

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 09**  
**Gender and Power Politics in bell hooks**

Good morning, dear students and welcome to this module. In the previous module we have discussed intersectionality. In the current module as well as in the next module we would look at how the ideas related with intersectionality were prominently present in certain black American writers.

In this current module we would look at the work of bell hooks. bell hooks has written more than 30 books. However, in the current module we would be basing our arguments only on those prominent books which are related with her ideas of gender.

We find that she has also written about pedagogy education media in the larger context of white supremacy. In the current module, we would focus on that work of bell hooks which is significant for us to understand the development of gender as we find it today.

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**bell hooks**

- bell hooks (born Gloria Jean Watkins, 1952) is an African-American author, feminist, and social activist.
  - Hooks assumed her pseudonym, the name of her great-grandmother, to honour female legacies; she preferred to spell it in all lowercase letters to put emphasis on her message rather than herself.
- Her writing has focused on the interconnectivity of race, class, and gender and their ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and domination.
- In the 1980s hooks established a support group for Black women called the 'Sisters of the Yam', which she later used as the title of a book, published in 1993, celebrating Black sisterhood.

When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism, and when antiracism does not incorporate opposition to patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other and both interests lose.

Intersectionality allows us to look at the social and political aspects of a given part in life.

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bell hooks was born as Gloria Jean Watkins in 1952. She is an African American writer feminist and social activist. During her early twenties, she had taken up the pseudo name of bell hooks it was the name of her great grandmother. She has adopted this pen name to

honour the female legacies and she decided to spell it in lowercase only, as she wanted to emphasize her message rather than her identities. Her writings are focused on the interconnectivity of race, class and gender and the ability of these identities to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and domination.

In the 1980s, bell hooks had established a support group for black women which was called the 'Sisters of the Yam'. The same name was also used as a title of a book by her which was published in 1993 the support group as well as this book later on celebrate black sisterhood.

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- hooks recognizes the interconnections of social classifications (race, gender, class, sexual identities etc.), ignoring which adds repressive angles to positioning of women.
- In her opinion the well-known definitions of feminism only privilege white bourgeois women.
- Feminism started as a movement to end sexist oppression, but it would be better defined as “the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 2000, viii).
- This definition “...clearly states that the movement is not about being anti-male. It makes clear that the problem is sexism. And that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action” (hooks 2000, viii).
- One of the most significant contributions of hooks is her approach to defining the diverse movement that feminism is.



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bell hooks had the opinion that well known definitions of feminism privilege only the white bourgeois women. And these definitions ignore the interconnections of social classifications which are also able to add repressive angles to the positioning of black women.

Feminism had started as a movement to end sexist oppression, but according to Bell Hooks it should be better defined as “a movement to end sexism sexist exploitation and oppression”. She finds that this definition states that feminism is not about being anti male, it makes clear that the problem which is faced by women is not men, but sexism.

However, we must also remember that all of us whether male or female have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. One of the most significant

contributions of bell hooks is her approach to defining the diverse movement that feminism happens to be.

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• Furthermore, this definition clarifies that if there are oppressed people, there are oppressors as well.

• Considerably, “females can be just as sexist as men. And while that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it would be wrong-minded for feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men”(hooks 2000, ix).

• Projections of patriarchal mass media!

“...to be “feminist” in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression.”  
bell hooks

Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression...  
As all advocates of feminist politics know, most people do not understand sexism, or if they do, they think it is not a problem. Masses of people think that feminism is always and only about women seeking to be equal to men. And a huge majority of these folks think feminism is anti-male. Their misunderstanding of feminist politics reflects the reality that most folks learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media.  
bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*

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bell hooks is able to identify that if there are oppressed people there are oppressors also. She also recognizes the fact that a women can also be sexist as much as a men can be; however, this cannot be taken to justify male domination, but it definitely shows that it would be wrong for the feminist thinker to think that the feminist movement is as simple as being a women against men.

She also feels that the wrong notions of what feminism is has been projected by patriarchal mass media. The misunderstandings about feminist politics do not reflect the reality, but the fact that most of the people are able to understand its meaning only through mass media which is patriarchal in its notions.

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bell hooks on interlocking systems of domination

- Even before “intersectionality” became a buzzword in feminist circles, hooks talked about the interlocking webs of oppression.

Source: Jennie-Laure Sully, <<https://youtu.be/sUpY8PZieV8>>

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Even before intersectionality was coined as a word and later on became a buzzword in feminist circle, we find that Bell Hooks has talked about the interlocking webs of oppression much earlier.

I began to use the phrase in my work white supremacist capitalist patriarchy because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality and not to just have one thing be like you know, gender is the important issue race is the important issue.

But for me the use of that that particular jargonistic phrase was a way a sort of shortcut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives and then if I really want to understand what is happening to me right now at this moment in my life as a black female of a certain age group, I won't be able to understand it if I am only looking through the lens of race.

