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**The Depiction of Black Feminism in Bell Hooks'**  
***Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (1982)***

*An Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for  
the Master's Degree in Literature and Civilization*

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# *Dedication*

*I dedicate this work to my beloved father may God have mercy on him.*

*Imane*

# *Dedication*

*I dedicate this work to my marvellous parents, my dearest sisters and brothers, and all my loved ones*

*Fatima*

## **Acknowledgement**

*Thanks giving to 'Allah' who gave us the health, strength and patience to realize this work.*

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## **Abstract**

Thanks to Feminism, white women could achieve a delightful success in gaining the right to vote, acquiring a higher education, and other privileges. However, Black women were still fighting the beliefs and stereotypes that made them looking inhuman and impure creatures. Their participation in the feminist movement was just advocating to the white feminist agenda. For this reason, Black Feminism created to reveal the dark side of Feminism and their exclusion from it. The aim of this work is to depict Black Feminism in Bell Hooks' book *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism*. It is an attempt to show what makes Black Feminists different from the white ordinary ones. In doing so the extended essay is divided into two chapters, the first one provides a historical background of Feminism as well as Black Feminism in the United States and Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism* (1982). Meanwhile, the second chapter is about portraying by using Hooks' book, the images of racism, sexism, class oppression and other types of terrible treatments that the black woman was obliged to endure.

**Acronyms:**

AWSA: The American Women Suffrage Association.

CRC: Combahee River Collective

NACW: National Association of Colored Women.

NBFO: National Black Feminist Organizations.

NFAAW: National Federation of Afro-American Women.

NWSA: National Women Suffrage Association.

USA: The United States of America.

WWII: World War Two.

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# General Introduction

In the past, women were not allowed to complain about the miserable situation that the patriarchal society imposed on them. They were forced to accept the social rules that made them on the bottom of society. By the coming of Feminism, the white female could alter her position in the social scale and became an economic provider of her family. Unlike the black women who were still suffering from both white and black patriarchal systems. Hence, they advocated the feminist movement hoping that it will be the door for defending their virtue in front of the world. But their desire was not an easy to be realized.

This research paper examines how the enslaved girl was brutalized and tortured by her white owners and treated as non-human being. It also shows how the white race distorted the black womanhood by promoting negative stereotypes to discredit the black female's reputation. It talks about the white-black patriarchal systems that shaped the American society and how the two regimes oppressed the black women. It also sheds light on the issue of racism within the feminist movement and how the white feminists excluded the black females from their agenda. At last, it studies the relationship between Feminism and the black women and used them as tools to advocate their feminist project. The problematic is fostered in three main questions:

- 1- Does Feminism serve the needs of all women?
- 2- Why did the black women react negatively against the feminist agenda?
- 3- What makes Black Feminism different from the white ordinary one?

The previous questions proposed three hypotheses:

- 1- Feminism served the needs of a specific group.
- 2- The black women excluded from the feminist project.
- 3- Black Feminism came as reaction to the racist attitudes of women's movement while Feminism sought political, social, economic equality of women with men.

The extended essay contains a general introduction, two chapters and a general conclusion. The first chapter provides an overview about Feminism with its

definition and historical background as well as Black Feminism in the United States and the representation of Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism*.

Concerning the second chapter, it is a depiction of Black Feminism that includes the images of the female slave experience during slavery and all kinds of oppression including racism, sexism, class oppression, the imperialism of patriarchy and other genres of devaluation and discrimination in Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism* (1982).

**Chapter One:**

**The Historical Background  
of Feminism**

### **Chapter One: The Historical Background of Feminism**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

#### **1.2. Definition of Feminism**

#### **1.3. The Historical Background of Feminism**

##### **1.3.1. The First Wave of Feminism**

###### **1.3.1.1. The First Wave of Feminism in the United States**

##### **1.3.2. The Second Wave of Feminism**

###### **1.3.2.1. The Second Wave of Feminism in the United States**

##### **1.3.3. The Third Wave of Feminism**

###### **1.3.3.1. The Third Wave of Feminism in the United States**

#### **1.4. The Definition of Black Feminism**

#### **1.5. Black Feminism in the United States**

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#### **1.8. Conclusion**

## **Chapter One: The Historical Background of Feminism**

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### **1.1. Introduction**

Being in the margin of society with no right that grants a place as a full citizen was the situation in which women were living in. Women from all over the world witnessed hard times under the oppression of the patriarchy community. After a long period of enduring, feminism came as a rebellion against the unjust attitudes towards women.

When white women were asking for their social and political rights such as education and vote, black women were struggling to be seen as human beings. Unlike white women, the black females were under the three forces of persecution: slavery, sexism and racism. Thus, Black Feminism emerged in order to pinnacle their horrific experience and expose their exclusion from white feminism.

This chapter introduces feminism with its waves and how this social movement grows through time. It deals also with Black Feminism in the United States. Since the work is advocated by Gloria Jean Watkins' *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism*, this chapter includes also the overview of that book and the biography of the writer.

### **1.2. Definition of Feminism**

Many scholars use the term feminism but each one of them tries to define and explain it differently. Some feminists see it as a struggle which frees women from the society's exploitation, where others refer to it as the doctrine that supports gender equality. Hooks in her book '*Feminist Theory-From Margin to Center*' defines Feminism as a movement that aims to terminate the sexist exploitation (8), then she continues that Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives" (Hooks26). Moreover; Barbara Berg believes that

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feminism grants the female full liberty to express herself freely. She explains it as follows: “It is the freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex-determined role freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action” (quoted in Hooks24).

Merriam Webster Dictionary gives two different definitions of feminism. The first one is the theory that supports gender equality in all domains, while the second meaning concerns just women’s rights.

Women in a patriarchal society witnessed the extreme hard life conditions in which they were deprived of their social, political, economic and cultural rights. For that reason, they were not capable to define themselves as full citizens. However they did not surrender to these circumstances and they kept struggling and challenging the masculine power in order to impose their presence in all disciplines.

### **1.3. The Historical Background of Feminism:**

The term ‘Feminism’ coined in France in the 1890s as ‘Féminisme’, then it was spread through European countries in the 1890s and to North and South America by 1910. The term combined the French word for woman, ‘femme’ and ‘isme’, which referred to a social movement or political ideology (Freedman 17).

Thanks to the social, political and economic changes that took place in Europe and the United States two centuries ago, women became conscious and started to organize movements of their own that call for their lacked rights. Feminism was one of them. This feminist movement has been divided into three waves. Each wave has particular demands and purposes.

#### **1.3.1. The First Wave Feminism:**

The first wave of feminism occurred in the late of nineteenth and early twentieth century, emerging out of an environment of urban industrialism and

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liberal, socialist politics. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage (Rampton 2015).

The women's studies department at Georgetown College defines the first feminist movement as an organized activity seeking reforms and changes of female's civil inequalities in the nineteenth century. Its major claims were women's suffrage, education, and marriage laws.

They were unsatisfied from their passive roles in society and wanted to become full citizens with complete civil rights with suffrage as their main concern. The majority of females were not able to vote because of the ideology of separate spheres. This way of thinking saw that women were not suitable only for domestic tasks and not for governmental affairs (quoted in Smilteek).

The publication of *Revolution* by Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony after the civil war in 1868 advocated the suffrage movement in USA. While other feminists as Barbara Leigh Smith gave an importance to education and employment. During the nineteenth century, the Bible was seen as the most influential divine book which determines women's roles in the house. This claim obstructed the progress of feminist movement. However, Stanton in return used some religious justification in her famous work '*The Woman's Bible*' to flourish feminism again (Daily History).

### **1.3.1.1. The First Wave of Feminism in the United States:**

In the second half of the nineteenth century several organizations were established for women's suffrage. In 1869, (NWSA) was one of the major organizations that supported the issue of voting. This latter refused the contents of the 15th Amendment unless it included women's voting. This amendment entitled Race No Bar to Vote-Ratified 3/02/1870 claims: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (The constitution of the United



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States of America with Explanatory notes 79). (AWSA) was another significant movement that invited the states to campaigning to get suffrage. In 1890, the two associations united and shaped (NAWSA) (Daily History).

After a century of fighting, the congress passed the 19th Amendment. This latter entitled Women's suffrage ratified in 4/06/1920 declares: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" (ibid 81). In 1920, vote for women became legal in the United States in addition to other rights that feminists were calling for such as education and employment. But suffrage was the major achievement of first wave feminists.

