

Learning to Survive: African American Women's Quest for Their Rights

During the Civil Rights Movement



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Abstract

The twentieth century marked one of the greatest events in African American history as people fought for their rights which sparked the protest of the African American Civil Rights Movement of America. The African Americans had been subjugated since the day they were brought to America as slaves to work on the plantations, even the abolition of slavery did not improve their conditions much. Moreover, the women in the African American community were the only minor group who were doubly marginalized. They were always under oppression at their own house, as was the position of any women in the 19th century. However, when the feminist movement took place, African American women found that they did not have a place for them either because the movement was dominantly led by white women. On the other hand, in case of the Civil Rights Movement, though the Black women were given a position as an activist, their job was usually pretty menial, and they were not really the face of the movement itself. Therefore, as the bill for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, it gave an opportunity of equal employment to women in America. Even though it includes women, it did not specify whether black women were included, however it is safe to assume that they were because the law was passed right during a movement involving the African Americans, and it does include all women.

This report will explore the idea of how the Civil Right movement of America is actually a drive to protect the human rights of the African Americans and also question the position of the African American women in the Civil Rights Movement. The paper will also examine how these women were treated when they had limited rights and then observe whether the Civil Rights Movement had actually helped them.

1. Introduction: Women's Rights and Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was announced in 1948 during the third assembly of the United Nations which was held in France. This declaration holds the first ever documented rules dedicated towards upholding the rights of being human. Even though, historians have unearthed evidences of human rights practice in the past, UDHR was first ever document to ensure human rights in the modern world. The Declaration has 30 articles with clauses under them, which ensure human rights on economic transfer, political category and basically ensures every human being on Earth equal rights¹. However, these laws may declare that all human beings have equal rights in life, they might actually not be binding unless they were incorporated into domestic laws. The UN Declaration of Human Rights does not require any state to ratify to it, so no states are legally bound to the Declaration. However the declaration has served as a foundation for two of the biggest binding Covenants, and they are, “The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” and “The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” and it also drilled the groundwork some of the most important treaties by United Nations such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention Against Torture and many more.

The International Human rights law were formed as a retaliation to the destruction and death that occurred during World War II and protect and provide the basic rights that humans deserve to people all over the world. Even though, there were many delegates from countries from all over

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations. < <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declarationhuman-rights/index.html>>

the world that joined forces to form the UDHR and created the Commission of Human Rights, the drafting committee for UDHR consisted of eight members who were Dr. Charles Malik (Lebanon), Alexandre Bogomolov (USSR), Dr. Peng-chun Chang (China), René Cassin (France), Charles Dukes (United Kingdom), William Hodgson (Australia), Hernan Santa Cruz (Chile), and John P. Humphrey (Canada), with Eleanor Roosevelt (U.S.) as the chairperson². As the UDHR was largely formed to make sure that the devastation of the World War was never repeated, it was clearly based on the ravages of war, which were more likely pertained to male experiences. The topic and experiences of wars have always been a male area of concern and involves men. Therefore, when laws were made to protect the basic rights of humans after World War II, it was quite clear that even though the laws were supposed to be against discrimination, they were based largely on male experiences. Because the laws addressed the rights of human beings in general, they left out female experiences and ignored the fact that the experiences of women are extremely different than that of a man and thus women's rights must also contain a different discourse. For example, sexual assault on women is an extreme form human rights violation, it is downright vile and an inhuman crime committed against a woman, and yet it had not been mentioned in the UDHR. The only part where women is specifically mentioned is in Section 2 of Article 25, where it says "Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection"³. Only the motherhood of women had been given a brief mention in this article. Therefore, "This separation of women's rights from human rights

² "The Drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". *United Nations*.