I won't be able to understand it if I am only looking through the lens of gender, I won't be able to understand and if I am only looking at white, how white people see me. Be one of the; one of the to me an important breakthrough I felt in my work and that of others was the call to use the term white supremacy over racism. Because racism in of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of color.

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*The term  
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keeps white people  
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of the discussion*

bell hooks on interlocking systems of domination

- Even before “intersectionality” became a buzzword in feminist circles, hooks talked about the interlocking webs of oppression.

Source: Jennie-Laure Sully, <<https://youtu.be/sUpY8PZieV8>>

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And it was always in a sense keeping things at the level at which whiteness and white people remained at the center of the discussion.

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- She questions the popular definition of feminism as a movement to make women the social equals of men, citing it as reductive and dismissive of the prevailing social reality, given that men across race and class lines are not equal.
- Instead, hooks emphasises focusing on sexist exploitation at large—including heterosexist, hierarchical gender-sexual roles, and sexual exploitation—as it occurs across the intersections of race, class, and gender.
- According to bell hooks, feminism needs to focus more on the systemic roots of oppression.
- She used the term "white supremacy, over racism" because racism in and of itself did not allow for a discourse of colonisation and decolonisation. It also did not recognise the internalised racism within people of colour.
- Further it kept whiteness and white people remained at the centre of the discussion.

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So, bell hooks has looked at the prevailing definitions of feminism as deductive as well as dismissing of the prevailing social reality. Suggesting that neither men nor women across race in class lines are not equal and therefore, the emphasis of feminist movement to make women as social equals of men is also a misunderstanding.

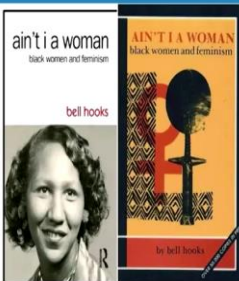
She instead focuses on sexist exploitation at large, she is able to include heterosexist, hierarchical gender sexual roles, and sexual exploitation as it occurs across the intersections of race, class and gender. So, she suggests that feminism needs to be more focused on the systematic roots of oppression.

She has used the term “white supremacy over racism” because in her opinion in and itself racism does not allow for a discourse of colonisation and decolonisation. At the same time, it does not recognize the internalized racism within people of colour. It is also kept whiteness and white people at the centre of the discussion.



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*Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981)

- bell hooks' ground-breaking monograph, which she describes as a "love gift from me to black women," analyses the unique experiences of Black women in America from slavery to the present in a passionate manner.
- Examines effect of racism and sexism on Black women, on civil rights movement, and also on feminist movements.
- The essay echoes Sojourner Truth's legendary speech at a women's rights convention in 1851 in Akron, Ohio.



Source: Routledge




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bell hooks most famous work remains to be the 1981 published book *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. It is considered to be a ground breaking monograph which she describes as a “love gift from me to black women”. It analyses the unique experiences of black women in America from the days of the slavery to the contemporary times in a highly passionate manner.

She examines the effect of racism and sexism on black women, on civil rights movement and also on feminist movement. The title of the essay as well as the essay itself echoes Sojourner Truth's legendary speech at a women's rights convention in 1851 in Akron Ohio.

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- Black women live amidst racial, sexual, and class oppression. A sensitivity to such peculiar conditions characterizes the Black feminist perspective.
- Existing feminist movements offer no fundamental critique of the patriarchal status quo. In other words, they consist of women who wish merely 'to fill the shoes of the men who block their way instead of devising alternative social structures.
- The result is that feminism is both racist and classist because white American women are socialized to be racist, classist and even sexist. Instead of acting as surrogate men, white women should seek further growth and change'. (p. 192)
  - hooks finally suggests: "the sisterhood that is necessary for the making of feminist revolution can be achieved only when all women disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy and competition with one another that has kept us vulnerable, weak and unable to envision new realities" (p. 154).



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bell hook suggest that the black feminist perspective must have a sensitivity towards the fact that black women have to live through oppression in different ways they have to face racial, sexual and class oppression simultaneously.


Existing feminist movement in her opinion had offered no fundamental critique of the patriarchal status quo. So, they consist of women who wish merely to fill the shoes of the men who block their way instead of devising alternative social structures without which a true equality or a true emancipation would not be possible.

And therefore, in her opinion feminism is both racist and classist because white American women are socialized to be racist classist and even sexist. Instead of acting as surrogate men, white women should seek further growth and change and “the true sisterhood can be achieved only when all women are able to disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy and competition with one another which makes all of them vulnerable weak and unable to envision new realities”.

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### Patriarchy, Sexism and Capitalism

- A decades-long analysis of the relationship between patriarchy, sexism, and capitalism, also linked with systems of slavery and imperialism:
  - Started in the antebellum South where slavery, racism, and sexism worked symbiotically to create an overarching system of institutionalized domination and oppression.
  - Draws attention to the sexual division of labour within slave culture, noting how both whites and blacks engaged in sexual politics that systematically devalued black women.
- “The area that most reveals the differentiation between the status of male slaves and female slaves is the work area. The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault” (p. 22)



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This book by bell hooks is based on a decade long analysis of the relationship between patriarchy sexism and capitalism. It is also linked with systems of slavery and imperialism. It has been started in the antebellum south where slavery racism and sexism worked symbiotically to create an overreaching system of institutionalized domination and oppression.


