
by bell hooks

AIN'T I A WOMAN

black women and feminism

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The figure on the cover is an Ashanti doll (Akua'ba) carried by young women in Ghana. It is also a fertility symbol.

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For Rosa Bell, my mother—

who told me when I was a child that she had once written poems—that I had inherited my love of reading and my longing to write from her.

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Introduction

At a time in American history when black women in every area of the country might have joined together to demand social equality for women and a recognition of the impact of sexism on our social status, we were by and large silent. Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriarchs. It was the silence of the oppressed—that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot. Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. In other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves—and we did. Consequently, when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, we argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism. We were afraid to acknowledge that sexism could be just as oppressive as racism. We clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were a new generation

of black women who had been taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority, and to be silent.

Unlike us, black women in 19th century America were conscious of the fact that true freedom entailed not just liberation from a sexist social order that systematically denied all women full human rights. These black women participated in both the struggle for racial equality and the women's rights movement. When the question was raised as to whether or not black female participation in the women's rights movement was a detriment to the struggle for racial equality, they argued that any improvement in the social status of black women would benefit all black people. Addressing the World Congress of Representative Women in 1893, Anna Cooper spoke on the status of black women:

The higher fruits of civilization cannot be extemporized, neither can they be developed normally in the brief space of thirty years. It requires the long and painful growth of generations. Yet all through the darkest period of the colored women's oppression in this country her yet unwritten history is full of heroic struggle, a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds, that often ended in a horrible death; to maintain and protect that which woman holds dearer than life. The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a fee, simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight, as of an entrapped tigress, to keep hallowed their own persons, would furnish material for epics. That more went down under the flood than stemmed the current is not extraordinary. The majority of our women are not heroines—but I do not know that a majority of any race of women are heroines. It is enough for me to know that while in the eyes of the highest tribunal in America she was deemed no more than chattel, an irresponsible thing, a dull block, to be drawn hither or thither at the volition of an owner, the Afro-American woman maintained ideals of womanhood unashamed by any ever conceived. Resting or fermenting in untutored minds, such ideals could not claim a hearing at the bar of the nation. The white woman could at least plead for her own emancipation; the black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent.

For the first time ever in American history, black women like

Mary Church Terrell, Sojourner Truth, Anna Cooper, Amanda Berry Smith and others broke through the long years of silence and began to articulate and record their experiences. In particular they emphasized the "female" aspect of their being which caused their lot to be different from that of the black male, a fact that was made evident when white men supported giving black men the vote while leaving all women disenfranchised. Horace Greeley and Wendell Phillips called it "the Negro's hour" but in actuality what was spoken of as black suffrage was black male suffrage. By supporting black male suffrage and denouncing white women's rights advocates, white men revealed the depths of their sexism—a sexism that was at that brief moment in American history greater than their racism. Prior to white male support of suffrage for black men, white women activists had believed it would further their cause to ally themselves with black political activists, but when it seemed black men might get the vote while they remained disenfranchised, political solidarity with black people was forgotten and they urged white men to allow racial solidarity to overshadow their plans to support black male suffrage.

As the racism of white women's rights advocates surfaced, the fragile bond between themselves and black activists was broken. Even though Elizabeth Stanton in her article "Women and Black Men," published in the 1869 issue of the *Revolution*, attempted to show that the republican cry for "manhood suffrage" was aimed at creating antagonism between black men and all women, the break between the two groups could not be mended. While many black male political activists sympathized with the cause of women's rights advocates, they were not willing to lose their own chance to gain the vote. Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice. The more radical black women activists demanded that black men and all women be given the vote. Sojourner Truth was the most outspoken black women on this issue. She argued publicly in favor of women gaining the right to vote and emphasized that

without this right black women would have to submit to the will of black men. Her famous statement, "there is a great stir about colored men getting their rights; but not a word about the colored woman; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before," reminded the American public that sexist oppression was as real a threat to the freedom of black women as racial oppression. But despite protests from white and black women activists sexism carried the day and black men received the vote.

