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One Woman: Historical Analysis

**Bell Hooks**

Feminism is a huge, diverse, and fluid movement that is still constantly developing and shifting. That being said, women and gender studies courses have a lot to work with in their curriculums; so much so, that it can be hard to cover all the details, especially when it boils down to individual contributors. While there are some major feminists that do get the proper amount of credit (ex. Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Betty Friedan, Elizabeth Stanton, etc.), there are many more who do not. I believe bell hooks is one of these women. Bell hooks is important because she was, and continues to be, an extremely influential and inspirational part of the ongoing feminist movement. As a second wave feminist, she saw a lack of diversity in the movement and took it upon herself to change that. Hooks challenged feminists to consider gender's relation to race, class, and sex, and coined the concept known as intersectionality. Her entire view embodies the many facets of the feminist movement in the best way possible.

Bell hooks was born in Kentucky, in 1952 as Gloria Jean Watkins. She grew up in a very traditional, southern household with a father who was a huge despotic force in her life. In fact, he was the reason Hooks first turned to writing and poetry. He, along with the rest of her family did not support her writing or passion to speak up for women, so in her need to voice her opinions, she escaped their oppressive walls through writing. Her pen name and the name she is mostly known by, ‘bell hooks’, was taken from her grandmother “as a way to honor her ancestors” (Bell Hooks - Biography). She consciously chooses not to capitalize her name in an attempt to avoid fame and attention and to distinguish herself from her grandmother. The most important thing to hooks is that her audience really grasp the message behind her books and overall efforts in feminism.

From early childhood, Hooks was an avid reader and an accomplished writer. However, her first few years at school were in a racially segregated environment. When she was finally enrolled into an integrated school system she faced a lot of bigotry whilst attempting to work among the predominantly white staff and student body. She received her bachelor's from Stanford, her Master's in English from the University of Wisconsin, and her doctorate from the University of Southern California (Ashba). She began writing her first book before she obtained her Bachelor's. This book was titled *Ain’t I a woman: black women and feminism* and she found a publisher in 1981, however, it took eight years for the book to be published (Jankowski). The point of this book was to shine some light on women of color and their efforts and struggles outside of the mainstream white-feminist movement. This text also examines the impact of sexist and racist social structures on the history of black women. She also brings up issues of capitalism and highlights some white-supremacist ideologies in the book.

One of her other extremely influential titles is called *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center.* This book delved into the harsh truth that while the feminist movement includes all women, black women are still separated. One of the most important things hooks stressed in this text was awareness of this margin; “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body (hooks).” This quote is really powerful. Hooks is telling her audience that although the feminist movement may somewhat include black women it is only in the margin, only outside of the fence. The core values and goals of the movement were still centered on white women. Hooks also advocated for male involvement in the movement, stating the importance of both genders to wholeheartedly join the fight for women’s equality by focusing on restricting power.

Aside from her many book titles (over 30), hooks also got her voice out into the world by any means necessary, she participated in documentaries, wrote books in different rhetorical forms to appeal to diverse audiences, and wrote articles for many mainstream magazines. She also taught and lectured at several different colleges. She has also won a lot of awards including the following (Wikipedia):

* *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*: "One of the twenty most influential women's books in the last 20 years" by *Publishers Weekly* (1992)
* bell hooks: The Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund (1994)
* *Homemade Love*: The Bank Street College Children's Book of the Year (2002)
* *Salvation: Black People and Love*: Hurston Wright Legacy Award nominee (2002)
* bell hooks: *Utne Reader* '​s "100 Visionaries Who Could Change Your Life"
* bell hooks: *The Atlantic Monthly* '​s "One of our nation's leading public intellectuals

As previously stated, hooks consistently expresses the importance of her words, feminist theory, and ideas rather than her fame from all her hard work. I believe bell hooks should have a day devoted solely to her in Women and Gender Studies courses because she embodies what it means to truly be a feminist. She stands up in the face of adversity and will not be silenced, yet she is educated and inclusive to all communities and individuals. As a black feminist she has even more validation behind this passion for equality than white feminists do.

While all feminists have an individual view, I believe black feminism is still hugely underrepresented in the curriculum. Feminism as a movement is amazing and inspiring and powerful, but we have to admit our faults; and one of those faults was starting off as a white, middle class movement who hypocritically preached for equality while simultaneously denying black females their rights. A larger section of the curriculum should be devoted to black feminism and within that section there should be a day devoted to bell hooks. Her history and accomplishments are relatable, inspirational, and important.

Not only is bell hooks an accomplished author and feminist theorist, she is also an activist. She still speaks at universities and on talk shows in order to help inspire the next wave of feminism to keep going, keep fighting, and keep pushing. I think it is especially important to talk about feminists who are still alive because as amazing and important as historical feminist are, discussing a live person gives students someone to relate to and possibly spark enough interest to follow up on hooks and attend one of her discussions. It is amazing to see the strong woman she has become when she started out as an oppressed child; and the fact that she was able to overcome the oppression that came from the inside on top of the outside world is even more impressive. Hooks gives women hope for the future and knowledge about a movement that will take you in and help build you up.

Lastly, bell hooks truly shows what it means to be a feminist. In one of her (many) videos on voice (Bell Hooks on Voice.mp4) Hooks mentions that the most powerful voice in the room is not necessarily the loudest or most selfish, but the more educated person who can get their points across to any audience. I think feminists, especially black feminist, get pegged as the stereotypical angry woman, but being an educated feminist and being able to calmly get points across is one way to show we have every right to be angry. Hooks does not boast about her knowledge or insist everyone think one certain way. Hook is a woman of quiet inspiration, a woman who without you even knowing it can weave her way into your psyche and change the way you look at society.

Works Cited

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