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INTERSECTIONALITY: bell hooks

Abstract:

The concept of Intersectionality has been known and utilised variously for various purposes in the past. This paper is an effort to look at the concept of intersection as explored by the feminist thinker, cultural critic, post modernist writer, and leftist political ideologue, Gloria Watkins, better known by her pseudonym, bell hooks. hooks talks about the intersection of the sub-concepts of race, class, and gender and looks at their relationships with each other and its impact on the Black women of American society. She derives her epistemic premise from the lived experiences of her own self, as well as other women like herself who have been victims of the social system which propagates an ideology she describes as “White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy”. The paper does not restrict itself to just talk about intersections between class, race, and gender, but goes ahead to describe how ‘critical pedagogy’ and its intersection with feminism to evolve into a concept called ‘Libertarian Feminist Pedagogy’ is utilised as a political strategy by hooks to talk about Black Feminism. The paper traces the history of intersection as a concept to the ‘intersectionality theory’ that had become a part of the sociological movement of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, and had come to become popular as the ‘revisionist feminist theory’ that challenged the notion that gender was the only factor that affected the happenings in a woman’s life. Thus, this paper is an attempt to understand the concept of intersection through the lens of bell hooks, and demystifying the significant relationships between race, class, gender, feminist pedagogy and other processes of getting into the core of the so-called ‘Black Feminist Thought(s)’.

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INTRODUCTION

The current paper, as the title suggests, talks about the concept of intersectionalities and how this concept operates is examined through the writings of feminist scholar, cultural critic, leftist political thinker, bell hooks. The rationale of this paper is to understand the importance of intersections in today’s academic works and in doing so one intends to bring out the disadvantages and drawbacks of looking at concepts like race, gender, class in an isolated manner. My interest in the concept of intersections arose while I started reading bell hooks’ book titled “Ain’t I a Woman” (1981), in whose introduction hooks criticised the common discourse in feminist political theory of the 1980’s which would constantly draw analogies between the situation of women and the situation of Blacks in America.

She rejected this kind of an argument calling it absolutely reductionist, and said that such an argument would imply that, in a sense, ‘all women are white and all Blacks are men’. This was a starting point of an analytical and political move by Black feminists and also other feminists to begin deconstructing both the categories of ‘Blacks’ and ‘women’, and this led to the development of an analysis of intersectionality between various social divisions like class, race, gender. This concept intrigued me very much and my wish to read about the concept increased manifold. The thinker that I have chosen for this paper is bell hooks, who have

indirectly used this concept in many of her works. Although this concept has not been originally coined by bell hooks, she uses it to critically understand race, gender and class. The paper has expanded its scope by attempting an analysis of intersection between education and feminism and how their intersection creates a radical form of pedagogy popularly called Liberatory Feminist Pedagogy. In the course of writing this paper, I have been immensely influenced by the present thinker and her thoughts on Black Feminist Epistemology, and as a student of political theory this engagement has given me an opportunity to shape my thoughts and ideologies and think about my own politics critically. Thus, the exercise of writing this term paper has been a fruitful one. The paper examines, to the best of its ability, the concept of intersectionality as I have understood it to be, through the works of bell hooks.

However, the scope of this paper is limited to understand the aforesaid concept and categories and no attempt has been made to contextualise this in the Indian context because this would have taken the debate on intersectionality to a new level, which is not the scope of this paper.

ABOUT THE THINKER- bell hooks

Gloria Jean Watkins who was born on September 25, 1952, is better known by her pen name bell hooks. She grew up in a working-class family with five sisters and one brother. Her father, Veodis Watkins, was a custodian and her mother, Rosa Bell Watkins, was a homemaker. Throughout her childhood, she was an avid reader. Her early education took place in racially segregated public schools, and she wrote of great adversities when making the transition to an integrated school, where teachers and students were predominantly white. She is currently Distinguished Professor of English at City College in New York. Hooks received her B.A. from Stanford University in 1973, her M.A. in 1976 from the University of Wisconsin and her Ph.D. in 1983 from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Although hooks is mainly known as a feminist thinker, her writings cover a broad range of topics on gender, race, teaching and the significance of media for contemporary culture. She strongly believes that these topics cannot be dealt with as separately, but must be understood as being interconnectedness. As an example, she refers to the idea of a "White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy" and its interconnectedness and intersections, rather than to its more traditionally separated and component parts.

A passionate scholar, hooks is among the leading public intellectuals of her generation. hooks/Watson's use of a pseudonym is intended to honour both her grandmother (whose name she took) and her mother, as well as provide her the opportunity to establish a separate voice from the person Gloria Watson. Her name is intentionally uncapitalised and there is a thought that has gone into the same. She believes that her thoughts and ideas are much more important than her name. Thus, to take away the importance of her name, she uncapitalised

her name intentionally. Hooks sees education as the practice of freedom. Profoundly influenced by Paulo Freire, she sees his ideas as affirming her "right as a subject in resistance to define reality".

Some of her most important books are: "Ain't I a woman : Black women and feminism", "Feminist theory from margin to center", "Feminism Is For Everybody", "Talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black", "Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics" , "Breaking bread: insurgent Black intellectual life", "Sisters of the yam: black women and self-recovery", "Black looks: race and representation", "Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom", "Outlaw culture: resisting representations" , "Killing rage: ending racism".

INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Intersectionality is a feminist sociological theory first highlighted by Kimberle Crenshaw in the year 1989 when she discussed issues of black women's employment in the US. Intersectionality is a methodology of studying the "relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations". The theory suggests and seeks to examine how various biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Intersectionality holds that classical conceptualisations of oppression within society such as racism, sexism, capitalism, homophobia, religion based bigotry, do not act independently of each other, instead these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the 'intersection' of multiple forms of oppression and discrimination. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and are influenced by the intersectional systems of society.

Intersectionality is an important paradigm for sociological and cultural studies , but there have been many challenges in utilising it to its fullest capacity. Difficulties arise due to many complexities involved in making 'multidimensional conceptualisations' that explain the way in which socially constructed categories of differentiation interact to create a social hierarchy.

The theory of intersectionality also suggests that discrete forms and expressions of oppressions actually shape and are shaped by one another by their interaction with each other. Thus in order to fully understand the racialization of oppressed groups one must investigate the ways in which racializing structures , social processes and social representations are shaped by gender, class, sexuality, etc. While the theory began as an exploration of oppression of women within society, today sociologists strive to apply it to all people and to many different intersections of group membership.

There has been very little comprehensive documentation of the history of intersectionality theory. But from whatever is present we can say that the concept of intersectionality came to the forefront of sociological circles in the late 1960's and early 1970's in conjunction with the multiracial feminist movement. It came as a part of radical feminism that had developed in the late 1960's known as the 'revisionist feminist theory'. This revisionist feminist theory challenged the notion that gender was the primary factor determining a woman's fate. The movement led by the women of colour disputed the idea that women were a homogenous category sharing essentially the same life experiences. This argument stemmed from the realization that white middle class women did not serve as an accurate representation of the feminist movement as a whole. Recognising that the forms of oppression experienced by white middle class women were different from those experienced by black, poor, or disabled women, feminists sought to understand the ways in which gender, race and class are combined to determine the female destiny.

