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# Black Women's Experience of Feminism

- Although first wave feminism professed to address all women's needs and concerns, yet it is not until the second wave that we begin to see public expressions of the significance of feminism to women of colour.
- In spite of a number of earlier female activists who spoke in public about the abolition of slavery in the US.

- It was only in the late 20th century that black women attempted to theorize the meaning of black feminism.
- The central concern of black feminist thought is the inseparability of race and gender.
- Most black feminists refuse to see themselves as women first and foremost.
- Angela Davis – political activities of the Black Panthers.

- Rosa Parks – 1955, refuse to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger.
- Audre Lorde’s “forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist, mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple”
- She did not want to divorce herself from any aspect of her identity n her feminist activism.

- Rather, Lorde concludes that in order to achieve a sense of Oneness, and escape the incessant feeling of Otherness
- “I will integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without restrictions of externally imposed definition”

- Sojourner Truth – American abolitionist who also advocated black women’s rights
- 1850s, she became involved in the women’s rights movement and added the fight for suffrage to that of freeing black slaves.
- Although she was illiterate, Truth dictated her autobiography to a friend and became well known public figure who attracted large crowds.

- Truth's speech, "Ain't I a Woman?", was delivered at a convention on women's rights in 1851.
- In it, she is reported to have challenged a Protestant minister's claims that men deserve more privileges than women because they are intellectually superior and because God created Jesus as a man.

- Harriet Tubman advocated black women's rights; a most militant black female activist of her time.
- She participated in the 1895 National Conference of Colored Women in America (NCCWA)
- She later became a strong supporter of women's suffrage.
- She was mostly interested in eradicating racial oppression and addressed issues of gender only when discussing the plight of black women.



- Frances Harper – highly educated lecturer, activist, poet and novelist.
- Nicknamed “Bronze Muse” as an intelligent and persuasive speaker
- She played an active part in the American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Council of women.
- Harper’s insistence on defining herself as a black American first and as woman next was written into one of the earliest manifestos of black feminism.

- The Combahee River Collective of black feminists initially met in 1974 with the aim of “defining and clarifying their politics”
- “We issued a statement in 1982 announcing our active commitment to struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression”

- “As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of colour face”
- “Black feminists and many more black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence”

- “We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is achieved as pervasive in black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race”
- “We find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously”

- “We struggle together with black men against racism while we also struggle with black men about sexism”
- “As black feminists and lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us”

# Feminism and Pornography

- While the debate over the value of reading romance novels was relatively quiet and understated, feminists remain bitterly divided in their attitudes towards sexually explicit material in fiction and the media.
- They differ in their interpretation of the meaning and social function of pornography.

- One group, the radical feminists, adopt an anti-pornography position which posits that all sexually explicit material is defamatory to women
- Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon are its key proponents.
- In the past, they have attempted to make the production of pornography a violation of civil rights.

- Other feminists adopt a more libertarian position. Nancy Friday is one critic who made a career out of compiling and examining women's sexual fantasies.
- She aimed to deconstruct the angel/whore dichotomy by celebrating women's erotic pleasure in its various representations.



- Recent scholarship on “feminist queer pornographies” has questioned mainstream pornography’s representation of behaviour that is typical of cis-identified, heteronormative and predominantly capitalist lifestyles.

# Feminism and the Body

- Second wave feminists challenged society's definition of femininity and its insistence on equating men with "mind" and women with nature and "body".
- As far back as the 1970s, feminists were aware of the power of the male gaze to objectify the female body by fixing it in photographs, paintings or other forms of artwork.

- Feminist activists challenge these representations of traditional stereotypes of femininity because it is through the media that female consumers internalize gender identity.
- 1978, Susie Orbach published *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, in which she discussed eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia as mechanisms for refusing sexual objectification.

- 1980s, feminist activity revolved around attempts at reclaiming the female body by deconstructing the stereotypes and visual objects which defined it.
- Feminist critics became determined to identify and analyse the underlying ideology and the social conditions which produced images of women as commodities.

- However, it was not until the 1990s during the third wave of feminist activity that the debate over the representation of the female body was developed further, and several theories about how women are “seen” by men were presented.
- But whether it is the thin and slender or the shapely and voluptuous, the ideal female body has always been an object of fascination and fetishism, and feminist public figures continue to warn against objectifying the female body.

- The American talk show host Oprah Winfrey is a strong advocate of women's self-empowerment.
- She has publicly discussed her own conflict with her body image, and has encouraged scores of women to understand and accept their bodies.

Thank You