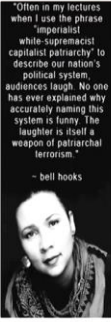
It also draws our attention to the sexual division of labour within slave culture. Nothing how both whites and blacks were engaged in sexual politics that systematically devalued black women, bell hooks is one of the first major critics to draw our attention towards the fact that black women were also systematically exploited by the black men during the days of slavery and I quote from her.

“The area that most reveals the differentiation between the status of male slaves and female slaves is the work area. The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields, the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault” unquote.



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- Her assessment of how black men and women embodied the effects of “patriarchal power” in slavery, draws our attention to the internal and external relations of personal identity formation within an evolving capitalist social order, where men’s and women’s relation to one another are not immune from productive capitalist forces.
- In hooks’ evaluation, the master-slave dialectic becomes exposed in the domestic sphere too:
  - Within it, men and women mediate their unequal power relations within the more significant racist-capitalist group politic
  - Men with a penchant for the white-male-capitalist power denied to them in the workplace attempt to recuperate a sense of “manhood” in the home.
- She does not vilify/demonize “man” as the primary source of exploitation and domination in the social milieu; instead, she understands black men’s patriarchal power as symptomatic of the macro politics of race and class within the totality of capitalist social relations.



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bell hooks has remarked that black men and women embodied the effects of “patriarchal power” in slavery and she tries to draw our attention to the internal and external relations of personal identity formation within an evolving capitalist social order where the relations between men and women are not immune from productive capitalist forces.

And in her evaluation the master-slave dialectic also becomes exposed in the domestic sphere also. It is not limited only to the external world which is controlled by the white men, but also within the homes where black women are exploited by the black men. So, within the sphere of home, we find that men and women mediate their unequal power relations in the more significant racist capitalist group politic.


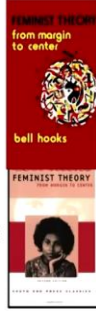
Black men with a penchant for the white male capitalist power which has been denied to them in the work place systematically attempt to recuperate a sense of manhood in the house and in the process, they insult and exploit their women folk.

Despite accepting that we find that bell hooks does not demonize men as the primary source of exploitation or domination within the social milieu. Instead, she understands that the patriarchal power of black men is symptomatic of the macro politics of race and class within the totality of capitalist social relations.

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*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984)

- bell hooks questioned the existing feminist discourses during her time, by pointing out the lack of a compact definition of feminism, and of the predominance of white, privileged feminists in the movement.
- Intersectionality - interlocking webs of oppression: she proposes a framework for evaluating culture, which starts off with the black working-class experience in order to examine common representations and images through interrogation techniques such as oppositional gazing.
- In her essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks (1992) presented the idea of the “oppositional gaze” as a way for people in subordinate positions to resist the dominant images and messages that communicate their devalued status.



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Another book which I would refer to in my discussions is bell hooks 1984 publication *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. In which she has questioned the existing feminist discourse again by pointing out the lack of a compact definition of feminism and of the predominance of white privileged feminists in the movement.

Here she talks about interlocking webs of oppression, this is exactly what intersectionality is. She proposes a framework for evaluating culture which starts off with a black working-class experience in order to examine common representations and images through interrogation techniques such as oppositional gazing.

In almost Foucauldian terms she presents the idea of oppositional gaze in her 1992 essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”. She looks at the idea of the oppositional gaze as a way for people to resist the dominant images and messages that convey to them their devalued status.

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- Specifically, hooks describes “the gaze” as a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that “looks” to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (p. 116)
- Crossing the borders entails looking at the points-of-view of other races, classes and sexes. One joins the struggle as subjects and not objects. Crossing borders demands a questioning of historical erasures of women of color in different socio-political settings.
  - Feminism, if unable to see beyond its own very Western scope, fails to envision ways to unite across cultures and oceans and borders that are not reductive, assimilating, or imperialist.
  - Her definition of Feminism does not privilege any race, class, or gendered group. In a postfeminist stance, hooks feels that it is vital that a theory bears a polysemy or multiple meanings.



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Again, very much like Foucault we find that hooks also describe the gaze as a site of resistance for the colonized black people not only in America, but globally. Subordinates in different relations of power learn through their experiences that there are different types of gazes.

There is a critical gaze, one that “looks” to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations- one learn to look a certain way in order to resist.

Available records of the times of slavery system tell us that several times, black people were punished simply because they had looked at their white masters. This particular type of gaze is also prominently displayed in the cinemas which depict the slavery systems.

Crossing the border entails looking at the points of view of other races classes and sexes. One joins the struggle as subjects and never as objects. Crossing border demands a questioning of the historical erasers of women of color in different socio-political settings, not only during the slavery system, but also outside America.