Although black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era, black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values. As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role. Gradually the radical revolutionary spirit that had characterized the intellectual and political contribution of black women in the 19th century was quelled. A definite change in the role played by black women in the political and social affairs of black people occurred in the 20th century. This change was indicative of an overall decline in the efforts of all American women to effect radical social reform. When the women's rights movement ended in the twenties, the voices of black women liberationists were stilled. The war had stripped the movement of its earlier fervor. While black women participated equally with black men in the struggle for survival by entering the work force whenever possible, they did not advocate an end to sexism. Twentieth-century black women had learned to accept sexism as natural, a given, a fact of life. Had surveys been taken among black women in the thirties and forties and had they been asked to name the most oppressive force in their lives, racism and not sexism would have headed the list.

When the civil rights movement began in the 50s, black women and men again joined together to struggle for racial equality, yet black female activists did not receive the public acclaim awarded black male leaders. Sexist role patterning was as much the norm in black communities as in any other American community. It was an accepted fact among black people

that the leaders who were most revered and respected were men. Black activists defined freedom as gaining the right to participate as full citizens in American culture; they were not rejecting the value system of that culture. Consequently, they did not question the rightness of patriarchy. The 60s movement toward black liberation marked the first time black people engaged in a struggle to resist racism in which clear boundaries were erected which separated the roles of women and men. Black male activists publicly acknowledged that they expected black women involved in the movement to conform to a sexist role pattern. They demanded that black women assume a subservient position. Black women were told that they should take care of household needs and breed warriors for the revolution. Toni Cade's article "On the Issue of Roles" is one discussion of the sexist attitudes that prevailed in black organizations during the 60s:

It would seem that every organization you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men wrote the position papers and decided on policy. Some groups condescendingly allotted two or three slots in the executive order to women. Others encouraged the sisters to form a separate caucus and work out something that wouldn't split the organization. Others got nasty and forced the women to storm out to organize separate workshops. Over the years, things have sort of been cooled out. But I have yet to hear a coolheaded analysis of just what any particular group's stand is on the question. Invariably, I hear from some dude that Black women must be supportive and patient so that black men can regain their manhood. The notion of womanhood, they argue—and only if pressed to address themselves to the notion do they think of it or argue—is dependent on his defining his manhood. So the shit goes on.

While some black women activists resisted the attempts of black men to coerce them into playing a secondary role in the movement, others capitulated to male demands for submission. What had begun as a movement to free all black people from racist oppression became a movement with its primary goal the establishment of black male patriarchy. It is not surprising that

a movement so concerned with promoting the interests of black men should fail to draw any attention to the dual impact of sexist and racist oppression on the social status of black women. Black women had been asked to fade into the background—to allow the spotlight to shine solely on black men. That the black woman was victimized by sexist and racist oppression was seen as insignificant, for woman's suffering however great could not take precedence over male pain.

Ironically, while the recent women's movement called attention to the fact that black women were dually victimized by racist and sexist oppression, white feminists tended to romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impact of that oppression. When feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong—and that is simply not the case. Usually, when people talk about the "strength" of black women they are referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression. They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation. Frequently observers of the black female experience confuse these issues. The tendency to romanticize the black female experience that began in the feminist movement was reflected in the culture as a whole. The stereotypical image of the "strong" black woman was no longer seen as dehumanizing, it became the new badge of black female glory. When the women's movement was at its peak and white women were rejecting the role of breeder, burden bearer, and sex object, black women were celebrated for their unique devotion to the task of mothering; for their "innate" ability to bear tremendous burdens; and for their ever-increasing availability as sex object. We appeared to have been unanimously elected to take up where white women were leaving off. They got *Ms.* magazine; we got *Essence*. They got books discussing the negative impact of sexism on their lives; we got books arguing that black women had nothing to gain by women's

liberation. Black women were told that we should find our dignity not in liberation from sexist oppression but in how well we could adjust, adapt, and cope. We had been asked to stand up and be congratulated for being "good little women" and then told to sit down and shut up. No one bothered to discuss the way in which sexism operates both independently of and simultaneously with racism to oppress us.