The term has also been historically linked to the concept of 'simultaneity' propagated during the 1970's wherein members of this particular school of thought argued that their lives and the forms of resistance to oppression were profoundly shaped by the simultaneous influences of race, class, gender and sexuality. The term 'intersectionality theory' first gained prominence in the 1990's when sociologist Patricia Hill Collins reintroduced the idea as part of her discussion on black feminism, and gradually this term gained prominence in common feminist parlance. Collins argued that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race,

gender, class, ethnicity. Experiences of class, gender, sexuality etc cannot be adequately understood unless the influences of racialization are carefully considered. Feminists argue that an understanding of intersectionality is a vital element to gaining political and social equality and improving our democratic system. Collins's theory is one of particular interest because it represents the sociological crossroads between modern and post modern feminist thought.

METHODOLOGIES OF STUDYING INTERSECTIONALITIES

Despite intersectionality having emerged as an important paradigm in feminist research, there has been little discussion on how to study intersectionality. Intersectionality has introduced new methodological problems and partly as an unintended consequence has limited the range of methodological approaches to study intersectionality. Generally researchers tend to use methodologies that are complex rather than use those that are too simplistic and reductionist. Feminists till date have used a variety of methodologies like ethnography, deconstruction,

genealogy, ethnomethodology, but in many cases they have forgotten to incorporate the complexities.

Essentially, there are three different approaches that have been identified to studying intersectionality. These methodologies are based particularly on their stance on the significance of categories, (*please see concept map in the last page*) that is how they analyse and use the complexity of intersectionality to enhance one's understanding of social life.

1. ANTICATEGORICAL COMPLEXITY APPROACH

The first methodology is called 'Anticategorical Complexity'. This approach has been based on the deconstruction of categorical divisions. It argues that social categories are an arbitrary construction of history and language and they contribute little to the understanding of ways in which people experience society. Also the anti-categorical approach further states that inequalities are rooted in the relationships that are defined by race, class, gender, sexuality, and therefore the only way to eliminate oppression in society is by eliminating categories used to section people into differing groups. This analysis claims that society is too complex to be reduced down into finite categories and instead recognises the need for a holistic approach in understanding intersectionality. This approach believes that social life is too irreducibly complex, overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of structures and subjects, and making fixed categories in society is nothing but to perpetuate inequalities in the already unequal system. This approach has been very successful in satisfying the demand for complexity, judging by the fact that now there is great scepticism about using simplistic methodologies. The deconstruction of categories is considered part and parcel of the

deconstruction of inequality itself. The epistemological premise of this approach is that nothing fits as neatly as imposing a homogenising and stable order on a heterogeneous and less stable social reality. The symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change. The foremost philosophical consequence of this approach has been to render the use of categories suspect because they have no foundation in 'material reality'. It is language that creates categorical reality rather than the other way round. This leads the researchers who follow this approach to doubt any research that depends on the premise of such categorization, because categorization leads to demarcation, which in turn leads to inequality.

2. INTERCATEGORICAL COMPLEXITY APPROACH

The Intercategorical approach, which might also be called the categorical approach to intersectionality begins by addressing the fact that inequality exists within society and then

uses this as a base of its discussions on intersectionality. This methodology believes that there are unequal relationships already present amongst the already present social groups, and this approach intends to understand and analyse these relationships, unequal and imperfect they may be. What is significant here is the kind of relationships that the categories share with each other, and not necessarily the nature of the categories themselves. According to the intercategory complexity methodology, the concern is with the nature of the relationships among social groups and importantly how they are changing. Proponents of this methodology use existing categorical distinctions to document inequality across multiple dimensions and measure its change over time. This approach requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to be able to properly document relationships of inequality among social groups. A critique to this approach is that there is nothing unique in this approach for this to become a methodology in itself, because the understanding of relationships between the different categories exists in both the other methodologies as well.

3. INTRACATEGORICAL COMPLEXITY APPROACH

The Intracategorical complexity approach can best be explained as the midpoint between the anticategorical and intercategory approaches. It recognises the shortcomings of existing social categories and it also questions the way in which they draw boundaries of distinction. Yet, this approach does not completely reject the importance of categories like the anticategorical approach; rather the intracategorical approach recognises the relevance of social categories to the understanding of modern experience. It also attempts to reconcile these contrasting views by focusing in people who cross the boundaries of constructed categories, in an effort to understand the ways in which the complexity and intersectionality the human experiences unfold. In this methodology to study intersectionality, categories have been given an ambivalent status. Case study methods of research can be called intracategorical approaches to intersection. Because although the study focuses just on the characteristics of one single group, it also acknowledges that this single group has many differences within itself.

While we are talking about the concept of “intersectionality”, it is imperative that we bring in here the works of renowned black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins , who refers to the various intersections of oppression as the ‘interlocking matrices of domination’. This is also referred to as the ‘vectors of oppression and privilege’ and these terms refer to how differences among people with regard to sexual orientation, class, race, age, serve as oppressive measures towards females, and ultimately change the experiences of living as a woman in society. Collins gives us a way to transcend these group specific politics that is based on Black Feminist Epistemology. (McCall)

If we could explore the history of the idea of 'intersectionality', we would understand that this idea probably goes back to the theories of Max Weber and George Simmel, both of whom were working in Germany in the 20th century. Weber was working on theorising how power and status affected Marx's conceptions of 'class stratification'. According to Weber, class consciousness and social change are more difficult to achieve than Marx thought; status affiliations and differences in power overrides class differences.

George Simmel focuses his theories on how modern city life creates friendship patterns. In modern urban settings, 'rational' group membership patterns prevail, but the significant thing to be noted here is that it is the individual who chooses what kind of group affiliations he wants to be a part of. Thus, the importance is primarily on the individual's decision making powers whether he/she wants or does not want to be a part of the group. He also says that under rational group membership, people will tend to see themselves as unique individuals with greater decision making powers. This freedom could be lessened in intensity because of increasing irrational behaviour in society.

Patricia Collins has a beautiful way of merging different epistemological concerns, just like she blends both these aforesaid theories of Weber and Collins. She borrows from Simmel the importance of the influences of intersectionalities on the individual, and talks about the way intersectionalities create different kinds of lived experiences and social realities. Similarly, she takes from Weber the concepts of power and social stratification, and she is concerned with how intersections create different kinds of inequalities, and how these cross-cutting influences affect social change.

Bell hooks' Conception of Intersection between RACE, GENDER and CLASS

Having looked at and understood the concept of Intersectionality, we are now at a stage where we can go ahead and understand the concept of Intersectionality as used by bell hooks. bell hooks has borrowed this concept of intersectionality and used it beautifully in her own analysis of class, gender and race. Essentially deriving her epistemological premise from her own lived experiences as a black woman as well as other such women around her, bell hooks talks in depth about the kind of intense intersections between the concepts of race, class and gender, and how these three categories merge to formulate the experiences of poor black women is what she essentially looks at. In doing so, her formulations lead to the coinage of the terminology called 'White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy'.

