



Black Feminism & its Difference with 1st Wave Feminism

Adrika Sengupta

Amity University Kolkata

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.2022.3.10.43>

“You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation.” – Brigham Young.

Basic idea of feminism irrespective of the two branch which is going get deal with in this paper that it is a convoluted set of ideologies and theories which aims in achieving equal social, political and economic rights for women. ¹ Despite it benefitting both the sexes, feminisms’ primary goal is to achieve equality for women since men’s rights are predominantly secured and they are already institutionally protected.

First wave feminism officially began at the Seneca Falls Convention (1st ever women’s rights convention, 1848), was all about suffrage movement and gave women the right to vote. 1st wave feminism also the first fight and first uprising of women took place in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century in the western world. During this time period, the whole of politics, businesses were totally dominated by men sections of the society. This type of men dominance is not a new concept in today’s world but then at that time people would have been diagnosed with paralysis if women would have occupied the position of a CEO or participated in being the leader of a political party. ²

Women had no self-identity and were basically subjected to being the property of their fathers and husbands and to the stereotypical thought that they only exist to take care of households and carry baby in their womb. In specific terms it can be stated that they were treated as objects rather lifeless and not as human beings.

First wave feminism which was interconnected with abolitionists movement completely focussed on the core idea of social reforms and liberation from oppression. Gradually, in 1848, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott faced denial with the offering of seat for them at the World Anti-Slavery convention in London, the formation of American Equal Rights Association (AERA) took place in 1866.³ The central aim of this association was to give women the right to vote in the elections, in which blacks were no doubt involved fully but the movement happen to establish itself a movement especially for the white women. Black women were literally denied in the participation of the demonstrations and if they came, they were forced to walk behind all the white women. In addition to this, for most of the time the black women who were present in few were never even asked to speak on the panels unless the panels were specifically concerned with issues related to black women.⁴

With the passage of fifteenth Amendment (commenced on February 3, 1870, enfranchised African American men while denying the right to vote to women of all colours.⁵) AERA collapsed since it being white women centric, could not accept the fact that black men were granted with the right to vote before them.

Eventually the association got divided into two viz., National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) which aimed towards uplifting women on a national basis and American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) which primarily focussed on gaining the right to vote through Amendments. Divide of the association did not prove to be an appropriate decision on behalf of the respectives for achieving the right to vote. But there were significant advancements made in the field of higher education for women. With this situation in hand, NWSA and AWSA merged into National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1869.

Just after the merger, success prevailed with Wyoming being the first state to grant suffrage to women. Immediately after these set of incidents, the movement led by NAWSA received support from groups like National Woman’s Party (NWP) who had likewise goal like NAWSA that to achieve suffrage by working towards constitutional amendments instead of state amendments. The party eventually brought protest outside the White House, as a result several members from the party got arrested, some went on hunger strikes, some carried out picketing and used publicity for generating pressure on the Wilson’s administration in favour of suffrage.⁶ (Also they supported the US effort in the second World War, portraying themselves as a patriotic organisation.)

¹ Jane J Lewis, “The core ideas and beliefs of women”, ThoughtCo., (August 2021). [Feminism: Ideas, Beliefs, and Movements \(thoughtco.com\)](https://www.thoughtco.com/feminism-ideas-beliefs-and-movements-1351111/)

² “A Brief History of the First Wave of Feminism,” Lessons from History, accessed October 6, 2022. [First Wave of Feminism | A Brief History | Lessons from History \(medium.com\)](https://www.lessonsfromhistory.com/a-brief-history-of-the-first-wave-of-feminism/)

³ “A Brief History of the First Wave of Feminism.”

⁴ Tara Anand, “A Brief Summary of the First Wave of Feminism”, Feminism in India, (April 2018). [A Brief Summary of The First Wave Of Feminism \(feminisminindia.com\)](https://www.feminisminindia.com/a-brief-summary-of-the-first-wave-of-feminism/)

⁵ “Fifteenth Amendment,” Britannica, accessed October 6, 2022. [Fifteenth Amendment | Definition, Significance, & Facts | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fifteenth-amendment)

⁶ Tara Anand, “A Brief Summary of the First Wave of Feminism”.

Finally in 1920, after much protests and uprisings, Congress passed 19th Amendment which granted women the right to vote. The Amendment declared, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."⁷ Even with this progress, black women remained under grievances, because black women still were disenfranchised, they were neglected, had to face physical assault and were stopped from exercising their right to vote through several monotonous disenfranchisement policies. With this, it can be clearly understood that first wave feminism was totally unbothered of the cause and issues of black women and took them as liability due to which black women had to face marginalisation and discrimination based on race as well as gender.

With the increased exclusion of black women from the mainstream along with the growing complexity and increased severity in their gender oppression, National Association of Coloured Women (NACW) was founded in 1896 (and Alpha Suffrage Club, established in 1913) to fight for black suffrage and raise awareness among black communities.

Black Feminist Movement was basically a response against women's movement and Black Liberation Movement.⁸ Its main moto was to develop a way that would cater with the needs of black women and empower them with new, critical ways of thinking centering the work of sexism and racism and their relationship burgeoning Black women's atrocities.

Black feminism activism is visible in the nineteenth century with several Black women presenting their views. Like in 1851, a speech was given by Sojourner Truth (women's rights advocate and abolitionist) at a women's rights convention, asking "Ain't I a Women", hinting a disguised challenge to both racism and sexism faced by Black Women. Also, another Black woman namely Anna Julia Cooper published a book, "A Voice from the South" describing the importance of social change through the voice of Black skinned female. In addition to this, Ida B. Wells being a journalist and an activist, led a crusade against the then existing lynching.⁹ With the ongoing Black community politics at that time, foundation for social justice towards sexism, marginalisation from white feminists and disenfranchisement under White male privilege eventually got laid in.

