

**Race, Gender, and identity in Selected Plays by
Adrienne Kennedy and Sonia Sanchez through the
Lens of Black Feminism, Black Arts Movement, and
the theatre of the Avant-garde**

by

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The term "feminism" has many different uses and its meanings are controversial. It is defined as a movement seeking the reorganization of the world upon the basis of sex equality, rejecting all forms of differentiation among or discrimination against individuals upon the grounds of sex. Although the term "feminism" became widespread in the 1910s, only a small number of women called themselves feminists. Feminism stresses the fact that it is a movement which seeks equality for all women and not just a specified category. Feminism aims at freeing all women from the shackles of racial, sexist, classist, and economic oppression and not just women of color or black women .

Feminism does not solely concern the oppression of women as women. It is also concerned with eradicating the various forms of oppression affecting women such as the sexist, racist, classist, economic, and cultural oppressions. Black women, in such patriarchal and racially divided societies, are influenced by the double jeopardy of such racial and sexist oppressions. Smith asserts: "Since a black woman, for example, cannot separate her race and her sex—these axes of her identity intersect and are always present in her lived experience. She can never be just a black person; she can never be just a woman either" (qtd. in Dicker 7).

Women, in such a patriarchal society, wanted to free themselves from the constraints and oppressions caused by patriarchy; a social system in which men rule and women are pushed into positions of

inferiority and subservience. Bell Hooks maintains: "Feminism can be thought of as a belief system that, by ending domination in all of its guises, liberates people so they can be their best selves. This liberation leads to social transformation" (qtd. in Dicker).

Feminism is considered a movement that aims at eradicating sexism; discrimination based on the belief that one sex is superior to the other. Likewise, it aims at eradicating racism, discrimination based on the belief that one race is superior to the other. Feminism's major aim is to achieve equality among the sexes by eliminating the different forms of oppression affecting them; thereby bringing about a radical change in the different areas of life .

Feminism, in America and the different organizations in the US, calls for the equality and the emancipation of all women. Early organizations in the US gave women the right to vote or to have an active role in their society. Hooks asserts that feminism is a movement that aims at making women "the social equals" of men ("Feminism: A Movement" 51). In other words, feminism is a movement that aims to eradicate patriarchal oppression. It also aims at achieving equality for "all" women, "freeing " all women regardless of their race or gender. It is a movement by women on behalf of women. It does not aim to privilege females over males; but aims at achieving social equalities for "all" women. (i.e.) it aims at making the woman a social equal to man.

Feminism concentrates on the fact that to achieve equality for all women, the various forms of domination should be eradicated or eliminated. To achieve equality on the grounds of sex, men should not exercise their power over women. Likewise, to achieve equality on the basis of race, white women should not regard themselves superior to black women due to their race or ethnic group. In other words, the major aim of feminism is to promote and enhance women's empowerment. In order to accomplish women's own empowerment, black women and other women of color should try to obliterate the multiple forms of gender and racial oppressions that deprive them of access to social, economic, and political arenas, so their empowerment requires progressive, radical social changes.

The biological distribution or the physical anatomy of both man and woman is considered a hindrance that contributes to the exclusion of women as the other. The exterior biological formation of the female body contributes to make the woman inferior in relation to the man whose exterior biological formation contributes to make him superior to the woman. Simon de Beauvoir adds: "This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called "a supernumerary bone" of Adam" (35).

It was commonly believed that man only seeks the suppression of the woman's will and needs only for his benefit and desire. Man seeks to make the woman inferior or marginal to him in order to satisfy his virility and arrogance. Man behaves scornfully and aggressively towards the woman because he is anxious about his virility which the woman threatens. But the woman is a free and an autonomous human being; though she finds herself living in a world in which men compel her to assume the position of inferiority and otherness.

The traditional and ancient view of the woman can be summed up in the words of Aristotle: "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities, we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness" (qtd. in Kreps 46). Biological differences between man and woman can be used only by men to whom freedom for women is considered a threat for their dominance, superiority, and supremacy. Kreps asserts: "Woman's immediate social environment puts enormous pressure on her to submit to male dominance" (47).

The relationship between man and woman is summed up in the concept of "different but complementary" (i.e.) men are biologically different from women, and the qualities attributed to men are different from those attributed to women; though they complement one another .

