

# DOUBLE JEOPARDY : THE BLACK WOMEN IN THE USA

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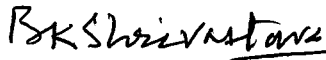
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Declaration

Certified that the dissertation entitled  
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submitted by Tripta Narang, for the award of the  
Degree of Master of Philosophy of this university,  
has not been previously submitted for any other  
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## PREFACE

The blacks are the largest minority in the largest western democracy. They constitute nearly 12.12 per cent of the total population over 250 million of United States of America (USA). Since the day one when they were off loaded as slaves on the American soil, the blacks have faced deprivation and socio-economic discrimination. The history of blacks in America is a long tale of struggle for freedom and equal status in a country whose Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal". The black women have been further jeopardised in their socio-economic development because apart from racial discrimination they shared with black men, they also had to bear the additional handicap which females have to face in the male dominated society any where in the world. They were thus 'Doubly Jeopardised'.

Over the years and in particular in the twentieth century, there have been some improvements in the status of the black women. She has emerged as a stable force in the family and society. Though higher educational achievements, she could enter into more skilled and better paying jobs than before. There have also been a few but distinguished achievers amongst black women in politics, in performing arts, in literature and in sports. However,

the question of a "equal status" in real sense with the white still looks a distant dream. The struggle for a sense of being and fulfilment has to continue.

The present study concentrates on black women in the United States, their sufferings and struggle for a better status, and their achievements and failures. It is largely based on secondary sources. There are four chapters besides chapter one on Introduction, chapter two deals with the occupation pattern, educational levels and place in politics of black women in the USA. Chapter three traces the Women's Liberation Movement; role of black women in the movement and differences between black feminism and white feminism. The fourth chapter discusses the experiences of a few prominent black women. Finally the last and the fifth chapter brings out the conclusions. The main focus of the study is to test the hypothesis that 'Double Jeopardy' is a major drag in the socio-economic development of black women.

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor Prof. B.K. Shrivastava for his valuable advice and guidance at all stages in preparation of this work. But for his unfailing patience, critical observations and continuous encouragement, the study could not have been finalized.

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It would be gross injustice if I fail to acknowledge my gratitude to my parents, my sisters and my friends. Their constant faith in my ability to undertake this study, encouragement and cooperation has been a great source of inspiration to me.

*Tripta Narang.*  
TRIPTA NARANG

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CHAPTER - I

## INTRODUCTION

According to the available statistics, in 1987 the black constituted the single largest minority, averaging about 12.12 per cent of the total population of the United States of 243,915 million. Their case is unique not only because of their number, but because of their continuous resistance against the American captivity.

They have been an integral part of the American society since they arrived in United States in 1619, when the first twenty black people were off loaded in Jamestown, Virginia as slaves. Since then their life has been one big struggle. A well known black scholar, W.E.B. Dubois wrote:

The history of American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood to merge his double self into a better and truer self. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>1</sup>

Dubois while making the statement did not imagine it would hold good even today. All these years, American

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<sup>1</sup>W.E.B. Dubois, The Souls of Black Folks (New York, New American Library, 1976), p. 48.



society has grappled with the dilemma of black presence while blacks worked, fought and died to end their oppression and claim a status equal to that of whites in the society.✓ The following pages further reinforce Dubois's view-point regarding the struggle of blacks in America.

✓The life of the blacks in the United States has been shaped by two contrasting environments. First, the southern staple producing farms and plantations, on which the vast majority of blacks worked initially (before the twentieth century) as slaves and later as share croppers; second, the urban Ghetto mainly a product of the twentieth century which grew primarily as a result of the migration of negroes from southern cities to the northern cities, which began soon after the first World War.<sup>2</sup>

The trickle of blacks which moved towards north from south, searching for better conditions that began in the late 1870s was almost a steady stream by 1900. The stimulous was not only because of the depressing conditions of the south but also the opportunities that

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<sup>2</sup>August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York, Hill and Wang Co., 1966), p.3.

blacks were offered with regard to employment which mainly made them migrate to the north. They left their worn-out land and moved towards more fertile fields, in an effort to raise themselves from day-labourers to share-croppers, cash-renters and even yarn owners. All this accumulated in migration of the blacks at a very high rate which can be deduced from the fact that in 1900, 90 per cent lived in south. This proportion decreased to 77 per cent in 1940, 68 per cent in 1950, 60 per cent in 1960<sup>3</sup> and 53 per cent in 1979.

As the urban population of blacks increased its problems multiplied. There was no longer the stultifying control by the southern plantation owner, and the opportunities for education were somewhat better in the north; but there was no lessening of hostility of the whites they had to face. The black industrial workers were barred from being members of any of the trade or labour unions. Moreover, the blacks coming to urban cities had to face the major problem of "housing" as the whites would not allow them to stay in the neighbourhood. It was at this time when the house

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<sup>3</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: Negro Problems and Modern Democracy (New York, Patheon Books, 1962), p. 82.

segregating act was passed in 1912 which formed the 'white blocks' and 'black blocks' and they were not allowed to go into each other's block.

The urbanization of the black population since 1900 had brought the most momentous change in family life of the blacks after emancipation. The movement which carried over a million blacks to southern cities alone, had torn the black loose from his cultural moorings. One of the most important consequences of the urbanization of blacks has been the rapid occupational differentiation of the population. A black middle class came into existence as the result of new opportunities and greater freedom as well as the new demands of the awakened black communities.<sup>4</sup> This middle class was nonetheless affected by an upper class outlook because of the segregation of the blacks. While incomes derived from occupations gave them a higher middle class status, some families were bent upon maintaining a life style of upper class despite suffering segregation.

The most significant element in the new social structure of blacks life was the black industrial proletariat that had been emerging since the blacks were

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<sup>4</sup>E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 365.

introduced into western civilization. Its position in industry in the north was insecure and of small consequence. Till the cessation of foreign immigration during the first World War, it had become a permanent part of the industrial proletariat. Although the World War II did not offer the opportunities for large masses of unskilled black labourers as did the first World War, the position of the black workers in industry improved. After the war the workers acquired a firm foothold in American industry.<sup>5</sup>

Today we are slowly getting used to seeing blacks in high offices of government. Their number is growing yearly. But not too long ago black people in America were not even considered whole human beings, much less able to hold office or even vote. During the days of slavery a black was counted, according to the Constitution of the United States, as three-fifths of a person. Even this was a compromise, because there were some at the constitutional convention who did not want to count blacks at all. The reason is that the number of members a state has in the House of Representatives depends on population. If the south could count

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 366.

slaves, even at a discount it would have gained more Congressmen.<sup>6</sup>

Change came with the end of the Civil War in the period called 'Reconstruction'. Besides freeing slaves from the bondage of plantation, Congress granted the blackmen citizenship by the Civil Rights Act of 1866. This act was supposed to guarantee equality in housing and employment and set the tone for a more sympathetic attitude on the part of white Americans towards blacks. But these federal laws were trampled on. Individual state passed laws that became known as the "black codes". Under these unemployed negroes could be fined and jailed as vagrants, and all blacks were prevented from socializing with white people by legally segregated public facilities.<sup>7</sup>

In 1865, Congress set up the Freedman's Bureau which gave ex-slaves basic health and education services. In 1867, it passed the First Reconstruction Act, which gave the blacks the right to vote; by 1870, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments of the Constitution further

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<sup>6</sup>Nancy Hicks, The Honorable Shirley Chisholm, Congress-Woman from Brooklyn (New York, Lion Book, 1971), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

broadened the rights of black people. The advent of the twentieth century brought about many changes in the lives of the blacks. The blacks began to appear at all levels, there were black state legislators and city councilmen and school board representatives. Between 1870 and 1902, twenty two blacks served in the Congress, two of them as Senators. They fought for the equality of blacks in America.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever may be the motives of these black Congressmen they were not around long enough to accomplish much, by 1902 there was not a single black left in Congress, one of the tactics which created this situation was gerrymandering, that is, redrawing the lines of voter districts with no other purpose than to give one group an advantage over another. Not until 1929, was another black elected to Congress. He was Oscar DePriest of Chicago, the first blackman elected in the twentieth century and the last black Republican to receive the backing of a predominantly black electorate.

During the last two decades of twentieth century a powerful black protest movement broke down the barriers of institutionalized segregation. Despite progress in

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<sup>8</sup>Hicks, n.6, p. 14.

the war against inequality, black children, youth and families were worse off than whites in every area of American life. Thirtyfive years after the epochal decision of the Supreme Court in 1954, against segregation in the Brown Vs Board of Education case, most black children still have not gained the opportunities that most other children take for granted.<sup>9</sup>

The poverty rate has fluctuated around one-third for the blacks and about one-tenth for the whites. The American poor population includes a higher proportion of children, minority and women than ever before. Today, out of every 100 black babies, 47 are born into poverty, compared to fewer than one in eight white babies.<sup>10</sup>

The economic situation of the blacks in America is pathological. Except for a small minority enjoying upper or middle class status, the masses of American blacks, in the rural south and in segregated slum quarters in southern and northern cities, are destitutes (the whites below the poverty line in 1987 were 11.5 per cent

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<sup>9</sup> "Blacks in America", U.S. News and World Report (Washington, D.C.), vol. 86, 14 March 1979, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> James D. Williams, eds., The State of Black America (New York, National Urban League, 1981), p. 5.

whereas blacks were 33.1 per cent).<sup>11</sup> They own little property, even their household goods are mostly inadequate and dilapidated. The income of blacks is not only low but irregular. They thus live from day to day and have scant security in future. This is what Gunnar Myrdal had pointed out in his book American Dilemma in 1960s,<sup>12</sup> but their position in the last decade of the twentieth century though much better is nowhere near that of whites.

Table

	<u>Economic Status</u> ( $\$$ )	<u>Educational</u> (%)
White male	16,467	12.7
Black male	9,448	12.2
Black female	6,164	12.2
White female	6,949	12.6

(Income figures are 1984 median incomes for those fifteen years or older. Educational attainment is for 1984, median years of school completed).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States 1987 (Washington, D.C., Govt. Printing Office, 1987).

<sup>12</sup>Myrdal, n.3, p. 295.

<sup>13</sup>U.S. Statistical Abstract, n.11, p. 390.



The struggle for equal rights for blacks was carried out in three major areas (a) efforts were directed towards lowering those barriers that whites had erected to maintain their isolation based on the assumption of black inferiority; (b) blacks sought economic opportunities, the right to be employed or promoted on the basis of ability rather than skin, colour or sex; (c) the enduring fight of blacks to obtain the same political rights as whites, (the voting right bill which was passed by the Supreme Court in 1965, 45 years after the 19th amendment was one of the achievement on the part of blacks).<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the non-improvement of the relative status of blacks, there are different schools of thought. First is of the opinion that it is because many blacks are marginal workers, without skill or training to get job at higher levels. Second, states that there is an apprehension that macro-economic shifts combined with demographic trends put the blacks at the bottom of the ladder. Third view is that the lack of improvement in

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<sup>14</sup>R. Farley, "After the starting line - Black and Women in uphill Race", Demography (Virginia, Population Association of America, Alexandria), vol. 25, Oct. 1988, p. 479.

black social and economic circumstances in a no growth economy. Fourth contends that dearth of employment for blacks precludes them from having stable families. Last but not the least, is the view that discrimination, subordination and control of the race are still a vital part of American institutions. What has changed are the ways in which historic subordination by race has been maintained.<sup>15</sup> The present study tries to project the actual conditions governing the life and work of women in general and black women in particular. It is contended here that women are oppressed in a male dominated community, and that black women are much more oppressed; in addition to being a women they also suffer from being black - a neglected and discriminated minority in the United States. Thus, black women are subjected to 'Double Jeopardy'.

The notion of Double Jeopardy is not new. It was first introduced by Anna Julia Cooper who near the end of the nineteenth century spoke and wrote of the double enslavement of black women and of their being confronted by both a woman question and a race problem".

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 479.

In 1904 Mary Church Terrell, the first President of National Association of Colored Women wrote "not only are colored women, handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race, not only because they are women, but because they are colored".<sup>16</sup>

In attempting to analyse the situation of the black woman in the United States of America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of facts and defensive attitude on the part of many.

Black woman in America can justly be described as a "slave of a slave". With the reduction of the black man in America to such abject oppression, the black woman had no protector and was used and is still being used in some cases as the scapegoat for the evils that the society has perpetuated on black men. Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by white colonizer. She has suffered the worse kind of economic exploitation having been forced to serve as the white woman's maid and wet nurse for white offspring while her own children

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<sup>16</sup>Deborah, K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple consciousness: The context of a Black Feminist Ideology", Signs (Chicago Univ. of Chicago Press), vol.14, Autumn 1988), p. 48.

were more often than not starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped, used to underpin the white masters household and powerless to reverse the syndrome.<sup>17</sup>

The ordeal of slavery and segregation have had far-reaching negative influence on almost all aspects of Afro-American women, vis., the life styles for survival, the relationships with mates and children, the daily coping mechanism and the aspirations and motivations for the future.

The role of black woman cannot be understood and explained adequately apart from this historical background, black women had to endure in a society of white in which, in theory, if not in practice, white women were placed upon a pedestal, and white males expressed their supremacy and inner feeling of chauvinism toward females in general and black females in particular.

As it is expected that women must work harder than men to achieve the same recognition and earn the same money, black women have throughout their history worked under a double burden. They have had to struggle

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<sup>17</sup> Toni Cade, The Black Woman: An Anthology (New York, 1970), pp. 90-92.

for the emancipation of their race while contending with prejudices and policies in American life that discriminate against women. W.E.B. Dubois once said that "no other women on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womenliness that they retain".<sup>18</sup>

The blurred roles and heavy responsibilities of black women in America have been difficult for them to cope with. The vast majority have had womanhood thrust upon them long before their white counterparts had to experience it. Economic inequalities forced many to carry the burden of responsibility for their entire families without the security offered to women of their racial and ethnic groups. At the same time they were coerced into taking on some of the purely non-feminine characteristics that prevail in mainstream of American society. Hence it was expected of them to be the "Head" of the black family but to some great degree also become a "dainty" symbol of American womanhood.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Robert Staples, The Black Woman in America (Chicago Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 214.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

Although it is ironic to find that inspite of the prejudices the American have against black men and women, they have always given black women the special status of a nurse and confidante to the children of white mothers they served. Whereas it is a known fact that they have been denied the rights society has traditionally given to women, namely marry and raise a family.