Feminism is unable to see beyond its own very western scope and therefore, it has failed to envision ways to unite across cultures in oceans and borders that are not reductive,

assimilating or imperialist. So, we can say that hooks definition of feminism does not privilege any race, or class, or a gendered group. In post feminist stance, hooks feel that it is vital that a theory bears a polysemy or multiple meanings.

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### Patriarchal Power and Feminist Praxis

- Hooks conceives of power as conditioned by existing social hierarchies, or what she refers to as “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (14).
- Within this social paradigm, power is distributed unevenly and indelibly: men have power, women are powerless; hooks position differs fundamentally from liberal/progressive tendencies, which focus on sexism only.
- Focus on intersectionality.
- In other words, she views racism, class exploitation, and sexism as mutually constitutive, but *she does not presuppose that the elimination of any one “-ism” can resolve the other contradictions.*
- Her feminist theory is not anti-male, but it does oppose patriarchy; it is not against whites, but it is anti-racist.




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Hooks also feels that, power is conditioned by existing social hierarchies what she refers to as “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy”. Within the social paradigm power is always distributed unevenly and in an indelible manner. For example, men have power women are powerless. Hooks positions differs fundamentally from liberal or progressive tendencies which focus on sexism only.

She has focused on the intersectional aspects of exploitation focusing on women as well as on men in different situations. She views racism, class exploitation, and sexism as mutually constitutive, but she does not presuppose that the elimination of any one “-ism” can resolve the other contradictions. In order to resolve contradictions, we have to look at the totality of the picture. Her feminist theory is also not anti-male, but it does oppose patriarchy, it is not against whites, but at the same time it happens to be anti-racist.

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- For hooks, sexism is of central concern, as it is the arbiter of all other “oppressions,” and also is experienced by most people: either as “discriminator or discriminated against, exploiter or exploited” (pg. 17)
  - Sexist oppression must be eradicated because it “directly shapes and determines relations of power in our private lives, in familiar social spaces, in that most intimate context—home—and in that most intimate sphere of relations—family.” (pg 18)
- Here, we see how her evolving feminist theory and praxis is grounded in the familiar social spaces of family and community.
  - Family relations often may be informed by acceptance of a politic of domination, they are simultaneously relations of care and connection. It is this convergence of two contradictory impulses—the urge to promote growth and the urge to inhibit growth—that provides a practical setting for feminist critique, resistance and transformation.
- She believes that a feminist praxis cannot stand in isolation from what takes place outside institutional settings;
  - it is fundamentally and inextricably linked to life histories and experiences that give rise to human subjectivities and social relationships.



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bell hooks also feels that sexism is experienced by most people either as a discriminator or discriminated against, as an exploiter or exploited and therefore, sexism is the arbiter of all other oppressions. Sexist oppression has to be eradicated because it “shapes and determines relationships of power not only in the society, but also in our familiar spaces in our private lives, in the most intimate context that is our home and family” and therefore, we find that feminist theory and praxis has to be grounded in these spaces too. She suggests that family relations are often informed by an acceptance of a politic of domination.


They are simultaneously, relations of care and connection and it is this convergence of two contradictory impulses. On the one hand we find that there is an urge to promote growth and at the same time there is also an urge to inhibit this growth and it provides a practical setting for feminist critique, resistance and transformation.

She believes that a feminist praxis cannot stand in isolation from what takes place outside institutional settings. It is fundamentally and inextricably linked to life histories and experiences that give rise to human subjectivities and social relationships.

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**Critique of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)**

- Claiming the outdated definition of feminism as limiting, she asserts that Friedan had failed to consider the plight of women from other classes or races--for instance, the plight of American black women.
- Friedan had pointed out "the problem that has no name"—the widespread unhappiness of women in the 1950s and early 1960s. Looking critically at the media projected images of women and the education system, she discussed the unhappiness of housewives despite living in material comfort and being married with children, as many of them had to lose their own identities owing to widespread social perceptions,
- While Friedan speaks of the white Bourgeois married women's desire to break away from the chains of household labour, she "did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women" (hooks 1984, 1-2).
- She further claims that Friedan's theory is discriminatory, making the white Bourgeois woman's plight the centre of feminist discourse.



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To further her argument bell hooks, also presents a critique of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* which was published in 1963 and is considered to be a milestone in feminist criticism. bell hooks finds that the definitions of feminism which are prevalent are limiting and she also suggest that Friedan has also fail to consider the plight of women from other classes or races.

For example, the plight of black American women in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan has pointed out "the problem which has no name" and this is the widespread unhappiness of women in the America of 1950s and early 1960s.

The decades immediately after the Second World War, she has looked critically at the educational system which promoted sexism, she has also looked at the media projected images of a happy women in the advertisements.


And she suggested that the unhappiness of those housewives who are otherwise are living in material comfort and follow the social norms of being married, of being with children, still have an inner vacancy and this exists because many of them had to lose their own identities owing to widespread social perceptions.