Feminists distinguished between sex and gender. Sex is the biological distinction among females and males; it is the signifier which leads to women's subordination and men's superiority or supremacy, whereas gender is the cultural and social meanings

attributed to such sexual differences. The notion of gender difference came into being with the advent of second-wave feminism. Lynne Segal gives the following definition of gender: "Gender was thus being used to refer both to the differences between men and women, and to the culturally diverse stereotypes or norms which were thought to determine those differences" (39).

Women's sex is considered a hindrance for their empowerment and advancement. Women are subordinated because they are females not males; thereby sex adds to their own victimization or subordination. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit argue that ". . . a women 's [sic] sex distinguishes her from doing things that a man can do and this leads to decisions being taken which excludes women from traditionally male jobs and positions of power" (13). The inequality of power relations among men and women is maintained through sexuality. Sex is the biological distinction among the sexes; it is the signifier that led to women's subordination and men's superiority or supremacy. Catherine McKinnon adds: ". . . the social relation between the sexes is organized so that men may dominate and women must submit and this relation is sexual—in fact is sex" (qtd. in Crowley and Himmelweit 37).

The major differences among men and women are not in the characteristics of men and women, but the difference is due to the fact that men are more powerful and women are less powerful (i.e.) men dominate and women only submit to men's desires and needs without hesitation. It is the social construction of power among men and women which leads to men's superiority and women's inferiority. Crowley and Himmelweit give another definition of the concept of gender in terms of power relations: "Gender is an inequality of power, a social status based on who is permitted to do what to whom. Only derivatively is it a difference" (37–8).

Race and gender intersect to affect the lives of African American women. Race is a system of social relations in which one group or category of people dominates over the other (i.e.) one group or category is more powerful than the other due to his/her skin color. In other words, it is the skin color which determines the superiority or

the inferiority of one racial group over the other. For example, blacks in such privileged white society are subordinated and rendered into a minor position in their society due to their race or ethnic category. The racial differences among the races are considered a determiner upon which one race prevails or dominates; whereas the other surrenders and submits. For example, the differences among blacks and whites add to their own victimization and marginalization. For African Americans, blackness is considered a stigma or a disgrace; whereas whiteness is a pride, an honor, and a privilege. In other words, the discrimination on the basis of skin color leads minorities such as blacks and other people of color to fight against their own racial discrimination. As a result of such racial discrimination among the sexes, minority groups developed an awareness of their race or their racial pride.

Blacks used multiple names, such as "persons of color", "people of color", "Black Americans", "black people", "colored people", (etc.) in order to signify their inferior and subordinate status in a society in which blackness and whiteness often clash in such a racist society where blackness is punished or abused and whiteness is rewarded or esteemed. People of color belong to a race that contributes to their subordination and marginalization, and are ignored and despised because of living among the white majority. In order to obtain their self-reliance and independence, they should liberate themselves from the sexual, racial and sexist constraints surrounding them and that led to their victimization and humiliation.

Both Blackness and whiteness have two contested and opposed meanings. Winthrop Jordan states: "Black was an emotionally partisan color, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion. White signified purity, virginity, virtue, beauty, and beneficence" (qtd. in William J. Wilson 32). In the African American context, blackness is despised whereas whiteness is honored and privileged; whiteness prevails or dominates, but Blackness only

submits and surrenders. Blackness is a symbol of malignancy and disgrace while whiteness is a symbol of purity and pride. Whiteness, for white women living in such racist society, is considered an obstacle because they are the only group of women who are privileged due to their color or race, whereas black women are victimized by their darker complexions. Besides, Black women largely face the burden of gender oppression within the black community at large.

Black women are more likely to see themselves as victims of gender oppression in which they are victimized and oppressed by the patriarchy and the white community at large. Black women experience animosity and malignancy on the part of their black male counterparts at home who always suppress women's powers and abilities for change in order to be always in the position of power and dominance and to guarantee women's subordination, subjection, and surrender, and the white community at large. Black men and women share the same fate as they altogether suffer racism, in such race-prejudiced society in which whiteness is a source of pride and privilege and blackness is a source of despise and self-hatred, due to the fact that they are black not white, and on the other hand they share white women the same tragic fate as they fall as preys and victims of male domination or patriarchal oppression.