Changes that have taken place in 1970s and 80s for black men and black women are similar in some and different in otherways. The driving force has been the shift from domestic service and labour into first blue collar, later service sector positions and then the professions.<sup>20</sup>

The more positive aspect of black women's heritage is that they also experienced a type of womanhood that has recently come to be viewed as desirable by white females who are seeking "liberation". Black women were allowed to be strong independent individuals who were not perpetually being propped up by the male dominated society.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Harry A. Ploski and James Williams, eds., The Negro Almanac (New York, McGraw and Hill Co., 1983), p.1309.

<sup>21</sup>Staples, n.18, p. 268.

Thus, the rise of woman's liberation presented black woman with a difficult question. Is it productive to fight for the rights of minorities and women at the same time, or will the involvement in one inevitably detract from success of the other? As the debate on this continued, Representative Shirley Chisholm (the first black woman elected to the United States Congress) observed that in many respects it was more difficult to be a woman than a black.<sup>22</sup>

The modern American Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was born out of Civil Rights Movement. Once before when working for justice for black slaves in the movement for the abolition of slavery in the 1830s and 70s, a handful of southern white middle class women had gained experience in collective action.

The domination of women's movement by whites was deeply resented by black women as a majority saw in this domination nothing but racism. The black woman American writer Bell Hooks expressed her anger in her book Ain't I a Woman : Black Women and feminism. She said, "every Women's Movement in America from its earliest origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation ....

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<sup>22</sup>Ploski and Williams, n.20, p. 1308.

white middle and upper class women have dominated every women's movement in the United States".<sup>23</sup>

The women of colour experience double or divided political loyalties because they must confront both racism and sexism. Although black women preceded white women in recognising and reacting to sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, the survival of black people has depended on women and men working together even as women confront men over sexist practices on a personal level and within black organizations.

The Nationalist Black Women Feminist Organization (NBFO) which was formed in May '73, defined its major concerns as self-definition and development of a positive image for black women. One of major gifts of black feminism has been to make it little easier, simply to be black and female. There is not one black woman in America who has not felt at least once like "the mule of the world" to USE Zora Neale Hurston's still apt phrase. Until black feminism came into being very few people cared about or took seriously the demoralization of being female and coloured, poor and hated.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Amy Cliff, Class Struggle and Women's Liberation 1640 to the present (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 162.

<sup>24</sup>Barbara Smith, "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement", Black Scholar (California, Sausalite ) vol.14, March/April 1985, p.9.



The feminist both black and white pointed out that many of the nations sexist laws and procedures exerted their most adverse effect on black women e.g. anti-abortion laws which have the effect of increasing the cost of abortions to astronomical prices that only few black women can afford. State labour laws deny certain well paid jobs to women, and welfare laws that rupture homes by denying aid to families that contain an able bodied male. However, while granting validity to these points many blacks were deeply disturbed by the women's movement and its relevance to the black women. For one thing, black women suffer the most from every form of female oppression. They are economically more dependent on their husbands, since they have fewer job opportunities than white women.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the necessity of their liberation from sexist as well as racist oppression black women's initial reaction to women's movement was that of 'DISTRUST'. They did not want to be used again to help some body gain power that is carefully kept out of their hands. The early image of women's liberation was of an elitist organization comprising of upper middle class women, with the concerns only for women of that class.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ploski and Williams, n.20, p. 1310.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

The white women assert that both black and white women share a common oppression; that black cannot be free until women are free. As it has been commented, "any attempt to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman, has all the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the rope burned hands of an amateur mountain climber."<sup>27</sup>

The greatest difference between the goals of white women and the needs of black women are succinctly summed up by Linda laure Cummings as follows:

Common oppression is fine for rhetoric but it does not reflect the actual distance between the oppression of the black man and woman who are unemployed and the white woman who is sick and tired of playboy foldouts, of Christian Dior, lowering hemlines or adding ruffles or of Miss Clairol telling her that blondes have more fun. What does black woman on welfare who has difficulty feeding her children have in common with the discontent of the suburban mother who has the luxury to protest washing the dishes on which her family's full meal was consumed".<sup>28</sup>

But over the years the black women have been joining women's liberation in great numbers which shows their changing attitudes towards the movement.

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<sup>27</sup> Staples, n.18, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.168.

Black women have strengthened their position considerably in the twentieth century keeping in mind the burden they had to carry. She has endured and emerged as a stable force in the family and society which is evident from the crowning of first black woman as Miss America, and election of the first black woman to the United States Congress. Only a few years ago, none of this would have been possible. America has come a long way in relatively short space of time when measured by the span of this nations history.<sup>29</sup>

As opportunities have opened up, the black women have been quick to make the transition from low paid unskilled domestic form and operative jobs to employment in clerical, professional technical, sales and service jobs. But in comparison to the white women they still have a long way to go. In an effort to increase upward mobility many black women have opted for national women's movements, which has caused upheaval among blacks who feel that "feminism has put the various black movements on the black burner of social priorities".<sup>30</sup>

One cannot overlook the fact that though not many, black women have made their mark in various walks

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<sup>29</sup> Ploski and Williams, n.20, p. 1310.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



of life. There have been some noted black women, who made the so called "superior" class, think again regarding their belief that black women are capable of nothing. Names like Shirley Chisholm, Maxine Walters, who is considered to be the most influential black woman in the United States politics. The famous singers like Mahalia Jackson (the Gospel singer) Tina Turner, Tracy Chapman, actress's like Ms Tyson, Novelist and poets like Maya Angelou who became famous with her book, 'I know why a caged bird sings', Lorde Audre who wrote Black Unicorn, and 'Still I Rise' and Vanessa Williams who became Miss America, the first black woman to achieve such a position, have risen despite the double jeopardy, so have athletes and sportswomen like Griffith Joyner and others.

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It would appear that the black women have been achievers throughout their history - Sojourner Truth (abolitionist and Women rights advocate), Phyllis Wheatle (the Rosa L. Parks) and Rosal Parks - a symbol of many women who before her time spoke out and acted against the insults and humiliation of the system of segregation.

Black women have taken important strides in many walks of life but much remains to be achieved, for in most instances they lag behind. They are likely to be unemployed, to be over represented in low-paying jobs, to be increasingly assuming the role of the family head with children to support and to account for a larger proportion of being poor.

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CHAPTER - II

PLACE OF BLACK WOMEN IN U.S.A.

Until the very recent past black people in America have been denied their history. American women have been denied their history even more, but this denial has not yet been widely recognized. History in the past largely written by white male historians, has simply failed to ask those questions which would elicit information about the female contribution, the female point of view. Women have been denied knowledge of their legitimate part in human history and consequently have been affected individually by having to see the world through male eyes not only in America but throughout the world.

Black women on the other hand have been ignored more than any other group by scholars with racist assumptions, belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferior by the American society -- Black and Women - and have been doubly invisible.<sup>1</sup>

Black women have had an ambiguous role in relation to white society. As they were women, white society has considered them more docile, less of a threat than their

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<sup>1</sup>Lerner Gerda, Black Women in White America (New York, Random House, 1972), p. 570.

men. The White Society has 'rewarded' them by allowing or forcing them into the service in white families. Their intimate contact with white people made them interpreters and intermediaries of white culture in the black home. At the same time, they had to struggle in partnership with their men to keep their families together and to allow the black community to survive. This dual and often conflicting role imposed tensions on black women but has also given them unusual strength.<sup>2</sup>

Black families and role of women:

Migration, uprooting, urbanization always creates problem, even the best organized and best integrated groups suffer under such circumstances. But when the fundamental core of organization, the family, is already weak, the magnitude of these problems can be staggering. The experience of slavery left, as its most serious heritage, a steady weakness in the black family. There was no possibility of taking responsibility for one's children, for one had in the end no power over them.<sup>3</sup>

There were in 1960, in the New York metropolitan city 353,000 black families - a quarter of them were headed

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 570.

<sup>3</sup>Nathan Glazer, Beyond the Melting Pot (Massachusetts, Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 52.

by women. In contrast less than one tenth of the white households were headed by women. The number of females looking after the whole household by themselves (increased it) was 41.7 per cent compared to 11.9 per cent of whites.<sup>4</sup>

The increasing number of black families headed by women has been cited as the basis for the increasing levels of poverty to be found among blacks and for the failure of blacks as a group to progress economically to a greater extent than they have. It is true that black female headed households have the lowest median income of any family type.

Black women's usual cultural image in America is that of a domineering type who rules the family, her husband included. She is seen as a masculinized female who must be subordinated in order that the black male may take his rightful place in society. This leaves one wondering how the victim of a dual oppression could have acquired such an image.<sup>5</sup>

Until the eighteenth century most of the black slaves were male, as initially they were preferred for

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<sup>4</sup>James D. Williams, eds., The State of Black America (New York, National Urban League, Inc., 1981), p. 153.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Staples, The Black Woman in America (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 10.



doing the heavy duties required of bondsmen. Later to increase the labour force the 'woman' was imported.

The slave woman was first a full time worker for her owner and only incidently a wife, mother and home maker. It has been suggested by Angela Davis that the sexual subjugation of the slave was the slave master's symbolic attempt to break her will to resist.<sup>6</sup> All this resulted in making the slave woman the centre of the family. The black father if present had little authority.

The plight of the black woman did not markedly improve even after the emancipation. They were now faced with the problem of adjusting to the society which was alien to them, black men were out of their jobs, and the task of providing and protecting their families became difficult. It was then left upto the black women to do what was necessary for the survival of her family. She went back into the house of whites from where she thought she had got her freedom. W.E.B. Dubois once said of domestic servants, "The personal degradation of their work is so great that any white man of decency would rather cut his daughter's throat than let her grow up to such a destiny".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

With the turn of the twentieth century and coming in of two world wars, mechanization of south, industrial growth in the north attracted people and the result was heavy migration, which highlighted the role of black woman as a surplus labour, which is essential to the profitable functioning of a capitalist economic system.

If black women constitute a reserve labour supply then black men are surely the proletariat of the American society. The irregularity or lack of employment of the black man has contributed to the prominent role of black women in family affairs. Some writers have seen the traces of 'matriarchal' family system in the black community. Lerner Gerda a well known scholar, has stated that the "question of black "matriarchy" is commonly misunderstood". The very term is deceptive, for "matriarchy" implies the exercise of power by women, and black women have been the most powerless in the entire society. The ranking order in the society is white men, white women, black men and black women. The wages of black women even today are the lowest of all groups. Like white women they were deprived of the ballot until 1920. After 1920, they ranked lower than black men in political representation and in access to economic power and positions in society, although both ranked low as compared to all white.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Gerda, n.1, p. 572.

In the 1960s, black families headed by a woman had a median family income of \$ 3,220 per year, less than half of the income \$ 6,778 of the families headed by black men (for the clear and recent picture see table 2.1).<sup>9</sup>

Table 2.1

<u>Married Couples</u>	<u>White families</u>	<u>Black families</u>
1971	\$ 25, 130	\$ 18,365
1981	\$ 25, 470	\$ 19,620
Female householder		
1971	\$ 13,120	\$ 8, 185
1981	\$ 12,510	\$ 7,510

The reality that emerges is that black women have a significant amount of family responsibility and need for income but have a lower income than the black male or white female. Then the question may arise why then the black male is not looking after his family? The answer is very simple. The rate of unemployment of black men have long been twice as high as that of white men. This

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<sup>9</sup>Source - U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

cited in - James D. Williams eds., The State of Black America 1984 (New York, National Urban League Inc. 1984).

has resulted in the break-up of the black family. Furthermore under the existing laws, government provides assistance to families where male is absent. Therefore, most of the aid is provided to the families which are headed by women.<sup>10</sup>

### Education Occupation and Income

It is commonly believed that black women occupy a higher and more powerful place in black society than black men because they have more education can more easily find employment and earn a higher income.<sup>11</sup> The real position of black women is somewhat different. It can be understood by her socio-economic status in the society. To know the status one has to concentrate on education, occupation and income. Both black men and women had to suffer the barriers of segregation for educating themselves in the society which was both capitalist and racist. Though now thirtyfive years after the BROWN VS BOARD OF EDUCATION case in 1954, when the Supreme Court declared segregation an offense, the situation has changed or should one say improved but total improvement is still to be achieved, as Charles V Hamilton said in 1978 in an interview, "however painful and slow the change is,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

it will be made".<sup>12</sup> Since the epochal decision of the Supreme Court the nation has been making a radical but far from shifts towards racial equality.

Black female educational attainment provide an appropriate starting point because of two reasons - (a) educational attainments have been shown to strongly influence other social and economic status roles which an individual occupies; and (b) black culture traditionally has placed heavy emphasis upon educational attainment as a vehicle for status enhancement and personal enrichment. There has been tremendous gain in this regard during the last quarter of the century. The percentage of black females graduating from school has increased over the years. (1960 - 45 per cent; 1974 - 75 per cent).<sup>13</sup> For the overall position on years of schooling completed during the 80s, (see table 2.2.) It is seen that percentage of black with higher educational attainments has increased from 1980 to 1987.

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<sup>12</sup>"Blacks in America", U.S. News and World Report (Washington, D.C.), 14th May 1979, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup>Walter R. Allen, "The Social and economic status of Black Women in the United States", Phylon (Atlanta, Georgia), vol. 42, March 1981, p. 29.

