brent Zook argued that Black American women needed a new feminist movement, as the second-wave Black feminism has failed to address the present realities and needs of young, Black women. (Peoples 20)
  - Thus ensuing in a dialogic relationship between hip-hop and feminism.
- It can be best understood as a means of reconciliation on the part of young Black women in the U.S. trying to create a space for themselves between the whiteness and/or academically sanitized versions of university-based feminism:
- Women who support feminist issues and also enjoy misogynistic hip-hop with elements of patriarchy.



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A term which is significant in the context of understanding how Black feminism gradually moves towards intersectionality is Hip-hop feminism. The term was coined by Joan Morgan in her book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*. The book was published in 1999. So, feminists like Morgan and Brent Zooks argued that Black American women needed a new feminist movement.

As they felt that the second wave Black feminists has failed to address the contemporary realities and the needs of young Black women thus, they wanted a dialogic relationship between hip-hop; a subculture which had started during the 1970's and feminism.

It can be best understood as a means of reconciliation on the part of a young Black woman in the U.S. trying to create a space for herself between the whiteness and the academically sanitized version of university-based feminism. So, it identified those women who supported the feminist issues, but also enjoy misogynistic hip-hop with certain elements of patriarchy.

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- Ever since hip-hop's inception, it has represented resistance to social marginalization; and later on, resistance to, and commentary on the economic and political oppression that makes social marginalization possible. (Peoples 23)
- Thus, hip-hop feminists are products of the hip-hop generation (1970s), but as Joan Morgan writes, are also “the daughters of feminist privilege.” (Morgan 1999, 59 as cited by Peoples, 26)
- Hip-hop feminists argue that it is a site where young Black women start to further establish their own gender critique and feminist identity. (Keyes 2000; Pough 2002; Byrd 2004, as cited by Peoples, 21)
- Wanted to move beyond the victim/oppressor binary, which in their opinion was the main stay of previous generations' feminist approach.




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So, ever since the inception hip-hop, it has represented resistance to social marginalization and later on certain idea of resistance too and a commentary on the economic and political oppression that makes social marginalization possible. Hip-hop feminism gave an opportunity to the young Black women to establish their own gender critique and feminist identity which wanted to oppose the binary operation.

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- They have expressed following three major points of criticism of second-wave Black feminism, fundamental to the development of their own feminist politics:
  - (1) second-wave Black feminists' preoccupation with hip-hop's misogyny at the expense of exploring its potential,
  - (2) their seemingly narrow and static conception of feminist identities emerging out of second-wave theorizing and activism,
  - (3) the outmoded and subsequently ineffectual strategies for outreach to, and empowerment of young Black women and girls employed by second-wave Black feminists. (Peoples, 39)
- Despite this critique, hip-hop feminists have not abandoned historical manifestations of Black American feminism.
- Rather, they build extensively on the work of second and first-wave Black feminists in their own theorizing.



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They have expressed certain major points of criticism of the second-wave Black feminism which are important for us to understand. According to them, the second-wave

feminist were preoccupied with hip-hop's misogyny at the expense of exploiting its potential. They also had a rather narrow and static conception of feministic identities which emerged out of their own theorizing and activism.

They also thought that the outmoded and subsequently ineffectual strategies for outreach to, and empowerment of young Black women and girls employed by second-wave Black feminist. Despite this critique, hip-hop feminists have not abundant historical manifestations of Black American feminism; rather they built extensively on the work of the second and first-wave Black feminists to concretize their own understanding of the social phenomena.

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- For instance, it takes up themes such as empowerment, importance of images and representation, and Black women's involvement in coalitional politics that were also prominently present in the theorizing of older generations of Black feminists.
- They use the opportunity of voicing critique to construct an individual, political, and social agenda of scrutiny and action for the current moment.
- Tricia Rose describes hip hop feminism as an opposition:
  - to blackness as a 'tangle of pathology' (e.g. propensity for poverty, sexual deviance, youth delinquency, crime) and
  - to the undermining of Black cultural expression (Black culture as a threat or as a culture lacking in value). <https://globalsocialtheory.org/topics/hip-hop-feminism/>
- The dialogic relationship between hip-hop and feminism can be seen as a critical framework to analyse Black womanhood and as an appeal more to contemporary girls and women whose lives are intertwined with hip-hop and its culture as a way to discuss their feminism.