She consistently, in all her works on Feminism, talks about how different the concept of feminism is for the white women and for black women. During the time when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, the black women were dealing with much more and hence they argued that there are worse means of oppression, the brutality of racism

being one of them. This is an interesting phenomenon because racist and sexist socialisation had conditioned the black women to devalue their 'femaleness' and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. Thus when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, the black women raised the issue that sexism was insignificant in the face of a more brutal form of oppression known as racism. bell hooks in her book 'A'nt I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism' argues that such positions were taken by the black women because they had been conditioned not to turn a blind eye to the fact that sexism was as brutal and as exploitative a form of oppression as racism, and that as black women they were doubly oppressed. It is important to trace the history of black feminist movement a little before we get into the intersectionalities. In the 19th century America, black women at least knew that actual, real freedom consisted of not just freedom from a sexist social order, but countering racism is an important means of gaining dignity. When the black women participated in the women's movements during this period, questions arose about whether women's rights movement would be a detriment to the cause of fighting racism, these women argued that any improvement in the social status of women would be beneficial for the blacks as a race/ community as well. Women like Sojourner Truth, Mary Terrel, Anna Cooper started breaking the long years of silence and began to record and articulate their experiences. They began to emphasise the 'female' aspect of their identity, and the understanding that their identities are much different from that of the black male started evolving. This fact started coming into the picture when the white men started supporting voting / suffrage rights for the black male, and rejected the same rights for the white women. And this revealed the depths of sexism of the white male. Interestingly, prior to the white male support for the black male's voting rights, white women activists had thought it was a wise act to support the black political activists, but when it seemed that black male might get the rights and they would get left out, the white women activists let the racism take over, and withdrew all support to black activists, and urged the white men to put racist discrimination ahead of sexist oppression. The 'gender' aspect of oppression and discrimination started gaining weight from this time onwards. It became clear that the status of women was considered to be the lowest in society. And this definitely came as a shock to the white women engaged in the women's movement.

In this whole process Black Women were in a position of complete double oppression, meaning that to ally with the women's suffrage movement would mean they are allying with the white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism; but to only support suffrage for black men would mean undermining their own dignity as women, and give in to and also to a certain extent 'endorse' the patriarchal oppressive structure that they live in. Thus, the first thing that becomes clear from this situation is that the black women were nowhere in the picture; neither did they have a place in the women's suffrage movement as it

was only for the white women, nor did they have any place in the black men's suffrage movement. The more radical black women demanded franchise rights for all citizens of America, including all Black men and all women of the country. Sojourner Truth was the most radical Black Woman activist of that time. Black women had started realizing that sexist oppression was as real and as grave a threat to them as racism, and hence if the problem has to be addressed they cannot be addressed at just one level. Although black men and women had struggled equally for the liberation from slavery, the truth that black men had always overshadowed black women cannot and should not be denied. As black men advanced in all spheres of American life they encouraged Black women to assume a more and more subservient role. When the women's rights movement ended in the twenties, it was ensured that the voices of the black women were stilled. While some black women resented the move of black men to oppress and subvert black women to a secondary status, majority of the black women gave in to the subversion and oppression of their own men, and what had started off as a movement to secure rights for the whole black community, ended up becoming a sexist exploitation and domination of black women by black men, who forgot the initial cause and isolated the women of their community who had started off as comrades-in-arms in the cause. The movement against oppression became a movement to uphold black male patriarchy. It is interesting how a movement so concerned with fighting racist oppression completely overlooked the condition of sexist and racist oppression combined for the black women.

There was an increasing tendency to romanticize the 'strength' of black women, in terms of physical strength, which was earlier seen as dehumanising in itself, but now the same thing got converted into a matter of pride, and the point to be noted here is that this sort of labelling happening from the outside of the black women's domain. And this was to a great extent hypocritical because this was also the time when white women participants of the women's movement were shouting slogans against the woman's role as 'breeder', 'burden bearer' and 'sex object'. But in the same breath, these women were celebrating these very roles of the black women. They hailed the black women's role of 'sincere mothering' and their ability to bear innate burdens of domestic work as assets. Increasingly, even during the women's movements Black Women were seen as increasingly available as sex objects, and the women activists never saw this as a problem to deal with.

Undoubtedly, sexism was operating at different levels. At one level, it operated independently, and on the other level, it operated in collusion with racism. Very importantly, it has to be understood that the 'IDENTITY' of the Black Women in America was a big question mark. They were either coalesced into the larger umbrella of 'women', where of course the only concerns that got addressed were those of the middle class white women; or they were put under the umbrella of 'blacks', wherein the only issues that got raised and addressed were those of the black male. Essentially, nobody looked at the black women as a

separate group of people, who had been through completely different life experiences than the other two groups under which they were essentialised. The forms of oppression that they had been through, the kind of sexist-racist exploitation that they had been going through since ages, was no match to those of the other two groups. And such reductionist ways of functioning was indeed snatching way the identity of these women, and reducing them to something that were absolutely not. In these anti-oppressive movements, slogans were raised and analogies were drawn between these two groups: 'blacks' and 'women'. But in between these two groups, where was the talk about the black women, who were the most oppressed of the lot. It was just not present, the black women's identity was made invisible, the fact that their needs and wants and problems and oppression have a different face, was not even thought of. Most of the feminists of this period equated the problems that black women faced with racism and not sexism. They were completely unable to understand the intricate intersections between both of these concepts. The assumption that one can see both these concepts, race and gender from different lenses, divorced from each other has to be done away with, and a new perspective that brings in such intersections would be useful for a better understanding of the concept of oppression and intersectionality.

bell hooks has a decidedly feminist stance or perspective of looking at everything, and hence uses the notion of difference in her works to delineate the experience of African American women as that experience is situated in current feminist theory. I think this is the right time to bring in the debate on how class intersects with race and gender to formulate lived experiences of the African American women that bell hooks is talking about. The best way to introduce and take this class angle further would be by bringing in an elaborate discussion on the experiences of black slave women and their experiences of sexist-racist oppression. Class-wise these women were the lowest in the rungs of social order, and hence, it would be apt and significant to understand how bell hooks has seen the phenomenon of black women's slavery. If one begins to understand this phenomenon of slavery, one would realize that 'institutionalised sexism' as bell hooks calls the phenomenon of patriarchy to be, was the base of America's social structure of the 19th century. Sexism was an integral part of the social and political order that the white colonizers tagged along with them from their European homelands. Little did anyone know that this would have a great impact on the social, economic, political and cultural lives of the African American women who were turned into slaves by the colonisers. The slave economy is very interesting in its own ways. In the slave economy, the female slaves were not as valued as the male slave. On an average, it cost more money to buy a male slave than to buy a female slave. Then how did black female slaves suddenly gain so much value? The scarcity of workers coupled with the relatively few numbers of black women in American colonies caused some white male planters to encourage, persuade and coerce immigrant white females to engage in sexual intercourse

with the black male slaves as means of producing more slaves. During the same period of time, an anti-amalgamation law was passed in the year 1664 which prohibited any kind of sexual contact of white women and black slave men. And when this law succeeded in its purpose, the black female slaves acquired a new status. Planters recognised the economic gain they could garner by breeding black female slaves. The new rule that was formulated informally was that unlike the offspring born out of the union of a black male slave and white female, the offspring born of any black female slave would be a slave since the day of his/her birth. And in this way the child would be the property of the slave owner of his/her mother. As the 'market value' of the black female slaves increased, more and more of them were procured and purchased at high prices by white slave traders. White male observers were immensely astounded but also impressed by the African male's subjugation and exploitation of Black females, and this kind of patriarchal set up encouraged them to further oppress the black women. The branding of the slaves was an important way of undermining their human dignity, and after the branding, they were stripped of any clothing. The nakedness of the African female constantly reminded her of her sexual vulnerability, and her body was the most common site for inflicting violence by means of rape. The threat of rape and other kinds of brutal sexual violence was a common means of inducing fear into the female slaves.