Table 2.2 : Years of school completed by race, sex, 1980-1987.PERCENT OF POPULATION

Year, Race, and sex	Population in (1000)	Elementary			High School		College		Median school years completed
		0-4 yrs	5-7 yrs	8 yrs	1-3 yrs	4 yrs	1-3 yrs	4 yrs	
1980 total persons	132,836	3.8	6.7	8.0	15.3	34.6	15.7	16.2	12.5
White Male	53,941	2.8	6.0	8.0	13.6	31.8	16.4	21.3	12.5
Female	60,349	2.5	5.6	8.4	15.5	39.1	15.6	13.3	12.6
Black Male	5,895	10.0	12.0	6.7	20.5	28.3	14.0	8.4	12.0
Female	7,300	6.7	11.6	7.3	22.9	30.0	13.2	8.3	12.8
1987 Total	149,144	2.4	4.5	5.8	11.7	38.7	17.1	19.9	12.7
White Male	61,678	2.1	4.2	5.8	10.6	35.6	17.2	24.5	12.8
Female	67,492	2.0	4.0	6.0	11.4	42.6	17.3	16.9	12.6
Black Male	6,919	5.9	8.6	5.7	17.2	36.1	15.5	11.0	12.4
Female	8,661	4.3	7.6	5.9	19.0	37.5	15.8	10.4	12.4

14. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, US Census of Population 1970, vols. 1 and 11; 1980, vol.1, Staples C and Current Population Reports Series, vol.20, no.428, - cited in US Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of US (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 131.

Historically, black women have been more educated than black men. This situation is often explained by stating that black mothers expressed a preference for the female child when a decision had to be made as to who would go to college. Throughout the history of blacks in America numerous black women have made contribution to education through schools, colleges, community and civil rights organizations and groups. In the years since compulsory ignorance for blacks was abandoned with emancipation, women have worked and struggled to educate themselves for service and in doing so to uplift the race. They have mainly focussed on the problems of educating blacks and poor people throughout their history. This has been a natural focus of their interest because of their personal background and the severe educational problems the black community has faced.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary black women are carriers of tradition of involvement and leadership in education, some are teachers, and administrators, others are community developers; they are also women who are civil rights activists, and scholars.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alan L. Sorkin, "Education occupation and income of the non-white women", Journal of Negro Education (Washington D.C.), vol. 4, Fall 1972, p. 345.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Frances Berry, "Twentieth Century Black Women", Journal of Negro Education, vol.51, 1982, p. 294.

Black women have been able to get positions as commissioners, superintendents and supervisors at the state and local levels. This certainly is an improvement and a step towards well deserved progress. They were also able to make an impact on the national policy of education and played an important role in the formulation as well as implementation of the policy.

Although, race is still an important limiting criterion for educational and political success, black women have held a number of crucial policy making positions. They have not been content to accept symbolic positions in which they represent black descriptively by colour or by race. Instead they have emphasized substantive representation even when it has involved political conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Everything has its good and bad points; same is true for the education of women who were happy to be educated, to make contribution and an achievement for themselves. It is evident that higher education alone cannot ensure high income. Despite being more educated than black men, black women are not able to get the same pay. Women, as it is, get sixty four cents to a man's

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<sup>17</sup>Dianne M. Pinderhugge, "Black Women and National Educational Policy", Journal of Negro Education, vol.51, 1982, p. 301.



dollar, which would be even less for black women, educated or not. This illustrates that sex discrimination in employment and income is even greater than racial discrimination and once more highlights the fact of the black woman's dual oppression.

Another results of higher education for black women has been a shortage of marriage partners at her socio-economic level. In American society women rarely marry men with less education than they have. Therefore, higher education in a strange way restricts the choice of a life partner for black women.

#### Occupation and Income

Job settings and relationships exert profound influence upon the life styles of individuals, thus it is important to consider the employment patterns of black women; employment outside the house historically has characterized the black female experience. Indeed, the very survival of black community rests on the continuous economic contributions of employed women, roughly one-half of all black women, sixteen years and over, have been employed since 1950, and there has been great improvement/increase in black female labour force participation over white women. From 1950 to 1970, however, this gap fell

from fourteen per cent (47 per cent to 33 per cent) to four per cent (49 per cent to 45 per cent). Over this entire period male labour force participation rates exceeded those for black females by a minimum twenty four per cent margin. This only confirms that men (white and black) work more than black women, who in turn work more than white women. It does not put black women in any advantageous position, as the unemployment rate among the black female is still higher than white women and men both black and white.<sup>18</sup>

The inequality experienced by women in labour market has been characterized by some as confinement to the secondary sector of a dual labour market. According to the dual economic theory, jobs and industries are readily divided into primary and secondary sectors, and this division is reinforced by barriers that make it difficult for workers to move from one sector to another.<sup>19</sup>

In every occupational category except in service sector black female unemployment far exceeds those of the other races and sex sub-groups. On an average black female

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<sup>18</sup> Allen, n.13, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Dianne M. Pearce, "The Feminization of Poverty", Society (New Jersey, Rutgers Univ. Press) vol.21, Nov/Dec. 1983, p. 71.

unemployment is roughly two and a half times white male rate, twice the white female rate, and one third more than the black male rate. Among the four - race, sex-groups, black women apparently bear the greater burden of job loss. While black women have registered incremental gains in other occupational categories it is important to note their continued concentration in low status low prestige occupations, even where black women achieve occupational parity, their earnings are still lower.<sup>20</sup>

In each occupational categories, it is important to note that male earnings outstrip black female earnings for the same work, while on average white female earnings are higher. The twin handicaps of race and sex discrimination continue, therefore, to limit black female access to jobs traditionally labelled the province of males and whites.<sup>21</sup> (see table 2.3 and table 2.4).

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<sup>20</sup>Allen, n. 13, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

Table 2.3

Labor Force, Employment and Earnings, by sex, race and educational attainment,  
1988

(Percent Distribution)

Sex, Race, years of School Completed.	Total employed	Managerial	Teah/sales/ adminis- tration	Service	Produ- ction	Operator Fabrica- tors.	Farming/ Fishing/ Forestry
Female (W)							
Less than 4 yrs of HS	100.0	6.2	25.0	33.2	5.0	28.4	2.2
4 yrs of High School	100.0	13.6	54.8	17.4	2.9	10.2	1.4
1 to 3 years of co- llege	100.0	30.0	53.8	11.1	1.8	2.8	.7
4 yrs of college or more	100.0	68.9	26.0	3.1	.7	.8	.5
Female (B)							
Less than 4 yrs of HS	100.0	3.8	10.4	59.2	3.0	23.4	.2
4 years of H.S.	100.0	9.2	40.6	28.9	2.7	18.2	.3
1-3 yrs of college	100.0	23.1	54.3	15.6	1.8	5.2	-
4 yrs of college or more	100.0	63.9	27.4	6.2	1.2	1.2	-

Source: US Bureau of Labour Statistics; Unpublished Data  
- cited in US Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of U.S. (Washington  
D.C., Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 390.

Table 2.4

Unemployment Rates for the female workers by Race - 1975-1983

Years	18 - 19 yrs		20 - 24 yrs		25 - 34 yrs		35 - 44 yrs		45 - 54 yrs		55 - 64 yrs	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
1975	38.3	16.1	22.5	11.2	12.9	8.5	8.6	6.6	6.7	5.8	5.3	5.1
1982	39.8	15.7	25.2	11.1	16.0	8.3	12.1	7.5	9.0	5.9	6.6	5.5
1983	56.1	14.9	32.5	9.6	18.6	7.1	10.1	5.2	9.7	5.0	7.8	4.0

Source: Employment and Training Report of the President, 1982-1983  
 rates are from employment and Earning Bureau of Labor  
 Statistics, November 1983.

cited in - The State of Black America 1984, (New York,  
 Urban League, Inc., 1984), p. 18.

Income

Income is probably the most critical determinant of black female social and economic status. One has to ask a question to oneself; does the status of black women and their income vary with difference in their family status? It has been noticed that the maximum rate of poverty prevails in the black female-headed households. In 1987, the per cent of female headed households with no spouse present below poverty line was 41.4 per cent. The unemployment rate among the black female headed householder is 15.4 per cent compared to white female headed householder which is 6.8 per cent. The median family income of these females is again less than that of white female householder. It is \$ 9,710 to \$ 17,018.<sup>22</sup> Females headed families in the United States are comprised of both black and white low-income families. However, female headed families constitute an overwhelming majority only among low income black families. At the beginning of the decade (80s) about 56 per cent of all poor black families were headed by females. This proportion rose further as a result of both the decline in the number of low income black families headed by men and the

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<sup>22</sup>U.S. Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of U.S. (Washington D.C., Govt. Printing Office, 1989), pp. 393, 446, 453.

concomitant increase in the numbers headed by women.<sup>23</sup>

This increase in the women heading the household happened to be the most significant social trend in the contemporary American society - the break up of the black family. The term "feminization of poverty", aptly describes the phenomena. The break-up of the family and poverty feminization have two aspects. First, black women often assume or are given responsibility for raising children both when the nuclear family dissolves as well as when children are born out of wedlock. Since the economic status of these women is low, they tend to contribute to the overall level and growth of poverty feminization. Second, women's status in society reflects on and is associated with the problems of low wages; occupational segregation and sex discrimination black women are not immune to these problems. Indeed, for them problems are compounded, they receive the lowest wages, are the most occupationally segregated group, and incur racial as well as sexual discrimination.

Many welfare programmes were introduced for the black people. First big programme came in the wake of 'New Deal'. One of the most important was the securing of

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<sup>23</sup>W.A. Low and Virgil A. Cliff, eds., Encyclopedia of Black America (New York, McGraw Hill Company, 1983), p. 460.

assistance of black specialists and advisors in various governmental departments. This brought about a new sense of political responsibility among the blacks.

The Government established innumerable agencies to aid in the recovery from the severe depression. The suffering of the blacks was most acute. They were last to be hired and first to be fired. The unemployment was highest among them. They were at the bottom of the ladder any way but the depression pushed them even further down. Therefore, when recovery took place they were also benefited. Their gratitude strengthened the democratic party.

Under agencies like Agricultural Adjustments Administration (A.A.A) farmers were given cash benefits for ploughing in their cotton, wheat, and tobacco crops and for slaughtering their hogs. The New Deal housing programme aided blacks not only in their efforts to keep their homes and to acquire better living accommodations, but also in the matter of providing employment on projects under construction. Under the public works administration and similar agencies, a considerable number of black hospitals and other public buildings were constructed. These were only some of the programmes which were started during the New Deal and helped in establishing a feeling of security and belonging among blacks. Since then five decades have gone by but even now as far as employment, income, nutritious



food are concerned, the blacks and their women are still suffering or are still shown the door because of the racial/sexist discrimination.

### The Black Woman in American Politics

In early colonial times free blacks apparently often enjoyed the same rights and duties as poor white people relieved from the indentured servitude. As a result of the civil war and the reconstruction amendments, blacks were enfranchised in the whole union. In North this change became permanent. In the south, where most blacks lived and still live, it was rapidly undone. While the blacks have been kept out of politics, in the sense that they have been kept from voting, in another sense namely as a political issue, they have been an important factor in the very region where they have been disfranchised in the south.<sup>24</sup>

After the Civil Rights Act passed in the sixties, impediments to registration and voting were largely removed. As a result black votes registration climbed up rapidly and the black voting increased to such an extent that it

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<sup>24</sup>Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), p. 429.

almost came near the percentage of white voting. By eighties black voter has come of age. The blacks are deeply involved in politics. They register and vote in substantial proportions, their newspaper keep up a continual flow of political news, they are active in club membership and in the support of political leaders. Clearly politics is seen as an area where the interest of individual and groups advance.<sup>25</sup>

Twentyfour years after passage of the voting Rights Act of 1965 and thirtytwo years after the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the first Civil Rights legislation since the Civil War, the black vote matured into its most powerful form. Black nationalists and other veterans of the 1950s and 1960s protests argued that the Civil Rights Movement had already proven the bankruptcy of electoral and coalition politics. Black Marxist on the other hand, maintained that the political sphere was a superficial area of conflict, it is the economy which determines the status of the black community. Besides, there were not enough blacks elected officials to make a difference. (Where they stand in the 80s, see table 2.5). Out of the total black officials elected there were 1,443 women elected officials in 1985.

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<sup>25</sup>Glazer, n.3, p. 67.

Table 2.5

Black elected officials, by office, 1970 - 1988

Year	Total	U.S. and State legislatures includes elected state administrators.	City and country offices, county commissioners, councilmen, Mayors Vice-mayorals, etc.	Law Enforcement Judges, Magistrates, constables, Marshals sheriffs, etc.	Education Members of State education agencies college, boards
1970 (Feb.)	1,479	179	719	213	368
1971 (Mar.)	1,870	216	909	274	471
1972 (Mar.)	2,275	224	1112	263	676
1973 (Apr.)	2,635	256	1268	334	777
1974 (Apr.)	3,007	256	1607	340	807
1975	3,522	299	1885	387	951
1980	4,963	326	2871	534	1232
1985	6,312	407	3689	685	1531
1986	6,384	410	3800	676	1498
1987	6,646	428	3949	727	1542
1988 (Jan)	6,793	424	4089	738	1542

SOURCE: Joint Centre for Political Studies, Washington D.C.,  
 Black Elected Officials: A copy Right.

Cited in - US Bureau of Census, Statistical abstract of US, n.22, p.255.

from South of 3.5 million blacks.<sup>28</sup> By 1973, only 53 per cent of the original number that was living in the south remained there.<sup>29</sup> By 1979, the trend was reversing. Thus older blacks, male and female, especially those from the southern states of the old confederacy, have generally begun to vote in life. If they voted at all, it is contended that in the process of political re-socialization heralded by the fall of legal barriers the young black women have adapted more easily to the changes taking place in the society than their mothers and grandmothers.<sup>30</sup>

The data shows that black women compared to black men, white men and women, have the lowest levels of trust in the federal government, the lowest feeling of political efficacy and the highest sense of discrimination in the area of employment. If we assume that these variables are the measures of alienations then a very small percentage of black women will be expected to go to the polls. But then it has already been pointed out that the percentage of voting among the blacks increasing for the last thirty years. In the face of a declining voter turn out of the white Americans since 1960, black women have moved ahead

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<sup>28</sup>Sandra Baxter, Women and Politics (Michigan, Univ. of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 77.