Unlike Europe, the United States witnessed two different feminist groups. The first and original group made up of white ones who were looking for social and political equality with males. The second group was made up of black women who felt to be apart from the first group. They testified the great struggle that women ever saw because of slavery, all kinds of discrimination including racism, sexism, and class that banned them from any right.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, and exactly in 1865, slavery in America was abolished. But the Black community found itself facing another dilemma that was known as segregation. This latter prevented the black women to be part of the movements led by white feminists. Though the black females became free, they were excluded from being in factories and schools with white people.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, black females wanted to share their lacking demands with the white ones. Unfortunately, the white feminists refused to be equal to black women. Their rejection was expressed through the creation of segregated institutions, organizations and events. Later on, black activists started to organize their own movements.

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### **1.3.2. The Second Wave of Feminism:**

Second wave feminism goes back to 1950s till 1980s. It was after the end of the Second World War when women were obliged to give back their jobs to male-workers again (Daily history). This was a precious occasion for women to shed light on the issue and call for equal pay. Susan Osborne raises two prominent issues in her book '*Feminism*'. The first one is abortion. The legislation of abortion was a central demand that women were asking for because they believed that they are free to do whatever they want by their bodies (30). She explains also that the second wave feminism with its organizations made a great effort to include the equal pay and equal employment opportunities among the essential demands. She adds that sex discrimination within the work places was another dilemma facing women.

Thus in 1976, the equal opportunities commission aims to finish the sexist discrimination and emphasis on equal chances for men and women (31). Over the course of the second wave, feminism also appeared among the Western cultures principles. The majority of people influenced by this movement insisted in their demands on equal pay, sexual and reproductive choice, parental leave, and political representation (Freedman 19).

#### **1.3.2.1. Second Wave of Feminism in the United States:**

In 1941, when the United States entered into the Second World War, the attitude towards women changed. They were useful as needed in all sorts of work however black women got few opportunities because of racism. In other words the whites were favored than the black ones at work. The main demands that white American women insisted on it were: equal pay and the legalization of abortion. Since men were engaged in the war, women took their places at work but unfortunately they were paid less than men. Thus, they were not satisfied with this and call for their legal right (Susan 30).

The second demand that American women called for was the legalization of abortion. On January 22, 1973, the Americans witnessed what was known by *Roe v. Wade*; it was a legal case in which the famous Supreme Court decision gave women

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the right to choose to have an abortion.(Susan30) It was officially included in the Fourteenth Amendment that says: "...No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; or shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" (The constitution of the United States of America).

The second wave of feminism synchronized the civil rights and black power movements in USA. These movements criticized "Imperialism", "Capitalism" and focused on the notion and interests of "oppressed groups: working classes, blacks, and in principle, also women and homosexuals" (Krolokkee et al 9). However racism and segregation still existed among the both communities (black and white) which meant that the black female was marginalized by the black liberation movement led by black activists and the feminist one led by white women (ibid8-9). During 1960s, Afro-American women were on the road of success because the Civil Rights movement failed in achieving the demands. Unfortunately, black males did not support such achievement since they were supporting the white patriarchy. Within 1980s, black females were again in the lowest status due to the sexist and racist discrimination imposed on them (ibid 8-9).

### **1.3.3 Third Wave of Feminism:**

Third wave feminism began in the mid of 1990s. It was the continuation of the first and second waves. Third wave feminists felt that the previous waves skipped some points although second wave feminists achieved their goals. (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA)

It was a turning point in the feminist movement. This wave facilitated the female's access and contribution in politics, business and other domains that women were not permitted to dream about (Iannello71). Rebecca Walker said: "We want to be linked without fore mothers and centuries of women's movements but we also want to make a space for young women to create their own; different brand of

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revolt; and so we chose the name Third wave” (quoted in Iannello 71). Third wavers felt that the second wave excluded some groups like lesbians, bisexual and transsexual perspectives.

Indeed feminism was a successful movement in some extends since it brought a lot of changes and new ideas in the modern society. Feminism helped woman to reach power and become such as Margaret Thatcher. But it was a failure because black women in particular were still living under the oppression of white men and women as well.

Although the feminist slogans and symbols clarified the purposes of feminism and declared that it was for all women without exceptions, it focused only on the needs of middle-class and well-educated white women. So, the black feminists realized that colored women were totally out from the feminist agenda and white feminists used black women as a tool to strengthen their movement and attract the public attention.

As a reaction to this racist position, another variant of feminism coined particularly for black women called ‘Black Feminism’.

### **1.3.3.1. The Third Wave of Feminism in United States:**

Far from the ordinary feminism in the United States, the Afro-American women often had a great dilemma. They had to decide whether to concentrate on the struggle for their race liberation or on the struggle for their gender liberation. To choose one usually meant to be rejected by the supporters of the other group (Maluchová 28). Hence, they organized themselves into a group that represented them differently from white considered themselves as womanists rather than black feminists. The term that appeared at firstly in Alice Walker’s essay “*In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*”. According to Walker, Womanism had a great role in improving the relationship between the black males and females. So, black women joined the males’ movement for race liberation and reject feminism. Intersectionality also had a great role in demonstrating the black women’s life experience and helped them in forming movements in order to call for their rights.

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To conclude, the 1980s in general was a period of significant achievements that black women witnessed. However, the 90s was just a continuation of the 80s and it brought no big improvement to black female (Maluchovà Andrea28-29-30-31).

### **1.4. The Definition of Black Feminism:**

Black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression and racism are bound together and relate to one another via intersectionality. Several points are taken from Alice Walker's womanism. She believes that black women witnessed a distinct and awful moments that white women did.

Black feminist organizations of the 1970s faced a lot of obstacles in demonstrating that feminism did not concern solely white women. Contrarily to Feminism, Black Feminism includes individuals of all races and ethnicities in their discourse and movement. But black females activists were the core of this organization (quoted in CRC2). There was a claim argues that black feminism began with Sojourner Truth's speech '*Ain't I a Woman*' in 1851. This sentence raises the notion of Intersectionality.

This latter was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. She explains it as an interaction or intersection of multiple kinds of discrimination including racism, sexism and class. She said that it was already existed with Anna Julia Cooper and Maria Stewart in the nineteenth century in the United States. It is obviously since all the subjects were not new as racism and sexism. Moreover, she mentions the focus of intersectionality which is the invisibility that is part from feminism. Hence, black feminism highlighted the issue of invisibility of colored women and attempted to promote the black feminist project (Adwunmi2014).

Intersectionality is a framework designed to explore the dynamic between co-existing identities (e.g. woman, Black) and connected systems of oppression (e.g. patriarchy, white supremacy). The term was created by Kimberlé Crenshaw and challenges an assumption continuing to undermine the feminist movement – that women are a homogeneous group, equally positioned by structures of power. In a

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feminist context, it allows for a fully developed understanding of how factors such as race and class shape women's lived experiences, how they interact with gender (Claire 2016).

To sum up, black women were excluded from being part of the feminist movement throughout the three waves, because white females refused to be equal to them. That means, racism still exists among such movements. However, black women did not surrender to that attitudes, rather they established their own organizations and movements that represented them as different females.

### **1.5. Black Feminism in the United States:**

The first advent of more than 20 Millions of Africans in America precisely in Virginia was in 1619. They were transported in ships under miserable conditions and cruel treatment. Slavers' brutality on Africans during the trip was the first stage of transforming free people into slaves. African females were more victimized and what made their experience different from males was the slave owners' sexual exploitation on them.

In the South of America, European colonizers were in need of cheap labor hands for agriculture, so Africans were directly placed on plantations. But women were given some other options of work, they were up to choose to work either in plantations as men did, to work as "house servant" with better conditions or to live in states such as Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland and work as producers of other slaves. Unfortunately, even those who chose to work in plantations and house servants were not excluded from being raped and asexually exploited. Black women were punished for their misapplication even worse than men. They were burned alive or even hanged (Hooks 2-3).

Despite the brutal conditions of slavery, African- American women used to express their concern either individually or in groups, spontaneously or in formal organizations. By the nineteenth century they started publicly calling for their needs with the help of some free black women such as Maria Stewart, Frances

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E.W.Horper and Sojourner Truth who spoke about black women's rights in the Women's Rights Movement (Black Feminism in US).