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group "women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women. No where is this more evident than in the vast body of feminist literature. A case in point is the following passage describing white female reactions to white male support of black male suffrage in the 19th century taken from William O'Neill's book *Everyone Was Brave*:

Their shocked disbelief that men would so humiliate them by supporting votes for Negroes but not for women demonstrated the limits of their sympathy for black men, even as it drove these former allies further apart.

This passage fails to accurately register the sexual and racial differentiation which together make for the exclusion of black women. In the statement, "their shocked disbelief that men should so humiliate them by supporting votes for Negroes but not for women," the word men in fact refers only to *white* men, the word Negroes refers only to black *men*, and the word women refers only to *white* women. The racial and sexual specificity of what is being referred to is conveniently left unacknowledged or even deliberately suppressed. Another example is from a more recent work by historian Barbara Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism*. Berg comments:

... In their fight for the vote, women both ignored and compromised the principles of feminism. The complexities of American society at the turn of the century induced the suffragists to change the basis of their demand for the franchise.

The women Berg refers to are white women yet she never states this. Throughout American history, the racial imperialism of whites has supported the custom of scholars using the term "women" even if they are referring solely to the experience of white women. Yet such a custom, whether practiced consciously or unconsciously, perpetuates racism in that it denies the existence of non-white women in America. It also perpetuates sexism in that it assumes that sexuality is the sole self-defining trait of white women and denies their racial identity. White women liberationists did not challenge this sexist-racist practice; they continued it.

The most glaring example of their support of the exclusion of black women was revealed when they drew analogies between "women" and "blacks" when what they were really comparing was the social status of white women with that of black people. Like many people in our racist society, white feminists could feel perfectly comfortable writing books or articles on the "woman question" in which they drew analogies between "women" and "blacks." Since analogies derive their power, their appeal, and their very reason for being from the sense of two disparate phenomena having been brought closer together, for white women to acknowledge the overlap between the terms "blacks" and "women" (that is the existence of black women) would render this analogy unnecessary. By continuously making this analogy, they unwittingly suggest that to them the term "woman" is synonymous with "white women" and the term "blacks" synonymous with "black men." What this indicates is that there exists in the language of the very movement that is supposedly concerned with eliminating sexist oppression, a sexist-racist attitude toward black women. Sexist-racist attitudes are not merely present in the consciousness of men in American society; they surface in all our ways of thinking and being. All too frequently in the women's movement it was assumed one could be free of sexist thinking by

simply adopting the appropriate feminist rhetoric; it was further assumed that identifying oneself as oppressed freed one from being an oppressor. To a very grave extent such thinking prevented white feminists from understanding and overcoming their own sexist-racist attitudes toward black women. They could pay lip-service to the idea of sisterhood and solidarity between women but at the same time dismiss black women.

Just as the 19th century conflict over black male suffrage versus woman suffrage had placed black women in a difficult position, contemporary black women felt they were asked to choose between a black movement that primarily served the interests of black male patriarchs and a women's movement which primarily served the interests of racist white women. Their response was not to demand a change in these two movements and a recognition of the interests of black women. Instead the great majority of black women allied themselves with the black patriarchy they believed would protect their interests. A few black women chose to ally themselves with the feminist movement. Those who dared to speak publicly in support of women's rights were attacked and criticized. Other black women found themselves in limbo, not wanting to ally themselves with sexist black men or racist white women. That black women did not collectively rally against the exclusion of our interests by both groups was an indication that sexist-racist socialization had effectively brainwashed us to feel that our interests were not worth fighting for, to believe that the only option available to us was submission to the terms of others. We did not challenge, question, or critique; we reacted. Many black women denounced women's liberation as "white female foolishness." Others reacted to white female racism by starting black feminist groups. While we denounced male concepts of black macho as disgusting and offensive, we did not talk about ourselves, about being black women, about what it means to be the victims of sexist-racist oppression.

The most notable attempt by black women to articulate their experiences, their attitudes toward woman's role in society, and the impact of sexism on their lives was the anthology *The Black Woman* edited by Toni Cade. The dialogue ended there. The growing demand for literature about women