Racist exploitation or oppression of black slave women as workers either in the fields or domestic households was not as dehumanising and humiliating as their sexual exploitation. The expectation of the white male slave owners was that the female slaves silently accept all the violence afflicted on them and any questioning of such exploitation could lead to severe repression. As bell hooks recounts incidents in her book, cases where black female slaves gave in to sexual exploitation 'willingly' they were rewarded with presents and gifts, but any attempts at refusal would lead to increase in the intensity of the violence. I assume that the political aim of this categorical rape of black women by white men was a symbol of ownership of these women as properties of the white males. The brutal treatment of enslaved black women by the white men exposed the depths of male hatred of a black woman and especially her body. And the worst part was that the enslaved women could not look to any group of men, be it white men or black men to protect her against sexual exploitation. There are documented cases wherein many times, in desperate attempts to save themselves the horror of rape and violence, the enslaved women looked at their white mistresses for help thinking that they would understand and if not anything else, would at least sympathise with them and give them emotional support. But nothing of that sort happened at all. In fact, some of these mistresses responded by punishing them harshly, physically torturing them sometimes; at other times they encouraged white males to use these women as sex-objects. This is a clear example of how intersection between class, race and gender happen in society. One analysis of this kind of behaviour by the white women is that the ill-treatment of their

coloured counterparts provided them some respite from becoming sex-objects for the white male, whose hatred towards the female body has already been talked about. This just goes to prove, the already stated arguments that lived experiences of white women are completely different from those of the black women, and hence collapsing these two separate groups of people under the same umbrella of 'womanhood' is unacceptable.

Rape was not the only means of dehumanizing black female slaves, there were other means as well like stripping them naked and flogging them in public. Breeding was another socially accepted way of sexually exploiting black women. As regards the hierarchies based solely on race, the social status of black women and men were the same, but sexist differentiation caused the lot of the male to be distinguished from that of the female. A measure of social equality existed between the sexes in the area of work but nowhere else. Black men and women often performed exactly the same kinds of work in the agricultural fields but even here the black women could not rise to leadership positions. A slave 'sub-culture' evolved during this period in which the patriarchal values of White society were reflected in this sub-culture, which means that the sex roles that had been defined in the white society.

In bell hooks' very significant work, "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center", she says that the central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that "all women are oppressed". This assertion implies that women share a common lot, and that factors like class, sexual preference, religion, etc do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalised but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society. "Being oppressed means the absence of choices" (hooks, 1984)¹

However, it is true that many women do have choices, as inadequate as they are, therefore exploitation and discrimination are words that more accurately describe the lot of women collectively in the United States. Many women do not join organised resistance against their oppression because sexism has not meant a complete lack of choices for them. They may know that they are being discriminated against on the basis of race, but some of the women don't count this as discrimination and oppression.

Very interestingly, hooks says that under capitalism, patriarchy is structured and shaped in a manner such that 'sexism restricts women's behaviour in some realms even as freedom from limitations is allowed in other spheres'. The absence of extreme restrictions leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed. This is such an idyllic state of nature for

¹ This is a quote from hooks' book, "Feminist Theory: From margin to center", and here hooks further explains how availability of choices is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor.

the sexist, exploiters and oppressors in society. That by providing certain kinds of , 'compromises' in the form of some freedoms, they easily make the women believe that there is nothing like oppression against women present in society , and even if there are, I am not part of getting oppressed, is what the women think. There are oppressed women in the United States, says bell hooks, and it is both necessary as well as appropriate that we speak against such oppression. French feminist Christine Delphy makes the point in her essay, "For a Materialist Feminism" that that the use of the term 'oppression' is important because it places feminist struggle in a radical political framework.

"The rebirth of feminism coincided with the use of the term 'oppression'. The ruling ideology, that is common sense, daily speech, does not speak about oppression but about a 'feminine condition'. It refers back to a naturalist explanation: to a constraint of nature, exterior reality out of reach and not modifiable by human action. The term 'oppression' on the contrary, refers back to a choice, an explanation, a situation that is political. 'Oppression' and 'social oppression' are therefore synonyms or rather social oppression is a redundancy: the notion of political origin, i.e., social, is an integral part of the concept of oppression"² (Delphy)

However, hooks says that, feminist emphasis on 'common oppression' in the United States was less a strategy for politicization than an appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the extent to which they shaped the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interests. Although the impulse towards unity and empathy that informed the notion of common oppression was directed at building solidarity, slogans like 'organize around your own oppression' provided the excuse many privileged women needed to ignore the differences between their social status and the status of the masses of women. It was obviously a mark of race and class privilege, as well as the expression of freedom from the many constraints sexism places on working class women, that middle class white women were able to make their interests the primary focus of the feminist movement and employ a rhetoric of commonality (not necessarily true) that made their condition synonymous with oppression. In this context hooks raises certain pertinent questions. Was there anyone amongst these white middle class women who would want a change in the vocabulary of the feminist movement that completely left the black women out? What other group of women in the USA had similar access to universities, publishing houses, mass media and more importantly, money? Had middle class black women begun a movement in which they had labelled themselves 'oppressed', no one would have taken them seriously, and this is a definite assumption. Had they formed public forums and given speeches about their 'oppression', they would have become the laughing stock of society, and

² French feminist Christine Delphy's essay, "For a Materialist Feminism" talks about the use of the term oppression as significant because it places feminist struggle in a radical political framework.

they would have definitely been criticized and attacked from all sides. This was not the case with white bourgeois feminists because they could appeal to a larger audience of women, like themselves, who were eager to change their lot in life. Their isolation from women of other class and race groups provided no immediate comparative base by which to test their assumptions of common oppression. Initially radical participants in the women's movement demanded that women penetrate that isolation and create a new space for contact with women from other race, class backgrounds. Works like *Liberation Now*, *Radical Feminism*, *Sisterhood is All Powerful* were all published in the early 1970's and contained articles and writings that attempted to address a large audience of women, an audience that was not necessarily, white, middle class, college educated and adult. These sentiments were shared by many feminists early in the movement, were however, not sustained. As feminism and women's movement became a tool for acquiring money, fame, and prestige for the feminist writers, individual opportunism undermined appeals for collective struggle. Interestingly, even women who were ideologically not opposed to capitalism, patriarchy, racism also labelled themselves as 'feminists'. Their expectations were varied. Privileged women wanted social equality with men and some others wanted equal pay for equal work, others wanted an alternative lifestyle for themselves. Many of these concerns were understood as 'legitimate' and were thus easily co-opted in the in the ruling capitalist patriarchy. Thus these kinds of small compromises offered by the ruling class, made these white, middle class, feminists happy about their so called success. But the contradictions in the feminist movement were conveniently ignored and not addressed at all. bell hooks says that it is no coincidence that feminist struggle has been so easily co-opted to serve the interests of the conservative and liberal feminists since feminism in the United States has so far been a "bourgeois ideology". (hooks)