<sup>29</sup>Newsweek (New York), February 1979, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

Significant demographic changes involving the mass movement of blacks to many urban areas in the North, the post World War-II changes affecting politics made it possible for the black candidates by the end of sixties, to challenge whites for elective office in the city council and mayoral races, across the nation. The electoral successes further stimulated black voting.<sup>26</sup> As a result, although blacks continue to vote at higher rate but still stand behind in the recent elections. The black minority is voting at rates much closer to the majority group than ever before, and significantly, blacks have joined other minority ethnic and religious groups who have tended to vote in blocs. There are fascinating stories in American history of the Irish vote, the Italian vote, the Jewish vote, the Catholic vote, among others. Following that tradition black leaders in America have organized a solidarity among their followers which has resulted in their sending a growing number of elected representative to state legislatures and to Congress. Their clout has also led to the election of black mayors in a number of major cities, including Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit and Washington, D.C. Their influence however clearly

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<sup>26</sup> James D. Williams, eds., The State of Black America (New York, National Urban League Inc., 1984), p.7.

left its mark in the 1976 Presidential election, when their vote provided the margin of victory for Jimmy Carter.

Blacks vote in large numbers and in all elections they participate with much enthusiasm, and the same thing is true of black women who have increased their rate of voting faster than have black men. These increases in voter participation for black women are all the more remarkable because they had the longer way to go to show the increase.

The unique status of the black women in the American political system when compared to other women is rooted in the heritage of slavery based on race.<sup>27</sup> It took seventytwo years following the declaration of independence before women actively sought the right to vote and another seventytwo before they attained their objective. Only a handful have reached the top, and out of those who have reached the top, there would hardly be any black women.

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<sup>27</sup> Mae. C. King, "The Unique Status of Black Women in U.S.A. Political System", Social Science Quarterly (Texas, Austin), vol. 56, June 1975, p. 116.

One may ask, why is it so? May be because for years it was not considered normal to have women politicians. This is true for United States also, where women have to face the same problem - the problem of having an "identity of her own, black women look for it as woman and also as black. The political process dependent as it is on the majority force a candidate to the centre of the political spectrum. The extreme becomes marginal, therefore electoral process poses certain problems for a candidate who wants to fight against the values, traditions and practices of a majority, which in turn makes the task for black women next to impossible.

But still they have been enough to break down the barriers which had been erected against them and they came out to make a place for themselves. Though they are not many, but they are there to make their presence felt.

To know how far they are politically motivated, one has to see their voting pattern and the fact how far have they been able to utilize their right to vote, which they got after much struggle (28 per cent of black women voted in 1952 and 1956, the rate for black women more than doubled by 1968, and in 1976, 50 per cent eligible black women voted).

This is a proven axiom : higher the socio-economic status (SES) higher the percentage of voting. It is not true in the case of black women voters. Their SES is low but voting is higher. The evidence supporting their low SES is quite clear. Black women have the lowest median income. Before the 60s probably no more than one-third of black women, not only in the south, but in the country as a whole voted in Presidential elections. Within the larger framework of political participation, which included voting, campaigning, holding political office or membership in politics, 63 per cent of black men and 47 per cent of black females were active in politics of the south during the 60s.

The major changes did not come until the passage of the voting Rights Act 1965 which provided direct federal assistance in registration and voting. The act is generally seen as the most significant step since the 15th amendment in opening up opportunities for black citizens to register and vote. The abolition of poll tax (24th amendment) and literacy requirements, were also beneficial. If a black woman did not vote before 1964, she probably had moved north or west to a state where blacks had experienced greater opportunity to vote prior to that year. According to the Census Bureau reports, the years between 1940 and 1966 witnessed the massive migration



to voting levels comparable with those of black men. In the Presidential election of 1968 and 1970 black women voting percentage was on par with that of black men. In 1976 it was higher (see table 2.6).<sup>31</sup>

The actual increase in income; education and occupation where they have occurred, have not been enough to explain the continuing increase in black women voting rate. The fact is that the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the removal of numerous legal barriers - though important factors is the increase in voting by black men cannot account entirely for change. It in part has grown out of a conviction that changes can be brought about by electoral process.

Table 2.6

A comparison by race, gender, region of voting in the 1976 Presidential election.  
(percent distribution)

	NORTH EAST		NORTH CENTRAL		SOUTH		WEST	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Men	62	46	66	55	58	44	59	48
Women	60	49	66	59	56	47	60	52
Both sexes	61	48	65	57	57	46	59	50

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports Population characteristics, series p.20, n.322.

31. cited in Sapdra Baxter, Women and Politics (Michigan, Univ. of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 82.

Black Women and the Equal Rights Amendment (E.R.A.)

While looking into the role and participation of black women in American politics one must also see their reaction to and attitudes towards the "Equal rights amendment".

E.R.A. assumes a similarity between the sexes and calls for their equality under the law. The first women's rights legislation was introduced in Congress, three years after women got the right to vote and ever since 1923, it has been introduced in the Congress without success.<sup>32</sup> The position on E.R.A. had been in a 'deadlock' since 1940s and 50s, after the major political parties pledged their support to it. It could only be revived again in 1960s, along with the New Women's Movement. Then for the first time in history in 1970, the House considered and passed by a 352-15 roll-call vote the constitutional amendment. It was rejected by the women who said that the "battle" was not between women and the House but between women and the Supreme Court. "The Court has held for years that women as a class are not entitled to equal protection of the laws. They are not 'persons' within the meaning of the Constitution."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1970  
(Washington D.C., 1970), p. 706.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

E.R.A. got support of Democratic Party along with some of the Republican Party members. People like Charles E. Goodell (R.N.Y.), Florence P. Dwyer (R.N.J.); Shirley Chisholm (D.N.Y), Martha W. Griffiths (I Michi) and others. Black women have been involved in many of the struggles against women's oppression in the society. One particular struggle which has won the support of many black women is the ratification of E.R.A. Many black organizations have endorsed the E.R.A. including the NAACP, National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, National Women Political Caucus and National Black Feminist Organizations. Trade unions with large black membership have also endorsed.

Black women support the "battle" of E.R.A. as there are still many laws which discriminate on the basis of sex and law which varies from state to state. Ratification of E.R.A. would make unconstitutional such laws which affect black women most severely. So it is in the interest of black women, as it would be a tool to fight for equal rights, equal pay, equal work and equal opportunities to compete for jobs. It would be a legal weapon to fight with, for black women to fight against the discriminatory tactics, which they have to face.

E.R.A. was favoured by many and it came under attack by some; these were groups which were anti-women, anti-black.<sup>34</sup> Groups like Restore Our Alienated Rights (ROAR) who have openly attacked E.R.A. Then there are Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society and an antibusing group in Louisville Kentucky, etc. The most vocal group expressing opposition to the E.R.A. is of Phyllis Schlafly who is a well-known right winger. She opposed not only the E.R.A. but is also against equal rights for blacks.

Whatever black women might have hoped to gain with the ratification with the E.R.A. could never see the light of the day as it was defeated. But they have not lost hope and have not given up the struggle. They know very well how each gain for black women's right is a gain for black liberation as well, as it is going to strengthen the movement.

Even after the defeat of ERA, the fight is on women's movement is going to carry it till they get E.R.A. ratified. As the President of (NOW) Eleanor Smeal Observes that the future of the women's movement is largely tied to the abortion issue and the revival of ERA. She said,

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<sup>34</sup> Cathy Sedwick and Reba Williams, "Black Women and the Equal Rights Amendment", Black Scholar, vol.7, July/August 1976, p. 27.

"We have to go through the whole ERA campaign again as we have no choice. I don't know how we can get any other rights otherwise".<sup>35</sup>

It may not be in the forefront now (80s and 90s) but is still an issue.

What conclusion one can draw about the political participation is influenced by their education, jobs and higher income, and also the success of the Civil Rights Movement which brought down the barriers, and resulted in the increase of their coming to polls. The important factor which changed things for them was the emergence of Women's Liberation Movement.

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<sup>35</sup>Don. Bonafede, "Still a long way to go", National Journal (Washington, D.C.), vol.37, 13th Sept. 1986, p. 2179.

C H A P T E R - I I I

BLACK WOMEN AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Feminist protest has been with America, since it was founded. As early as 1787, Abigail Adams, wrote to her husband John, then sitting in the Constitutional Convention, admonishing him not to "put such unlimited power in the hands of husbands, remember all men would be tyrants if they could,". She went on to threaten that "If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to ferment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice and representation".<sup>1</sup>

The position of American women relative to men actually declined after the revolution, the concern with equality was heightened. When middle-class women began to work in the Abolitionist movement they found that their effectiveness was hampered by the social stigma against women speaking in public, and realized that they could not work to free the slaves without working to free themselves.

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<sup>1</sup>Jo. Freeman, The Politics of Women's Liberation Movement (New York, Mckay Press, 1984), p.12.

It was their relative deprivation which proved to be the main cause for the failure of the early feminist movement. The fact that it was led largely by white middle class and professional women only<sup>2</sup> contributed to it in no small measure.

The social forces which gave rise to the new feminist movements in the 20s and 30s were the same as for the movements which broke out in the 18th and the 19th century. These forces were industrialisation, urbanization, displacement of female functions in the home, education, and changing values. But these attempts were also not fully successful. It was only in the 1960s that the movement gained real momentum, proved to be successful and achieved worldwide acceptance.

#### Origin of the Women's Liberation Movement

Social strain does not create social movements; it only creates the potential for movements. This strain often occurs, or is perceived, as a sharp break with the past; and a movement's psychological, if not necessarily organizational origin is pinpointed from that time. Thus the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation is usually regarded as the beginning of the Civil Rights

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<sup>2</sup>Barbara Sinclair Deckard, The Women's Movement (New York, John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), p. 335.



Movements.<sup>3</sup>

Without such a signpost, a movement's origins are far less clear, and women's liberation movement was not the only such movement to catch most thoughtful observers by surprise. Most attempts to explain why feminism emerged precisely when it did in the mid-1960s had to conclude with Ferriss' that "from the close perspective of 1970, events of the past decade provide evidence of no compelling cause of the rise of the feminist movement".<sup>4</sup>

Ferriss' examination of the time series data over the previous years did not reveal any significant changes in socio-economic variables which could account for the emergence of a women's movement, at the time it was created. From such strain indicators one could surmise that any time during the past was as conducive to the movement formation as any other.<sup>5</sup>

The ascendancy of the Women's liberation movement has been one of the most surprising developments taking place in the United States. Only a few years ago

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<sup>3</sup>Freeman, n.1, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.44.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

most Americans would have never believed that such a movement would have any significance in American life. Indeed, the prevailing cultural belief was that women were pampered, that they controlled the economics of the society and that "momism" was a threat to the masculine fiber of American life.<sup>6</sup>

But the late 60s and early 70s saw the emergence of a rising consciousness in women. Thousands of women began marching and shouting, to protest against the oppression of women. Women's groups sprang up all over the country - on the campuses, in high school, in communities, in professional organizations, in churches, and in unions. They all had one common theme: WOMEN ARE SECOND CLASS CITIZENS: THEY WON'T BE ANY LONGER.

Although the aims of the Women's Liberation Movement may differ from group to group, the major goals of the movement are -

- Establishment of child care centres so that women will be free to work outside the home.
- Equal pay for equal work and the same employment benefits as men.
- Elimination of discrimination in employment.

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<sup>6</sup>Robert Staples, The Black Woman in America, (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 162.

- Classes in self-defense so that women will be less vulnerable to rape and other assaults by men.
- Adequate welfare allowances for those women who are in need of public assistance.
- Legal recognition of the right of every woman to determine whether she shall bear a child by repeal of all laws, against abortions, birth control and sterilization.
- Free birth control facilities to all women who want it.
- Institution of educational programmes dealing with women, their history, psychology, sociology and literature.
- The elimination of generally derogatory image of women as sex objects by the media.
- Opening of all public facilities to people without regard to sex.

These goals reflect the variety of ideologies.

Some women have been concerned about the way women are depicted as sex objects in magazines, movies, etc. Others have focussed breaking down the barriers to entering male-only bars and athletic team.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.163.

### Growth of the Movement

Many people first became aware of the women's liberation movement in 1968; when already the movement was in full force; different women's organizations were already founded, and one of the most prominent was 'National Organization of Women' (NOW) and there were different wings in movement like Radical Wings etc. People became aware of it in Sept. '68 when the Radical Women's protest of the MISS AMERICA contest got the front page coverage and became the first feminist activity to get so much of coverage. The purpose was to "protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us". Another group that got considerable publicity was "WITCH" which stood for 'Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell'. By 1969, the movement was getting considerable if often condescending and inaccurate publicity. But even before the media discovered the movement, it had begun to spread.

The early treatment of the movement by the media led a few radical women's groups to refuse all contact with media, a member of NOW a group which was not hostile to media felt that "media was showing the women's movement as silly".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Deckard, n.2, p. 344.

But all this did not hamper the movement's progress. Women generally were awakening to the need of the time but many were not yet sure about what could and should be done. Women who had never before been politically active began to discuss women's issues and sometimes to form groups. OWL (Older Women's Liberation) had been formed by 1970 and took part in the second Congress to unite women held in that year.<sup>9</sup> Year after year women's movement gained momentum, strength and confidence in themselves to achieve their goals and equality in the society. The fight is still on.

#### Present Position of the Women's Movement

Over the past two decades, women have clearly established themselves as a major social and political force; they have also broken down many of the barriers in the business world and made greater strides in the pursuits of equal justice. Yet, there remains the haunting realization that the promises of the 1960s and 1970s have still to be fulfilled and, that perhaps some of the progress has been an illusion.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

"Women candidates are scrutinized by the public much more than men" said Stephanie Stoliea of Women's Campaign Fund (WCF) in Washington. "In running for office, questions are asked whether (women) are tough enough, experienced enough. They have to pass a higher political standard than men".<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, some of the gains that women's groups point to do not seem very impressive. They note that women now hold 1,102 state legislative seats, or 14.8 per cent of the total seats, triple the number they held in 1969. It is a significant increase but it pales alongside the fact that women make up for more than 53 per cent of the voting population.