While Friedan speaks of the white bourgeois married women's desire to break away from the chains of household labour. She, according to bell hooks "did not speak of the needs of those women who do not have men, who do not have children, who do not even

have any homes”. She ignores the existence of all those women who are non white and who are also poor and perhaps do not have the advantage of education. And therefore, she feels that Frieden’s theory is discriminatory making the white bourgeois woman’s plight the centre of feminist discourse.

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- She also questions whether the feminist experience of white women is an adequate perspective on women’s collective realities (hooks, 1984, p. 3).
- Limiting feminist theory to the discourse on gender cannot be a solid foundation for theorizing.
  - Marginalized women or women of other races or classes should make use of their “special vantage points” and take a look at “the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (hooks, 1984, p. 15).
- Revolutionary feminism can make a difference. Through a necessary struggle and a fostering of critical political consciousness, change is possible.
- More than just ending sexism, revolutionary feminism seeks to end racism, class elitism and imperialism as well.
  - In order to do this, there should be a global revolution of sustained freedom, justice and peace anchored on a human’s self-actualization.



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This is the reiteration of hooks belief that the feminist experiences of white women is an adequate perspective on the collective realities of women and limiting feminist theory to the discourse on gender also cannot be a solid foundation for theorizing.


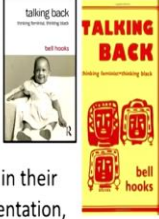
According to her, those women who are marginalized who belong to the marginalized classes or races for example, should make use of their spatial vantage points and take a look at the dominant I quote “racist classes sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” unquote.

According to bell hooks, revolutionary feminism can indeed make a difference through unnecessary struggle and a fostering of critical potential consciousness, change is possible. In order to do this, there should be a global revolution of sustained freedom, justice and peace which should be anchored on every individuals self-actualization.

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*Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989)

- In this collection of personal and theoretical essays, hooks reflect on her signature issues of racism, feminism, politics and pedagogy.
- Writing about the oppression of Black women and their craving to speak in their own voice, hooks discusses the struggle of self-identification, self-representation, and self-realization of marginalized groups.
- Among her discoveries is that moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, making a new life and new growth possible.



Source: Routledge

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Another significant book by bell hooks is *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* which was published in 1989. This also helps us to contextualize contemporary understandings of gender. This is a collection of personal and theoretical essays in which hooks has reflected on her signature issues racism, feminism, politics as well as pedagogy. She has written about the oppression of black women and their cravings to speak in their own voice to find out their own language in order to represent their own identity.


So, hooks discusses the struggle of self identification, self representation and self realization of marginalized group. Among her discovery is that moving from silence into a speech is for the oppressed, is gesture of defines that heals them, makes possible a new life and a new growth.



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- Talking back suggests rebelliousness and resistance on the part of the unauthorized: an act of transformation in discovering their authority, their coming to voice.
- hooks defines “talking back” as “speaking as an equal to an authority figure”. Silence – or an inability to speak for oneself, to object practices of domination, and to challenge the existing social hierarchy – is viewed as the “right speech” for the oppressed (5-6).
  - “The context of silence is varied and multi-dimensional” (8) and can be found within family, community, or society. Silencing, in other words, happens nearly everywhere, as “we live in a world in crises – a world governed by politics of domination” (19).
- Silence itself is not the lack of speaking; instead, it is an act of submission.
- To overcome this submission means not only to “emerge from silence into speech”(6), but to make this speech *heard*.\*

\*<file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/18-Other-275-4-10-20190220.pdf>




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Hooks suggest that conventionally silence is viewed as the right speech for the oppressed. Silence is interpreted as once inability to speak for oneself to object to practices of domination and inability to challenge the existing social hierarchy.

However, “talking back” is to speak “like an equal to an authority figure” to challenge these practices. The context of silence is varied and it is also multi-dimensional. It can be found within different contexts, within family, community or society. Silencing happens almost everywhere, “we live in a world in crisis, a world governed by politics, of domination” according to her.

Silence itself is not the lack of speaking instead it has to be understood as an act of submission. And to overcome this submission means not only to “emerge from silence into a speech” but also a sustained effort to make this speech heard and only then one can think of challenging acts of oppression.

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- hooks describes “talking back” in her early childhood life in a world where children were meant to be seen and not heard as “speaking as an equal to an authority figure...daring to disagree and sometimes...just...having an opinion.”(pg 10)
- *Talking back* as a female child in this world did not mean that women were *silent*.
  - It is, in fact, the speaking of the women in the home sphere “giving orders, making threats, fussing” *where the men appear absent or silent*, and the language spoken by the women seemed “so rich, so poetic that it felt...like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate.” (p. 11)
- In this world, the world of black women, women speak, but their voices were nonetheless “often the soliloquy, the talking into thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear...the talk that is simply not listened to.” (p. 13)
- Thus, while not silenced, the speech of mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and their friends remained a kind of “background noise,” even as it asserted itself in the giving of orders or the making of threats.

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Hooks recalls her own childhood days, when speaking as an equal to an authority figure was considered to be an act of daring. During her childhood it was thought that children are meant to be seen and not heard.


