



Ain Shams University
Faculty of arts
English Department

**Resisting the Double Marginalization of Black
Women in Selected Poems by Audre Lorde and
Lucille Clifton**

A Thesis Submitted by

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To

**The Department of English Language and
Literature, Faculty of Arts
Ain Shams University**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in English**

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2018



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Approval Sheet

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2018

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to *Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University* for persistent help and encouragement.

My deepest gratitude is due to *Dr. Sylvia Sobhy Fam* (Associate Professor of English Poetry, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University) for her continuing support, valuable remarks, insightful guidance and fruitful discussions.

I would like to extend my appreciation to *Dr. Iman Farouk El-Bakary* (Associate Professor of English Poetry, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University) for her patience and meticulous observations that enriched the whole work.

Special thanks are due to *my father, mother and sister* whose unconditional love and support helped in the achievement of this work.

Finally, I dedicate my work to *all women* who have suffered silence, exploitation and humiliation.

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Preface

During the slavery era and the epochs following it, black women were doubly marginalized to the extent that they found it impossible to establish solidarity with white women or to shape their own independent identity within the patriarchy of their black community. Throughout the years, the western community, especially the American, has regarded black women as second-class citizens with no legal or social rights. Being silenced and othered, black women have protested against racial discrimination and fought for their political and legal rights. They also revolted against the sexism of black and white men who dealt with them as commodities. Many theories emerged in order to fight for black women's rights and maintain their identity. The main target of the thesis is to demonstrate how the images of black women are dealt with in Lorde's and Clifton's poetry. It will depict the poetesses striving for liberation and justice using the power of their verse.

This thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. Throughout chapter one, Alice Walker's "Womanism" will be analyzed in relation to other theories, such as Feminism and Black Feminism. These will be examined from the various perspectives of many critics and writers. After pointing to the history of Womanism, chapter two will demonstrate the poems

and ideas of Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton, who were affected by womanism and contributed greatly to the liberation of black women from the racist stereotypes imposed upon them. Furthermore, in chapter three, their poetry will be explored as African-American poetesses who fought against gender bias and sexism. Their visions and ideas will be minutely demonstrated. Every poem of these two writers will be dealt with separately, in addition to shedding light on images, metaphors, symbols etc.

Chapter four will examine the different perspectives of the poetesses towards black women. The chapter will also manifest the similarities and differences in the methods and styles that Lucille Clifton and Audre Lorde employed through their poetry. The conclusion will summarize the overall findings of the thesis.

Chapter One

Womanism; The Birth of a New Hope and a Voice for Black Women

Globally, Feminism is a widespread political, cultural and economic movement designed to establish equal rights and protection for women. It embodies several political and sociological ideologies and philosophies that support women's role within the society. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights of abortion, parental care and reproduction, as well as prevention of domestic sexual violence and rape. The term "Feminism" first emerged in France in the 1880s. It appeared later in Great Britain during the 1890s, and finally invaded the United States in 1910. According to the feminist writers, Rebecca Walker and Maggie Humm, Feminism is mainly divided into three waves. The first feminist wave started in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States and the United Kingdom, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third has extended from the 1990s to the present.

Originally, first-wave Feminism concentrated on the reinforcement of property rights for women. By the end of the nineteenth century, the focus was mainly on obtaining political power, especially the right of women's suffrage. In Britain, suffragists organized several campaigns to gain the right to vote. The Representation of the People Act was passed in 1918, giving the vote to women over the age of thirty, and in 1928, the right of vote was extended to all women over twenty-one. However, in the United States, the leaders of the first-wave Feminism, involving Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, campaigned to eliminate slavery. American first-wave Feminism came to an end when the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution

(1919) was declared, granting women the right to vote all over the States. Consequently, second-wave Feminism came to light, heralding a newer phase of Feminism.

Second-wave Feminism called for social change through the emancipation of women and the prevention of marginalization. In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan criticized the idea that women can fulfill their identity only through raising children, serving husbands and being sexually passive. But actually, this wave of Feminism is "white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression". (McCann and Kim 2013, 51). In 1964, the Women's Movement was established in the United States to fulfill the social and political right for white women, excluding women of color. Thus, black women started to organize their own movements in order to oppose sexual and racial oppression.

"In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection." (Lorde 1984, 114). This "Watching" has generated multiple ways of survival for black women who were victimized and marginalized. Thus, many movements and theories have emerged to give voice to the silenced and grant them "protection". Many black female activists appealed to Afrocentric epistemology, based on the experiences of ordinary black women who faced different kinds of oppression. From here, Africana Studies theories emerged, and their principal purpose was to explain multiple dimensions of black people's lives, especially black women's.