Female candidates have fared less well in running for Congress. They hold a meagre 25 of the 535 senate and House seats, including only two in the senate or 4.7 per cent of the total membership of Congress.

Much, if not most, of the movement's vitality is directed at getting elected to public office, with special emphasis at the state and local level. It is there the movement activist feel that women have the best

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<sup>10</sup> Dom Bonafede, "Still a long way to go", National Journal (Washington, D.C.), vol.13, 13th September 1986, p. 2176.

chance of winning office and doing the most good on behalf of women's interests as well as being in a position to influence the post-1990 congressional reapportionment. Many of the obstacles that have long plagued woman candidates are still in place, but the novelty of women seeking office has diminished considerably in recent years. Black women candidates have done especially well in electoral politics. Of 6,424 elected black officials in the United States 1,483 are women. Money generally remains the problem for women candidates although the PACs (Public Accounts Committees) say they want women to go to them and that their doors are not closed, but then they also want women candidates to prove themselves first.

For the women's rights activists, the question confronting the feminist movement today is not the distance it has come but the direction it is headed. Leaders of women's organizations are persuaded that notwithstanding the evident progress they have made in diminishing sex-discrimination and achieving equal status with men in the work place, they still have a long way to go. They are aware that it is unlikely to be a steady, orderly march, but instead an erratic, incremental trek of fits and starts.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.2175.

For the most part, the women's movement is travelling along two parallel paths, different in nature but mutually reinforcing, one involves electoral politics and the other socio-economic issues.

### Black Feminism

In forging the women's liberation movement, many techniques were borrowed from the black movement -- all black organizations, creation of black consciousness and identity, the changing of names that signified their oppression etc. Women took these techniques from the black movement, in part, because they had been successfully used by blacks. But then women also asserted that their situation was similar to that of blacks.<sup>12</sup>

Black feminism finds its origins in the historical reality of Afro-American Women's continuous life and death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system ( a system of white male rule) has always been determined by black women's membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis pointed out,

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<sup>12</sup>Staples, n.6, p. 164.



Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestations, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been black women activists - some known like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances Harper, Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell and thousands upon thousands of unknown who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique.<sup>13</sup>

A black feminists presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Blacks and Third World and working women have been involved in the feminist movements from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself, have served to obscure the black women's participation. The National Black Women Feminist Organization (NBFO) was formed as far back in 1973.<sup>14</sup> The first conference of NBFO met on the east coast in New York. It attracted 400 women. Though its leadership acknowledged difficulties in organizing black women around feminist

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<sup>13</sup>Gloria T. Hill, But Some of us are brave (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. p. . . .

issues, for example, when Eleanor Holmes Norton, a NBFO board member stated, "Five years ago you couldn't have gotten five women to come here". A welfare mother said, "Five years ago.... We tried to start a consciousness raising group four months ago and nobody was interested."<sup>15</sup>

The group stressed that many goals central to the women's liberation movement were of critical importance to black women.

Black feminist politics also has an obvious connection to movements for black liberation, particularly those of 60s and 70s. It was the experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop politics that was anti-racist, unlike that of blackmen and white men.<sup>16</sup>

There is also an undeniably a personal genesis for black feminism that it is the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black woman lives. Black feminists and many more black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in the day to day existence.

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<sup>15</sup>Deckard, n.2, p. 342.

<sup>16</sup>Hill, n.13, p. 13.

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule and most importantly feminism, the political analysis and practice that women used to struggle against their oppression. Then the development is also tied down to the contemporary economic and political positions of the black people. The difference between male and female incomes is dramatically less among blacks than among whites, suggesting that sex alone is not the sole determinant of economic status.

The black feminists movement was also tied down due to certain myths which were created by some black men and women in collaboration as the reaction to the "threat" posed by the change, which they thought would come due to the black feminists movement. These myths were as follows: (a) THE BLACK WOMEN WERE ALREADY LIBERATED - which was just to confuse the term "liberation". For those who were a part of the movement, it was argued that black women were already liberated as they had always gone out of the house and worked. They headed the families and were seldom sheltered or pampered. The Black women knew that their lives in some ways incorporated the goals for which white middle class women were fighting for. The report presented by DANIEL P. MOYNIHAN regarding the "Matriarchy theory" further distorted the actual position of the

status of black woman. (b) RACISM WAS THE ONLY FACTOR OR ONLY OPPRESSION BLACK WOMEN HAD TO SUFFER. (c) FEMINISM WAS NOTHING BUT MAN HATING - which of course was not true, the movement certainly did not mean hate men.<sup>17</sup>

These were some of the "home truths" or myths which coloured the black feminist movement. The fact is that there was a vital movement of woman of colour in America.

Unlike any other movement, Black feminism provides the theory that clarifies the nature of black women's experience, makes possible positive support from other black women and encourages political action that will change the very system which has put black women down.

Inspite of the barriers which came in front of the black feminist movement, it made certain gains, not only in developing the theory, but also in day to day organizations. Black feminists have worked on countless issues. Some of these could be identified with previous feminist movements, which black women have defined as their priorities. These were far from being irrelevant or peripheral to black people. The issues that have been focussed on, touch the basic core of their community's survival.

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Smith, "Some Home Truths by Contemporary Black Feminist Movement", Black Scholar (Sausalite, California) vol. 16, March/April 1985, p. 4.

Some of the issues that have been worked upon are - reproductive rights, equal access to abortion, sterilization, abuse, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled, violence against women, rape, battering, sexual harassment, welfare rights, educational reforms, housing, legal reform, anti-imperialist struggles, anti-racist movement, nuclear disarmament and preserving the environment.<sup>18</sup> These are some of the areas where black feminists have worked sometimes together with the white feminists.

The question which worries the black community is the relevance of all this for the black woman. The white woman has been asserting that the oppressions faced by them and black women are common and blacks can not be free unless the women are free in the society. Even those who support the movement admit that many of its goals are class bound. Congress woman Shirley Chisholm, asserts that women's liberation with its emphasis on economic justice for women must be viewed as a contributing factor to the overall economic improvement of black women. As an example, she cited the National Day Care system advocated by the Women's movement as benefitting black women.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

Black women also came into conflict with the women's liberation movement on other issues. At the root of their rejection of the movement were the different historical experiences they had encountered and the fact that forms of oppression that the white woman has suffered have never applied to the Black woman. White women for instance are protesting against the sheltered lives they lead i.e. being put on a pedestal and being confined to suburbia with all its gadgetary. It is the white woman's desire to be emancipated from her home in suburbia that is most incomprehensible to Black women. White women may be expressed as a group they are still white. Many black women feel that one of their greatest enemies has been the white women who for hundred of years underpaid and demanded the black women in the kitchens of America.<sup>19</sup>

A primary objection many black women have against involvement in the women's movement is that it may estrange them from their men. This was explained by a black female spokesman who thought that "An organized effort to 'liberate' black women is, at best premature. Should we liberate her and leave black men and children - the rest of race - to their own salvation, each seeking his own road to freedom". This in a way reiterates the belief of many black women that black men are not their enemies; it is

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<sup>19</sup>

Staples, n.6, p. 169.

the oppressive forces in the larger society that subjugate black men, women, and children. One of the most obvious difference between black and white women is that while black women have suffered all the disabilities of their sex, they have seldom been afforded the protection accorded to white women. Black men have never been allowed to protect their women. Thus black women have always been forced to take care of themselves. In the words of Congress woman Shirley Chishalm, "I have been liberated a long time. There are some aspects of women's liberation that relate to black woman, but the rest of it is balcony".<sup>20</sup>

#### MALE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Most men are conditioned through the socialization process to believe that they are endowed with qualities of leadership and that women should play a subordinate role in human affairs. This form of male chauvinism is found everywhere in the world, and likewise for the men in America. But black men in the American society cannot help but be affected by the stereotyped roles of men and women. To a certain degree they try to use male supremacy values as do white men, but have been prevented from doing so by the various social forces which stop them from carrying out the suppression of their women.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 172.

In reviewing the attitudes of black male leaders towards black women writers and scholars have found a mixture of affection, a recognition of their contribution to the black struggle for liberation, and a desire to protect them from the ravages of white racism. So when the question of black men's attitude towards women's movement came - then one black woman remarked that "Black men are the one group accustomed to women who are able and assertive because their mothers and sisters, were that way, and they can't reject their mothers, sisters and wives".<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to this belief the reaction of black men towards the women liberation movement or towards black feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than black women by the possibility that black feminists might organize around their own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hard working allies in their struggle but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist way of interacting with an oppressing their women.

Black feminism has been assailed on the ground that it divides the struggle and is a powerful deterrent to the growth of an autonomous black movement.<sup>22</sup> In spite of

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth F. Hood, "Black Women, White Women, separate path of liberation, Black Scholar, Sept./Oct. 1983, p.26.



all the fears, beliefs and values black women did not join the movement in large numbers.

Many changes have occurred in the roles of blacks and women in the past forty years with respect to their functions in American society because of awareness of the impact of their own collective behaviour. World events and technological changes have affected the producer-consumer roles of the two groups. The contemporary black civil rights movement and the ensuing women's liberation movement stimulated changes in the organized behaviour of these recognized minorities.

Women, as blacks increased the awareness of themselves as underpaid, under-appreciated workers. They saw differences both in size of pay checks and in institutional attitudes towards their special needs as persons. Only an impetus was necessary for them to take collective action against sex-discrimination. The black Civil Rights Movement provided that impetus.

#### Black and White Feminism - A Comparison

Black and white women recognized the commonalities in their oppression and of those forces operating to establish the "structured conduciveness for changing their situations."<sup>23</sup> Yet the two groups did not form a close

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 27.

alliance against their common enemy, the patriarchal system.

The contemporary white women's movement failed in many respects to identify with the problems peculiar to her group, most of which arise from the triple burdens of racism, sexism and poverty.<sup>24</sup>

The socialisation process differs between blacks and whites in measurable ways, creating distance and suspicion. It has been seen that judicial courts and public opinion tend to favour white women with respect to concern for action against violence levelled at them. It accepts the physical appearance of white women; the provisions of benefits which will ensure them position of advantage in life and chances conducive to their being reared in genteel, refined circumstances, and bearing the illogical white people's hate often hurled at blacks.<sup>25</sup>

Quantifiable differences between black and white women exist in all spheres of life: family income, education, employment opportunities, housing, access to leisure-time activities, the arts etc. Racism in its virulence

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p.31 .

<sup>25</sup>William H. Chafe, Women and Equality (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 52-53.

places black women at the bottom of the heap economically and socially. Since white women do not struggle against racism with a fervour equal to that of their anti-sexist campaigns, there is no exact parallel between them and black women. Simply stated, white women as a group continue to value their whiteness above their sex.<sup>26</sup> The Gulf created by racial difference has not been bridged by the commonality of sex.

The unwillingness of white women to identify with the problems of black women and her refusal to take the offensive against racism has set up barriers between the two groups. Black-white coalitions for civil rights have not been effective instrument in the struggle to eliminate racism. The problem of sexism therefore cannot command the undivided attention of blacks.

White and black women cannot unite in their struggle against sex-discrimination until both groups recognize the functions of sexism and racism as controlling structures in a system that presupposes inequality between the sexes and races. White women cannot be free until they reject all the forms of racism that separate them from black people. In the struggle for human rights,

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<sup>26</sup> Hood, n.22, p. 35.

black and white women will follow separate paths so long as either group harbours illusions about the possibility of freedom becoming a reality before the existing structures of racism and sexism crumble.<sup>27</sup>

Black women have voiced strong feelings and claimed that the struggle for women's liberation cannot be divorced from the struggle for black liberation. Thereby, they have created a situation wherein they have to engage simultaneously in two struggles. Black women can look back and recall the black minds operating with a raised level of consciousness towards the goal of liberation from the oppressive forces of racism. Many organizations were formed and strategies developed to bring about changes in the lives of blacks in such areas as housing, jobs, education, medical care and freedom from police harassment and brutality.<sup>28</sup> Yet it has been noticed that all the tactics employed did not bring about the desired result as far as the changes in the social and economic welfare of blacks and women were concerned.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria, I. Joseph, and Jill Jewis, Common Differences: Conflicts in black and white feminist perspective (New York, Anchor 1981), p. 275.

Black women's initial reaction towards the women's movement was one of distrust. Their initial responses were ones of sneering, jeering, ignoring and dismissal.

The white women's attitudes towards the black liberation movement and towards black women in their movement, have been undergoing a change during the last few years. Some of their political strategies started to change when faced with black women's demands and anger. It cannot be denied that black women's liberation in America, like the status of all blacks, requires radical remedies. Black women and all blacks are consigned to seeking radical ends in a system whose structure is extraordinarily well organised to prevent any real changes from taking place.

The Black Women have a long history that enforces their attitude that, "there ain't gonna be no real changes made for our benefit under the present system".<sup>29</sup> This belief is one of the reasons that black women view the women's movement with suspicion.

One thing which needs to be clearly understood is that the sexist or racist policies exist not simply

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

because of white male leaders who are insensitive to the moral implications of the system's discrimination against women and blacks. The replacement of these leaders with black women will not necessarily make things better, change will depend on the nature of the persons' political analysis and vision, not on the colour of the skin or gender. Sparring is not the answer, nor is it a matter of questioning one another's oppressions or comparing oppressions, or taking comfort in the commonness of oppressions, or wallowing in a sense of being victimized.

Black women have to realize that sex-discrimination is an integral part of the dominant governmental, economic, educational, legal and family institutions of the American society, that the sexism surrounds them and is ready to impinge on their lives oppressively at every moment as they try to survive within a society run by capitalist white males. They also need to realise that if these white men felt it necessary to employ sexism as a means to further subjugate black women they would do so in the wink of an eye. Both white and black women should no longer be fooled into thinking that by pressing their personal "most severe oppressions", or making a pitch that "their" oppression is the severest of oppressions, they will achieve any substantive gains.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph and Lewis, n. 28, p. 280.

The juxtaposition of black women consciousness and white feminism sets the stage for the need to construct different political sites for challenging the unsatisfactory realities of the male-female polarities. The differences recognized in the sexual relationships between black men and women, in contrast to white men and women relate to the question of power.