<<http://www.un.org/en/sections/universal-declaration/drafters-universal-declaration-humanrights/index.html>>

³ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights". *United Nations*. <<http://www.un.org/en/universaldeclaration-human-rights/index.html>>

has perpetuated the secondary status of women and highlights the importance of recognizing specific women's human rights concerns"⁴

One may argue that the UN does have a convention that concerns women only and that is the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) but the most important question would be if CEDAW has actually been able to improve the standards of life for women. CEDAW was passed as a bill much later, in 1981 that is more than three decades after the UDHR was declared. Before all these laws were passed, women had a very marginal position in the society that even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could not amend. This happened because the idea of women's rights as a contender of human rights was ostensibly left out from the whole process of the making of the Declaration, which in turn made the laws "built on typically male life experiences and in their current form do not respond to the most pressing risks women face"⁵. This notion brings us to a more concerning matter and that is what about the women who already belong to a minority group in a racially diverse country. The perfect example for this would be the women belonging to the African American community in the United States. Before there was the Civil Rights Movement or before the Civil Rights Act or before CEDAW ever emerged, these women were doubly marginalized by the men of their own community and by men at large. Therefore, the most important timeline for this paper is the mid-20th century that saw the protests of the African American Civil Rights Movement and also the Feminist Movement in the United States, which took place simultaneously, and this was also the time period when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed.

⁴ Bunch, Charlotte. "Transforming Human Rights from a Feminist Perspective". *Women's Rights Human Rights*, Edited by Julia Peters and Andrea Wolper, Routledge, 1995, P 12.

⁵ Charlesworth, Hilary. "What are "Women's International Human Rights"?" *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives*, Edited by Rebecca J. Cook, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, P 59.

Pausing the discussion about the rights of women for now, if we look back to history, when most dominant countries were ruled by the monarchs and the Church, any rights in general was absent from the lives of ordinary people, men and women alike. The earliest sign of severe breach in human rights that occurred was during the Atlantic Slave Trade, where the British forcefully brought slaves from Africa through the middle passage to work in their plantations in the Americas. Jamestown, Virginia in the 17th century, was one of the first and largest ports in America, which operated in the slave trade. The slaves were brought by vessels in Jamestown and would promptly be auctioned off to others who were willing to buy them as quickly as soon they set foot at the port. After the journey these slaves had to go through half of them would die either from disease or would commit suicide⁶. By the 18th century, most African slaves were working in the tobacco and cotton plantations which were owned by their masters. It was mostly in the American South that slaves were needed to work in the plantations and the slaves in North America were used for cheap labor by the European settlers. However, tensions were starting to form between the British colonizers and the colonists, who were starting to resist against the British legislations in America.

One of the earliest battles against the forces of domination and acquiring freedom and equal rights for the people was the American Revolution, which broke out in 1775 and lasted till 1783⁷. The American War of Independence finally shows the resistance of the colonies against further subjugation and their rise as persons of their own agency. The rebellion mainly started when the British government tried to raise revenue by imposing taxes on the colony, even though there were

⁶ Wood, William J. "The Illegal Beginning of American Negro Slavery". *American Bar Association Journal*. 1970. Pp 46-47. < /www.jstor.org/stable/25725011>

⁷ "Revolutionary War". *History.com*. 2009.

<<http://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/american-revolution-history>>

existing tensions between the British and the colonists because of the Boston Massacre⁸. The rebellion soon changed its course and turned into the American war of Independence when, during July 1776, the Continental Congress voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence which was drafted by five men that includes Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson⁹. The biggest issue that brought forward the rebellion was imposing taxes on the people of the colony without their consent, for even in the U.S Declaration of Independence, one of the clauses say “For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:”¹⁰. It is a great violation of the rights of those who were already living under the domination of a colony to pay for any additional taxes without any prior notice. As it happened, the colonies rebelled. The war marked a turning point in history, because for the first time, a colonized group was able to usurp a dominant group and came out victorious. This was a brand-new revelation for many of the soldiers who participated in the war, especially the French soldiers who joined the American army to fight against their common enemy, the British.

After the American Revolution, there were uprising and turmoil that started among the citizens in America that was mainly about slavery. That was because there were certain instances when the entire African American race were associated with slavery. The Northerners saw the subjugation of the slaves as a variant of their own domination by the British. Slavery was never very prominent in the American North, but when the business of cotton plantation thrived in the American South, they were in more need of slaves. That was when the abolitionist law was demanded for being

⁸ “Revolutionary War”. *History.com*. 2009.

<<http://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/american-revolution-history>>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “The Declaration of Independence”. *USHistory.org*.