The field of African Studies started in the nineteenth century, based on the writings of black revolutionists and

activists Casely Hayford, Benjamin Brawley, Francis Harper, Martin Delaney and Edward Wilmont Blyden. The concept "Africana" refers to "the philosophy of the African continuum and African consociation" (Aldridge and Young 2000, 62). Besides, the term "Africana" did not only relate to continental Africans, but it expanded to include Africans worldwide. According to Conyers, the study of black women within the discipline of Africana studies should be:

to facilitate and provide the necessary groundwork for the development of more complete, and integrated narratives of black history and culture that will yield more comprehensive, in depth, and holistic interpretation and body of information about our past, representing both genders without prejudice. (2016, 407)

So, during the twentieth century, many Africana studies departments were established at major universities with the aim of encompassing the African diaspora. The main objective of those departments was to encourage students to broaden their knowledge of human experiences, specifically black experiences which were overlooked by the educational institutions. From the viewpoint of Robert Harris Jr, a history professor at the Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, New York City, the development of Africana studies passed through four stages. The first stage started from 1890s until the Second World War. Through that stage, numerous organizations were established to analyze the history and culture of African people. The second stage focused on the religious, political and social lives of African Americans. In the third stage, a set of newly established academic programs was created, such as Black studies. Black studies resulted from the massive rebellions of black college students who were searching for a scholarship of change. The fourth and last stage

was named "Africana Studies" which involved a minute theoretical exposition of Black studies. Moreover, Africana studies demonstrated the institutionalization of Black studies in accordance with its coherence with the academic curriculum. Away from Black studies, many theories emanated from Africana studies such as Black Feminism and Womanism. Those devoted themselves to the study of black women's experiences as well as their social position within the U.S community.

Black Feminism theory is defined by the black theorist and activist Pearl Cleage as "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities- intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic" (qtd in Phillips 2006, 62). Using the term "black Feminism" helps African American women comprehend that the economic, social and educational issues affecting them in the United States are part of the global women's emancipation struggles. The roots of Black Feminism were established through the publication of *An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force* in 1969, authored by Mary Ann Weathers. Weathers pointed out that black women suffered from sexual and racial oppression, and insisted that white women should build connections with them, thereby building a new sense of revolution. Thus, the black feminist movement emanated in response to the Civil Rights Movement (1960) and the Women's Movement (1964).

The black women who participated in both movements were discriminated against sexually and racially. Black women were at the forefront of struggle to fight racism and sexism and to gain identity and equal rights. Black males assumed that racism was more offensive to them than it was to black women, because the chief objective of racism was the destruction of their manhood. Although the purpose of the Civil Rights

Movement was to free the black race, it was in words and deeds to free black males only. The most prominent achievements of the African American Civil Rights Movement were the post-Civil War constitutional amendments that abrogated slavery and granted citizenship to blacks. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, ending segregation in public places and preventing employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex or religion. Moreover, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Right Act in 1965, which aimed at enabling black people to exercise their political rights, particularly the right to vote.

Despite those privileges, black women lacked the sense of belonging, as black men focused on controlling their sexuality, and they equated freedom with manhood. They also exploited the matriarchy issue to force black women into maintaining exclusive commitments to racial interests and narrowing black women's roles and images in ways fitting a more traditional western view of women. Unfortunately, both black and white men created certain stereotypes and dominant images for black women, and they made use of these images. According to Patricia Hill Collins, there were four main recurrent images that formed an oppressive matrix of domination. Black women were only seen as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers and jezebels.

The image of the mammy was created to shape the role of African American women in white houses. She was pictured as a loyal domestic servant, devoted to her housework. In contrast to the image of white women who were presented as good mothers, paying attention to developing the morality of their offspring, black women were seen as sexual slaves restricted to transmitting their role to their own children. Yet, because of the failure of the mammy image to control black women, the second image emerged. The image of African American women as black matriarchs aimed at defining black women's place

within black houses. They were symbolized as bad aggressive mothers who failed to fulfill their duties, especially towards their children. Thus, this image was regarded by many intellectuals as cruel because it omitted the traumas and difficulties that black women experienced in order to support their families.

For certain political and economic purposes, black women were seen as welfare mothers. Because it was claimed that black women were able to breed children as easily as animals, slave-owners wanted them to give birth to many children in order to help in building a prosperous economy for the United States. In addition, the image of jezebels was used to describe black women as sexually promiscuous. This image claimed that black women could not be rape victims, as they usually wanted sex. Thus, the images of jezebels as well as mammies, matriarchs and welfare mothers were the strong justification for controlling and exploiting African American women. Later, black women found hope in the Women's Movement, which was established to achieve equality for all women.