Black feminism is the context for the development of black defined struggles, examining the sexist tensions and conflict in the terms of black culture and its shaping within and against white dominant culture. It has to seek ways in which black women and men can politically negotiate the tensions and abuse in a way that reinforces their collaboration against racism. If black feminism has a committed solidarity with men, then their anti-racist imperative of white feminism has to seek political visions and strategies that have men on the agenda, not just committed individuals, but also in terms of coalition against the particular forms of patriarchal racist and capitalist society.

The foremost objective obviously, for all black people, which emerges is the elimination of the racial prejudices. The black are aspiring for their liberation in the United States. The second priority is, being able

to establish a decent way of life for their families. Once they have achieved these, then and only then, may be, the black women will be able to take up elimination of oppression based on sex-discrimination as the first objective.



CHAPTER - IV

EXPERIENCES OF THE FEW FAMOUS BLACK WOMEN

To Fredrick Douglass, an abolitionist leader is credited the plea that "the Negro be not judged by the heights to which he has risen but by the depths from which he has climbed".<sup>1</sup> Judged on that basis, a few of the negro women embody one of the modern miracles of the new world.

The black woman was the most pathetic figure on the American continent, she was not a person, in the opinion of many, but a thing, whose personality had no claim to the respect of mankind. She was a household drudge a means of getting distasteful work done, she was an animated agriculture implement to augment the service of mules and plows in cultivating and harvesting the cotton crop. She was an automatic incubator, a producer of human live stock, beneath whose heart and lungs more potential labourers could be bred and nurtured and brought to the light of toilsome day.<sup>2</sup> Today she stands side by side with the finest manhood, her race has been able to produce. Whatever glory belongs to the people for an

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Lerner Gerda, Black Women in White America (New York, Random House, 1972), p. 579.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

unprecedented development in history in a short period of time, a full share belongs to the womanhood of the race.

By the very force of circumstances, the part she has played in the progress of the race has been of necessity to a certain extent, subtle and indirect. She has not always been permitted a place in the front ranks where she could show her face and make her voice heard with effect .... (But). She has been quick to seize every opportunity which presented itself to her.<sup>3</sup>

One can easily imagine how many difficulties she must have faced to achieve something which she had been denied all her life. In this chapter an effort would be made to trace the rise of a few black women to the pinnacle of fame and glory. These women reached the top and attained excellence in their chosen field. They came from diverse backgrounds and attained success in different fields but they had something in 'common'; they resolutely refused to accept the inferior status that the society had thrust upon them. These examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

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<sup>3</sup>Gerda, n.1, p. 576.

Shirley Chisholm

Shirley St. Hill Chisholm's rise to national prominence in the United States political system was an outstanding achievement for a woman and for a person of colour. The national attention she received reached its peak in 1972, when she announced her name for Presidency from the Democratic Party and campaigned for it. Indeed, her sex, her black skin, and foreign parentage caused the most progressive segments of society to question Chisholm's potential as a political leader in a traditionally white, male-dominated arena.

During her campaign she highlighted her years of working her way up through grass roots politics, fighting past barriers at every step of the way, partially because she was black but mostly because she was a woman. She pointed out how she made it within the system inspite of the system.<sup>4</sup> By her candidacy she desired to give the most neglected group in American society a real voice, and the votes she received made one thing clear that minorities in America were going to be a force to be reckon with. In one of her campaign speeches where she talked about the economic justice for women she said, "when one

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<sup>4</sup>Nancy Hicks, The Honourable Shirley Chisholm Congress Woman from Brooklyn (New York, Lion Book, 1971), p. 172.

group of society is as oppressed as American women, no one can be free", Males with their anti-feminists attitudes maim both themselves and their women.<sup>5</sup> She repeatedly stressed that like black people, women had to face bias; such is the predicament of all American women and multiplied for those of us who operate under racial prejudices.<sup>6</sup> When asked as to where was the discrimination and bias in the system when she could get so far she replied that, "on the contrary my battle was long, incredibly hard and continual. Because I pushed, I encountered the strong prejudices of less competent males both black and white".<sup>7</sup>

The unique personal and professional strengths that undergird Chisholm's impressive career as a public servant had their roots in her humble, strictly disciplined childhood. "I am unbossed and unbought", she said over and over again. She would say, "This is my symbol and I intend to maintain it even if it costs me my political life. I rose to prominence because of my ability to take a stand. If I change now, the young and black people in this country would be disillusioned. If you are

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<sup>5</sup>Hicks, n.4, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

a leader, you are supposed to act like one you are not supposed to straddle. I want to be this kind of free agent until I die".<sup>8</sup>

### Early Years:

Born to parents who immigrated from Barbados and Guiana, Chisholm was endowed with a strong sense of ethnic pride, which was perhaps why she was able to violate the implicit and explicit behaviour codes which had prevented many United States born blacks from excelling.

Strong family ties, helped Shirely to reinforce ideals which were inculcated by her parents, who believed strongly in British value of education, individual initiative and entrepreneurship, but were opposed to the "divine right of kings" and scorned the inherent racism and colonialism. Instead her father chose to be a strong supporter of Marcus Garvey's movement of 1920s and a firm believer in the declaration that "Black is Beautiful". Her father was a very proud blackman and he instilled that pride in his children 'a pride in ourselves and our race that was not as fashionable at that time as it is today'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Frank P. Le Veners and Jane P. Sweeney, Women Leaders in Contemporary U.S. Politics (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987), p.11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

The racially changing Brooklyn community in which Chisholm was reared was also catalytic in forming her understanding of systematic racism at a very young age.

Throughout her school years, Shirley Chisholm excelled academically but the educational options available to her were constricted by racial and sexual bias of the war years. She was offered scholarship to Oberlin and to Vassar for her brilliance during her high school years, but could not avail it as her parents were not in a position to afford a room out of the town school. So she went to Brooklyn College, where black were not allowed in the campus/social clubs, so she and some of her friends formed a black women's student society which she named "IPOTHIA" an acronym for "in pursuit of the highest in all". Besides her efforts the harsh reality of racism in higher education and systematic exclusion of blacks and women from vocations in medicine science and law, limited her choice to professions. In fact, blacks were not even permitted to enter the social work professions as late as the 1940s. After graduating from Columbia University with a B.A. and M.A. in education she began her career as a school teacher and later assumed the directorship of a day care centre.

Shirley Chisholm's work in elementary education and school administration reinforced her intention to

fight ignorance and poverty at all levels of society. Her involvement in local politics gave her a practical education in the working process of the Democratic party and sharpened her ability to turn ideas and beliefs into votes. The turning point in her professional career came when she came in contact with a blind professor of political science who gave her all the encouragement and made it possible for her to take the big and daring step to enter into politics. He in other words gave her the "push" that was needed to enter into political arena.

During the early years of her career in politics Shirley fought diligently on behalf of working class citizens in her district, which was (12th Congressional District in Brooklyn). The period between 1960s and 70s was crucial for Shirley Chisholm. During this period, she gained a reputation as a maverick and troublemaker - qualities which proved beneficial in the later years for her to fight against the inequalities in the system. With the support of progressive white and black voters, she was able to form a club called Unity Democratic Club as an alternative to the existing political machine in her district. The first major victory of this "rainbow coalition" was the election of Thomas R. Jones as the First Black assembly man from Brooklyn district. But



this victory was overshadowed by her nomination for the position of state representative of the district, where she had to face a great deal of resistance and challenges of males both black and white. In fact, she had to suffer from racism in the Democratic Party from liberal as well as Conservative groups and sexism on the part of white and blackmen proved to be challenging life forces throughout her long career as a public official.

#### The Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm

Elected to the 91st Congress in 1969 she was preceded by her reputation as an unpredictable black and uncontrollable woman. As it is she was breaking the precedent merely by being who and what she was. Anyone could see that there were a very few women in the House and fewer blacks and there was only one black Congresswoman.

She was simply being a first which meant a lot. Being a first black woman was one thing but what she did later was uncharacteristic of the newly elected legislator. She stood up to protest against her committee assignment; she objected to being appointed to the Committee on agriculture. She pointed out that there were only nine blacks in the house. Since they were not represented in proportion to their numbers in the country, it was obligatory on the

part of the Congress to see to it that the few there were in the House should be in the place or Committee in which they could do some good to their people, she won her argument. Though the assignment she got afterwards was not very good according to her but was certainly better than forestry committee. While in Congress she maintained a heavy speaking schedule, her maiden speech in Congress in which she expressed her strongest antiwar feelings, caused her to be in great demand on the nation's campuses, the heart of the antiwar movement, because she was the first black Congress woman. She was also sought after by the fast growing women liberation groups. She spoke on various issues, made speeches in the Congress relating to the Bussing dilemma, black politics and women and labour and many other causes. On child development she said, "There are thirtytwo million working women in the United States, who have over five million children but only two per cent get child care facilities, the rest face the nightmarish task and change of baby sitters. Congress is enacting one of the most important pieces of legislation that will be affecting the lives of all kinds of children in the country."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1971 (Washington D.C., 1971), p. 659.

On the Emergency Detention, in the House she said the mere presence of the Act on the books is offensive especially to "Americans of Colour". "Today it is not the Kuklux Klan or the syndicate whose doors are being kicked in, it is the 'Black Panthers' skin colour gentlemen, that is the criteria it makes us special targets".<sup>11</sup>

She was offered the position of President of National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL). She declined the offer, but continued to make appearances and campaigned on its behalf. Many black leaders objected to her support to (NARAL), as many of them saw it as racial attack on the blacks. They argued that through these laws whites wanted to restrict black growth and such programmes were labelled as "genocide" by blacks.

The development and implementation of human services programmes for women, minorities, and poor were hallmarks of Chisholm's legislative tenure. She also fought hard for equitable administration of existing laws for all disenfranchised and marginated groups, but the most outstanding achievements in her political career

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<sup>11</sup>Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1970,  
Washington D.C., 1970), p. 567.

was when she offered her candidature for the office of the President in 1971. Her candidacy opened doors for women and minorities by serving as a catalyst for aggressive political action and exposed the racism and sexism of many so-called liberal Democrats.

She was not the only black politician thinking along these lines. Black political activity had increased greatly since '68. Each election year brought more black office holders on state and local levels, more black mayors of major cities, more black Congressmen. Many black political leaders felt that the black vote could be significant factor in the upcoming elections if it were organised and used properly.<sup>12</sup>

On January 25th 1972 in a press Conference she formally announced her bid for the nomination as the Presidential candidate of the Democratic party. She said at a rally of her supporters:

I stand before you today as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States. I am not the candidate of Black America, although I am a black and proud. I am not the candidate of women's movement of this country, although I am a woman

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<sup>12</sup>James Haskins, Fighting Shirley Chishalm (New York, Alfred A. Knoph, 1975), p. 153.

and am equally proud of that. I am not candidate of any political bosses or special interests .... I am the candidate of the people.<sup>13</sup>

Deeply committed to the cause of equal justice to blacks and women, she refused to become the captive of either faction - a position that precipitated a better power struggle between members of both groups.

Her stand was not even supported by blacks and she described black male antipathy for her campaign as simple chauvinism. She charged that "black male politicians were no different than white male politicians ...."<sup>14</sup> Her campaign was underfinanced and lacked effective organization. She was unable to draw crowds even in black neighbourhoods. The time for a black woman Presidential candidate had not arrived. And she knew that she was flag bearer for a time that was yet to come. Shirley Chisholm's ascent to a position of power and respect in a male dominated and male controlled professions was far from easy. She often stated to the displeasure of black males that sexism was by far the strongest barrier to her success. Her espousal of feminism aroused the ire of both blackmen and women, because many committees see the feminist movement as synonymous with white middle

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>14</sup>Venees and Sweenly, n.7, p. 17.

class female privilege. As white women have traditionally benefitted from racism and have failed to effectively challenge inequities facing women of colour, many white women did not support Shirley's bid for Presidency. But whatever may be the attitude of the people, Shirley Chisholm was always committed to equal opportunity for both blacks and women. She was a strong supporter of Equal Rights Amendment for women, and her commitment has remained constant ever since. She was part of the black caucus, (which was a part of the black caucus) which was composed of thirteen representatives in the 92nd Congress. These members who served the 91st Congress represented all black Americans. They wanted President Nixon's total commitment to the goal of equal rights for all Americans. Then she was also a supporter of the 'shadow cabinet' in the house to oversee federal enforcement of civil rights laws in response to conclusion of a report to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.<sup>15</sup>

During a telephone interview in the mid 1980s, Shirley pointed out that females in politics face a harder battle than their white counter-parts. In essence the barriers of sexism in political life have been bridged to a great extent but racism still poses a threat to Presidential hopefuls.

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<sup>15</sup> Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1970, n.11, p. 690.

Realizing the validity of this perceptions many female activists and policy makers who also happen to be black were forming their own coalitions and associations in the seventies. The most dynamic of these organizations was National Black Political Caucus, which was started by Shirley Chisholm. To some the formations of such organizations confirmed the exclusion of black woman from existing organizations as a complement to traditional women's associations.

Shirley resigned from Congress in 1982 because she was disappointed by the conservative mood in the country. She paved the way for other women politicians by sensitizing the Democratic Party and the United States political system to the dynamism and ethical leadership of women. She symbolized change and progressive reform in the political system.

Shirley Chisholm provided an excellent example for women in policy making process. She represented strength and ability to fight the challenges, barriers put up by the male dominated system. She knew how to make place for oneself in the anti-feminist and racist society.