<<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>>

passed for the freedom of slaves in the American North, which sparked the kindling of the abolitionist movement to spread throughout America. By the early 19th century, the import of slaves to America was abolished however, domestic slavery was still in full swing. Plantation owners had no qualms about trading slaves inside America, even church ministers who owned plantations justified keeping slaves. All that ended after Abraham Lincoln became President in 1860, shortly after which the Civil War of America (1861-1865) erupted, and subsequently that led to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which effectively ended slavery. After the Reconstruction period of America, the African Americans were faced with a new law which threatened the independence that they found after the Civil War. The Jim Crow laws were enacted by the Democratic dominated legislature that the government imposed which segregated the African American community from the rest of the population. It mainly started to be enforced in the American South, where the African Americans were separated from their white counterparts publicly, which put them to a disadvantage socially, economically and also in terms of education. The African American were believed to be inferior to the White population because they were slaves before so they should not be socially communicated. On the other hand, in the American North, the segregation was different, the African Americans could find houses in a respectable community, they were discriminated against in employment and so on. The oppression from the Jim Crow laws continued right until the African Americans started protesting and The Civil Rights Movement took place. The Civil Rights Movement of America and Human Rights are very similar in characteristics because both were created and spread because of the desire to provide humans with their basic human rights so that everyone can live equally in the society without the fear of persecution at every turn. Therefore, the idea of the Civil Rights Movement does coincide with Human Rights as the notion for both emerged in the mid-20th century.

It is often claimed that the American War of Independence has galvanized the whole world towards democracy. It gave birth to the idea of freedom and independence and the emergence of the idea of “republicanism”. That is, the state should be ruled by a government chosen by the people and their elected representatives as opposed to monarchy. His new concept created a ripple of realization among all the subjugated classes around the world and historians believe that this idea of abolishing the monarchy and choosing a government through the votes of the people really appealed to the bourgeoisie class in France and that was what ultimately led to the French Revolution (1789 - 1799). Granted, the causes for the French Revolution were not similar to that of the American Revolution, they are two different events in their own way. Whereas the American Revolution had more of a political agenda, the French Revolution is more of a societal and economic phenomenon. During the 18th century, France suffered a major downturn in its economy mainly because of bad harvest, and the economy also suffered from financial problems because of their cooperation with the Independence War of America¹¹. Also, the teachings of the Enlightenment about the reconstruction of society and institutions that would free people from the tyranny of the Church and the monarchs¹² which gave strength to the middle-class citizens of France. Therefore, the rise in power of the bourgeoisie along with the monetary problems in France served as a catalyst for the beginning of the French Revolution and the idea of “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” was formed.

The French Revolution was one of the earliest battles that people fought for their individual rights. The beginning of the revolution was marked by the passing of the “Declaration of the Rights

¹¹ Campbell, Dr. Peter. “The Origins of The French Revolution”. *Interview with The University of Portsmouth*. 2005. P. 2.

<<http://www.port.ac.uk/special/france1815to2003/chapter1/interviews/filetodownload,38770,en.pdf>>

¹² Ibid

of Man and of the Citizen”, by the National Constituent Assembly in France ensuring human and civil rights for all the citizens, and also considered to be one of the pioneers that has inspired the United Nation’s “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”. The “Declaration of the rights of Man and of the Citizen” has laid down a vision of a state where the government and laws will be made on the consent of the general public and which will favor them and their wellbeing equally. Equality is an important part of the Declaration because Article 1 says, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions can be founded only on the common good¹³”. Clearly the article said that “men” has the right to claim their freedom and equality, however that also begs the question that ‘what constitutes “men”?’ . As expected, the Declaration had no place for woman, because the creators of the bill did not believe that women were part of the Political agenda¹⁴ The only person who had advocated for the rights of women in France was Nicolas de Condorcet¹⁵ and his advocacy was always shot down by the political leaders and often met with derision and skepticism. The lack of female concern on a document as important as the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen”, prompted the French activist, feminist, and playwright Olympe de Gouges, who was also a member of the French feminist group *Cercle Social*, to write her own “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen” in response, that led to her accusation of treason, arrest and immediate execution by the guillotine¹⁶. Her declaration has the same format as the original declaration and the first article says, “Woman are born free and remains

¹³ Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789). *Wikipedia.org*.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Man_and_of_the_Citizen#cite_note-30>

¹⁴ Hunt, Lynn. *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*. Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press: Boston and New York. P. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ “Olympe de Gouges (1748—1793)”. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy IEP*.

