

Bell Hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. South End Press: Boston, 1984. 174 pages.

Bell Hooks' new book speaks directly to major contradictions within the feminist movement in the United States: Eurocentrism, elitism, opportunism, romanticism of sisterhood, and a false consciousness which targets men as the enemy and deflects attention from an economic system based upon exploitation, racism and sexual discrimination. From Margin to Center, a leading work in an emergent body of literature written by Black feminists, clearly delineates the nexus of race, class and sexual oppression upon the lives of Black women.

Hooks insists that we as Black women speak out, clearly articulating our priorities as women of color. Through her own example, we are urged to write our own theoretical framework which defines the broad parameters of our struggle and outlines strategies for change. We must give voice to our yearnings and in so doing, we must dare to speak in our own behalf -- unabashed and unbowed. For too long, "In this country Black women traditionally have had compassion for everybody except ourselves... We have too often been expected to be all things to all people, speaking everyone else's viewpoint but our own."

Things have changed dramatically. Black women are no longer silent. We have entered the arena of debate and we have done our homework. As Black women we have begun to express compassion for ourselves. We have begun to assess our own particular condition as women and as members of an oppressed ethnic group. We have even dared to become advocates of feminism -- that is within an Afrocentric context. We have done this in spite of resistance and incisive criticism from Black women and Black men who deem feminism an inappropriate topic for us. Those of us who have a vision of a future free of exploitation on the basis of race, sex and class, remain undaunted. In increasing numbers our novels, poems and expository works attest to our understanding that sexism is indeed a barrier which we must organize to eradicate.

Bell Hooks' earlier work, Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (1981); Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis', Common Differences (1981); and Angela Y. Davis', Women, Race and Class (1983), collectively provide a rationale for Black women's necessary participation in the feminist movement on our own terms. Together, these works have explored our multifaceted history and its various permutations: the impac

of racism on Black women during slavery, the devaluation of Black womanhood, racism within the contemporary feminist movement, the relationship between mothers and daughters, sexual attitudes and sexuality, housework, birth control and struggle.

Hooks, Davis and Joseph see Black women's feminist concerns as undeniable and they speak in direct contrast to Black and African women (and men) who preoccupied by reactions to racism, cast aspersions and espouse the belief that...

Black American and African women should beware of the term 'feminism' which is suspect, negative and usually associated with middle-class white American women who (either out of luxury or drudgery) have developed the fashionable feminist liberation idea to either defend their relatively privileged position in corporate white America, or to find a footing for the white women in the status-quo. These women have no idea what it means to be a Black woman in America, and Africa women should therefore view them as phonies who have abandoned their marriages and homes to become lesbians, divorcees etc., to bring shame to womanhood."²

None of the writers previously alluded to -- Hooks, Davis or Joseph -- denies the existence of racism and elitism within the contemporary feminist movement. Instead, they express repugnance for its tenacious grip on the movement and its alienation of women of color. Furthermore, these authors do however, contradict the notion that the feminist movement belongs to white women (middle-class white women at that), and challenge the idea that Black women do not have legitimate concerns related to gender and exploitation. Each further refutes the reductionist analysis that combatting racism alone, will mean that Black women will then ipso facto become liberated. Instead, our struggle is defined as one against the combined forces of racial, sexual, and class oppression.

Here, Hooks' metaphor, from margin to center, becomes quite a propos. Instead of the plight of women of color being pushed to the periphery, their priorities must be brought to the center. Hooks contends that if feminists are to succeed in creating a viable mass movement against sexual oppression, it must account for the complexity and diversity of female experience and cease catering to the needs of a privileged few. This means enlarging the scope of analysis from a narrow focus on the concerns of a minority of white middle-class women to one that addresses the conditions of Native American, Black Asian, Latino, and poor women in general. A viable feminist framework must acknowledge that "women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other

prejudices" which have³ precluded their coming together and organizing effectively. Only after the recognition of common differences is acknowledged and the diversity of women's condition is made central to the feminist framework, can the feminist movement move forward.

A look at the issues Hooks addresses in the twelve chapters of her book reveals the breadth of her analysis as she identifies pivotal concerns. She begins her discussion with a critique of the contemporary feminist movement that asserts that "Feminism in the U.S. has never emerged from the women who are the most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually -- women who are powerless to change their condition in life: all non-white women and poor women."⁴ Furthermore, she comments that "It was a mark of race and class privilege, as well as the expression of freedom from many constraints of sexism placed upon 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 that made their condition synonymous with oppression."⁵ Women who were not opposed to patriarchy, capitalism, classism or racism, labeled themselves feminists; yet these women claimed sisterhood with the very women they sought to silence and exclude from the struggle. This chauvinism has led to a backlash where -- either explicitly or implicitly through their behavior -- Black women and other women of color have refused to join them. Hence, the movement's stagnation and isolation form the very forces who could have galvanized feminism into a legitimate mass based organization. To transform feminism and raise it from this quagmire, Hooks suggests that feminism be defined clearly, as a movement to end sexist oppression as well as other forms of oppression and domination -- not as a movement promoting a life-style choice or as gaining equality with men within an oppressive and exploitative system.

