The Socio-Economic Position of Afro-American Women in Gyasi's *Homegoing*: A Study of Gender Pay Discrimination and Identity

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Abstract: *This article explores the socioeconomic place of Afro-American women from slavery to the present in Gyasi's Homegoing through bell hook's feminist lens. bell hooks is of the view that the stigma wrought upon the image of black women by the slave trade has crushed their social status in contemporary America. This research shows how Afro-Afro-American continues to live in contemporary white supremacist America where they cannot escape from the clutches of occupational discrimination and gender pay disparity. Compared to any other field, black women are more likely to work in low-paid sectors including food service, housekeeping, and healthcare centers, and less likely to hold management or engineering roles, which tend to pay greater. Black mothers who earn less have little money for basic needs like accommodation, food, and education. This has a long-term effect on their property, higher education, or savings. The current factors affecting the wages of black women are racial and gender discrimination, workplace harassment, segregation, and hostile policies of different organizations.*

Introduction

Afro-American women work at all levels in a wide range of occupations and sectors. But many black women continue to face the same false impressions about their profession that were created decades ago through the nexus of racial and gender biases. Since Afro-American women are perceived differently from women of other racial and ethnic groups, as well as males, they are subject to unjust expectations, particular difficulties, and prejudicial preconceptions about where they fit in the job. Black women have had to negotiate and sometimes confront conflicting, misleading, or biased narratives about their work ethic, commitment to their families, and general status that affect choices about how much money they should make. In the workplace, it is disastrous when sexism and racism collide. Afro-Americans have historically had the greatest labour force participation rates of all women because they are expected to work. This work assumption is firmly embedded in long-standing prejudicial beliefs that have existed since the dehumanizing history of slavery, the post-slavery era, the emergence of the workforce in the 20th century, and contemporary times. Black women's job has traditionally been associated with their lower social position as compared to white women, who were promoted within the social structure and required to uphold a paternal feminist approach centered only on the home. Black women worked early in the 19th century

and continuing throughout the 20th century, but they were typically restricted to the lowest-paid positions.

Irrespective of their origin or culture, all women were prohibited by law from well-paid positions that were only available to men. Black women still face the powerful lingering effects of history that undervalued their standing as women. The increased labour force of Black women has not always resulted in better pay. Negative assumptions they are lazy, resistant to hard work, and contented with any job rather than worthy of the best one, have likewise not been eradicated. Black women typically confront a workplace narrative that downplays the significance of their private caregiving duties or argues that these roles should be given priority to employment. These prejudiced slogans has historical origins in the time of slavery, when they were subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation in order to get free labour without protection rights. Later on, these narratives were also evident in the massive imbalanced percentage of Black women working in households and nursing centers where they got inadequate pay and little regard for their domestic duties.

Black women have entered more diversified areas over time, but they have also experienced significant occupational segregation, which keeps them focused on positions with poor income and no advancement. Black women frequently experience opposition since they are not seen as conforming to the traditional, largely male standards of success, even after moving into jobs traditionally occupied by men or white workers and climbing the professional ladder into executive or leadership positions. This constrained perspective reinforces a myth that restricts Black women's employment opportunities and puts obstacles in the way of their future professional success.

Theoretical Framework

A black woman may experience discrimination from an organization that is not based mainly on her race or gender, but rather on a combination of the two factors. Hooks (1981) arguments contribute to society's continual misguided and tarnished representations of Afro-American women (Perkins, 1983, p.145). She studies the experiences of black women in racist or sexist America since the beginning of slavery to the present to provide more

accurate knowledge of black women's role in the removal of stereotypes. In A Review Essay on the Books of bell hooks: Organizational Diversity Lessons from a Thoughtful Race and Gender Heretic , Cheng (1997) says that For hooks . when gender and race are combined, Euro-Americans of both sexes form superior strata (p. 556). He claims that gender and race are social strata for hooks. Members in the higher income groups enjoy more privileges than those in the lower income groups. Euro-American homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons have better status than minority group gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Non-native-born peoples, especially those who have been conquered militarily, politically, economically, or culturally, have weaker status than native-born peoples in the United States.