Black women who joined the Women's Movement underwent a harsh phase of racism imposed upon them by white women. This movement took the form of exclusion, as black women were not summoned to participate in conferences, and they were seen as third world women. A great part of the frustration that black women suffered from was due to white women's unwillingness to admit their racism. They promoted the racist ideology and became oppressors themselves.

Many Black Scholars blame the black culture and its traditions for taking part in oppressing black women. Black culture fosters a firm trend towards early motherhood for young girls, leaving education behind. This leads of course to superiority of white women as well as black men, who think of black women as mere sexual objects. The mission of black

feminist organizations was to draw the attention of black women towards self-definition as well as to mobilize them for action. They used several means to achieve their goal such as marches and the press.

The black women's stance towards liberation arose from the constant argument about their roles within the black community in the 1960s and early 1970s. Black men limited black women's role to reproducing children for the sake of the revolution. When black women resisted these kinds of stereotypes and aimed towards birth control, black men denied them, as they desired to brag about the number of children they have fathered. Black women were greatly aware that they had more significant roles to play in the revolution than their fertility. They also rejected the idea that a black man was the exclusive economic provider for the black family, and asserted that they economically and emotionally upheld their families. Patricia Hill Collins points out that "African-American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group's efforts to harness Black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation." (Collins 2000, 50).

The main objective of controlling reproduction was that black women were fully aware that giving birth to more children would effectively assist in constructing the economic future for the U.S community. Once those children were old enough, they would be constrained to help their mothers, either in farming the lands or within the masters' houses. Black women were also cognizant of the fact that children who were born to enslaved mothers would be slaves as well. They had a considerable ambition towards erasing the passive image imposed upon women of color, as well as their children. The rebuff of black mothers to bear children can be depicted as an act of resistance.

Sexual violence was pictured as a system of oppression that dominated and humiliated black women. According to Patricia Hill Collins, sexuality can be conceived as "conceptual glue that binds intersecting oppressions together." (Collins 2000, 135). Under the capitalist system of the United States, black women's bodies were handled as commodities that were sold through open markets and auctions. Their sexuality and bodies were publicized by Law as public property with no privacy to be taken into consideration by the whites. Professor and activist Barbara Omolade remarks:

White men used their power in the public sphere to construct a private sphere that would meet their needs and their desire for black women, which if publicly admitted would have undermined the false construct of race they needed to maintain public power. Therefore, the history of black women in America reflects the juncture where the private and public spheres and personal and political oppression meet (qtd in Collins 2000, 134)

From the 1970s literacy began to spread among African-Americans and gradually started to form a new kind of resistance. Many black women writers formed a community to motivate other women to challenge the controlling stereotypes associated with them. Most women of color lacked the ability to hold positions of power because of the racial solidarity. Respect was the pivot theme of those writers who aspired to deliver a firm message to the society. The concept of respect was extended to include not only the writings, but the blues singers as well. Aretha Franklin's song "Respect" was one of the most popular songs during that era. She sings to her man: "All I'm asking for is a little respect when you come home". Although the words seem to be normal and can be used in daily life, she aimed at a deeper meaning. The song is a symbol and

illustration of the harsh conditions of black women within a society.

Black women were greatly conscious of the inevitable social problems such as poverty, poor living, violence and racism. They started to question themselves if they did not appreciate their blackness, why should anyone appreciate it? Domination was present in every realm of their lives. It was there in schools, housing, employment and government. Black women refused to bury their minds and talents within iron kettles and pots. Black feminists endeavored to analyze the intersecting oppressions, how they worked and influenced women of color within the United States. They also used every possible means such as music, literature and daily conversations to fortify black women's consciousness. By asserting African-American women's identity, black feminist thinkers manifested the importance of knowledge for empowerment.

Thus, black women activists stressed that empowerment not only required changing the consciousness of black women, but also required modifying the despotic social institutions they confronted through their lives. As long as they were stuck at the bottom of the hierarchy, black women found it necessary to resist oppressions and change their positions within the community. Patricia Hill Collins declares that the first steps towards freedom should start with Education. She states:

When my mother taught me to read, took me to the public library when I was five, and told me that if I learned to read, I could experience a form of freedom, neither she nor I saw the magnitude of that one action in my life and the lives that my work has subsequently touched. As people push against, step away from, and shift the terms of their participation in power relations, the shape of power relations changes for everyone. Like individual subjectivity, resistance strategies and