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender and its influence varies. For instance, the impact of race, class, and gender upon African American women is different from its impact upon white women. African American women, whose long-lived experience is shaped by so many years of racism, are more likely to identify themselves as members of racially marginalized groups than do white women who are tormented and oppressed by patriarchy in such male and white-dominated society.

Racism is the ideology of domination or racial exploitation in which one race is superior to the other due to its color or ethnic group. Not only did the physical traits among blacks and whites that lead to their victimization but also other qualities such as social position.

social behavior, intelligence, and personality formation which add to their subordination and subjugation. It is based upon the belief that women are naturally different from one another according to their culture, personality, and mental abilities on the basis of their genetic inheritance, that some women are superior to others. It is their inherited traits that led to the superiority of certain groups and the inferiority of others.

If black men are victimized by racism, they nevertheless exploit and oppress black women and thus they can be considered oppressors and oppressed at the same time. Likewise, white women are privileged due to their white color or race, though they are victimized due to their sex. In contrast, black women are oppressed and exploited at the same time. For black men, racism can be considered the dangerous form of oppression affecting them, and they assert that the elimination of racism undermines the elimination of any other forms of oppression affecting them and when racism is eradicated, black men can be able to assume their power and authority upon black women.

Besides, several definitions of sexism are given by many theorists. Betty A. Reardon states that sexism is an "attitude", "an institutional structure" which led to the subordination of a person or a group due to their sex. It is "a belief system" based on the physical differences among males and females that are considered a vital determinant of the social, economic, cultural, and political roles attributed to both men and women (qtd. in Rothenberg 21). Sexism has relegated women into a minor position to such an extent that made them suffer from their identity and role as women both psychologically and mentally.

Sexism is the first and the primitive form of oppression experienced by women of all categories, whether white or black women; but racism affects women of color or black women only. It is harder to eradicate sexism than it is to eradicate racism. Sexism is considered a tool by which men used to exercise their power over

women. Likewise, Steinem privileges "gender oppression" or "sexism" above other forms of oppression. She declares: "gender is probably the most restricting force in American life . . . sexism is still confused with nature as racism once was" (qtd. in Gines 38). Consequently, women of all categories have led social protests and political movements to eliminate sexism upon their lives, because the elimination of sexism leads to the elimination of other forms of oppression affecting them. White and black men are the only beneficiaries of sexism through which they can be able to be the dominants or the powerful. Likewise, racism only privileges white men and women and its only victims are black men and women.

Black people are divided into two categories: those who accept their own blackness and those who regard their blackness as a stigma and a source of their own victimization. Therefore, the second category try to imitate whites by adopting white habits, values, ways of living, and so forth. In other words, blacks aspire to whiteness by assuming a white identity and purging their black psyches and identities out of anonymity and disdain or self-hatred.

For example, certain stereotypical images are attached to African American women since the era of slavery by their slave masters at work or their black male counterparts at home such as the image of "the Mammy", "Matriarch", "Jezebel", (etc.), that render them into a minor position in their society.

Black feminism is a political movement that aims at achieving liberation and autonomy of black women in particular and women of color in general by eradicating the multiple forms of oppression affecting them. Black feminism aims at achieving racial equality for black people in such homogenous societies where whites dominate and blacks only surrender. Black feminism came as a reaction to the sexism of the black movement as well as the racism of the women's movement. Black women experience sexism within the black movement on the part of their black male counterparts who try to diminish their roles.

In addition, Black feminist criticism is concerned with providing the audience with a critical background of black history, black women's lives, and interests. It is defined as a form of criticism written by black feminist critics to give the audience a critical background about black feminist writings from a feminist perspective. But the term is extended to refer to the works written by a male from a feminist or a political background. The literary works written by black male and female authors reflect, to a greater degree, the prevailing circumstances of their time.

Black feminists were involved into movements that aim at achieving liberation and autonomy for black people, particularly those of the 1960 and 1970s, such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers, the Black Power Movement, and finally artistic Black Arts Movement. It is worth noting that Black feminism is influenced by three waves or three distinct periods in African American history in the United States: the Abolitionist Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement (Combahee 107).

The Black Arts Movement is the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement. Writers and activists of the Black Arts Movement turned to black vernacular and popular culture, such as the blues, jazz, and other forms of black music as a source of a new black aesthetic. BAM aims at exalting black values, black culture, black history, and black ways of looking at the world. It aims at asserting that "black is beautiful"; thereby blackness can be considered a source of pride and privilege for African-Americans rather than being a source of hatred and animosity.