She goes further to state that the ideology of "competitive, atomistic liberal individualism" has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle. The usurpation of feminism by bourgeois women to support their class interests has been to a very grave extent justified by feminist theory. (eg, the ideology of 'common oppression') (hooks,1981)

According to hooks, any movement to resist the co-option feminist struggle must begin by introducing a different feminist perspective, which means, a theory should be evolved, one that is not informed by the ideology of liberal individualism. The exclusionary practices of women who dominate feminist discourse have made it practically impossible for new and varied theories to emerge. Feminism has its own party line and women who feel the need of a different strategy, a different foundation, often find themselves ostracized and silenced. Criticisms of or alternatives to established feminist ideas are not encouraged. Yet there are groups of women who feel for themselves only if they first create, through critiques, an

awareness of the factor that alienate them. Many individual white women within the women's movement see a liberatory solution to personal dilemmas. Having directly benefitted from the movement, they are less inclined to criticise it or to engage in rigorous examination of its structure than those who feel it has not had a revolutionary impact on their lives or the lives of the masses of women in our society.

Non-white, mostly black women who feel affirmed within the current structure of the feminist movement seem also to feel that their definitions of the party line, whether on the issue of Black Feminism or on other issues, is the only legitimate discourse. Rather than encourage a diversity of voices, critical dialogue, and controversy, they, like some white women seek to stifle dissent and act as if they are best able to judge whether other women's voices are worth being heard or not. This to me seems like a tendency towards 'dogmatism' within a liberal feminist movement and hence brings out the contradictions within the movement itself. There is a resistance to a hegemonic dominance of feminist thought by insisting that it is a theory in the making, and also that it should be regularly criticised, questioned, and explored via new possibilities.

Now, very interestingly, bell hooks breaks some long held myths, about feminist discourse. She says that her persistent critique of sexist oppression has been informed by her status as a member of an oppressed group, her experience of sexist exploitation, discrimination and the sense that prevailing feminist analysis has not been the force of shaping her feminist consciousness. This is a very interesting insight for those who think that reducing the experiences of different groups of women under one single umbrella of 'liberal feminism' would work. In fact, there are many white women within the movement who had never considered resisting male dominance until the feminist movement created an awareness that could and hence should resist sexist oppression. Hooks says that on the contrary to her white counterparts, her awareness of feminist struggle was stimulated by social circumstances. She says that her upbringing in South American countryside, black, father-dominated, working class household, made her experience degrees of patriarchal oppression at various levels in the family, and the same was also experienced by her mother, sisters, brother as well. It was her 'anger' which became a part of her epistemological premise of feminist discourse, and which led her to question the politics of dominance and enabled her to resist sexist socialisation. She goes on to describe how, frequently, white feminists act as if black women did not know sexist oppression before they initiated a feminist movement which made them realize that they are oppressed. They believe that they have provided 'the' analysis and 'the' program for the liberation of all women. Grossly mistaken they are, says hooks. These white feminists do not understand and cannot even imagine the kind of oppression that the Black women have gone through, and the kind of oppressive situations that many of them still live in. And often people who live in extremely oppressive, patriarchal conditions, understand the

politics of sexist oppression much better than the people who have not experienced such extreme levels of oppression. This also leads to formulations of interesting strategies of resistance to counter discrimination because of their lived experiences.

The Black women who observed white feminist focus on male tyranny and women's oppression as if it were a new revelation and they felt that they such a focus had little impact on their lives. To them it was just another indication of the privileged living conditions of the middle and upper class white women that they would need a theory to inform them that they were 'oppressed'. The implication, being that people who are truly oppressed know it even though they may not be engaged in organised resistance or are unable to articulate in written form the nature of their oppression. These black women saw nothing liberatory in party line analyses of women's oppression.(hooks) Through her experience of being a black woman interested in understanding the realities of sexist oppression, bell hooks participated in various feminist groups where she says that she found that white women adopted a condescending attitude towards her and other non-white feminists. And she understands this condescending behaviour of the white women towards the black women feminists, as one of the means they employed to remind them that the women's movement was 'theirs' and that they were able to participate because they were allowed to do so by the white feminists. She remembers that they were not treated as equals in this process. And though they wanted hooks and her other black feminist colleagues to provide a firsthand account of black women's experiences, they still felt that it was their role to decide if these experiences are or can be treated as authentic.

Attempts by white feminists to silence black women have been rarely written about. Through her own experiences, hooks says that such silencing has happened all too often in a variety of ways, in a variety of places like classrooms, conference rooms, privacy of cosy living rooms, where the black women have to face racist remarks and discrimination by groups of white women, who call themselves feminists. Racist stereotypes about the 'strong, superhuman black women operate as strong myths in the minds of many white women' (hooks), which leads them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimised in this society and the significant role that white women play in maintaining and perpetuating this discrimination and oppression. By projecting onto black women a supernatural sort of a power and strength, the tendency of the white women is to both promote a false image of themselves as 'powerless, passive victims' and in this way they strategically deflect attention away from their 'aggressiveness, their power, their willingness to dominate and control others'. These unacknowledged aspects of the social status of many white women prevent them from transcending racism and limit the scope of their understanding of women's overall social status. These innumerable contradictions within feminist discourse have led to schisms and fractures in the same. The privileged feminists belonging to the white, middle class

community have largely been unable to speak to, with and for diverse groups of women because they either do not understand fully the interrelatedness of gender, race, class, or even if they know this, they refuse to take these intersections seriously. Feminist analysis of women's lot tends to focus exclusively on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to construct feminist theory. They reflect the dominant tendency in Western patriarchal minds to mystify woman's reality by insisting that gender is the sole determinant of women's fate. Obviously it is much easier for women who have not experienced race and class based oppression to focus solely on gender. Although socialist feminists focus on class and gender, they tend to dismiss race or they make a point of acknowledging that race is important and then proceed to offer an analysis in which race is not considered. As group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are they collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but their overall social status is lower than that of any other group as well. Occupying such a position they bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression.

Also another point that hooks brings out is that , the black women have never had the 'socialisation' to assume the role of an exploiter or oppressor, but have always been forced to don the robes of the exploited or the oppressed. White women and black men have it both ways, that is, they act as exploiters as well as the exploited at the same time. Black men may be victimised by racism but may be sexist exploiters, and white women on the other hand, may be racist exploiters but may at the same time be victims of sexist oppression. Both these groups have led liberation movements that fought for their rights, but at the same time, encroached on the rights of other people, in this case, the black women are the targets for both these groups. Black women with no institutionalised "other" that they can actually suppress and exploit often have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its accompanying ideology. Thus their epistemic premise being their lived experiences shape their consciousness in such a way that their world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege, whatever that might be, and however relative that might be to their experiences.

Hooks argues very beautifully that the black women have to understand that this kind of disadvantage that they have at present should be recognised as a vantage point from where their marginality gives them a perspective and an opportunity to look at feminism in a completely different way. This perspective enables them to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter hegemony. She says that black women have a lot to contribute to feminist theory and praxis.