<<http://www.iep.utm.edu/gouges/>>

equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may only be based on common utility”. However, it did not create the impact of women rights movement as it should have, the document was lost among the political uprising of their French revolution and her immediate death. On the other hand, one of the most important document that created a stir in the whole world and was immensely successful was Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* in 1792, a year after de Gouges’ “Rights of Woman”. Mary Wollstonecraft is considered is one of the earliest philosophers who paved the pathway for feminism. Wollstonecraft’s “Rights of Woman” is a response to the 18th century philosophers, especially after reading Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord report to the French Assembly which states that women should only receive domestic education to help around in the household chores. Wollstonecraft, using her book, inflicted all the double standards in society regarding women and condemned men for not giving importance to women education. She also urged women not to be overly emotional as men think they are and be more rational and in control of their emotions. Her main argument was that women should get the same education as men and she also point out that if a woman is not educated then how can she be expected to raise educated children. All the women who fought for women’s rights were primarily white women, most white feminists did not bother about the African American or Black women until much later after the Civil Rights Movement and the African American women became a part of the Black Power Movement and of the third wave of feminism.

The fight for women rights has come a long way since then, going back to our previous discussion, it seems that some of the best revolutions or conventions declaring the rights of humans and advocating equality did not actually involve women. Women had to fight for their rights to gain recognition as a human being and that the rights for equality also should include them. Women

have always been subjugated throughout history because of patriarchy, however there are also places where women from the minority groups are even more dominated by the men of their groups as well as patriarchy. One substantial example of such minority group is the African American community in the United States. One of the greatest movement in America for individual rights was by the African Americans referred to as the Civil Rights of America which led to the emergence of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Therefore, this paper will explore the involvement of the African American women in the Movement and the important roles they played by examining the literature produced in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and also find out whether laws passed after the Civil Rights Movement had actually benefited the women in any way.

2. African American Women and their roles in the American Civil Rights Movement

Black women in America have been the subject of discrimination since the first time they brought to America in 1619¹⁷. Since they landed on America as slaves, their life had turned into a fight for pure survival. Throughout the years after the abolishment of slavery, the African Americans have strived to gain an equal footing in the American society. Being a minor community and from different ethnicities and victims of slavery, African Americans were subjected to years of racist oppression. Therefore, the women in the African American community were automatically victims of this racial discrimination while falling prey to the domination of the men in their own community as well. The struggles that these women had to go through in order to achieve something in life was tremendous because they were not only disregarded by men of their own community but also by white men and women because of racism. Therefore, the African American women were sexually discriminated against by the men of their own community and white men; on the other hand, they were also discriminated against racially by white women. White women were themselves dominated by the men in their family and which led to dissemination of feminism all over the Western world in the 19th century, which was mainly led by the white women.

Before the feminist movements, most women all over the world occupied a similar position in the society and that was the position of subordination. Even though feminism gave the women rights for their voices to be properly heard, the only voices that were heard were of the white Western women. The sisterhood of women, which was a concept highly encouraged by feminists was not extended to women of colour, especially African American women, who were also a part

¹⁷ Gyant, LaVerne. "Passing The Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement". *Journal of Black Studies*. 1996. Pg 629 < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784888>>

of the Western world albeit from a minority group. Having experiences of patriarchal domination, the white women were not unfamiliar with the realities of female subjugation; yet they did not have much sympathy for the African American women.