During the late of that century precisely at the end of the Civil War 1865, black women started to organize their own clubs due to the impossibility to join both male and white women organizations. Black females found themselves obliged to fight for their rights as human beings and also against racism that appeared during the first-wave feminism when white women refused to support the black women's struggle for their rights. They were also struggling against sexism because black males excluded them from their organizations and this was after the abolition of slavery (Meluchová 5).

In 1895, (NFAAW) was founded. This movement contained 36 clubs in 12 states and in 1896 united with the League of Colored Women into (NACW) which consisted mainly of teachers. Their interests were education, material progress and health conditions. By the end of this, the black women's conditions somewhat improved (ibid 10). By the beginning of the 20 century women were still persisting on their struggle for suffrage but Afro-American women had obstacles with some racist politicians and white suffragists. However, they had to compete with the white ones in order to obtain their right to vote but they gave more importance to achieve racial equality (ibid 13).

The twentieth century also witnessed another active movement called 'The Harlem Renaissance' appeared precisely from 1918 to 1937(Hutchinson 2019).It was considered as the rebirth African American culture and art. The Harlem Renaissance concentrated on the self-definition of black people and the black experience. The role that was given to females during Harlem Renaissance was just salon hostess or entertainer. Female writers and others were ignored as participant to the movement. Concerning the black females, Rinny said "In truth, the African-American female was a vital and integral part of the Harlem Renaissance who deserved far more than to be transgressed by the African-American male and society as whole" (*bglh-marketplace*).

In 1941, the United States entered the WWII and females were needed to work outside their home and black women also had some chances to employ. After

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WWII, the labor of Afro-Americans and mainly women were needed for manufactured goods (Meluchová 16). The black women's opportunities improved during the 1940s and 1950s where they succeeded in some fields such as dancing singing, filming and writing. During the 1960's the Afro-American men and women merged together in their struggle for equality (ibid 19). In 1963, the Equal Pay Right was signed by J. F. Kennedy which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex. It was the first federal law that referred to sex discrimination. The law said that in certain areas women who had the same work as their colleagues must be paid the same wages” (Meluchová 21). 1963 was also famous by the March in Washington that claimed for the Afro-Americans’ opportunity to express their disappointment about the subsistent life conditions.

After a decade of struggle and fight, (NBFO) was founded and its main demands were political, social and economic equality for black women. Even in the 1980's black women were still suffering from racist and sexist discrimination and they believed that black feminism is different from the conventional one and they called themselves womanist which appeared at first in Alice Walker's essay "*In Search of Our Mother's Garden*".(Meluchová 21, 28, 29)

During the 1980's there were some achievements for black females such as writing through which Afro-American writers expressed the black women's experience and thoughts. In 1990's also black females found themselves in the same situation of double struggle (race and gender liberation). To sum it up, the existence of Afro-American women in the United States from early time till the current century had faced several obstacles that constrain them from living as normal citizens with all their rights (ibid 30).

### **1.6. Biography of Bell Hooks:**

Gloria Jean Watkins was born on September 25, 1952 in Hopkinsville Kentucky. She belongs to a poor working class family. Her father Veodis Watkins was a doorman and her mother Rosa Bell Watkins was a housewife. Watkins was hardly affected by her grandmother ‘Bell Hooks’ who was known by her keen



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decisions and presence. She was a pupil in one of the segregated public schools in Hopkinsville. Gloria Watkins studied at Stanford University on scholarship. She finished her studies in 1973 and got her Master degree in English Literature in 1976 at University of Wisconsin at Madison. She worked about Toni Morrison's work in her PhD dissertation. In 1983 she obtained her PhD at the University of California Santa Cruz. Gloria Watkins chose her grandmother's name Bell Hooks as a penname because she wanted to focus on her work rather than her character.

Watkins was surprised by the lack of interest in race issues by white women writers and gender issues by black male scholars. She wrote her first masterpiece "*Ain't I a Woman*": *Black Women and Feminism* (1981). This book treats the intersection of race, sexism and class at the center of black women's life. This work paved the way for further critical writings. She became also a teacher at Oberlin College on Ohio 1988. In 1989, she published *Talking Black: "Thinking Feminist", "Thinking Black"* which reflected the impact of white imperialist, patriarchal domination in daily life.

Hooks is a writer, teacher and cultural critic. She is among the pioneers of black feminism. She published over 30 books and scholarly articles in different topics as patriarchy, self A discovery, masculinity, feminist thought, creation and politics and engaged pedagogy (Quintana2010).

### **1.6 .The Overview of Bell Hooks' Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (1981):**

The title of Hooks' book *Ain't I a Woman* indicates to Sojourner Truth's speech. It asks for the validity to be considered a woman. *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism* calls for the inclusion of black women and find their position in society. This work shows the black girl experience in USA and how they suffered from different kinds of discrimination and oppression.

Bell Hooks' work examines firstly the black slave female experience and how she brutalized and victimized by the white oppressive system. It includes also the impact of sexism in the enslaved woman's life. Hooks discusses about several

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inhuman acts like rape, working in the fields in terrible conditions, breeding or birthing babies for the white master's advantage and other abusive deeds.

The next part is about the devaluation of black womanhood. It continued its explanation of the bad treatments that the black female faced. Hooks mentioned many myths and stereotypes that the white race used to make the black community on the bottom like the matriarchal myth which gave a wrong sense of power to the black mother to create a conflict between the black man and woman and distort the black girl's femininity. However the third chapter is about the imperialism of the white and black patriarchy and how the two contributed on shaping the black woman's life. The next section treats the issue of racism within the feminist movement and how the white women refused the black woman's participation with them.

The last chapter talks about the exclusion of black women from Feminism and how they used as tools to advocate the feminist agenda. Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* explains and shows the black woman's experience in USA and raises the issues of sexism, racism and patriarchy that were applied to marginalize the black woman. It investigates the evolution of black women from slavery to the feminist movement. The author used this book to make the audience aware about the injustice of the white systems and the white women's negative attitudes and their racism that tried to prevent the black women to move on.

### **1-8- Conclusion:**

This chapter has been mostly concerned with feminism in general, and it stated the life conditions that women were living under, in addition to the circumstances that caused them to organize such movement. This latter went through stages that were known by waves; each wave was concerned with special demands. Over the course of the chapter, black woman was the target. It also reported the black female struggle in the United States in order to be seen as human being at the initial step. It also shed light on the obstacles that faced them in order to be part of the feminist movement, such as racism and segregation caused by the

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white community. The black females' challenge to form their own organizations and call for their rights was also among the first chapter interests. Since the second chapter is concerned with depicting the black females' life experience in *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and Feminism* written by Bell Hooks, this chapter includes also the overview of that book and the bibliography of that writer.

**Chapter Two:**  
**The Depiction of Black**  
**Feminism in Bell Hooks'**  
*Ain't I a Woman: Black*  
*Women and Feminism*  
*(1982)*

**The Depiction of Black Feminism in Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982)**

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**Chapter Two: The Depiction of Black Feminism in Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982)**

**2.1. Introduction**

**2.2. Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience**

**2.3. Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood**

**2.4. The Imperialism of Patriarchy**

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## **2.1. Introduction:**

After long suffering and oppression of women, Feminism came to raise their voices, solve their problems and put an end for the unjust treatment that male applied on them. It was the voice that enabled them to express their wishes and hopes. Even though the white female could finally talk openly about her experience in conferences and meetings, the black girl had no opportunity to enter such kinds of encounters. This latter was excluded from the feminist curriculum because the black woman had not the privilege to be called a woman yet.

From this perspective, the second chapter deals with Bell Hooks' book entitled *Ain't I a Woman* in which she depicts the pictures of oppression that the black women witnessed during slavery till the twentieth century. The female slave experience was the harshest section since it includes brutal and inhuman scenes such as rape, sexism, physical and moral abuse. It also treats the issue of devaluating the black womanhood by promoting negative myths that distorted the black woman's reputation. This chapter explains how the patriarchal system formed the American society and black woman's life in particular. It focuses on racism within the feminist groups and how the white women refused the black girl's participation in women's movement. At last, it examines their exclusion and rejection from all feminist organizations and their despair from the racist behaviors of its members.