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They also take up themes such as empowerment of women, importance of images and representation. So, the dialogic relationship between hip-hop and feminism can be seen as a critical framework to analyse Black womanhood and as an appeal to contemporary girls and women whose lives are intertwined with hip-hop and its culture as a way to discuss their feminism.

So, in this module we have discussed certain trends which have emerged in the context of Black feminism. We would continue it further in our next module. In the next slide, there is a video link which has been given. Those of you who want to understand the concept of the welfare queen and how this stereotyped has come to exist, can look at it.

Thank you.

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Video 3: PBS NewsHour. (2019, Jun 2). The true story behind the 'welfare queen' stereotype. YouTube.  
[https://youtu.be/mr\\_8B1lzFFY?t=74](https://youtu.be/mr_8B1lzFFY?t=74)



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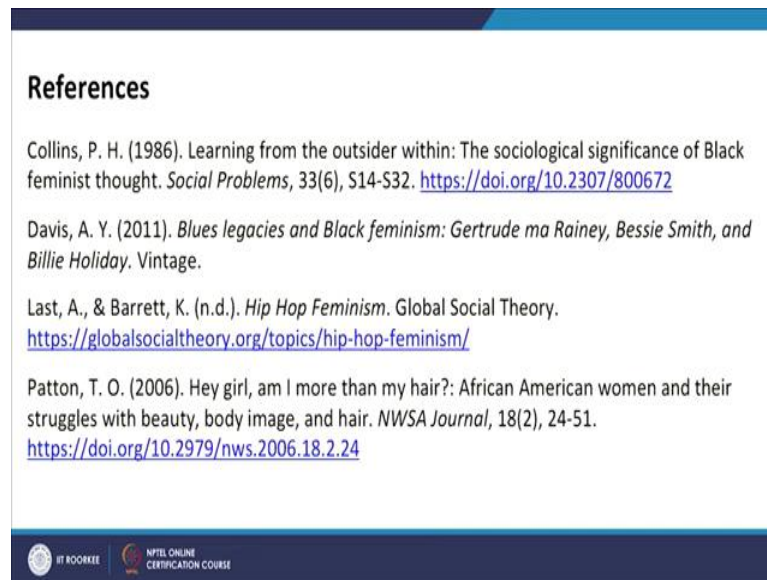
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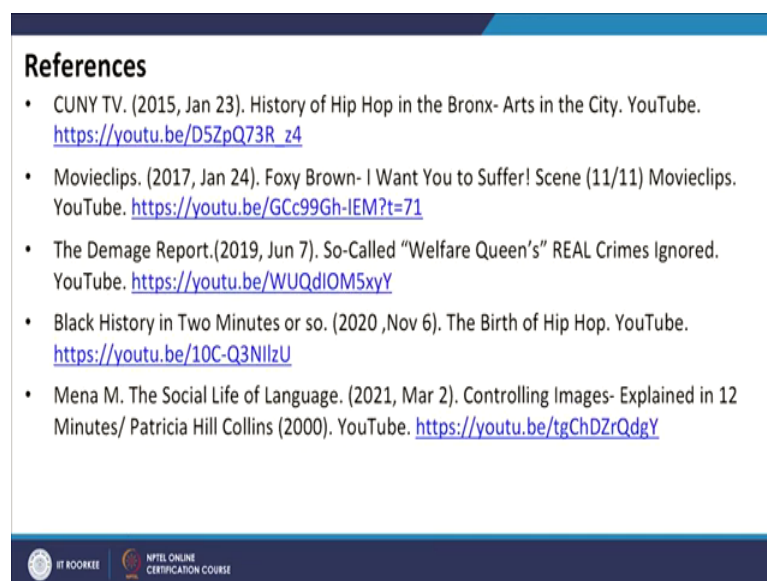
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