The Civil Rights Movement is a political movement of the 1960s and 1970s which aims at achieving freedom for all black people. One of the major aims of the Civil Rights Movement is the elimination of segregation which aims at separating blacks and whites in all areas of

daily activities. In other words, black people are segregated or obliged to live in desperate places away from the white community.

Racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia are distinct forms of oppression. Racial oppression is defined as a sort of discrimination in which a specified category of people is discriminated or marginalized because of belonging to a different race. In addition, sexist or patriarchal oppression is defined as a sort of discrimination to which women are subject due to their sex, (i.e.) being females not males. Thereby, men exercise their power over women in order to be always the dominants, the leaders, and the supremacists. Thereby, they extinguish women's powers, desires only for their benefits in order for women to be inferior, and subordinate to them.

It is evident that black feminism influenced by three waves or three distinct periods in African American history in the United States: the Abolitionist movement, the Black Power movement, and its artistic sister the Black Arts movement. Certain critics assert that Sonia Sanchez and Adrienne Kennedy are two major figures of the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement [BAM] originated in New York City, particularly in Harlem city, its birthplace; with Amiri Baraka's reputation as the father of BAM or the one who coined the term to designate the movement. "Harlem" is the fountain where many intellectual, artistic, literary, and political productions spring.

BAM is the cultural arm of the Black Power movement; as it speaks to the needs and aspirations of the black community. Black artists are innovators of new ideas and values. In other words, BAM is considered a cultural and an artistic revolution in art and politics through which black people create new ideas, values, music, art, culture, and ways of looking at the world. Thereby, they revolt against what is old, racist, and sexist such as white values, music, art, culture and white ways of looking at the world. Black artists try to create a world of their own; a world that is considered a reflection of their culture and heritage away from such blind imitation to the whites. The artists and leaders of BAM were united in their focus and concern to

uplift and elevate the black community. They not only focused on the life for blacks in the United States; but also looked at those living in the diaspora; especially in Cuba, the Carribean, and Africa.

BAM aims at achieving a radical change in the black community at large by resisting what is "old" and creating "new" art forms, morals, and literature because it strives to make a unification between ethics and aesthetics, (i.e.) the absence of the ethics will lead to a downfall of the black aesthetics or the black cultural inheritance in general. Similarly, BAM sought to establish a black aesthetic by destroying or resisting what is "old" and white", (i.e.) it aims at creating an aesthetic of separatism. BAM, in short, sought to free African Americans from the constraints of Western or Eurocentric culture.

Black Art not only existed but also thrived and would be essential to the cultural salvation of the black race. BAM concentrated on specific art forms such as poetry, dance, music, and drama rather than the novel because these artistic forms are fundamentally oral and can be performed on the stage, or at rally, or in a street corner or a public house. Performance and orality play an important role in African American literary productions. Black artists focused on art as an expression of the political and cultural circumstances of their time. BAM aimed at creating a revolution in the history and the culture of black people. Black Art evokes the total experience of black people.

BAM rejects the notion of "Art for the sake of art" and maintains the idea that "art is for people's sake", (i.e.) the major function of art is to redefine the black experience, revive African American heritage and culture through the establishment of community theatres, create literary magazines that register the literary works of black writers like the Drama Review, Negro Digest; and anthologies such as Black Fire, edited by Larry Neal and Baraka. In other words, the modernist model, in Plato's Republic, "art is for art's sake" is replaced by the ideal "art is for people's sake". Karenga comments: "Black Art must

be for the people, by the people, and from the people. That is to say, it must be functional, collective and committing (qtd. in Gail Collins, "The Art of Transformation" 286). Plato in his "Republic", asserts that Art is for art's sake; thereby alienating the audience away from the literary work. In other words, art is not judged by the audience or the spectators but for its value and importance in itself. This modernist view of Plato is replaced by another view "art is for people's sake", (i.e.) art should reflect the hardships and the oppressions of Black Americans and how these forms of oppressions can be eradicated for the benefit of these minorities. Salaam affirms: "BAM adherents dismissed "art for art's sake" as a "White orientation" unworthy of consideration for a people who were oppressed" (41).