## **2.2. Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience:**

The first chapter entitled 'Sexism and the Black Female Slave' introduces in details the reasons and the circumstances behind the terrible life experience that black females witnessed. Moreover, Bell Hooks signified how racism cooperated together with sexism and slavery to put black women in the lowest status and the worst conditions than any other social group in America.

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Historians and scholars said that sexism has been originated from Europeans. When the white invaders came to America, they were needly to laborers in their factories and plantations. The laborers who were available were the blacks imported from Africa to America as slaves, however not all slaves were prized in the slave trade since the black female slaves were not valued. This was the first apply of sexism in America. The second one was when the need of laborers increased and the black females were found with few numbers consequently white males encouraged white females to have sexual relationships with black male slaves. Meanwhile, both races of women (whites and blacks) were suffering under the American white patriarchal community. Concerning the offspring resulted from the inter-racial relationships, the female's race was the measure to classify them. Thus, black women gave birth to slaves while black men who's partners were whites had free children (15, 16). As a conclusion, the black female slaves experienced awful conditions of life under slavery, racism and sexism.

The black females' experience started in their homeland Africa, where they were living under a harsh patriarchal order whereon females were obliged to do all the hard work just as it was stated in Amanda Berry Smith's report about the condition of African women during the nineteenth century:

The poor women of Africa, like those of India, have a hard time. As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry all the wood, carry all the water on their heads, and plant all the rice. The men and boys cut and burn the bush, with the help of the women; but sorving the rice, and planting the cassava, the women have to do. You will often see a great, big man walking ahead with nothing in his hand but a cutless (as they always carry that or a spear), and a woman, his wife, coming on behind with a great big child on her back and load on her head ( quoted in Hooks 16).

Due to their accustomedness of obedience to a higher authority, black women were targeted by white male slavers thus they were useful in both plantations and

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domestic tasks in addition to being safer than males who were dangerous. Hence, during the slave passage to the New World, black female slaves were harmfully tortured; even pregnant ones did not deserve any compassion. The sadistical experiences that black women and men witnessed during the trip were just the initial stage of transforming free humans into slaves. White slavers used all the methods of brutalization existed at that time precisely to succeed in preparing controlled slaves. Hooks said that the slavers recorded in their books that they were cruel to Africans just to tame them, this was exactly an attempt to justify their cruelty (17, 18, 19).

Though the slave ship experience had a great physical and psychological impact on both males and females, from one angle, she confirmed that the black female was more victimized than the male since she “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”(22). From another angle, scholars minimized the black female slave experience and refused to discuss it despite the fact of her being under the two other forces (sexism and racism). In the meantime, they emphasized that the black male was much victimized because he was stripped of his masculinity and treated as females. They confirmed that this is the worst for men. Therefore, black men’s oppression during slavery has been called de-masculinization(20). Regarding this contradiction, Hooks suggested to scholars to: “Examine the dynamics of sexist and racist oppression during slavery in the light of the masculinization of black female and not the de-masculinization of the black male” (22).

In addition to the hard works imposed on the black female slaves and within the cruelty and the torture of their masters, they were also sexually exploited, than if a black woman did not acquiesce to her master’s sexual demands, she would be punished and petrified. White males’ sexual exploitation did not exclude the black male slaves, Hooks wrote the following statement about this exploitation:



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Racist exploitation of black women as workers either in the fields or domestic household was not as de-humanizing and demoralizing as the sexual exploitation. The sexism of colonial white male patriarchy spared the black male slave the humiliation of homosexual rape and other forms of sexual assault. While institutionalized sexism was a system that protects black male sexuality, it (socially) legitimized sexual exploitation of black females (24).

White males absolved themselves from the responsibility of sexually exploiting the black females by giving them money (bribing them), consequently to classify them as prostitutes in indirect way (25).

In order to support her argument concerning the social status of black women, the writer used some white abolitionists' reports such as Lydia Marie Child who summed up with: "The negro woman is unprotected either by law or public opinion. She is the property of her master, and her daughters are his property" (quoted in Hooks26). The black activist Angela Davis, by her part, also argued that the sexual exploitation of the black female slaves was "an institutionalized method of terrorism which had its goal the demoralization and de-humanization of black women" (quoted in Hooks27).

There were also many other white abolitionists who were supporting the anti-slavery efforts solely to stop the sexual relationships between white men and black female slaves instead of consolidating with the black community, in this regard Linda Brent commented on her mistress' attitude toward her husband's rape of black females as follows:

I was soon convinced that her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted, but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr, but she was incapable of feeling for the condition

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of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slaves were placed (quoted in Hooks28).

In colonial American society, the brutal treatment that the white men exposed upon the enslaved black women caused the male's hatred of women and women's body. In fact, the white male religious teachers had a great influence by considering woman in general as inherently sinful creature and men are victims of her sexual impulses (29). Consequently, white men believed that women themselves were responsible for breeding the misogynistic feeling. As a solution and in order to dominate and control women, white colonial men institutionalized sexist discrimination and sexist oppression (31).

In the nineteenth century, and by the growing economic prosperity, white Americans rejected the fundamentalist Christian doctrine and changed their perception of women. Thus, white women were considered virtuous ladies. Meanwhile, the sexual exploitation, the oppression and the cruelty upon the black female rose, which means that racism, was the sole reason (32). This intentioned change that occurred under the leadership of white Americans had two objectives. The first one was to benefit the maximum from raping the black women. The second objective was to make the black males doubted about their masculinity and could not protect the females of their race.

White Americans succeeded, from one side, in making the black males imitating them in raping the black females rather than protecting them from such assault. Drivers who were concerned with transporting the slaves to the plantations were the ones who used to rape the black females as they felt themselves somehow powerful than any other slave (35). In this content, the historian Eugene Genovese discussed the sexual exploitation of enslaved females and concluded that: "some drivers forced the slave women in much the same way as did some masters and overseers....Under the task system the driver set the day's work for each slave and had no trouble making a woman's lot miserable if she refused him" (quoted in Hookds35).

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Enslaved black woman felt depressed by both groups of men, whites and blacks, so she often demanded help from their white mistresses who unfortunately responded them by persecution and torment just the way their husbands did (36). Moreover, raping and sexually assaulted the black female was legitimized whereas for the white women were considered a crime that law should punish the doer. Regarding this point, Genovese contended that: "Rape meant, by definition, rape of white women, for no such crime as rape of black women. Even when a black man sexually attacked a black woman, he could be punished by his master; no way existed to bring him to trial or to convict him if so brought" (quoted in Hooks 35).

In colonial America, white men had two purposes through the sexual exploitation of black women. The first one was to satisfy their libidos as it was mentioned before, and the second one which was much important for the slave owners was the production of slaves. Breeding was legitimized since there were special states where the black females (ladies or girls, married or unmarried) were sent to. There were also special markets to sell them. In addition to this humiliation, white men did not care for the black pregnant woman's health and they forced her to do all the works she used to do, which resulted frequently in miscarriages and dead babies more than survived ones (42). But the most damnable thing was that colonial men did not respect the space between pregnancies and they forced the black women to engage in another sexual intercourse once she gave birth to a baby.

The southern white observer of the practice of slave breeding, Frederick Olmstead commented: "In the state of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, as much attention is paid to the breeding and growth of negroes as to that of horses and mules" (quoted in hooks 39). In order to encourage breeding among the black women, some slave owners used to reward them. Another method was found by the slave owners to have large numbers of slaves, they encouraged the sexual relationships between black males and black females which were prohibited before. Thus, the black community thought that the Americans were helping them to have their own culture and they desired a minister to perform their marriages ceremony like the whites did (43).

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After long years of challenges, the black community had its own sub-culture but the patriarchal white America reappeared concerning sex roles where some plantations owners divided the roles of slave families. At that time black males were not given the complete authority to rule their families (44). Bell Hooks stated that some sociologists and historians said that the reason behind the situation the blacks were living in was that their sexual politics and this was just to make the white community far from such impact (45).

### **2.3. Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood:**

The second chapter is about the continuation of black womanhood after slavery. The sexist racist view continued its attempts to distort the black woman's reputation. Hooks says that the institutionalized devaluation of black womanhood encouraged all white men to regard black females as whores or prostitutes (62). This saying clears up the writer's direction which is her refusal to the white supremacist system. Besides, she stated in this section the horrific stereotypes that had been said by the white American public to devalue the black womanhood. Her analysis of the period during the black reconstruction composes a lot of negative images about black women. The most prominent and disturbing myth was describing the African American woman as sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black or white (Hooks 52). This was the white's perception about the black female which is a kind of dehumanization because it shows the female in general as evil and sin. This ideology was taken from the Christian belief that sees the black woman as a source of evil and lust.