One of bell hooks' most important works is "Feminism is For Everybody" and although it is a basic reading on the feminist movements, I personally believe that every scholar interested in understanding Feminism as a political theory should ideally read this book, since it puts out

the intricacies in the movement very lucidly. Essentially if we look at the feminist movement critically, we would realize that a basic problem within the feminist discourse has been the inability to arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept the definitions that could serve as points of unification. I personally feel that this should not be considered as a problem within the discourse. What and why is there a need to have one common definition of such a vast phenomenon and ideology that governs the lives of so many different groups of women. However, the only problem is that without a clear definition of the same, we cannot have a sound foundation on which to construct a theory or engage in overall meaningful praxis. The most common definition of feminist movement or women's liberation movement is that it is a movement that intends to make women the 'social equals of men'. This definition raises many problematic questions. Since all men are not equal in the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal class structure, the question arises as to which men do the men want to be equal to? Also, another question that can be raised is whether all women share a common vision of what equality means to them? I personally think that this is a rather simplistic definition and it fails to incorporate differences in class and race, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited, or oppressed. Upper class white women's rights issues have been satisfied with simple definitions for obvious reasons already stated previously. Women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continuously reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status. While they are aware that sexism enables men in their respective groups to have privileges denied to them, they are more likely to see exaggerated expressions of male chauvinism among their peers as stemming from the male's sense of himself as powerless and ineffectual in relation to ruling male groups, rather than an expression of an overall privileged status.

Not all women involved in the women's movement were content with making women's liberation synonymous with gaining equality in social status with men. Many radical feminists argue that neither a feminism that focuses on woman as an autonomous being worthy of personal freedom nor one that focuses on the attainment of equality of opportunity with men can rid society of sexism and male domination. According to them, feminism is a 'struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganising society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism , economic expansion and material desires'.(hooks) When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it centralises the experiences of all women , especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied or changed by political movements. Very beautifully and simply defined by bell hooks, feminism, she says 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. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or a role that one can step into. Diverting energy from feminist movement that aims to change society, many women concentrate on the creation of a counter-culture, a woman-centred world wherein participants have little contact with men. Such attempts do not indicate a respect or concern for the vast majority of women who are unable to integrate their cultural expressions with the visions offered by ‘alternative woman centred communities’. However, equating feminist struggle with living in a counter cultural, woman centred world erected barriers that closed the movement off from most women. Despite sexist discrimination, exploitation or oppression, many women feel their lives as they live them are important and valuable. Naturally the suggestion that these lives could be simply left and abandoned for an alternative feminist lifestyle met with a lot of resistance. Feeling their life experiences devalued, deemed solely negative and worthless, many women responded by vehemently attacking feminism as a reaction to the proposition to create an alternative lifestyle for the women.

Bell hooks in her “Feminist Theory: From margin to centre” says that focusing on feminism as political commitment, one tends to resist the emphasis on individual identity and lifestyle. Such resistance engages us in revolutionary praxis. The ethics of western society informed by the imperialism and capitalism are personal rather than social. They teach us that the individual good is more important than the collective good and consequently that individual change is of greater significance than collective change. She raises the point that as a black feminist woman, she is often asked what she considers to be more important, being black or being a woman. The question on prioritising and deciding which identity should be placed at a higher level is something that all Black Feminists have faced. Whether feminist struggle to end sexist oppression is more important than the struggle to end racism and vice versa, is another question that she is often asked. She replies interestingly by saying that all such questions are rooted in ‘competitive either/or thinking’, the belief that the self is formed in opposition to another. Therefore, it is something like; one is a feminist because one is not something else. Most people are socialised to think in terms of opposition rather than compatibility. Rather than see anti-racist work as totally compatible with working to end sexist oppression, they are often seen as two movements competing for the first place. If one answers in the affirmative to the question of whether one is a feminist or not, people tend to assume that the person has no other political ideologies than feminism. Similarly, saying that you are anti-racist, would lead people to think that this is your only political stance. And this is what bell hooks is fighting against. She says that these intricate intersections between race,

class and gender have to be understood very clearly to get a deeper understanding of what feminism is in reality.

In her book, "*A'int I a Woman*", bell hooks has devoted a full chapter on, what she calls, the 'Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability', and this very beautifully brings out the concept of intersection that I am exploring in this paper. She says that American women of all races are socialised to think of racism only in the context of 'race hatred'. Specifically, in case of black and white people, racism generally is used synonymously in the context of discrimination against the black people by the white people. She brings in here, the concept of 'racial imperialism'. She says that the American woman's understanding of racism as a political tool of colonialism and imperialism is severely limited. American women have been socialised, even brainwashed to accept a version of American History that was created to uphold and maintain the racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy. One measure of the success of such indoctrination is the perpetuation of the very evils that oppress people. 'If the white women who organised the contemporary movement towards feminism were even remotely aware of racial politics in American history, they would have known that overcoming barriers that separate women from one another would entail confronting the reality of racism, and not just racism as a general evil in society but the race hatred they might harbour in their own psyches'. (hooks)

Despite the predominance of patriarchal rule in America, the country was colonised on a racially imperialistic base. No degree of patriarchal bonding between white male colonisers and Native American black men overshadowed white racial imperialism. Racism took precedence over sexual alliances in both the white world's interaction with Native Americans and African Americans, just as racism overshadowed any bonding between white women and black women on the basis of sex.

While those feminists who argue that sexual imperialism is more endemic to all societies than racial imperialism are probably correct, American society is one in which racial imperialism supersedes sexual imperialism. To black women the issue is not whether white women are more or less racist than white men, but the fact that they are racist is enough for them to understand that the white women would not support their cause of fighting oppression. Hooks argues that every women's movement in America from its earliest origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation, a fact which in no way invalidates feminism as a political ideology. The racial apartheid social structure of the 20th century American life was mirrored in the women's rights movement. The first white women's rights advocates were never seeking social equality for all women; what they were seeking was equality for all white women. Understandably, relationships between white and black women were charged with tensions and conflicts in the early part of the 20th century. The women's rights

movement had drawn a big fat line in between these two groups of women and hence, reconciliation was impossible. This movement was a constant reminder to the black women of this distance that had been created between them and the white feminist activists, and they knew that this distance could not be bridged so easily.

I quote bell hooks from her book, 'A'int I a Woman' :

“Despite the reality that white upper and middle class women in America suffer from sexist discrimination and sexist abuse, they are not as a group as oppressed as poor white or black or yellow women. Their unwillingness to distinguish between various degrees of discrimination caused black women to see them as enemies. As many upper middle class white feminists who suffer least from sexist oppression were attempting to focus all attention on themselves, it follows that they would not accept an analysis of woman’s lot in America which argued that not all women are equally oppressed because some women are able to use their class, race and educational privilege to effectively resist sexist oppression.”

Initially class privilege was not discussed by the white women in the women’s movement. They wanted to project an image of themselves as victims and that could not be done by drawing attention to their class. In fact, the contemporary women’s movement was extremely class bound. As a group, the white participants did not denounce capitalism. They chose to define liberation using the terms of ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, equating liberation with gaining economic status and money power. Like all ideal capitalists, they proclaimed work as the key to liberation. This emphasis on work was yet another indication of the extent to which the white female liberationists’ perception of reality was totally narcissistic, classist, and racist. This phenomenon was termed as ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, by bell hooks.