However, one should not think that women were necessarily silent. They used language in different ways. Women in home sphere, in her own communities were often talking. They were giving orders, threatening people, threatening each other, fussing, whereas, men appear to be either absent or silent. And to a young bell hook, the language of these women seemed so, rich and so, highly poetic that she did not want to be isolated from it.

However, but the voices of these women “were either soliloquy or they were talking into thin air, the talking to ears that did not hear... the talk that is simply not listened to” and this was the talk of the women. So, while not silenced the women, also did not have a voice. At best it could be understood as a background noise, whether they were pleading for something, or giving orders, or even making threats. They did not have any agency in this voice.

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### Black Feminist Consciousness

- Talking back in this context could be a loud but powerless speech silenced in its insignificance despite its burden of keeping structure within various private spheres.
  - For hooks, her most evident perception of dialogue in which speech is shared and recognized in its intimacy, intensity, joyfulness, loudness, tenderness, and wit, and thus filled with the power of discourse, occurred among the black women in her life.
- By understanding the varied ways in which black women's speech is confined to background noise, we can again understand the differences that many though not all, black women face in moving from the talking back of their mothers and the transformative talking back of feminist consciousness.




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So, Talking Back in this context could be a loud, but powerless speech silenced in its insignificance despite its burden of keeping structure within various private spheres. The most evident perception of dialogue, according to hooks, in which speech is shared and recognized in its intimacy, joyfulness and wit etc. which is filled with the power of discourse, occurred among the black women in her life.

By understanding the varied ways in which black women's speech is confined to being a background noise, we can again understand the differences that many black women face in moving from talking back to their mothers and the transformative talking back of feminist consciousness.

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- Indeed, hooks articulates the “talking back that falls silent” which black women may face not only in the domestic sphere but also in the sphere of feminist thinking, in the public sphere of black feminist thinking, writing, or activism; eg., lesser participation of black women in the second wave feminism.
- Describing the suppression of speech that characterized her home life, she argues that we must understand acts of suppression of speech, the breakdown of spirit, and persecution as these occur in the public sphere as well, especially to those who are made or deemed voiceless by systems of oppression.
- Speech, that questioned authority brought issues of pain and vulnerability to the fore, which aimed to expose the contradictions of one’s reality, was identified as “crazy” speech and, just as importantly, speech that betrayed the privacy and primacy of the home sphere.



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Hooks feel that the silence of black women is felt not only in their domestic spheres, but also in the public sphere of black feminist thinking, writing and also activism. For example, she has pointed out the fact of lesser participation of black women in the second wave feminism either as a critical theory or as a movement.

Describing the suppression of speech that had characterized her home life, she argues that we must understand acts of suppression of speech, the breakdown of spirit and persecution as these occur in the public sphere as well, especially to those who are made voiceless by systems of oppression.

The speech which according to bell hooks questioned the authority and brought issues of pain and vulnerability to the fore front, was also identified as crazy speech and it was also a speech that betrayed the privacy, as well as the primacy of the home sphere.

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- What bell hooks brings to a discussion of feminist consciousness is the particular alienation, paranoia, anxiety, struggle, resistance, and strength of a black woman feminist consciousness which must come to voice in a landscape in which intersecting matrices of domination offer black women little or no privilege to speak meaningful knowledge about their existence.
- Moreover, how the struggles, questions, conflicts, failures and progress of black women's lives as they negotiate the larger social sphere, reflect and disclose the pernicious racism, sexism, and classism in our society.
- Often characterized as angry, demanding, limited in their knowledge, black women, and especially black women intellectuals, face a tremendous battle to speak and to write in the hopes of being heard.




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Continuing her argument further bell hooks suggests that, black women are often characterized either as angry or demanding or limited in their knowledge. And therefore, they face a tremendous battle to speak and to write in public space in a hope of being hurt.


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### *Sisters Of The Yam: Black Women and Self-recovery* (1993)

- How the emotional health of black women has been, and continues to be impacted by sexism and racism.
  - Both an expression of the joy of self-healing and the need to be ever vigilant in the struggle for equality, she continues to speak of/to the experience of black womanhood.
- She also shows how black women can empower themselves and effectively struggle against racism, sexism and consumer capitalism.
  - Choosing wellness, joy, and self-care is an act of Black political resistance.
- As Black women heal their individual wounds, they become more able to engage in collective healing needed for transformational change (Hooks, 2015).



Source: Routledge




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Another book which is significant in this context is the 1993 publication *Sisters of The Yam: Black Women and Self-recovery*. So, she looks at how the emotional health of black women has always been impacted by the prevalent issues of sexism and racism.

Yam is a symbol of joy, of self-healing as well as it reminds us of the experiences of black womanhood. So, as black women heal their individual wounds, they become better able to cope with the process of collective healing, which is needed for transformational change in different societies.