It is clear that the whites built their myths based on religious philosophies. They used religion as an argument to persuade the white and black communities that the black woman is inferior. They knew so well that the American citizen never says 'No' to the Biblical justifications, thus the enslaved women as well accepted this awful fact thinking that this was the absolute reality. Hooks said so but she did not explain their attitude by saying the great majority of enslaved black women

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accepted the dominant culture's sexual morality and adapted it to their circumstances (54). This way of thinking bequeathed to the coming generations. For this reason, the black females were still under the oppression of the patriarchy and other racist-sexist forces.

The whites targeted the black females because they were regarded as the weakest members in society and the black male's dignity. They attempted to touch their masculinity. Indeed the African American men felt impotent and incapable because of the racist white regime. Hooks reported a black woman's witnessing when her husband wanted to protect his wife's reputation and arrested because of his behavior. She said that the judge stated that the court will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a white man (quoted in Hooks 57). This claim shows that the white racist agenda never ended. Instead, it continued in promoting for further racist projects and designing conspiracies against the black folks.

The forbidden inter-racial marriage was another excuse used by the whites to prevent a legal relationship with the black girl. In their eyes, the black woman could not be a lady. The American patriarchal people reacted severely against the marriage between white men and the black females because they were afraid that their status would be threatened. In other words, becoming a wife of a white man means having a high privilege and respect. Hooks argues that: "...if a large majority of that small group of white men who dominate decision-making bodies in American society were to marry black women, the foundation of white rule would be threatened" (64). However the marriage between white women and black males was accepted because the white girl was a fragile and weak. In this case, there was no threat to the existence of the patriarchal rule. Hooks said so in her analysis: "Since white women represent a powerless group when not allied with powerful white men, their marriage to black men is no great threat to existing white patriarchal rule" (ibid).

Even the mass media played a key role in devaluating the black womanhood. The white producers gave negative roles to the black actresses and made them

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clowns of the American cinema. The first option is immoral and unpleasant role however the second one misrepresented the feminine picture. Hooks declares: "In other television shows the predominant image of black women is that of the sex object, prostitute and whore... etc. The second image is that of the overweight nagging maternal figure" (66). The American television tried to depress the black female's psyche and confirm their myths about the black girl. These stereotypes existed long before slavery which claimed that the black female owned a bizarre masculine characteristic. For this reason, black women were forced to work at hard tasks. Bell Hooks says: "...black women possessed unusual masculine-like characteristics not common to the female species. To prove their point, they often forced black women to labor at difficult jobs while black male slaves stood idle" (71). The whites used the maximum of theories to dominate the black minds in particular to ensure their loyalty and servitude for the white families.

The term 'Black Matriarchy' was widely spread among the American people to discredit the black men and women. Hooks explains the point by saying: "Black women were told that they had overstepped the bonds of femininity because they worked outside the home to provide economic support for their families and that by so doing they had de-masculinized black men" (75). It was logical reaction since the white woman was also not allowed to access the business world at that time. But the community gave other arguments concerning the issue to portray the black woman as a guilty and irresponsible person. Someone who thought about the self and ignored the social norms of the patriarchal American society clearly believed that the black female's stance devalued the black male's rank at home because the wife became an economic provider of the family. This idea mentioned in Hooks' book when she spoke about the white male scholars and their sexist view since they were students of an elite world as she stated. These members saw that: "The assumption being that black men had vacated their parenting roles because of domineering black women, whose dominance was attributed to their being economic providers while black men were unemployed" (Hooks 76). Well, the

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writer wanted to say that their writings indirectly supported the patriarchal rule because the white male in general could not see a woman in the lead.

Even the black husband would not accept so due to the influence of the white man upon the American African's psyche. Unfortunately, they were affected by the myth of matriarchs even though they knew it was a lie told by the whites. Hooks said so to highlight the position: "the argument that black women were matriarchs was readily accepted by black people even though it was an image created by white males" (78). Concerning the idea, any reader has a critical mind would ask several questions about the reason behind the negative attitude that the black man showed towards the black female's access into the working domains. If the reader looks deeply, he could notice the blind imitation of the white patriarchal man that the black male offered to keep his masculinity in secure. They thought in this way their manhood was protected under the umbrella of the patriarchal society. They had the gets to use the matriarchal myth against the black women to blame the black women for their passive roles at homes. Unconsciously, they motivated a mutual sexism i.e the white-black sexism. Hooks clarifies that in her declaration: "white racist oppressors were able to establish a bond of solidarity with black men based on mutual sexism" (79).

Hooks' analysis focuses on the fact that the historians disregarded the oppression of black women although they were victims of a double oppression i.e the sexist-racist oppression (80). The myth of matriarchy was unbelievable because it degraded the black female's image as wife and mother. The most shocking part is the black male's solidarity with the wrong side to devalue the black womanhood. They could not realize that it was an organized conspiracy against the black folk to keep them under control.

Yet many black women liked the matriarchal theory because they felt proud to become a vital member in the black family as Hooks mentioned in her writing (80). This theory pushed the white Americans to create another myth to minimize the black woman's personality. They said that the black woman had amazonic

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characteristics which enable “a collective group of women who joined together in an effort to promote female self-government” (82). The whites used this fantasy deliberately for two opposite reasons. The first one to show their interest to solve the internal affairs of the black family. The second cause, they could achieve their real agenda which was destroying the blacks' dignity.

Hooks' despair appears when she says: “when white women enter the work force today it is seen as a positive step, a move toward gaining independence, while more than ever before in our history black women who enter the work force are encouraged to feel that they are taking jobs from black men or de-masculinizing them” (83). This quote shows the author's certainty about the white racism that separated the white-black female despite their belonging to the same sex. This made the black woman on the bottom of society. In addition to the myths of matriarchs and Amazons, the sapphire image is another theory added to cause the same damage as the previous ones did. The sapphire image is similar to the traditional vision that depict the black woman as evil (Hooks 85). It was used in TV shows particularly in **Amos'n Andy** in which Kingfish's wife is a disturbing, termagant person so by using the mass media they attempted to show fake feelings towards the black man (hooks 85).

These myths and stereotypes continued its devaluation of the black womanhood thinking that it was an effective method to remove the black original identity and replace it by another one which is based on the negative stereotypes that the whites coined before. The African American female found herself alone without protection because she lost the last hope when the black man adopted the white patriarchal policy. The African American male imitated the white's behavior in terms of sexism. They believed such kinds of manners made them powerful and independent men but the old history glorified the whites and put the contribution of the black people especially the black woman in the margin of oblivion. In this case, it was depending on the black female either to seek change and react so strongly against the racist-sexist policy or stay in the corner waiting for another oppressive



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method to come. Hooks focused on the fact that the devaluation of the black womanhood came as result of the sexual exploitation during slavery.

### **2.4. The Imperialism of Patriarchy:**

In the third chapter entitled '*The Imperialism of Patriarchy*', Bell Hooks explained how the imperialist capitalism system affected the American society and how it changed the foundations of the American patriarchy. As well as, she reported its consequences on women in general then she went specifically on describing the status of black women at that time. The writer did not miss the occasion to speak about the Muslim movement that was under the lead of Elijah Muhammad, and how the black people were influenced by it. Hooks also dealt with the struggles that the black liberation movement faced in order to achieve the goals demanded.

As an introductory sentence, she said "When the contemporary movement toward feminism began, there was a little discussion of the impact of sexism on the social status of black women" (Hooks 87). This latter meant that the black females were excluded from such movement, in other words, the black females had not the privilege to be called women yet. She claimed that even the white women from upper and middle classes practiced sexism upon black women by showing no support to their oppressed situation. Their interest behind this was solely the economic equality between the white sexes which consequently gave an opportunity to poor and lower –class men to oppress lower class white and black women. While white feminists targeted the white patriarchy and considered it as an enemy, black males saw an occasion to cover their sexism and their sexist exploitation of women (Hooks87). In complementing, Bell Hooks argued that the sexist oppression among the black community was a result of imitation of the whites plus the higher status given to black males than females. It was a way through which black men wanted to show their masculinity that they were stripped of it. In addition, black males sought to prove that racism was not the only problem the Americans complained about (Hooks88).