To further strengthen the form of domination over the African Americans, the Jim Crow laws were introduced that absolutely segregated the Black community from the Whites. The laws were quite harsh and abided by strictly in the American South especially. Aldon D. Morris, in his article stated, "The Jim Crow regime was a major characteristic of American society in 1950 and had been so for over seven decades. Following slavery, it became the new form of white domination, which insured that Blacks would remain oppressed well into the twentieth century" (518)¹⁸. This was the new form of subjugation that the Black community was subjected to, separated and prevented them from taking part in any sort of political, social or economic events in the society. After the abolishment of slavery, African slaves gained freedom from their owners and many gathered to create their own community to live in. When the white supremacists saw that they would have to get along with the African American community, the Jim Crow laws were introduced which completely separated the Black community from the rest of the population in America. Their rights as a citizen in America, as minimal as it was, were taken away as they were being ostracized from society and cast off as a separate community. It is evident that their economic condition also worsened and as they were very marginalized in the wage spectrum at their jobs; "therefore, "in 1950 social inequality in the work place meant that nonwhite families earned nationally 54% of the median income of white families" (Qtd in Morris 518). The African

¹⁸ Morris, Aldon D. "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks". *Annual Review of Sociology*. 1999. Pg. 518. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223515> >

Americans had to go through hardships because of the racial discrimination they faced. They were not allowed to go to any public places where the White people went rather they had to go to the “Black only” designated restrooms, cafes and even schools, etc. Moreover, they were made to sit at the very back of a bus or train reserved only for Blacks and had to travel without sleep because hotels were unwilling to accommodate them overnight¹⁹.

During the early half of the 20th century, violence against African Americans increased drastically, and the incidents have all been documented. “John Hope Franklin (1967) detailed the violence that white supremacist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia, heaped upon African American” (Morris 518)¹⁹. The most effective means of terror and the way to ensure the obedience of the African Americans was a punishment called lynching. Many have described lynching as unlawful killings by the people of the community or a mob: “Lynching, the unlawful killing of a supposed criminal by members of a community, developed into a widespread and stylized phenomenon in the years between the American Civil War and the Great Depression. Most scholarly studies of the practice have viewed it in instrumental terms, as a mechanism either for maintaining social order or for perpetuating racial inequality” (11)²⁰, as stated in Andrew S. Buckser’s “Lynching as Ritual in the American South”. Therefore, these carnages occurred because people either thought they were doing the country a favour by killing the alleged criminal without getting the officials involved or just because of pure racism. The act of lynching is part of the painful injustice that African Americans had to suffer in the past and lynching itself is regarded with derision, whereas civil servants and government officials in charge of helping the public turned the other way.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Buckser, Andrew S. "Lynching as Ritual in the American South." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 1992: P 11.

Between the years 1900 to 1906, African Americans had led many protests in favor of revoking the Jim Crow laws as they were the reason that Blacks were being subjected to racism and inequality. It was during this time that African American women actively joined the fight to overthrow the Jim Crow laws and also to acquire women rights as there were many women who were also lynched to death brutally by a white angry mob. For example, in 1914, an African American teenager named Marie Scott was lynched by a mob in Oklahoma because her brother killed one of the men who sexually assaulted her, however the brother fled and she was arrested²¹. Both men and women have suffered because of the injustice of lynching, which had been easily perpetuated as the Jim Crow laws exiled the African Americans from the rest of the society and gave the white people power over them. In 1909-1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was founded, which is considered the first national council to fight against the Jim Crow regime and the racial segregation²². Many movements during the first half of the 20th century was attempting to lessen the violence and inequality that the African American had been suffering, such as the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s, which was a literary movement. It used literature to create a new image of Black people and the literature produced was termed as 'protest literature. In the mid-20th century, two events occurred that led the African American community into a crisis, and "[T]hey were the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in the Brown vs. Board of Education case and the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955" (Morris 521). The Brown case brought favorable results as the NAACP won the case and declared racially

²¹ "The Anti-Lynching Crusaders: The Lynching of Women," [1922], NAACP Papers, Part 7: The Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912-1955, Series B: Anti-Lynching Legislative and Publicity Files, 1916-1955, Library of Congress (Microfilm, Reel 3, Frames 570-73) <<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/lynch/doc7.htm>>

²² Morris, Aldon D. "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks". *Annual Review of Sociology*. 1999. Pg. 520. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223515> >

segregated schools unconstitutional” (Morris 521). On the other hand, the lynching of the 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 for whistling at a white woman brought a lot of hatred and protest against the Jim Crow laws and white juries as they acquitted the murderer of Emmett Till. Because the news of this lynching found widespread recognition and attention, people became aware of how harmful and vicious these laws against the Black people were. According to Morris, “The hope generated by the Brown Ruling and the outrage caused by Till's lynching, helped set the stage for the emergence of the modern civil rights movement (522)”.