Main point of establishing Black Feminism, is the purpose to explain the notion that women of colour have been thrice victimised by racism, sexism and economic exploitation which equally acted as oppressive forces for them in a simultaneous and relentless way.¹⁰ This recognition of oppression in the sense of sexism and racism was failed to be discovered and addressed by both the Feminist Movement and Black Liberation Movement and the Black Women's agenda remained in dark to be addressed by. Thereby Black Feminist movement was needed indeed since it focused on the experiences, needs and desires of women of colour. Thus, the main avidity of the movement by the them was to create a criterion by which women of colour can assess their realities in thought as well as in action (Hudson- Weems 1985).

Under their struggle, intersectionality comes as a significant aspect which is defined as the way gender, race, caste, class and other social categories accumulates to negatively affect treatment towards individuals, in turn affecting their meaning of life. It basically happens to mean a theoretical framework for analysing the aspects of a person's life like his/her socio-politico identities. Different sorts of social categorisation on the basis of class, gender, religion etc., actually creates different modes of discrimination and privilege in the life of an individual like for instance, if a black woman runs a business in the society, she is prone to face discrimination on the basis of her gender and race.

In 1970, Combahee River Collective was formed by a group of black women, recognising intersectionality as an integral and important part of their movement, which demarcated a clear distinction between the struggle to that of White / First Wave Feminism and theirs since they did not focus on just one issue or aspect but an entire range of oppressions.

Even during the twentieth century, their activism in social justice did not just fade away, which can be understood with the publication of works by women sociologists like Patricia Hill Collins, critical race scholar like Kimberlee Crenshaw and writer Bell Hooks.¹¹

Their fight for intersectionality is still extended to this twenty-first century and remains an essential part of Black Feminism. Like for example, the foundation of #BlackLivesMatter (on the principles of intersectionality) in 2014 by three Black Women viz., Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza and Patrice Cullors. This essentially signifies that their activism not only centers only Black Women but also Black LGBTQ people, Black people with disabilities, other groups within Black community.¹²

To conclude early feminist analysis only reflected specific concerns of white, middle-class women while Black Feminists rejected the idea of single unified gender oppression faced evenly by all women of the community. Alice Walker expressed in her words that black women always experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression to that of white women. Thus Black Feminist Movement is totally a way to address the whole of, racism, classism and sexism, and in the meanwhile, 1st wave feminism was mainly about the voting rights of white women.

Several organisations along with the Black Feminist movement was committed in ending all sorts of struggle and oppression against women. With this movement many white women acknowledged their racism and addressed the same by organising anti-racist seminars but it did not have much impact in the white feminist and black communities. Though the feminist theories in the mainstream got broadened in terms of range and scope (with the inclusion of race, class, sexuality etc.) black community did not get sway by it. Black Liberation movement until now fails to recognise the issues affecting Black

⁷ "A Brief History of the First Wave of Feminism."

⁸ "Black Feminism: A Historical overview in the context of the United States," iPleaders, accessed October 7, 2022. Black feminism: a historical overview in the context of the United States - iPleaders

⁹ "Black Feminism: A Historical overview in the context of the United States".

¹⁰ "Black Feminism," Free Essays – PhDessay.com, accessed October 8, 2022. Black Feminism Essay Example - PHDessay.com

¹¹ "A Brief History of Black Feminism in the United States." Blackfeminisms.com, accessed October 8, 2022. A Brief History of Black Feminism in the United States (blackfeminisms.com)

¹² "A Brief History of Black Feminism in the United States".

women. The awareness among them have undoubtedly increased in the “academic community of the Blacks regarding sexism faced by women but the pop culture including singers, rappers still continue to be misogynistic and sexist in their music” (Anvita Bhardwaj 2020).

In the end women needs to support all other women out there irrespective of all socially constructed boundaries for achieving true liberation from the male dominated oppressive system and abstractly expected portrayal of societies.

References:

Anand, Tara. “A Brief Summary of the First Wave of Feminism”, Feminism in India, (April 2018). [A Brief Summary Of The First Wave Of Feminism \(feminisminindia.com\)](https://feminisminindia.com)

Blackfeminisms.com. “A Brief History of Black Feminism in the United States.” Accessed October 8, 2022. [A Brief History of Black Feminism in the United States \(blackfeminisms.com\)](https://blackfeminisms.com)

Britannica. “Fifteenth Amendment.” Accessed October 6, 2022. [Fifteenth Amendment | Definition, Significance, & Facts | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/learn-more-about/fifteenth-amendment)

Free Essays – PhDessay.com. “Black Feminism.” Accessed October 8, 2022. [Black Feminism Essay Example - PHDessay.com](https://www.phdessay.com/black-feminism-essay-example/)

iPleaders. “Black Feminism: A Historical overview in the context of the United States.” Accessed October 7, 2022. [Black feminism: a historical overview in the context of the United States - iPleaders](https://www.iPLEADERS.com/black-feminism-a-historical-overview-in-the-context-of-the-united-states/)

Lessons from History. “A Brief History of the First Wave of Feminism.” Accessed October 6, 2022, [First Wave of Feminism | A Brief History | Lessons from History \(medium.com\)](https://www.lessonsfromhistory.com/black-feminism-a-brief-history/)

Lewis, Jane J. “The core ideas and beliefs of women.” ThoughtCo., (August 2021). [Feminism: Ideas, Beliefs, and Movements \(thoughtco.com\)](https://www.thoughtco.com/black-feminism-ideas-beliefs-movements/)