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Throughout the nineteenth century, the black liberation movement was shaped under male leadership, while females were excluded though it included some courageous ladies such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. These ladies were seen exceptional individuals who did not represent the norm (Hooks89). In this regard, the writer argued with a quote from Frederick Douglas' "*What the Black Man Want*" in which he emphasized that racism in America reflected a struggle between white and black males whereas females were excluded and remained deprived of their rights (Hooks90). In an explicit words, the leadership of black rights movement functioned with patriarchal paradigm that marginalized black women.

By the same century, within their subculture, black males created a social patriarchal order just the same way the white community did. But this latter (white patriarchy) did not appreciate it and used some strategies to weaken it. Among those strategies, they continued their attempt in depriving black males from their masculinity by preferring the black females in the work force than males, Hooks cleared up this by: "The idea that black men felt emasculated because black women worked outside the home is based on the assumption that men find their identity through work and are personally fulfilled by acting as breadwinners" (Hooks93). Myron Brenton also shed more light on this problem in his: "The American Male-A Penetrating Look at the Masculinity Crisis" where Bell Hooks commented as follows: "He argues that men who accept the idea that work is an expression of their masculine power and should be the most important aspect of their life experience are usually disappointed" (Hooks93). Thus it was a technique used by the white patriarchy to cover their strategy to win the males competitiveness toward the domination of capitalist power structures in American society over black male (Hooks94).

The scenario of the nineteenth century repeated itself during the twentieth century, where black males recognized their duty toward their families and were willing to be the protectors of females of their race. This was an expression of their masculinity that was wasted before. Concerning the black females, they remained in

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the same social class (the lowest) under the impact of racism and the two social patriarchies (white and black).

Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King JR, Stokley Carmichael, Amiri Baraka and other black male leaders in the black liberation movement supported patriarchy and refused the idea of working women outside the home and also refused the endeavors about the equality between sexes. It clearly appeared in Amiri Baraka comment:

Those were the days, all right. A man was a man, and a woman was a woman, and each of them knew what that meant. Father was the head of his family in the real sense of the term. Mother respect him for it and received all the gratifications she needed or wanted at home, doing her well-defined jobs....Man was strong, women was feminine ---and there was little loose talk about phony equality (quoted in Hooks 96).

It was feint made by the white supremacists that black man was a real man since he could control his woman. The reality behind this was to argue that black men were rapists (96).

According to the 60s black political activists, the black liberation movement was the starting stage of emerging black patriarchy. However critics argued that black men had a contradiction of values; they were working for the black power from one side and choosing white females companions from another side (Hooks97).Of course it was encouraged by whites in order to devalue the black power because they believed that they would never be equal to the blacks who were brought to America as worthless slaves. Bell Hooks continued her statement about the 60s black power movement and said that it did not represent the black community as whole since it was a reaction against racism and in the same time the black leaders were supporting patriarchy(Hooks98).This explicated that the black males were imitating the whites in making women subordinate to them. Consequently, black women were under the two forces of racism and black patriarchy. Thus males (blacks and whites) were sharing sexism and both of them

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believed that women were inferior. John Stoltenberg commented on the political structure of patriarchy in America as follows:

Under patriarchy, men are arbiters of identity for both males and females, because the cultural norm of human identity is, by definition, male identity-masculinity. And, under patriarchy, the cultural norm of male identity consists in power, prestige, privilege, and prerogative as over and against the gender class women. That's what masculinity is. It isn't something else (quoted in Hooks 99).

The long years of slavery and the way the slave owners treated the black females largely affected the black men's perception of those females. They saw themselves the sole representative of the black race during the black liberation movement since females were seen as devalued objects. Black men also socialized with white sexism that generated misogyny among men of both races. But Leonard Schein reported, in his essay 'All Men Are Misogynists', the reality that men in general disregarded it:

Patriarchy's foundation is the oppression of women. The cement of this foundation is the socialization of men to hate women....The patriarchal nuclear family makes all its members dependent upon the male(father/husband).It is in this atmosphere that we grow up, and are extremely sensitive to this hierarchy of power even as children. We realize, more than adults know, that our father (and society in his image, from policeman to doctor to president) is powerful, and that our mother is powerless. She has to scheme and manipulate through sympathy to get what she wants (quoted in Hooks101)

Sexism of the twentieth century became misogyny among the two male groups. Since women of the two races were not equal, each male group expressed their hatred differently. While the whites were using their females as sex objects for economic purposes, the blacks increased the domestic brutality upon their females (Hooks102). This indicated that black females were still dehumanized. From a psychological standpoint, Schein said: "Psychologically, we objectify the people we hate and consider them our inferiors..." (quoted in Hooks102).Thus, the black

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men's perception of black females was like whites did (they were still seen as objects to be exploited).

Within this century, the way of expressing "masculinity" or "masculine power" differed among the males of the two races. While white men measured their masculinity by their ability to exploit others for their own interests, black men believed that the masculine power lied on the ability to use force against others (kill each other) or like it was called by Bell Hooks "black-on-black homicide". (Hooks 102-103)

The twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of another movement called 'Feminism'. Some of its supporters thought that it was the reason behind the status women switched to. But actually, it was the result of the American capitalist economic system since a great number of women entered the work force arguing that fathers' incomes were not enough for families. Bell Hooks continued asserting that feminism was just a psychological tool, used by feminists, to persuade women that work was liberating. Even at work, men were present to demonstrate their masculinity by practicing violence upon women and imposing de-humanizing works on them (Hooks 105).

She confirmed that the generation that has been socialized with sexism, brutality and oppression of women, started to recognize, by the twentieth century, that it was a way of expressing their anxiety, anger and fear of losing their masculinity. Schein in his essay concluded that:

We must understand that our anger (and hatred) is something that comes within us. It is not women's fault. It is the attitude that patriarchal society has encouraged us to feel toward all women. When finally confronted with the reality of feminism, which threatens our power and privileges, our defenses cannot hide our anger and we turn to incredible violence (quoted in Hooks 107)

As it was a century of many changes, during the 60s and 70s, a great number of black men joined the Black Muslim groups because they appreciated the sex roles division set by the Muslim doctrine. In this regard, Essien-Udom noted in his report "*Black Nationalism*" that; Muslim women appear to accept their men as

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'first among equals', and in theory, at least, regard the man as the breadwinner and the head of the family. The Muslim women address the men as 'sir'. Wives address their husbands similarly (quoted in Hooks109).

Within the growth of American prosperity, the white males' perception of women changed; they saw the white ones as virtuous ladies however the black ones remained devalued, unlike the Muslim communities where women in general are equal. Thus, the black males who joined the Muslim movement changed their perception of females of their race. They labeled them in the status of respected wife and mother especially with their covered bodies (Hooks110).

Regarding this fact, Bell Hooks argued with what was reported in Essein-Udom's "*The Negro Women: Journey from Shame*":

One of the principal motives which lead Negro women to join the Nation is their desire to escape from their positions women in Negro subculture....Womanly virtues are respected to the Nation. The Muslim male's attitude toward, and treatment of, Negro women contrasts sharply with the disrespect and indifference with which lower-class Negroes treat them. Muhammad's semireligious demand that his followers must respect the black woman has an appeal for black women seeking to escape from their lowly and humiliating position in Negro society and from the predatory sex ethos of lower-class. A refuge from these abuses is found in the Nation of Islam, and freedom from sex exploitation. It is a journey from shame to dignity (quoted in Hooks110-111).

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Women's accession to the Muslim movement was an indication that she was searching for her dignity that she was stripped of it.

Coming back to the American patriarchal society, men of the two races were in a serious competition. Black males believed that all things that whites did, are symbols of power. Thus, even in choosing companions, the black men preferred to be with white females (Hooks 112). In "*Sex and Racism in America*", Calvin Harnton wrote: "...in America, ...the white woman is the great symbol of sexual purity and pride, the black man is often driven to pursue her..." (quoted in Hooks 112). Consequently, the black females were still worthless and were not seen ladies yet. There were black thinkers who shed light on the reality behind the black males' choice of white companions. According to Bell Hooks, they said that it was a technique to make the black males privilege the masculine power (patriarchy) than to challenge racism (Hooks 113). The Imperialist Capitalism that dominated America (a system that benefited the state as a whole rather than families) played a major role in changing the traditional interests of patriarchy (116-117).