Adrienne Kennedy (1931–) and Sonia Sanchez (1934–) are major key figures of the BAM. Darlene Clark Hine comments: "The two female playwrights most closely associated with the loose network of artists who composed the Black Arts Movement and who were most successful within its domain were undoubtedly Adrienne Kennedy and Sonia Sanchez" (*Black Women* 1: 140).

Sonia Sanchez (1934–) became a vocal poet activist in the Black Power and the Black Arts Movements during the 1960s. During the 1950s and 1960s, she was affiliated with the Black Arts Movement and the Civil Rights Movement in New York City, and she believed in integration. She is considered one of the most well-known figures of the Black Arts Movement, as well as its most significant female figures. She is an advocate for the people and is considered a chief proponent of racial and feminist issues in the arts. She is considered a typical black militant playwright of the 1960s and 1970s through her plays: *The Bronx is Next* (1968), *Sister Son/ji* (1969), *Dirty Hearts* (1971), *Malcolm/Man Don't Live Here No Mo'* (1972), and *Uh Uh, But How Do It Free Us?* (1974). Through her plays, Sanchez condemns racism and sexism that she encountered as a young female writer within the black militant community, and revolts against the different forms of oppression affecting women, other races, and other cultures.

Therefore, most of her plays are autobiographically inspired because they are considered an embodiment of her innate sufferings and hardships within the black community. She wrote many books, plays, and poems that reflect the struggles of black people within the larger black community. Sonia Sanchez employed the concept of "militancy" in her plays, which can be considered one of the most potent strategies for addressing the continued assaults on the rights and liberties of African Americans during the mid-twentieth century. Her plays focused on the black struggle for liberation from racial and sexist oppressions. Her characters revolt against the burden of oppression of African American women. Throughout her plays, Sanchez reflects the struggle of the black militant community and her efforts to privilege the struggle of black women searching for their identity.

Adrienne Kennedy (1931–) was raised in an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio, where she experienced racism for the first time. She earnestly struggles to maintain her own voice as an African American playwright by writing her first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) for which she won an Obie Award for the most distinguished play of her time. She wrote so many plays like *The Owl Answers* (1965), *The Beast Story*, *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1966), *A Rat's Mass* (1966), and others. She is considered a major key figure of BAM of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of Kennedy's plays explore issues of kinship, race, identity, miscegenation, and violence in the American society, and many of her works are autobiographically inspired.

In addition, Adrienne Kennedy belongs to the theatre of the "avant-garde". Smethurst gives the following definition of the popular avant-garde: ". . . 'avant-garde' connotes a bold journey into the future that, as Ezra Pound polemicized, made things new" (58). The avant-gardists, like the Black Arts playwrights, apply innovative ideas, techniques, and visions in all literary forms; especially in art, music.

Consequently, the avant-gardists revolt and resist all that is old, in art and life.

Avant-garde theatre provides innovative ideas that seem at the very beginning to be strange to both the author and the audience. Avant-garde theatre requires creativity and innovation in the techniques, language, style, and diction in the various art forms. This model of the avant-garde was developed and promoted by BAM in the northeast during the 1960s through the efforts of the poet, playwright, essayist, political activist, and cultural critic, Amiri Baraka, as well as the works of Larry Neal, Askia Touré, James Stewart, Sonia Sanchez, A.B. Spelman, James Stewart, and others.

In addition, the avant-garde art aims at making a revolution in art and culture by creating innovative works of art that resist the conventional approaches to literature in their form and content, (i.e.) avant-garde art provides new and innovative methods and ideas that seem at the very beginning, to be strange and odd to both the author and the audience. Avant-garde theatre requires creativity and innovation in the techniques, language, style, diction and so forth in the various art forms. At first, this avant-garde theatre was met with little attention on the part of traditional theatergoers, but later their dramatic works were received with recognition and appreciation. Avant-garde theatre has political, social, and personal implications for its viewers.

BAM was decidedly anti avant-garde, because the avant-garde theatre centers on such Eurocentric or Western ideas and culture in art and politics, by its references to dadism, surrealism, and futurism, and symbolism, imagism, which can be considered an extension of the whites' traditions, values, and history. But BAM is a nationalistic movement which resists the Eurocentric ideas of the avant-garde by its promotion of black ideas, values, culture, and black visions; a vision that resists the oppressive attitudes, ways, customs, philosophies, and habits which the oppressors had imposed upon the oppressed black people.

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