Double Burden Black Women and Everyday Racism by Jean and Feagin (1998) explores the workplace racial prejudice which African-American women face every day in the *civilized* white world. White men think Afro-American women have no creative and professional skills. They are frequently overlooked as capable employees. As a result, they confront greater challenges than whites in the hiring and promotion processes, as well as in day-to-day job performance. Despite stereotypes about African American women being less capable, well-educated black women were apparently hired more frequently than their male counterparts in the 1990s. When a white worker has the option of employing or promoting a black woman or a black male, the black woman is frequently chosen. One explanation is that white men in positions of leadership find black women more acceptable. A computer scientist was on the lookout for a job and became the target of unwanted attention. She moved to America five years ago from a north-eastern setting where she worked as a reputed programmer, and applied at a high-level computer company in America. Things went extremely nicely on the phone ... It was almost as if she was on show when she arrived. First of all, she was addressed with the phrase "You are Francine Rogers?" "Yes," she answered. And, while she was finishing the application, at least ten white people came out of the office to have a look. They did not believe that she showed the courage to claim "I am a computer technician," since she was dark (Jean & Feagin, 1998, p.48).

Forced Labour

Enslaved black women in the American South contributed to their lords' economic productivity rather than their families' nutrition. The significant social role of a woman in Africa was that of a mother. This feature of African women was degraded during slavery. Whereas pregnancy was a ritual for African women that won them more importance as it was a financial advantage for the white owner in the American plantation that formed by the mid-eighteenth century, as it increased his labour force through slave childbearing. They bore severe physical and psychological problems as a result of pregnancy. As the slave woman was supposed to meet the demands of the white owner, she returned to the fields quickly after giving birth, leaving her baby to be attended by others. Black women were thought to be hyper-sexual beings by their white masters who simultaneously hated and fancied them. White masters felt the need to have sexual relationships with them in order to increase the production of slaves and to seek pleasure. Female slaves often agreed to be in sexual relations with their masters in the hopes that this attempt would enhance their or their children's possibilities of being freed by the master. Slave owners, on the other hand, usually took slaves forcibly. Mostly masters used younger, unmarried slaves for sex and even raped married women occasionally. The slave husband's failure to give protection to his wife from such sexual violence reveals another major element of black enslaved men and women's relationships. Black enslaved women provided affection to the children who were born as a result of violence , says Jennifer Hallam (2016) in *The Slave Experience: Men, Women, and Gender* (p. 2).

Black women are still forced to serve the white nation against their will. Black women are still subjected to forced labour in miserable circumstances for little or no payment with violence and brutality. They are still forced to toil in sweat shops, clean homes, labor on farms, or work as prostitutes or strippers , reports Gilmore (2004). Contemporary slave trade is still alive and has taken a new form in America. Abuse, rape, violence, and murder are the results of forced labour. Their perpetrators have total power over them and have deprived them of their honour. Gilmore (2004) quotes Laurel Fletcher who is a researcher at the

Human Rights Centre: the majority believes that slave trade was solved many years back. But forced abortion, inadequate nourishment, and degradation have all been experienced by many contemporary women slaves. The victims of forced labour who grow starved in imprisonment seem to be at threat of lasting illness (Bales, Fletcher, & Stover, 2004, p.39).

Occupational Discrimination

Afro-American women have never been considered capable enough to compete white men and women in professionalism. Even after the abolition of slave trade, occupational discrimination confined Black women to domestic jobs only. Many Black women have been subjected to sexual harassment as a result of their working conditions, which include low pay and isolation. In the majority of cases, harassers promised greater jobs or work promotions in return for sex. Victimization worsens Black women's capacity to raise their children successfully. For a number of reasons, black women stay quiet about sexual harassment. Blaming the victim, for example, may require them to share horrific tales of abuse. This could be especially troublesome for Black women because their reports of rape have previously, and even today, been ignored. The Jezebel and the Matriarch, historically stereotyped representations, have all helped to the marginalization of African victims of sexual assault (West, 1995, p.170).

Afro-American women have been treated as occupational hazards . Even during the time of slavery, they were made ever available for sexual assault. They were forced to serve as domestic workers working day and night for the white families. They assumed the roles of maids and washerwomen and were sexually assaulted, molested and raped in the households of White Americans for whom they worked. Harris-Perry (2011) believes that black women have been associated with negative stereotypes still affecting their self-esteem and social identities.

Rape or sexual assault is controlled by the power; where there is power, there are the chances of rape or sexual assault. As western culture is patriarchal, rape of black women has become a norm. White men have all the powers to rule over them. As black women are considered uncivilized, rape has been a classical act of hatred, violation, contempt or

desire to break personality. No force can eliminate rape in the region which shares power and patriarchy.

Analysis

Homegoing studies Afro-American female characters occupational discrimination, gender pay gap. They are thought to be too dark or intellectually too weak to work anywhere better. Race and gender are white constructions that prevent women of colour from achieving higher in life.