In this chapter I have attempted to describe in detail bell hooks’ conception intersectionality between class, race and gender, and how this intersectionality operates at varied levels.

bell hooks’ LIBERATORY FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

Feminist pedagogy encompasses a wide range of challenges of restructuring education. Some of the most important writers who have focused on feminist pedagogy are Jane Roland Martin, bell hooks, Jean O’ Barr, Mary Wyer and all of them focus on different approaches towards the feminist analysis to challenge the current educational system and to advocate alternative practices. bell hooks has been an important educator and cultural critic and she has dedicated much of her career to the development of a truly liberatory feminist pedagogy. Some of her most exciting and inspiring ideas for transforming the classroom have appeared

in the collection of essays titled 'Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom' which was published in 1994. hooks talks about some of the major concerns in the academia today, which are implementing multicultural curricula, dealing with apathy on the part of students and teachers, introducing one's politics into the classroom, and confronting issues of race, class and desire with students.

One of the major influences on bell hooks' works on pedagogy has been Paulo Freire, especially his work 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. In her famous work, 'Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center' which I have quoted elsewhere in the paper as well, hooks first expressed her concern that feminists were ignoring literacy as part of their agenda. She says that basic literacy is often taken for granted by feminists, because many of the women engaged in the feminist movement have been white and middle class and their often fail to address the circumstances of women from underprivileged or poor backgrounds. She expressed particular concern about the fate of women of colour, who constituted a majority of these poor and underprivileged groups and often lacked even the basic reading and writing skills. She also pointed out that most of the information on feminism has been circulated in written form in materials such as books, pamphlets, flyers, etc. She firmly believes that the feminist activists have failed to explore the in-depth intersections between sexist exploitation of women in this society and the degree of women's education, including a lack of basic reading and writing skills.³ It is this intersection that I am going to be talking about with reference to her concept of "Liberatory Feminist Pedagogy". Despite the fact that hooks had been writing about it for years, about the need for white, middle class feminists to get involved in the fight against the illiteracy that continues to plague of their less fortunate counterparts, there has infact been very little improvement in the literacy rate among women of colour. Hooks offers several suggestions concerning the eradication of illiteracy in America. She advocates feminist organised literacy programmes in communities where there are a number of women who lack basic reading, writing and critical thinking skills. Hooks realizes that funding is a critical factor in the success or failure of such programmes, she recommends the implementation of small programmes in poor and working class neighbourhoods that could be staffed by committed volunteers. (hooks, 1981)

Another approach would involve disseminating feminist thought on a much smaller and more personal scale-by word of mouth and teaching methodologies. hooks has been a teacher of Women's Studies for many years and the majority of her students and colleagues were usually white women. She challenged her students to come out of their shells and talk to women of colour on the campus, to approach women they did not know and share their feminist ideas with them. She wished to bridge the gap between the white women and black

³ This concept has been derived from Chapter-8 of bell hooks' book "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center", and the name of the chapter is 'Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda'.

women, and although she knew that this divide was difficult to bridge as the root of such inequality lay in the mindset or the psyche of the women in question; but she still pushed her students to break the barrier and get involved in interactions and conversations with women of colour. However, in her experiences, hooks admits, that much to her despair, she found that many of her white female students who talked at length about how necessary it was to bridge this gap, and how they thought that feminism was as important for black women as it was for them; outside of the classroom they were hesitant and reluctant to even sit down and talk with their coloured counterparts. This reluctance and inability to take feminism outside the classroom situations of the university was something that further prevented black women students to access information about feminist agendas.

Another important point to be noted here is that hooks has identified an “ever-widening gulf between the feminist theorists and practitioners” (hooks,1994) and this is a potential problem that could undermine the final goals of feminism. She has charged intellectuals and academicians to have elevated the discourse in feminist theory to such a complex level that it is virtually impossible for the women outside of the universities and academic circles to comprehend what feminism is all about.

Another claim that she rightly makes is that much of the academic theorising about feminism also clearly exhibits a class bias, since the ideas that are developed often have little or no relationship to the lived experiences of most women, particularly those who come from marginalised groups. On the other hand, many feminist activists have adopted a profoundly anti-intellectual stance, wherein they refuse to look at theory at all, and this hooks finds extremely problematic. While such feminist activists might claim a moral high ground for themselves by pointing out all of the meaningful things they are doing to improve the quality of women’s lives and to protect the rights of women, they fail to recognise that traditionally there has been a lack of literacy and access to higher education that has prevented them from developing intellectually, which in turn has continued to exclude them from contributing to political, academic and scientific discourse.

Hence, the intersection between academic discourse and activism has to be understood in great depth only then can there be an end to sexist oppression of black women. A marriage between theory and praxis is absolutely essential to bring about such a change. Hooks has been a feminist intellectual as well as an activist and she has contemplated on what she could do help reconcile the differences in these two camps. And this is the reason why she has deliberately decided not to use the conventional scholarly formats or writing styles in most of her work, which is a lucid read for everybody. She says that such a decision for her was a political one, motivated by the desire to be inclusive, to reach a many readers and audience as possible, and this also why apart from her writings has been so interested in giving speeches

and talks. She is not worried about the fact that her more recent work which include essays, interviews, self-dialogues might lose its importance in the academic circles on the basis of their not being 'scholarly' enough. She sticks to her ideology of lucid writing that can reach a large mass of people and can be comprehensible to them. She has often been criticised for not being 'scholarly' enough in her writings. However, she has been a rebel and she has rebelled against the imposition of a set pattern of writing in the academia. She insists that the benefits of her more accessible style that can reach the readers who she wants to be read by (black women who have not had easy access to higher education) outweighs the any loss of her work's academic prestige and acceptance. She argues that; 'the ability to "translate" ideas to an audience that varies in age, sex, degree of literacy is a skill feminist educators need to develop. Concentration of feminist educators in universities encourages habitual use of an academic style that may make it impossible for teachers to communicate effectively with individuals who are not familiar with either academic style or jargons. All too often educators, especially university professors fear their work will not be valued by other academics if it is presented in a way that makes it accessible to a wider audience. If these educators thought of rendering their work in a number of different styles, 'translations', they would be able to satisfy arbitrary academic standards while making their work available to masses of people.'" (hooks, 1984)

This goes to show the fearless character of the thinker in question and also the fact that she has a mission in mind, that of making feminism accessible to the women and men who need it the most, which is the most marginalised sections of the society. Going on theorising in isolation without any link to organic reality will render such theories futile. Thus we see that ,bell hooks has been struggling since a long time to unite her feminist theory with the practical applications in people's , especially black women's lives, and she feels that she has been able to be successful to a great extent. Creating theory that can be meaningful and can be contextualised within the lived experiences of the marginalised women (and also men)for whom she has been writing for so long, goes a long way towards the creation of a truly 'liberatory educational practice'. And this has not been difficult for her to do so because she derives her epistemology from her own experiences of a rural, South American, working class background, where access to education was very difficult for her. And it is these particular people that she has been looking at and producing most of her works as she believes that an ideology as liberating and as useful as feminism should reach the most oppressed women, because it is they who need it the most.