Barbara Jordon

Barbara Jordon was the first black women to be elected to Texas legislature. She was not the first to reach the political arena. But she did rise to great heights which were considered impossible for black women to reach. She fought her way through braving the struggles and overcoming the difficulties in her path of success. She wrote later that at the very beginning of her career she promised to herself: "I am not going to be like the rest, my point of reference was other black people. It seemed an impossibility to make any transition to that larger world out there".<sup>16</sup>

She was born in 1936, and spent her early years with her grandfather as her parents financial condition was not very sound. She learned quite a lot from her grandfather who would tell her not to be like other kids, he would say, "you just trot your own horse and don't get into the same rut as everyone else".<sup>17</sup>

She went back to stay with her parents, but it was very difficult in early days and there would be fights and arguments all the time. Explaining the

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<sup>16</sup>Barbara Jordon and Shelby Hearon, Barbara Jordon: A Self-Portrait (New York, Double day Co. Garden City, 1979), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 7.



situation at her home she said, "So I was as accepting of life then as I could manage, because I did not have a choice. It could have been fun to rebel at some point, but I did it, I had to be where I was because at that point in time, I had to be taken care of by my parents. I knew there were things that I wanted to be different for me at some later date, but most of time I went along with the things as they were".<sup>18</sup>

She did her schooling from Phyllis Wheatly High School, and was chosen by a National black sorority that looked over a roster of senior girls to select one who was most outstanding. She was selected to become The Girl of the Year in 1952. Then Barbara added another award to her long list of oratorical awards by winning the state award of the United States Association on 3rd July in Waco. Then again on 4th July when she represented the state of Texas at the National Convention, she got the first prize which included \$ 299, scholarship to school of her own choice and a literacy medal.

On graduating from the school, in a statement to Informer (Black magazine). She said, "It's just another milestone I have passed, it's just the beginning".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

It was indeed a beginning to a successful career for Barbara. But she felt that winning a medal was not enough. It was going to take more than one medal to do anything for the children who were considered good enough to play the black maid in the elementary school presentations. She told herself that if she wanted to be one of the few blacks who made it in the white world, then she had better move. Her first step towards it was taken when she joined the law school in Boston University. There were six hundred students in all and out of them only six were women and two black women, Barbara and Issie.

In the law school also they had to suffer the discrimination of being a woman as the professor's did not call the "ladies" very much to recite in the class. Women were just tolerated and not considered really top class when it came to the study of the law.

Change was no doubt taking place in the American society but at a very slow pace. Barbara was of the opinion that since the decision of Brown Vs Board of Education that happened ages ago nothing much has been done. The only way to move things along, she concluded, was to get into a position where you could implement laws.

That was when she seriously started thinking of getting into politics. Then the time came and she graduated successfully from the law school and got her degree, but that was not the opening for her to get into politics. She did not even know influential people in political arena. So whatever had to be done it had to be done by herself.

She decided to participate in the Presidential campaign of 1960 which was going on for John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson who were running for President and Vice President respectively. She started helping the campaigner with the development of a black workers programme. It was very successful and there was 80 per cent turn out, which was the best 'get out and vote' that anybody could recall in that country. By the time the campaign ended she had earned the reputation of being a good orator. That was the time when she was actually bitten by the 'political bug' and she could not turn "political loose". As a result, she stood for Texas legislature in 1962 and campaigned under the slogan "retrenchment and reform". She was one of the twelve candidates who stood from that particular district. It was during this campaign that for the first time she got standing ovation after she finished giving her speech.

The response she was getting never showed that she would lose, but when she did, she realized that she did well in black areas, but in other places she could not get the votes. The votes just did not come from white people. She wondered where she went wrong when a professor at Rice University told her that, 'you know it's going to be hard for you to win a seat in the Texas legislature. You have got too much going against you. You are black, you are a woman and you are large, people do not really like that image'.<sup>20</sup> Initially, she thought these were just the side issues but later she came to realize that these issues were indeed very important, she decided that she would win with these things attached to her name. She lost again in 1964 elections. After that she wondered whether she should stay in politics or not? Her family members wanted her to forget politics and get married which was not to be the case for Barbara as she was determined to make place for herself in the society. She realized that the public expectations were different for a man and for a woman. Where a man was concerned, the public perception was that man was supported to get out and lead and make decisions but a woman had to have, one and above and beyond other aspirations, a home

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

and family. That was what every normal woman was supposed to want and if Barbara did not want it then she must not be normal.<sup>21</sup>

Since her defeat in 1964, she was working as the administrative assistant to country Judge Bill Elliot, and at night in her own office. But a year later she decided to stand again in the elections but this time as the State Senator she had to stand against Charli Whitefiled who was a good liberal and staunch labour supporter.

During her campaign, in one of the speeches she said, "I ran race in 1962, you endorsed me and I lost, I came again in 1964, but the same result. I want you to know I have no intention of being a three time loser."<sup>22</sup>

She won that election making a nation-wide news, by becoming first black woman in the Texas legislature, one of a small group of the first blacks elected in the South since Reconstruction. She said that, "this is the way it ought to be. I am going to stay in the Senate as long as I want to stay there nobody can stop me now".<sup>23</sup> The law had allowed Barbara at last to enter the all white world of good old boys.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

Barbara Jordon - The Senator

In her maiden speech she gave her full support to liberal leader Babe Schwartz's opposition to adding of one per cent city sales tax to the existing state sales tax. Schwartz's responded by praising her maiden effort. By the time she presented her first bill, she had learnt to take advantage of the mutual trust. During the presentation of her bill she said, "I am a member of two groups long discriminated against in Texas politics. But I discovered the weight of those factors that are a part of whatever I am, will sometimes cause people to vote for an issue. I am in favour of rather than against it."<sup>24</sup> Then being black and female instead of a liability proved an asset when she could get passage for her Fair Employment Practices Act, Senate Bill 79, (FEPC) created and provided for the regulation of discriminatory acts in employment. She was re-elected to Senate for four years term in 1968. She had to stand again because of redistricting in the state. She was elected for two years in 1966 and again in 1968 but this time for the four year term. All this proved just a stepping stone for her successful career later in the United States Congress.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

Barbara Congresswoman

When she called for Lyndon Johnson the then President, at the fund raising cocktail party it was a sort of a campaign for her to be elected for the U.S. Congress. While making a speech at the party, the President said, "Barbara Jordon proved to us that black is beautiful, she is a women of keen intellect and unusual legislative ability, a symbol proving that we can over come, wherever she goes she is going to be at the top, wherever she goes all of us are going to be behind her, "so blacks and women can vote for Barbara Jordon and feel good".<sup>25</sup> Then she entered the history books by becoming the 'Governor for one day' of her state. She was also put on the Judiciary Committee for the impeachment of President Nixon, but nothing came out of it as President resigned and Gerlad Ford became the President.

In 1968 the U.S. Congress had passed the omnibus crime control and safe street Act. This act had created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) with the purpose of assisting the state and local governments in their law enforcement activities. The Act however did not provide for civil rights. In 1973, in the very first session of her first term the act came for renewal.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

Barbara decided to register her presence by attacking the bill's lacunae, regarding the civil rights. Working out what became known as the Jordan Amendment, Barbara proposed to mandate the use of federal funds in a non-discriminatory fashion. Having taken the amendment through the sub-committee and the whole committee, she retained it on the floor of the House where it passed. After it came out of the Senate in substantially different form and was sent to conference committee headed by Senator John L. McClellan (Democrat, Arkansas) and Barbara was made the conferee which was a unique position for a fresh person and also for someone who originally proposed the wording. The amendment was passed and inserted into the Bill.<sup>26</sup>

Most important of her civil rights work was her getting extension to voting rights acts which she considered had effectively prohibited blacks in various covert, convoluted ways since they were given the right in the Fifteenth Amendment. It required only blacks to define such terms as *ex post facto* and *habeas corpus*, or the financially discriminating poll tax which Texas had used. In 1975 she introduced an amendment to bill's

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<sup>26</sup>Congress and the Nation, vol. IV (Washington D.C., 1973), pp. 562-564.



renewal requiring that Texas be placed under its jurisdiction.

She was asked to be the character witness of (Former Texas Governor) John Connolly who was accused of accepting illegal gifts in 1975 but was later cleared of all accusations against him.

In the Democratic party's nominating convention in 1976, she was asked by the party bosses to be the key note speaker. The Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter won the elections. After the elections she was often asked whether she would be in President Carter's cabinet. She was offered many alternative positions like the ones in the United Nations, Solicitor General and others but she wanted to become the 'Attorney General', she was very firm and therefore she was not taken in the Carter's Cabinet.

She had other things to look forward to about which she knew nothing. In 1977, she received a letter from Harvard University, informing her that she had been selected for an Honorary Doctoral Degree to be given to her at the University's June commencement. She was convinced that she had reached a point in her life where she was going to be heard and attended to. She recalled,

"whether I prefaced my name with Representative Congress Woman, Senator or whatever and if I had reached that point, then I did not have to be a part of those political institutions which demand so much of one's time in a routine way".<sup>27</sup> She decided to move into a new direction, and utilize her time in such a way that it would be structured by country's needs as she perceived them.

On the day she was going to get her Doctorate Degree, she was asked to speak for few minutes and she did. It was again for the "first time" for a black woman to address the Harvard Commencement and for any individual to be selected both by the Honory Degree Committee and the speaker's committee. That was the time when she made her exit from politics, and went into the teaching profession and is still teaching.

### Mahalia Jackson

Mahalia Jackson's life and achievement is being presented here not because she has been in politics, but because she had become famous and won recognition. She like the other two was born in poverty and therefore had to struggle hard even to survive. She did not have time to study, but inspite of all hardships, she managed to make people of America accept her for what she was; a black

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

and a woman. With her singing, she smashed all the barriers erected by the White World.

Born on Water Street in New Orleans in 1911, between the rail tracks and the level of the Mississippi River, she grew up in a mixed neighbourhood with Negroes, French, Creoles and Italians, all trying to scratch out a living. She lived with her parents on the plantation and saw real sufferings of the slaves and how they were treated by their masters, how little they earned for their living. In those days coloured children were allowed to go to school only on the rainy days whereas white children were allowed to go to school every day. The day the sun shone in the sky, the coloured children were supposed to be out in the field cropping cotton. The coloured schools went as far as fifth grade because the blacks were supposed to teach themselves only upto that. Moreover, whites did not want them to get higher education.

When she was only five years old her mother died, and she started living with her Aunt Duke where her life completely changed. So long she was the pet of the family but her aunt put an end to all the fun she was used to having. Her aunt was very serious and believed in Church and her work, which was to be life for her from then on. She started working, she would do things

like scrubbing the floors with red bricks and washing clothes. She recalled later; "Growing up, I knew that some of the children I played with were white and I was coloured but it made no difference".<sup>28</sup>

She was used to going to white people's house with her aunt who used to work there, and thus had reasons to meet some nice white people who treated blacks nicely and gave them nice things. She had a good voice and used to sing in the Church. By the time Mahalia was sixteen, she had seen many people shift from New Orleans to Chicago because anyone who would come back home from Chicago would tell others how much better the life was in Chicago. Certainly there were more facilities than in New Orleans. Jackson was encouraged to use all her savings as a nursemaid and laundress and go to Chicago.

Chicago by then had become the greatest centre for black race in America. The life of blacks in Chicago was in full bloom. For Mahalia going to Chicago was a real treat and very exciting to see blacks doing so well for themselves. Before she could organise her life in the metropolitan city and think of continuing her studies,

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<sup>28</sup> Mahalia Jackson and Evan Mcleod Wylie, Moving on up (New York, 1966), p. 23.

her aunt fell ill and she had to go back to what she was best at being a maid or washerwoman.

### Mahalia the Gospel Singer

Her Aunt Alice took her to one of their Churches, Salem Baptist Church and that was the right road for Mahalia to walk on in Chicago. Then she met the founder of the Church and his family. Reverend Johnson on hearing that she had learnt singing invited her to try out for their choir. She subsequently recorded her first public performance as follows: "There were fifty people in the choir, but at the first rehearsal that voice of mine got going over all the rest. When the choir leader waved his hand to stop us short, I was ready to die, but then I was asked to try the solo and everybody liked the way I sang and I became the member of the choir".<sup>29</sup>

When the depression hit Chicago the life of the blacks fell apart. Mahalia had by then joined the 'Johnson Gospel Singers' formed by Johnson brothers. It was the first Gospel singer group in the city. Initially they would sing only for the Church but later on they were asked around. Their little group was just what the Churches needed to keep their doors open, and they would earn \$ 1.50 each night for singing in the churches. They

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

sang all over the south side and invitations came from outside the city for them to and visit coloured churches in downstate Illinois and Indiana.

On the advise of some of her admirers Mahalia save some money to take lessons. She and another of her friend went to Professor Dubois Musié School, who after listening to her said, "you've got to learn to stop hollering. It will take time to build up your voice. The way you sing is not a credit to the Negro race, you've got to learn to sing songs, so that white people can understand them".<sup>30</sup> She wondered how could she sing to make white people understand when she was coloured herself. That was the first and last lesson for Mahalia. She never bothered with them again in her life.

Her singing was getting better with each day and she was able to earn \$ 10 per night for herself. The more gospel singing got hold in Chicago and around the city, the more and more objections started coming from ministers, who said that her way of singing was not dignified. Her reply to these people was that "she was serving God, no one had to teach her how to do it, and said that what she did was written in the Bible, and she read it everyday."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

Most of the criticism in those early days came from wealthy blacks, but they did not do a thing to help her. The only person who helped her was an undertaker and politician Bob Miller who was the first one to present her in concert in High School and raised her concert's admission fee from a dime to forty cents. She made a promise to God that she would sing only the Gospel songs, and did just that.

In 1935, she married Isaac Hockenbull, a graduate from Fisk University, but could not get along and they were divorced after some time. After her divorce she said, "that I was meant to give my life to Church that it had to be that way and she is not ashamed of it".<sup>32</sup>

She was earning enough money to keep herself away from maids work but still she could not depend solely on her singing. She opened up a "Beauty Salon" and a "Florist Shop" both shops gave good business to her.