Gender is Constructed

In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988), Butler says that gender is not biological but a pure social construction. Marcus (2020) quotes Simone de Beauvoir's notion that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. She says that when speaking of gender in this sense, it is an identity constructed with the help of patterned repetition of acts or behaviours but not a fixed identity or a power that allows particular actions. Construction of gendered self is established through movement and placement of body. These routine movements performed in public, she says, make the individuals accept (or reject or undermine) a person and let him/her participate in the mode of belief. Gender is formed by more than just mundane movements: gender has become a historical phenomenon rather than a physical reality, she quotes Simone de Beauvoir.

Body is a part of the active system in which it embodies contemporary culture and historical possibilities (pp. 520-521). Butler emphasizes that a person must become a woman in order to adapt to and then adhere to the modern social environment in which she lives, a 'strategy' rather than a 'project,' because the word project suggests that the person who performs their gender has a lot of control over their physical body and identity, whereas strategy indicates a survival process. Gender has a cultural meaning. The majority observes, internalizes, and believes the performance, and then performs the gender to which they are assigned. The same conceptions are seen, internalized, and performed by future generations (pp. 526-529). Butler discusses the conflict between internalized and externalized gender performance, as well as what a woman might

perceive of her gender against what she is acting externally.

After the Civil War (1861-1865), the slave trade was abolished, but race, gender, class, sexual identity, the process of marginalization, and the stereotypes set during slavery continued to shape the lives of Afro-American people especially women. It was a time of reconstruction for the country, as well as black people s identities. No longer slaves, they had to redefine themselves. They were neither American nor were they African now. According to Smelser (1998), many African American writers and other feminists in the late 19th century resurrected the old memories of slave trade as a blessing in the context that, even though it had been an agony, it gave black Americans a positive basis for identity in a world that had revoked discrimination after slavery in the South and North. It was neither good nor bad, but something in the middle, puzzling and complicated for them. After slavery, black women in America became a mixture of African and American, a new form of identity that encompassed both, a "double-consciousness" as claimed by Bois (2007, p.8). It means to be "both African and American, devoted to a state, but not to its racist culture" (Eyerman, 2003, p.162).

Trauma does not have to be personally experienced (Eyerman, 2003, p. 3) and it is conveyed without ever being uttered Residing inside the next generation as a silent present of phantom (Whitehead 2004, p.14). Amani and many other female African descendants in the novel have struggled hard to make a new social identity after their old one had been removed many years before. They have not been told about it. Despite this, they continue to suffer from many painful effects of slavery, including discrimination and "micro-aggressions," as described by Craps (2013, p. 26). These micro-aggressions that contemporary Afro-American women face include being refused promotions or business loans, getting questioned in traffic or being stereotyped in the media. Though her father was enslaved, Willie feels relieved of the pressure of slavery and she is able to grow free of the shackles of slave trade throughout the country's reconstruction. Willie moves to Harlem in the early 1900s, when the United States was experiencing success but not for her. When she first arrives in Harlem, she gets to confront with the

realities of racism and discrimination. Willie is thought to be too dark for everything. She is too dark to perform at the Jazzing and to get an apartment just one street down (p.209) in Manhattan where white people reside. She is too black to marry a suitable white man. Being a black woman with no good family background, she is kept isolated from rest of the white American society.

In one of the bars, The Jazzing, where Willie works, she gets to watch the minstrel shows for the very first time. Minstrel shows were the most popular form of entertainment in antebellum America claimed by Hughes (2006, p.28). At The Jazzing in the novel, they perform in shows like these, reducing African American men and women to childish figures (p.28) and trying to make fun of them through songs and immature performances. But Du Bois (2007) argues that such minstrel shows were supposed to portray the joyous life of the black slaves and how thankful they must all be to get such compassionate white masters to look after them. These minstrel shows do not expose the horrors of slavery in the South generally but that wasn't the South Willie knew and it wasn't the South her parents had known either (p.212). According to Toni Morrison, Black people are the first to encounter modernity in the form of captivity, torture, and enslavement that they have faced in displacement, isolation, fragmentation, and dehumanization which Friedrich Nietzsche subsequently described as "quintessentially modern" (Eshun, 2003, p.288). Marjorie's character subsequently explores the issue of her being too black since she is not as black as her classmates but the "wrong kind" (p.268). She is rather recognized to be a "white girl" (269) since she is not behaving the same as the other African-American girls do. But Marjorie cannot change the fact that she is black.