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- Yam serves as a symbol that links community and kinship, providing nourishment and healing for the body as a medicinal food.
  - It is a universal linkage to the authors' experience connecting to self, sisterhood and healing. Women, with yams and calabashes, embody a sweeping legacy of black womanhood.
  - Everywhere "black women live in the world, we eat yam. It is a symbol of our Diasporic connections. Yams provide nourishment for the body as food, yet they are also used medicinally—to heal the body" (Hooks 2005, p. 6).
- A contemporary interpretation of yams includes nourishment, comfort, emotional or psychological healing through symbolic connections.
- In the introduction to the book, hooks (1993) discusses the healing powers present within individuals that are augmented or nurtured through collective activities such as support groups—groups that are organised explicitly for African American women who are "sisters of the yam."



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A contemporary interpretation of yam which used to be a staple diet for most of the African people, includes nourishment, comfort as well as emotional and psychological healing through symbolic connections with their legacies. In the introduction to the book hooks discusses the healing powers which are present within individuals that are augmented and further nurtured through collective activities. And therefore, she has titled the book "sisters of the yam" to underscores the significance of support groups.


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### *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000)

- In the preface hooks argues for Feminist Theory's importance to feminist discourse
- It examines the "interlocking nature of gender, race, and class" —what has come to be known as intersectionality (xii).
- Hooks defines feminism as a "movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."
- The usefulness of this definition, hooks argue, lies in it making clear that for feminists, sexism is the enemy and not men; and that revolutionary feminist practice combats institutionalized oppression and not individual offence.



Source: Routledge




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In her 2000 book *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks argue for feminist theory's importance to feminist discourses. She again examines "the interlocking nature of gender, race and class" what has now come to be known as intersectionality. Hooks had defined feminism as a "movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression". The book also highlights the fact that bell hooks, looks at sexism as the enemy, she does not consider men to be the enemy of a women.

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### Feminist Class Struggle

- In Chapter 7 – "Feminist Class Struggle", hooks links class and behaviour -- how women are taught expectations about behaviour and how they understand and resolve problems.
  - Drawing from work by Rita Mae Brown, Betty Friedan, Mary Barfoot, Charlotte Bunch, and Nancy Myron, as well as her own previously-published work (e.g., *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*), Hooks critiques the notion that the economic gains of affluent females are a positive sign for all women.
- Instead, hooks argues "that freedom of privileged-class women of all races has required the sustained subordination of working-class and poor women" (41).
- She asks readers to consider how "feminist liberation is linked to a vision of social change which challenges class elitism" (43).
  - "When women work to make money to consume more rather than to enhance the quality of our lives on all levels, work does not lead to economic self-sufficiency. More money does not mean more freedom if our finances are not used to facilitate well-being"(53).



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In the chapter seven of this book hooks, has been able to link class and behavior how women are taught expectations about their behavior and how they understand and resolve problems.

In propagating her ideas in this context hooks has drawn from the works of Rita Brown Betty Friedan, Mary Barfoot, Bunch, Nancy Myron etc. as well as from her own previously published works particularly *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. She critiques the notion that the economic gains of affluent females are a positive sign for all women.

Hooks presents an interesting idea that “freedom of privileged class women of all races has required the sustained subordination of working class and poor women”. She says that more money does not mean more freedom if our finances are not used to facilitate well being. She also suggests that “feminist liberation is should be linked to a vision of social change which should challenge class elitism”.

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- hooks connects theory with practice and sees the commitment to feminism as connected to political action. Accepts that a woman can also be sexist.
- She argues that the current feminist movement lacks a strong sense of sisterhood due to this focus on competition (sexually, economically, physically) concurrent with a lack of participation in consciousness-raising groups.
  - She passionately argues for taking feminist theory from the academy and giving it back to the communities from which it sprang.
- She further argues that feminism cannot succeed without men's participation in the movement, that men can exist as "worthy comrade[s] in struggle" because feminism is anti-sexism, not anti-male. The enemy, then, is sexist thought and behaviour by men or women.
- She concludes that "enlightened" feminists see that men are not the problem, that the problems are patriarchy, sexism, and male domination (67).





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So, Hooks has been able to connect theory with practice, highlighting also the fact that a women can also be a sexist and suggesting the strong need of sisterhood. She also argues that feminism cannot succeed without the participation of men in the movement and men can exist as worthy comrades in struggle, because feminism is anti sexism not anti male.



This idea is very close to the initial formalization of feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir. She also concludes that enlightened feminists see that men are not the problem rather patriarchy, sexism and male domination remain to be the problem in the society.

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<p><i>We Real Cool</i> Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)</p> <p>THE POOL PLAYERS SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOWER.</p> <p><i>We real cool. We Left school. We Lurk late. We Strike straight. We Sing sin. We Thin gin. We Jazz June. We Die soon.</i></p>	<p><b><i>We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (2004)</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contains ten essays on black males.</li><li>• Title alludes to a 1959 poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, the first black woman to be appointed the Poet Laureate of the United States.</li><li>• Like Brooks, hooks worries about the men in her life, black men experiencing crises of masculinity as prisoners of patriarchal imperialism.</li><li>• Hooks argues that black men have become wary of the simple goodness of being loved.</li><li>• She talks about how black males are compelled to repress themselves in white America. They are taught violence and aggression as the key to survival.</li></ul>	 <p>Source: Routledge</p> 
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Her book *We Real Cool* contains ten essays on black males, the title alludes to a 1959 poem by Brooks. Like Brooks, hooks also worries about men in her life, black men experiencing crisis of masculinity as prisoners of patriarchal imperialism. She talks about how black men are compelled to repress themselves in an America which is dominantly white, they are taught violence and aggression as their keys to survival.