The remainder of Hooks' book is devoted to discussing a variety of issues including the following: the mystification of sisterhood and its ripoff; the need to see men as comrade in the struggle and not as the 'enemy'; rethinking the nature of work; the centrality of educating women; the need to end violence and all forms of domination; changing perspectives on power; ending female sexual oppression, transforming parenting; and the need to reorganize the feminist movement so that it will move beyond cosmetic reforms which only serve to promote the needs of a small minority of women who have had hegemonic control over feminist discourse. Until now.

Hooks has troubled the waters; her book is a theoretical breakthrough. For she discusses issues which have hitherto been given lip-service only: women are not a monolith

group; there is diversity, there is conflict, and there are differences in spite of the commonality of gender. Hooks' critical assessment of the limitations within the contemporary feminist movement is lucid and thoroughgoing. She not only identifies short-comings, but she also provides means to overcome them. What I found most useful about her work, From Margin to Center, is that she pulls together the various strands and argues effectively for an analysis which acknowledges the interdependence of race, sex and class and the necessity of fighting them through a combined and multi-pronged strategy. Hooks skillfully sidesteps the Marxist orthodoxy of myopically focusing on class to the exclusion of all else; she transcends the nationalist thinking of defining race as the sole barrier; and she refuses to be seduced by the lure of sisterhood with women who have co-opted feminism and appropriated it as a vehicle for their own self-serving needs.

The circle must be widened and the base must be expanded. In her conclusion, Hooks enjoins women and men to support feminism and to restore its revolutionary life force by "rethinking and reshaping its direction so that the experiences of people on the margin who suffer sexist oppression and other forms of group oppression are understood, addressed and incorporated into the making of theory and the planning of action."⁶ I highly recommend this book because of its depth and clarity. As a principled analyst, Hooks' approach is to perform the criticism necessary to strengthen feminism without trashing it because of its blatant shortcomings which can be remediated through concerted action. Hooks encourages the colloquy regarding race, class and sex to continue. The debate continues, but the ground rules have been changed. Black women and other women of color are addressed and identified as principal characters in the struggle against sexism; they are brought front stage, center, no longer relegated to the wings. And, men too, are not allowed to abdicate their obligation to struggle with women in bringing about an end to exploitation based upon race, class and sex.

Sandra Jackson
Ph.D. Candidate
School of Education
Univ. of Calif., Berkeley

NOTES

¹ Audrey Lourde. Sister Outsider. The Crossing Press: New York, 1984, p. 62.

² African Woman magazine. January/February, 1982, p. 17.

³ Bell Hooks. From Margin to Center: Feminist Theory. South End Press: Boston, 1984, p. 44.

⁴ Hooks, p. 1.

⁵ Hooks, p. 6.

⁶ Hooks, p. 161.

Sharon Stichter, Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response 1895-1975. Essex, UK: Longman, 1982.

Sharon Stichter's book describes the effect of the capitalist world market on local Kenyan economies. It is a model of clear writing and an important contribution on this topic, with one central limitation that I will return to later in this review.

The book is arranged chronologically, moving from the militarily-based economic activity of the nineteenth century to a conclusion where she speculates on the possibilities for future working class action in Kenya. The areas covered include the development of a migrant labor economy before and after World War One, the increasing presence of wage labor, the conflict of estate and peasant sectors in the 1920s, the depression of the 1930s, and the background to the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s.

She states that in the nineteenth century the internal self-sufficiency of the lineage societies was a barrier to capitalist penetration, as there was no need to earn wages. Local elders and leaders began to act as collaborators by providing wage labor for European projects, in part because the monetary return was greater for the suppliers of labor than for the laborers themselves. Eventually therefore, "a peripheral capitalist economy emerged, built on part-time migrant and squatter labour." (p. 19)

The author includes specific descriptions of various African societies, showing for example why Kikuyu, Kamba, Lu and other societies reacted differently to European demand for labor. The three main forces that impelled Africans to work for wages were land alienation, taxation, and administrative coercion. Thus groups such as the Kikuyu