In 1946, she brought out her first record of her song "Moving on up"; that record moved so fast that it made her famous but only with blacks. Then in 1950, she was invited to attend a conference which was held to discuss and lecture about folk music and jazz. After the

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

conference, it seemed as if the dam had broken. She was invited by Ed Sullivan to appear on his T.V. show. She was made the official soloist for the National Baptist convention the largest Negro Church group in the world and then came the invitation from New York for her to give a concert at Carnegie. All the previous records were broken regarding the attendance at the Hall, and ~~critics~~ wrote lovely reviews. She was a success and a credit to the Carnegie Hall, where she became the regular singer. After seeing the success and affection she got from the people she thought, "May be I have turned a corner, may be I am going to be accepted just for myself and not treated differently because I am a Negro".<sup>33</sup> But she realized how wrong she was when in 1954, instead of doing a local programme on a big CBS station in Chicago she wanted the programme to be on the network. She was stunned by the answer she got, "you are alright here with a local sponsor, but there is not a sponsor who sells his production down south that would take a chance on a Negro singer. They are afraid the southernns would not like it".<sup>34</sup>

It was alright as long as she was on the stage but the minute she stepped down, it was very likely that people would treat her as if she had leprosy, "I am no

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 94.



special Negro, I do not want to be treated differently than any other member of my race. It is just that when you move back and forth between the white and coloured worlds every day, the hostility and cruelty of some white people toward the Negro hits you so hard. You do not know whether to explode or pray for some one who has such hatred in his soul".<sup>35</sup>

People do not change over night and that was the case of the whites; they just would not accept blacks . Mahalia bought a house in the white neighbourhood but very soon the whole neighbourhood was of blacks as whites refused to live in the same place as blacks. She got a chance to sing at the 'Montgomery Improvement Association', second only to the most important association of the blacks, the NAACP, so that they could raise funds, to be able to help their coloured friends. About Martin Luther King Jr., she said, "The more I saw of Revered King the more it seemed to me that the Lord had specially prepared this one man with the education and the warmth of spirit to do his work."<sup>36</sup>

She was making long strides as far as her career was concerned, and making whites accpet her, along with helping in any way she could her own people. She was

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

honoured with a reception in Washington D.C. at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Chester Bowles, and sang a concert at Constitutional Hall, where years earlier in 1939 Marian Anderson had been barred because she was a black-woman. Time had changed because when Mahalia went to sing, the hall was jam packed with coloured folks. After the concert one black girl asked her crying, "Miss Jackson, how can you sing, My country, it is the sweet land of liberty, as if you believed it when you know the white people in America do not want us here?" It is not their country Mahalia replied then, 'It is our country too'. We coloured folks were brought here long ago and we have been born here and raised, our families are here. We are Americans as much as anybody else. What we are going through now means better days ahead for you younger people.<sup>37-</sup>

She was invited to sing the "star spangled Banner" at the inauguration celebrations for President Kennedy and the show was produced by Frank Sinatra. It was great moment in Mahalia's life when she met President Kennedy and thought that blacks were fortunate to have him as the President, who believed in equal rights and had it in his heart to do something about it.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

Though she is no longer among us, but then one cannot deny her the credit for doing so much for herself, her people and for the Gospel singing. When at every step she was discriminated, was doubly victimized but she did not let anything stop her. She is still remembered because of her courage determination but above all she is alive in her songs.

This was the history of only the chosen three famous blackwomen, who had come from different backgrounds, achieved different things in life, but had to go through the victimization of discrimination inherent in the political system. They all wanted to be accepted by the whites, not only themselves but <sup>the</sup> whole black community they were fighting for.

There were many more black women who while fighting for themselves also fought for their race; their rights and for being treated as equals. They have passed into oblivion but their relentless struggle in their own days made the task of others who came later somewhat easiers; their burden somewhat lighter. Some of these women made history and left their names in the history books but there were thousands who fought without getting recognition. The progress the U.S. has made in evolving towards a democratic and egalitarian society owes a great deal to these silent unknown black women. However, it is the dramatic events which attracts the attention, and

it is in this context that one should see the success stories.

In addition to the ones mentioned in this chapter we may note in passing a few more whose success inspired others. Barbara Watson - First woman and first black to head a state department Bureau with rank of Assistant Secretary. She held this post in 1974 December and was re-appointed to it by President Carter. Toni Morrison - who received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1978, again the first time that award was given to a black writer. Rosa L. Parks - because of whom action triggered in the 381 days bus boycott, during the Civil Rights Movement. She made the headlines when she refused to move from the seat in the bus which was for whites only. Coretta Scott King - who was the wife of Martin Luther King Jr., and founder of the Centre of the non-violent social change and a leader in her own right. She became the first woman to preach at St. Paul's Cathedral in London and was appointed representative to the 32nd General Assembly of the United Nations by President Carter. Angela Davis - was a rebel in her own right, she joined the Communist Party and was among the 'ten most wanted' list of Federal Bureau of Investigation. She was sent to prison in 1970. The 'Free Angela' movement shook not only America but the

whole world to see that so many people were with her.

Leontyne Price - First black opera star to appear on television in an NBC TV production.

They all had to undergo various hurdles and bear the sting of discrimination, live in poverty and rejection at the hands of other human beings. But all this did not deter them from getting at a stage where they were accepted and welcomed to the fold of the white world.

CHAPTER - V

CONCLUSIONS

✓Two different worlds - of the blacks and of the whites - interacted and yet remained apart. Poverty, discrimination and humiliation were part of the world of the blacks, whereas the whites had, power, money acclaim and everything for which blacks were striving for. Many blacks accepted all this and tried to reach for the stars within the ambit of the rules framed by a white dominated society. Some of them did succeed; others fell by the wayside. The condition of black women was worse than that of blackmen; because even the black society assigned them a different role to get married to give birth to children and raise a family. Therefore, when a black woman stepped out of the house and entered the world of politics and entertainment she did not get the support of the blacks. Only when she became a national celebrity, was she claimed by the blacks. The black women faced the cold discrimination, indifference and even hostility.✓

The central theme of this work is about black women who have been oppressed as a result of their biological characteristics, their sex and race. All dimensions of the roles they play in America are affected by this racial and sexual oppression they are subjected to.

This also makes any study of black woman unique because she faces dual subjugation being black and female and how she copes with her oppressor is a question which is of grave importance.

The black women were brought to the continent like black men as slaves in 1619, only three out of the twenty slaves who landed in Jamestown Virginia. In her native Africa the black woman, whatever her cultural background, had enjoyed an orderly existence in a social structure with established legal system and strong family ties. In America, as a slave, she was dropped suddenly and completely to the bottom of the social scale, where her position was totally vulnerable, lacking status or rights, she became easy prey to men, both black and white, as well as the vindictiveness of white women.<sup>1</sup>

No concessions were made for the black women because of sex, as was routinely the case of white women. She was expected to do as much work in the fields as a man. She was not allowed to be 'literate', added to her roles of cook, washerwoman, housecleaner, gatherer and preparer of foods, and runner of errands, was the function of "mammy" to the white children and sometimes that of

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<sup>1</sup>Mabel M. Smythe, The Black American Reference Book (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1983), p. 341.



confidante to their lazy mothers. In general in the slave family the mother or another black woman, rather than the father, was the dominant and important figure, that was so because very frequently the man was sold away from his family, and even if he was present his decisions could be vetoed by his white owner.

During slavery blacks were forced to adjust simultaneously to two contradictory worlds. One white privileged and oppressive the other black, exploited and oppressed. In spite of her life of constant drudgery and her responsibilities as the head of the slave family, the black woman still found the strength to protest slavery.<sup>2</sup> She participated in all of the many groups and movements that from the early nineteenth century protested against slavery and worked for abolition.

✓Any study of the black woman's past in America, can lead only to one conclusion: the strides she has made towards the realization of yesterdays "Impossible Dream" are the result of an overwhelming dedication and unending hard work.<sup>3</sup> ✓

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<sup>2</sup>Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts (New York, Green Wood Press, 1945), pp. 144-45.

<sup>3</sup>Smythe, n.1, p. 350.

### Black Women in Contemporary Society

It is well known that to forge ahead one has to push forward and someone is also pushed aside (the fourth chapter has already extensively discussed this while talking of Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan and Mahalia Jackson). Opposition is therefore natural, but black women could not press too hard either ~~their~~ 'blackness' or 'womanness', for pressing either would have made ~~their~~ task of climbing up more difficult, but their innermost feelings occasionally did break out and they lashed at the oppression. Their example was not easy to follow. But, ~~heir~~ struggle made things easier for those who came later carrying the heavy load of 'Double Jeopardy'.

The question is have things improved for the blacks? Most black, male and female alike, find the struggle to survive and advance in a racist society a never ending, burden and challenge. That's why it was no surprise when a black boy on a T.V. show was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, responded, " I want to be white". It is as if to be white is the chief qualification required for jobs, housing, protection and privileges of all kinds in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

As if it was not enough for them to be shunned by whites in the society. The black woman has been subject to yet another form of discrimination gender prejudice from fellow blacks. A saying that sums up this kind of prejudice became prevalent, "If you are white, you are right; if you are brown, hang around; if you are black get back".<sup>5</sup> This concern for white standards of beauty applied more to black women than to black men.

This issue is actually not one of the major problems of black women. Their fundamental concerns are still with their families, employment opportunities, education, involvement in politics and advancement in careers, all this gives them little time for personal bitterness. They are still behind the white women in employment, the difference in 1960 was 9.4 per cent to 12.2 per cent of white women. In 1970 the gap narrowed to 12.1 per cent to 12.5 per cent of white women. In 1980 it was, however, with the greatest gain for black women in clerical work the smallest in managerial and official positions. In 1988 the white women in managerial jobs were 68.9 per cent with educational qualification of doing 4 or more years of college with the same qualification the black women in managerial service were 63.9

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 352.

per cent. The same is true for educational attainment also, the medians of years of school completed by white females is 12.8 to 12.4 per cent of black females.<sup>6</sup>

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For their success in politics. The double disadvantage and the matriach burden of the black community, black women are expected to take the political back seat in contrast with the white women. It is a known fact, "If women are scarce in government, minority women are even scarcer". One outcome of the Civil Rights struggle was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 for blacks and its extension, the result was the act broke down the barriers of participation and resulted in a significant increase in black voter registration and subsequent voting. There was also increase in the blacks elected to the public offices. There was 111 per cent increase in black mayors from 135 in 1975 to 286 in 1985, a 42 per cent increase in black state legislature from 276 to 392 and 19 per cent increase in black congress officials from 16 to 19 per cent which created an opportunity for black women, considering that in 1972 only four black women were elected to U.S. Congress, their number has certainly increased since then there has been an increase of 2.9 per cent. There are 2 U.S. representatives, 72 state legislators, 14

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<sup>6</sup>U.S. Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of U.S. (Washington D.C, Govt. Printing Office, 1989), p. 390.

regional officials, 64 country, 60 municipal, 78 judicial and law enforcement, 424 education. How many of those struggling for an acceptance in American society, have got it. They have done everything possible to be treated as equal as part of the whole. In spite of the harsh realities and the continuing adversities faced by black women collectively and individually their achievements have been remarkable. They have not only held families together against overwhelming odds, but have gone into exciting professional endeavours. There is now scarcely a professional or business area in which black women are not found. The long struggle to survive forged a woman with astonishing tenacity, a woman who has learned to use stumbling blocks as stepping-stones, building a self-confidence that no amount of abuse could wholly destroy.

In many respects the black woman today stands at the cross-roads will she continue her historic roles as family supporter and guider meeting every situation with resolve while often remaining in the background? Or will she follow the current tread and attempt to gain increasing control over her own destiny, rather than reacting to the patterns which are designed for her by the society? These questions have their answers, depending upon the black woman getting 'equality' with white women without any discrimination regarding racism in it. Having the problems

of identity, recognition resolved their role in women's liberation has not been very enthusiastic, the reason given by many black women was - "We have got to liberate black men first".<sup>7</sup>

In the preceding chapters we have seen that how strongly they are marching ahead and making their presence felt. But then no one can imagine the physical and mental agonies of those who came up to the forefront to say No? rejecting the myths and stereotyping about themselves, denying the roles which society had assigned for them.

Only a few have reached the top, some have managed the middle level, but then there are thousands and thousands who are still standing at the beginning of the long and dark road of struggle, one can still hear the cry of Sojourner Truth who in the nineteenth century started fighting against the illtreatment of the black women and had said 'Ain't I A Woman?

If this is a situation in the last decade of the twentieth century, of the black women, one can ask oneself regarding the issues she would be fighting for, the goals

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<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Janeway, The Changing Roles of Black Women (New York, Arno Press, 1973), p. 17.

she would be striving to achieve in the twenty first century. The income differential between white and black families continues to give evidence of racial discrimination. In 1984, black median family income was \$ 15,430 compared to \$ 27,690 for white families. In 1987, the corresponding incomes were \$ 15,475 and \$ 27,427. The overall black poverty rate in 1984 was 33.8 per cent where as for whites it was only 11.5 per cent. In 1987 it was 33.1 per cent to 10.5 per cent. The number of black males unemployed rose from 433,000 in 1970 to 1.1 million in 1985, which resulted in the increase of the female headed households. Almost half 46 per cent of the federal and state prison populations are black males even though blacks constitute only 12.12 per cent of population. With their criminal records, it would be difficult for them to find employment. They still lack job skills, same goes for females also whose rate of incarceration are also increasing rapidly with roughly one fifths of all crimes being committed by them.<sup>8</sup>

There is a decline in marriage rates for blacks which is naturally linked with high rates of unemployment.

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of U.S., n.6, pp. 453.

- Ladner A Joyce, 'Black Women face the 21st century major issues and problems', Black Scholar (California Sauslite), Sept/Oct. 1986, pp. 14-18.

divorce and black males in prison. Jobs created in the service sector have not benefitted blacks on a large scale. The growth of high technology has, for the most part, excluded unskilled and under educated blacks. Then there is also a problem of teenage unemployment, the black teenage male unemployment rate was 41.4 per cent and female was 37.9 per cent. The rate for teenage white males was considerably lower(18.8 percent) and 15.5 percent for females.<sup>9</sup>

This picture is dark and gloomy, after all her hard labour her struggles which have made an improvement upon her past experiences. "If anyone should ask a Negro woman what is her greatest achievement, her honest answer would be, "I survived".<sup>10</sup> What does the future hold for her? Does she get a chance to live or does she continue to survive? The most plausible guess is that equality with whites is yet a distant dream. The struggle would continue. The successes will be hard to come.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in, Carol Mcphee and Ann Fitzgerald, Feminist Quotations (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1979), p. 165.



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