After long years of fight, the black liberation movement could finally eliminate segregation but black females were still suffering under the two sexist forces. This indicated that they were excluded from that movement. All in all, it was the white patriarchy's strategies to make the black male believe that oppression of women was the expression of power and masculinity.

### **2.5. Racism and Feminism: The issue of Accountability:**

The American society is shaped by a racist oppressive system. The whites applied this system to divide the community into groups and keep the racial imperialistic policy or the white supremacy. Hooks defines 'Racism' as follows: "a social evil perpetuated by prejudiced white people that could be overcome through bonding blacks and liberal whites" (120). Here, the writer introduces racism as an undesirable act that could be solved by solidarity between whites and blacks. But it

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was some how difficult because it existed every where in schools, streets, government, organizations...etc. It represented the white supremacy and hatred toward the black people who were regarded as an inferior and backward minorities. The black woman in particular was the most victimized and oppressed member since she lived under racist-sexist oppression. She was marginalized due to her race and sex. Unfortunately, she was betrayed by a woman like her. The white woman who supposed to be a friend of her and defended her case in the feminist movement, she removed the black woman from the feminist agenda. Racism was an essential part in the feminist movement.

In this chapter, the author criticizes the white feminists who used the movement to achieve their own goals and neglect the sisterhood with all women that they were talking about. Bell Hooks' analysis reveals some realities about the racist feminist movement and focuses on the fact that Feminism is created only for white women and their demands. Hooks stated that it did not matter if the white woman is more or less racist than the white male, the matter is that they were racist. This declaration justifies the exclusion of colored women from the feminist program and also shows the dark side of the movement. As the feminists declared Feminism is an ideology that speaks out for all women but it does not seem so. The feminists talked about their needs and rights but never mentioned racism which was a great dilemma in the American society. This stance demonstrates their support to the racist regime that the white man established to retain the white supremacy. The white woman's acceptance of the racial hierarchy appears when Hooks said that the white feminists showed their rage toward the decision of granting the black male the right to vote (127).

Many black feminists such as Josephine Ruffin who introduced the black organization the New Era Club was refused to join the Woman's Club Conference (Hooks 129). When the president of the federation Mrs. Lowe was questioned to justify their refusal, she replied "Mrs. Ruffin belongs among her own people. Among them she would be a leader and could do much good, but among us she can create no thing but trouble" (quoted in Hooks).The feminist movement was the last



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hope for the colored females to speak out their voices and narrate their terrible moments. But it was an uneasy task because of the negative stereotypes that pictured the black woman as an impure creature (Hooks 130 *ibid*). In addition, the white women did not support the black womanhood due to their fear from losing their status as a superior race. They could not see the success of an inferior group of people especially a successful black girl who was seen centuries ago as the mule of the world.

Their racism and jealousy pushed them to spread once again further myths to the families from hiring the black female workers. Hooks believed that white women employers used complaints about black women workers to discourage the employer from hiring them (133). Therefore, the black girl was obliged to do hard processes and take men's places with undesirable conditions. The writer argues that the wages of the black and white women workers were not the same although they did the same work (134). This act encouraged indirectly the racist abuses in different places: at work, public areas, schools...etc which made the black female uncomfortable and forced to leave in another place. Bell Hooks gives the reader a clear image about the situation by saying that the refusal white women to share dressing rooms, bathrooms, or lounge areas with black women often meant that black women were denied access to these comforts (135).

The tension between the two groups revealed the hypocrisy and racism that existed within the feminist movement. Its slogans showed a sisterhood and solidarity with all women but the core of Feminism is racist. Hooks addresses the same idea when she says:

They urged black women to join 'their' movement in some cases the women's movement, but in dialogues and writings, their attitudes toward black women were both racist and sexist. Their racism did not assume the form of overt experience of hatred, it was far more subtle. It took the form of simply ignoring the existence of black women or writing about them using common sexist and racist stereotypes (137).

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The American racist ideology pushed the white woman to declare that the word 'woman' means solely the white female and other colored females were seen as the other and did not deserve to be called so (Hooks 138). In the eyes of the white feminists, the white female's experience was much requisite to mention and talk about. For the sake of obtaining sympathy and attract attention, they deliberately compared themselves by the black men as the writer explains in her analysis. The white women suffered as well from the sexist discrimination but she was still far away from the black women's experience during her life time. The white upper and middle class women never mentioned their class in order to seem victims in the eyes of the American community. Hooks explains so in these few words: "They wanted to project an image of themselves as victims and that could not be done by drawing attention to their class" (145).

According to the American society, the house wife who did her usual domestic tasks at home and lived continuously a deadly routine was more victimized comparing with non-white girls. Actually, it was an expected reaction since white women liberations excluded the non-white woman and concentrated its interest on the white middle and upper class women. The black woman was aware about the white female racist attitudes but she believed it could be altered as Hooks mentioned (149). The author explained that the participation of the black woman in the women's movement revealed the real intent of the feminists. They concluded that Feminism was only for the white woman who sought her own ends (ibid).

The white feminists refused to talk about the issue of racism within the movement to make all women victims and all men oppressors (Hooks 150). For this cause, the black women decided to establish their own organization which was a reaction to the white Feminism. The black feminists created this group to fight all kinds of oppression including racist, sexist and class oppression. Hooks claimed that Black Feminism is a logical political movement that struggles various types of iniquity (151). Creating the black feminist groups gave the black female a sense of confidence and strength to react against the women's movement. It was a way of expressing their rage and anger at white women. Hooks said that the black women

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described the white female negatively to mock the white women liberationists (152).

She also reported that the tension between the black and white women started during slavery (153). In other words, racism was not the major cause that motivated the black women to protest. In away or another, the white female played the role of oppressor as well, she beaten and punished the enslaved girl so heavily to express her temper fearing from loosing their status as a superior woman. This image explained by Hooks:“ She feared only that her newly acquired social status might be threatened by white male sexual interaction with black women.....she directed her anger and rage at the enslaved black women”(154).

At the end, the author mentioned that the white male evoked the conflict between the two groups to ensure the remaining of the patriarchal system (155). This competition developed due to the white man's declaration who denounced that one group of women could have the privileges to support the oppression of other groups (156). According to her, the sisterhood between the black and white women is an important process to vanish all kinds of myths and stereotypes that separated women such as 'Racism'. It was a huge a problem within the feminist movement and must be removed (157-158).

### **2.6. Black Women and Feminism:**

This chapter represents the last section of Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* in which the author examines the relationship between the feminist movement and black women which can be described as the black female's exclusion from the movement since they were as tools to serve the white feminist agenda. At the beginning, Hooks mentioned 'Sojourner Truth' one of the leading ladies that contributed in the establishment of Black Feminism during the nineteenth century and the one who said the most famous expression *Ain't I a Woman*. The author praised and talked about Sojourner's efforts that she did to

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support the social equality for the black woman. Hooks said: "Her eagerness to speak publicly in favor of women's rights despite public disapproval and resistance paved the way for other politically-minded black women to express their views" (160).

The black feminist organizations created to put an end to the racist procedures that existed within the feminist movement and react against the American racial social system. The black women found out that they should organize themselves to address their own affairs. The writer asserted this idea in the following quote: "In fact, black female reform organizations were solidly rooted in the women's movement. It was in reaction to the racism of white women and to the fact that the US remained society with an apartheid social structure that compelled black women to focus on themselves rather than all women" (163). Although the racial and sexist treatments within the movement, the white and black organizations were still sharing some common points since women were the heart of both organizations.

Yet, the black feminists focused their attention on the stereotypes that distorted the black womanhood as depicting them as sexually immoral creatures. The black women were more feminist and radical because of their experience which was different from the white woman's life. For instance, Hooks said that the African American girls left the south and migrated north to work as prostitutes (166). This image shows the hard moments that the black woman was forced to endure.

As an example, Hooks spoke about her most favorite black activists 'Anna Julia Cooper'. According to the author's analysis, Anna Cooper was the first black feminist who made the public aware about how racism and sexism influenced the social status of the colored women. She defended the black women by explaining that they were able to be advocated of rights for women (167). In *A voice from the south*, she criticized the black male's refusal to support the black female's participation in the women's rights struggle. She saw that the black woman as well had the right to be a leader in the conflict against racism. Cooper emphasized also

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on the importance of getting a higher education (ibid). As many feminists, Anna Cooper believed that education meant more opportunities and chances to change their miserable situations and reach higher positions in the political organizations.