One of her teaching strategies, hence, has always been to use anecdotes and sharing of experiences from her own life or from other people's lives and such acts of testifying about how oppression operates helps tremendously to advance the feminist movement in the African American communities. Bell hooks has been successful in discussing feminism with

people in poor and working class African American communities, publishing essays and other short pieces in a wide variety of mainstream publications and talking about the same to African American intellectuals, artists, pop culture figures, and by doing so she has been able to gauge the progress that her kind of feminist practice is making in getting acceptance in society.

bell hooks' first major book on education, "Teaching to Transgress", was published in 1994. It is a collection of essays exploring her ideas on pedagogy in which she writes in a very personal style, often anecdotal giving examples from her own experiences. As mentioned earlier in the paper, this style that she has used in this book is quite deliberate as she intended the book to be read by a diverse audience covering anyone interested in the practice of education. She argued for a "progressive, holistic education and an engaged pedagogy". (hooks,1994)

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those teachers who also believe that there is an aspect of their vocations that is sacred; who believes that their work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of their students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of their students is essential if we they are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (hooks, 1994)

She goes on to stress the demands this places upon educators in terms of authenticity and commitment. Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices engaged pedagogy emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.

Within the Liberatory Feminist Pedagogy, bell hooks focuses on teaching practice, and she examines the classroom as a locus of oppression and as a potential site for liberation. Too often contemporary education is based on the 'banking system of education' that has been propagated by Paulo Freire. In this model, the professor has the currency of knowledge and deposits it into the students' minds where it is stored and withdrawn at a later date. Classroom rituals of control and the unjust exercise of power frequently reinforce the dynamic of the powerful professor and the passive, objectified student. The results in the students' primary lesson, being obedience to authority. Such a classroom reinforces societal hierarchies and domination. Although it can teach and perpetuate oppression, the classroom, for hooks, "remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy". Learning can be liberating; education can become the practice of freedom. Instead of being the site for reproducing elite values, the university should encourage students and teachers to transgress

“those boundaries that would confine each pupil to rote, assembly line approach to learning.” (hooks,1994) Throughout her work, hooks looks at ways to make learning an exciting process based on collective effort. Central to her vision of classroom transformation is the goal of the classroom becoming a democratic setting where everyone’s presence is affirmed and valued. Hooks sees teaching as a performatory act serving “as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged...” (hooks, 1994) This engaged pedagogy presupposes that all members of a learning community are responsible for classroom dynamics. Recognising that authority and experience can exclude and silence, the professor must move attention away from her own voice to that of her students.

bell hooks is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire whom she met and worked with on a number of occasions. She claims that she was like a person dying of thirst when she first encountered Freire and although she did not agree with everything he said; she maintains that ‘the fact that there was some mud in my water was not important’. (hooks, 1994) Freire has had a profound effect on her thinking and on bell hooks' practice, particularly around the concepts of literacy and consciousness raising.

hooks is a feminist and for her, literacy is essential to the future of the feminist movement because the lack of reading, writing and critical skills serves to exclude many women and men from feminist consciousness. Not only that, it excludes many from the political process and the labour market. She regards literacy as more than being able to read and write, however. For her, it allows people, particularly those who are marginalized and discriminated against in society to acquire a critical consciousness. Freire’s concept of critical consciousness has been particularly important to her work. She also promotes a notion of praxis in a similar way to Freire i.e. a combination of reflection and action and regards her notion of ‘engaged pedagogy’ as one which requires praxis on the part of not only students but also teachers. Teachers must be aware of themselves as practitioners and as human beings if they wish to teach students in a non-threatening, anti-discriminatory way. Self-actualisation should be the goal of the teacher as well as the students.

bell hook’s pedagogy is one that is responsive to the specific situation of each particular group of students and she sees education as taking place not only in the classroom but also wherever people are. She refers in her new book to ‘communities of resistance’ as places where democratic educators can work.

She acknowledges that within the teaching and learning relationship, more often than not, the question of power and authority comes into play. She says that what she tries to do is acknowledge her authority and the limitations of it and then think of how both teacher and students can learn together in a way that no one acquires the kind of power to use the classroom as a space of domination. She also makes the point that this domination is not restricted to the teacher/student relationship but where there is diversity amongst the students

particularly around the issues of race and gender and sexual practice, it is possible for everyone to engage in power struggles and, in fact, ‘for certain students to have potentially the power to coerce, dominate and silence’. In order to create a learning environment within the classroom she aims to diffuse hierarchy and create a sense of community. hooks maintains that the classroom should be ‘a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership’ (hooks)

Although much of her criticism of the educational world is aimed at the traditional educationalist and what Freire refers to as the banking concept of education, she is also very aware that much of the ideology of modern society arises from the mass media. She is particularly scathing about the power and the effect of television on the American public. ‘No one, no matter how intelligent and skilful at critical thinking, is protected against the subliminal suggestions that imprint themselves on our unconscious brain if we are watching hours and hours of television’ (hooks). She sees parents and students fearing alternative ways of thinking. She maintains that it is vital to challenge all the misinformation that is constantly directed at people and poses as objective unbiased knowledge. She sees this as an essential educational task. She refers in her writing to the importance of the ‘decolonisation of ways of knowing’ (hooks). She makes the point that what is needed are mass-based political movements calling on citizens to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, to work on behalf of ending domination in all of its forms – to work for justice, changing the educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support what she refers to as ‘white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically.

“The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.” (hooks, 1994: 207)

CONCLUSION

This paper has essentially engaged with black feminist thinker and scholar ,bell hooks’ concern with the interlacing dynamics of race, gender, class and class and her overall orientation to the whole person and to their well-being when connected with her ability to engage with educational practice in a direct way set her apart from the vast bulk of her contemporaries. Hers is a unique and radical feminist voice that has challenged the stereotypes of class, race, gender and stormed ahead to enable her students to challenge

ordinary means and ways. Intersectional analysis of social divisions has come to occupy central spaces in both sociological and other analyses of stratification as well as in feminist and other legal, political and policy discourses of international human rights. There has been a gradual recognition of the inadequacy of analysing various social divisions, but especially race and gender, as separate, internally homogeneous, social categories resulting in the marginalization of the specific effects of these, especially on women of colour. ⁴Through bell hooks' works, this paper has attempted to understand the concept of intersectionality, and the importance of studying intersectionality in the present times has been brought out by talking in detail about how categories like race, gender, class, oppression, education cannot be seen in isolation from each other. The kinds of oppression and discrimination that these categories produce for large sections of people are all interrelated. If we see the objective to be one that wishes to end "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy", a major strategy to achieve this could be using 'liberatory feminist education' as a tool. Bell hooks has used intersectionalism as opposed to reductionism, and intersectionality according to hooks allows one to focus on what is the most important problem from amongst a range of problems that already exist and the existence of whom are already acknowledged. Finally, as per my understanding of the concept of intersectionality, I would say, feminism as a political theory and an ideology would not be of much value without intersectionality, which would further lead to inclusion and a political theory as vibrant as feminism needs to be inclusive of women of all race, class, caste, ethnicity, and other kinds of differences. Feminism is a movement to end all kinds of sexist oppression and to move out and break free from the overpowering patriarchal structures, and this can only be achieved if there is a great deal of inclusion in the feminist movement.

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⁴ In an interesting article on 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', Nira Yuval-Davis talks about the uses of intersectionality as a methodology, and the ontological bases of gender,race, class and their relationships with each other.

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CONCEPT MAP