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- "... how the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy ... affects the souls of Black boys and men – and by extension Black girls and women.
- "Layered with many pop culture references and voices of various Black authors and social workers, bell hooks unapologetically asserts that Black masculinity is a reflection of white domination and provides some alternative ways/solutions Black men AND women can work together to overcome the damage and hurt, with love." (July 7, 2018 review by Darkowaa\*).
- Media portrayals of black men as fierce and ruthless.
- Mainstream culture inculcates fear of black men, rewarding them most when they act out the "Native Son" role of a brutal psychopath to confirm that fear.

\* <<https://africanbookaddict.com/2018/07/07/we-real-cool-black-men-and-masculinity-by-bell-hooks/>>




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bell hooks suggest that black masculinity is a reflection of white domination and is able to provide some alternative solutions to black men as well as women, who should be able to work together to overcome the damage and hurt. She points at the media portrayals of black men as being basically fierce and ruthless. Mainstream culture inculcates fear of black men, rewarding them most when they act out the “Native Son” role of a brutal psychopath confirming the social fears.

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- She talks about the adverse effects of the development of racist and sexist attitudes in American culture and how they contributed to the criminalization and dehumanization of black males.
- hooks finds that black men are taught violence and aggression as the keys to survival, an ideology reified in the lucrative gangs-and-guns side of hip-hop music and culture: from George Jackson's *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970, a combination of autobiography and manifesto addressed to an African American audience) to Stephen King's *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* (1982).
- Hooks also attacks the stereotype of the older black women as a powerful matriarch, fiercely independent of men.
  - In reality, "most black women have been more than willing to surrender control over their hard-earned resources to the men in their lives: father, brothers, lovers."




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bell hooks also suggests that the development of racist and sexist attitudes in American culture have contributed to the criminalization and dehumanization of black males. She has looked at various media publications including George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* and Stephen King's *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*.

She attacks the stereotypes also of older black women as being powerful matriarchs, fiercely independent of men. And she suggests that most black women are more than willing to surrender control over their heart and resources to the men in their lives in different relationships.

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- hooks explains how this self-assured and autonomous attitude transforms into the "spiritual zombiehood of today's 'cool' black male" (153), commenting that there has been a fundamental gap between black and white concepts of manhood.
- bell hooks examines the origin and impact of this conflict very thoroughly. There are two main problems. First, it is the still existing pejorative stereotypes about black men being "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, [...] untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling" (hooks xii).
- Not only do those stereotypes degrade and harm black men in general, but they are also explicitly limiting their opportunities to express themselves socially, economically, sexually and individually.
- All in all, "negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to over-determine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves" (ibid.).




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When she looks at black masculinity in contemporary American society, she points out two main problems. First is the still existing pejorative stereotypes about black men being animals brutes etc. etc. Not only do these stereotypes degrade and harm black men in general, they are also explicitly limiting their opportunities, to express themselves socially, economically, sexually and individually.

So, these negative stereotypes have harmed the concept of black masculinity in the same way, as we have seen earlier stereotype harming the concept of femininity for black women.

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- Second, the prevailing notion of manhood is a conservative ideal of masculinity based on “the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy”
  - This includes building a family, providing for wife and children, and being in charge of the finances. (151).
  - As a man, one must not show emotions or weakness. Those features are considered female qualities and are unacceptable concerning the “dominator model” (4).
- Race and class play a role in a white capitalist patriarchal society. hooks believes in intersectional feminism. She examines how feminism can change the lives of people for the better. Her texts show the effect of class, gender, race among other factors on the lives of Black People. She examines the core issues of feminism and its positive promise to eliminate sexism, sexual exploitation, and oppression.

–Feminist theorists should speak to more than just those in the ivory tower, and they should acknowledge the experiences of all human beings (not only women). Distinctness of human differences must be recognized.

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Secondly, the prevailing notions of manhood remains to be the conservative ideal of masculinity based on the “values of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”. This includes building a family, providing for them being in charge of the finances etc. also a men should not be able to show emotions or weaknesses.

So, race and class play a role in a white capitalist patriarchal society. Hooks believes in intersectional feminism. She examines how feminism can change the lives of people for the better. She is able to show the effect of class, gender, race etc. among other factors on the lives of black people.

Examining the core issues of feminism and its positive promise to eliminate sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression, she thinks that the feminist theories should speak to more than just those in the ivory tower.

She feels that the feminist theory should be able to acknowledge the experiences of all human beings across borders not only women, but men also. We would close the discussion here we would continue our discussion of those black American thinkers and writers who have been able to predate the concept of intersectionality. Thank You.

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