Additionally, the black women saw that they needed to speak about women suffrage to reformulate the educational regime (Hooks 168). During the 1960s the blacks were not permitted to attend the whites' classes due to segregation and racism that dominated the American community. Subsequently, the black feminists realized the necessity of suffrage in changing the educational system. Gaining the right to vote means more power and achievements. For this reason, Mary Church Terrell encouraged women suffrage. As Hooks stated Terrell described the white women as the accomplices of the white men in their crimes. In her eyes, they were responsible for racism as the male did (169).

As long as the white feminists rejected the participation of the black women in the feminist organizations, the black females had no chance to alter their position in the country. Hence, they supported women suffrage to find their interests betrayed (Hooks 172). The black feminists focused their attention to the issue of racism and tried to resist the Ku Klux Klan and its racial code (Hooks 173). Due to the spread of the racial discrimination within women's organizations, the black women were no more interested in supporting such kind of unions.

When the Civil Rights Movement ended, male leaders like Martin Luther King Junior, A. Phillip Randolph and Roy Wilkins remembered by the American public but no one mentioned the efforts of Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates and Fannie Lou Hamer. After WWII, the liberty that women obtained during this period was a threat to the male patriarchy system. Therefore, the males used the media to eliminate their independence (Hooks 177). As a response the black women wanted to prove their femininity by devaluating the black manhood. There was a famous expression among the black community stated that 'a black man ain't shit' 'the nigger ain't no good'. They promoted for these sayings to depict the black man as a failed husband who could not be an economic provider for his family (Ibid 178).

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Another group of black females brought a strange way of thinking comparing with the previous groups. Some black women believed that the formation of a powerful black patriarchy is necessary. They saw that males should be the dominant figures (182). They were afraid from losing their relationship with the black men so they accepted the male sexist oppression. Many black mothers discouraged their daughters from being workers unless they obliged to do so (Hooks 184).

The black females realized the hatred of white women, so they attacked the white women liberations to express their rage toward them (186). According to the white feminists' (Feminism 'is a way to free themselves from the constraints imposed upon them by idealized concepts of femininity, black women saw it as a way to free themselves from constraints that sexism imposed on them (Hooks 187). The black females discovered that the white women knew nothing about the needs of lower class and the colored females as well (188). The black women felt depressed because of the racist feminist ideology that denied and ignored their case. Some of them left the organizations, others fought solely and the rest went to conferences but they were not fully participated (189).

Feminism created to serve the needs of the white women. They did not accept a critique or comment on their movement (Hooks 190). Hooks said that: "A feminist ideology that mouths radical rhetoric about resistance and revolution while actively seeking to establish itself within the capitalist patriarchal system is essentially corrupt (191). These racist attitudes made the black female scared from missing the little they had. Hence, they refused to join to the feminist movement. Eventually, Hooks ignited a flame of hope in the black female's heart hoping that they continued their struggle against the oppressed systems.

### **2.7. Conclusion:**

The second chapter dealt with Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* in which reveals shocking facts about Feminism and its racist attitude toward the black female. This chapter proved that the movement has a shiny and interesting aspect as well as a mysterious one that is hidden from the public. It explains how the white feminists

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rejected the black women because of their race and their fear from losing their status as superior women. As a result, Black Feminism appeared to stress the issue of racism within the feminist organization and got their betrayed interest.

# **General conclusion**



## General conclusion

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The black woman faced many obstacles and problems in her lifetime. She victimized and brutalized because of her race and sex. She suffered from discrimination, racism, sexism under the laws of patriarchy. The imperialism of patriarchy forced the black women to accept their situation without objection. With the coming of Feminism, they built their hopes on it thinking that it will be a chance for a bright future. But their dream was hard to realize because they were not regarded as women yet.

As it highlighted in the first chapter, Feminism is an organized activity sought the social, political and economic equality of women with men. Its publications and slogans asserted that this movement served the needs of all women of all races. But the conferences denounced by the sufferings of the white upper-middle class women and their disability to work outside their homes and never mentioned the bad experiences that the black women were living in. For this cause, Black Feminism was created to shed light on their rejection from the feminist movement and revealed the conspiracy of the white feminists.

Indeed, the black feminists raised in their conferences different issues such as poverty, care for the aged and disabled people or prostitution. However, the white feminists talked about education and the establishment of literary societies. In addition to this, the white women's goal was proving their capacity to play a major role as the male. In the contrast, the black females established their own organizations to raise their voices and speak about their problems trying to alter their position in their societies. But their main aim is detecting the dark side of Feminism.

After reading and depicting the images of oppression and brutality in Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, several facts and realities have been revealed about Feminism. This latter served only the needs of the white upper-middle class women and neglected the colored women's issues especially black females. The white feminists were afraid to lose their privilege of being superior comparing with other groups. Thus, they supported the white imperialistic system indirectly to ensure a high position in society in front of man. Unlike the

## **General conclusion**

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feminist movement, Black Feminism was distinct in terms of demands and subjects. From one side, the black feminists attempted to attack white women because of their racist attitudes towards them. From the other side, they had one central demand which is to be considered as women. For these reasons, Black Feminism was against the feminist agenda due to the negative stances of the white females and their corrupt and racist mind.

The black female proved her strength and ability to be a complete citizen by becoming a teacher, writer and political leader but she could not alter the social injustices that dominated the American thought. For instance, racism is one of these unchangeable issues.

# **Appendices**

## Examples of Famous Pioneers of Black Feminism:

### Figure 01:

**Sojourner Truth** (Isabella Baumfree) was an African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist. She was born in 1779, Rifton, New York, United States, and she was a typical of children born into slavery and campaigned on the issues of women's suffrage and black rights. Truth ran away from slavery in 1827, and became a well-known preacher and poet. She is famous by her speech on racial inequalities "Ain't I a Woman?" at the 1851 Women's Convention in Ohio in which she spoke out about equal rights for black women. Truth used intentionally that question to point out the discrimination she experienced as a black woman. She greatly contributed to the cause of women especially the women of color, by giving women a platform to speak of the social injustices. She left behind a great and rich legacy behind her, mainly her *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850)*.



**Figure 02:**

**Anna Julia Cooper** is a prominent figure in the American history as a writer and educator. She was born on August 10, 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina, United States (D.C). Julia is well-known by her book “A Voice from the South”. Later on, she became a classic African American feminist text. She dedicated her whole life to defend and give back to her community. She worked as a teacher a principal and founded numerous organizations to solve problems of: education and housing for the less fortunate. Her life is an achievement and a legacy for women—especially those of color, from difficult upbringing to the obstacles conquered during her life as a teacher and a principal. Then, from 1890s Cooper involved in the black women’s club movement in which she became a popular public speaker



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## Bibliography

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This research is entitled “The Depiction of Black Feminism in Bell Hooks’ ‘Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism 1982’”. It deals in details with Feminism in the first chapter, however the second chapter engages with the study of the black female life experience. This work aims at signifying that Feminism does not serve the needs of all women. Consequently, Black Feminism emerged to speak out the black female’s suffering.

Cette recherche s’intitule “la représentation du Féminisme Noir dans ‘N’ai-Je Pas une Femme : Femmes Noires et Féminisme 1982’” Bell Hooks. Elle traite en détail du Féminisme dans le premier chapitre, mais le deuxième chapitre aborde l’étude de l’expérience de vie des femmes noires. Ce travail vise à signifier que le féminisme ne répond pas aux besoins de toutes les femmes. Par conséquent, le féminisme Noir a émergé pour parler de la souffrance des femmes noires.

هذا البحث بعنوان "تصوير الحركة النسوية السوداء في 'ألسنت با مرأة: النساء السوداوات والحركة النسائية 1982'" لـ بيل هوكس. إنه يتناول الحركة النسوية في الفصل الأول بالتفصيل ، كما أن الفصل الثاني خُصَّصَ لدراسة تجربة الإناث السوداوات المعاشة. يهدف هذا العمل إلى تبين أن الحركة النسوية لا تخدم احتياجات جميع النساء. و بالتالي، ظهرت الحركة النسوية السوداء للتعبير عن معاناة الأنثى السوداء.