This is the reason that the other Afro-American and white girls at school regard her as one of them. Marjorie's teacher invites her to "talk about what being African American means to her" (p.273) She replies that she is not and eventually a feeling of hatred develops between them, reflecting the anger that exists between Americans and Africans as claimed by Goyal (2014, p.60). They hate Marjorie because she is the "wrong kind" of black placing her "at the bottom of the racial hierarchy", says Landry (2018, p.11). They do not like Marjorie because she

speaks with an African accent and does not think of herself African American. She does not see herself at the bottom of hierarchy and is unable to realize that "it doesn't matter where she came from to the white people (p. 273). But the bitter fact is that she is black regardless of where she is born whether in Africa or America.

Race seems to be something which is "performed". Race, according to Austin (2004), is not merely a reflection of family history or an enforced social categorization, but also a reflection of collective notions about behaviours, practices, and performances (p.53). As a result, the formation of race and its social implications serves as a control process and depicts power structures through shaping economic distribution and availability, as well as engaging with institutions to one's advantage or disadvantage. Wright says in *Becoming Black* (2003) that the Black discourse has traditionally been a heteropatriarchal language in which only men claim subjectivity while Black women remain unseen as the "Other of the Other" (p.125). Slave women faced the hardships of enslavement differently from slave men. In addition to hunting, they carried and raised infants and handled responsibilities at home. Gender, heavily influenced by race, was intricately related to one's individual identities and position from cradle to grave. Gendered identities were rebuilt and portrayed in extremely distinct, even oppositional, racist circumstances for African Americans.

Ongoing Socioeconomic insecurities of Afro-American

The continued stereotypical representations – reproduced in the press, societal places, and personal encounters – affect the evaluation of Afro-American women in professional life. Black women have used a range of strategies and methods to bring attention to the stereotype's consequences. Moreover, whether through politics, academics, art, choreography, or literature, Black women validate their wrath. Black women have initiated many debates about the disregard and examination of their sentiments as a result of their advocacy and speech. Willie, her dark-skinned daughter, and her husband Robert, who is light enough to pass as white, symbolize the discriminatory attitude of the white society towards women "who are black" not "white". Willie is a self-assured, ambitious young lady adored

by her parents and praised by everybody for her remarkable voice. Before moving to Harlem with her husband, she used to sing national anthem in her father's union meetings.

Race seems to be a symbol of permanent, irreversible distinction between civilizations, language communities, or supporters of particular belief doctrines, which all have deeply financial interests. Jones and Norwood (2017) argue that even in the contemporary period, Afro-American women are seen to be loud , aggressive and uncivilized . During the period of Harlem Renaissance, Willie migrates to New York with her husband to find better life opportunities. Willie experiences there that the city is bounded by racial barriers that make her step out of her Harlem apartment. Willie eventually finds work as a housekeeper for a black household and takes a job in a jazz club at night. Her work, however, require her to clean up, not to sing because white viewers only want to watch light-skinned beauties, says the owner of the club.

Willie's job as a cleaner is an expression of continued racial discrimination, gender inequality and dehumanization (Gyasi 2016). Willie draws public attention despite that she is not a particularly beautiful entertainer. The American men around her think of her a sexual commodity and take advantage of her. She is an African American living in a world dominated by white people.

Willie s journey is set against the backdrop of the Great Migration, which had seen around six million Black Americans migrate from country areas in the South to northern and western cities. Between 1916 and 1970, the movement was a response to low financial circumstances and institutionalized racism in some parts of the South. However, as the story of Willie demonstrates, discrimination and dehumanization did not end in the white society. Willie with her dark complexion must cope with all the challenges that racial prejudice implies. She fantasizes about performing in a jazz club. Jazz was created by African American artists and mixed up European and West African styles of music and instruments; it seems a realistic ambition. Despite the fact that all of the artists in a jazz club are black, Willie is unable to find work as a singer. White visitors, she is advised, can only appreciate light-skinned African Americans in plays and music if they are playing archetypal African barbarians or joyful slaves of plantation. Western people were already familiarized with such performances from minstrel shows. After the American Civil War (1861–65), African American minstrels grew in popularity, despite that they were first produced by white actors in black makeup. Minstrel performances employed racial stereotypical views to achieve humour regardless of the blackness of the artists. Jazzing only for light girls if you were a man may be (p.209).

Conclusion

White people are incapable of viewing the competence of Afro-American women beyond racial prejudice. They still face occupational inequalities in contemporary America. To hooks, it is very difficult but not impossible to shatter the white narratives about Afro-American women. She thinks that writing is a good medium for giving expression to what one has been going through socially, politically, and morally in the white world. hooks urges the readers to use their revolutionary voice to make violence against them public, inspiring additional people to become awakened spectators. This ultimately has the capacity to change culture so that it becomes less oppressive.

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