The Civil Rights Movements of 1954 to 1965 has been one of America's most iconic and memorable revolutions when it comes to the idea of fighting against oppression and inequality and to secure the legal and constitutional rights for African Americans as citizens of the country. The African American community came together for this movement because of the years of abuse they had been suffering politically, socially and economically. The movement gained great recognition through their non-violent protests and marches, one of which was the March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his most famous “I have a dream” speech. And another incident that is said to have marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement was the Montgomery bus boycott by Rosa Parks, where she refused to give up her bus seat to a White man and got herself arrested. Normal people, without much knowledge about the history of the modern civil rights movement, only acknowledge and remember Dr. King as the front runner of the movement. However, there were many other important activists who worked behind the scenes to make the movement a success and many of them were women. Most people know about the mother of the Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks, and also other activists such as Ella Baker, Mahalia Jackson and some others, however, there were many other female activists who had been the centre of the revolution but were unknown or at least not as popular. Even though there were many female

leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, their fame had not spread because rather than being the face of the rebellion, many of them were bridge leaders who worked to connect the gaps in between.

An article by LaVerne Gyant stated that, "According to Baker, "The movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women, since it came out of church.... The number of women who carried the movement was much larger than that of men" (quoted in Lerner, 1972, p. 351)"²³. This may be easier to understand if we understand the structure of the movement itself. As mentioned before, women had different roles in the movement itself as they were more on the sidelines of the rebellion whereas men acted as the spokespersons and were at the very centre. Before that, we need to question the meaning of being a leader and the sustainability of the label. A person is only perceived as the leader when he or she is acknowledged in the public place, being more active and outspoken. On the other hand, if the labels were removed, thousands of men as well as women will be found who had worked as hard as the leaders but were never as popular or renowned because they mostly worked behind the scenes.

Women were significant contributors in the Civil Rights Movement too, but most people do not recognize their roles because of the stereotyped label that have been attached with the word 'leader', which normally and always pertains to a man. These narrow definitions of being a leader renders the potentials of a women to become an individual with her own rights. Belinda Robnett in her article expressed that, "Victoria Gray, an activist, provided a response typical of my interviewees: "They, [Ella Baker and Septima Clark, who will be discussed in detail later] were both leaders . . . in the sense of that effectiveness, of the loyalty of those who work with and around

²³ Gyant, LaVerne. "Passing The Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement". *Journal of Black Studies*. 1996. Pg 1. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784888>>

them. It was a lot to do with a kind of loyalty and influence that you are able to elicit from the people around you." (1665). All these women had no doubt played important roles in their groups and carried out difficult tasks, but the idea that they could be a leader in still largely underdeveloped. But then again it is also important to know about the difference between formal and informal leadership. A formal leader is a person who acts as a person of power in the organization and has the authority over their subordinates, whereas informal leaders are "actors within the organization who have personal but not official power over lower participants. The same person may have official power over some subordinates and personal influence as well over others. Moreover, he may be an officer to some of his subordinates, a formal leader for some others, and an informal leader of participants of his own rank over whom he has no official power" (Etzioni 1961, p. 90)²⁴. Therefore, the informal leaders are considered as leaders but this position has not been examined deeply to gather what exactly do this position entail. Robnett (1996) also mentioned that informal leadership are of two types, one specialized at the development of group beliefs or motivation and the other is concerned with movement mobilization²⁵.

Throughout the ages the role of women in the individual movements or revolutions that erupted during their times, have been analyzed to understand the position of the African American women during the modern civil rights movement. Even though scholars describe these women as part of the civil rights movement, there is no extensive analysis on why they are not included in the role of leadership. The systematic exclusion of women from the position of formal leadership and always directing them towards a form of informal leadership is what has shaped the

²⁴ Robnett, Belinda. "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization". *American Journal of Sociology*. 1996. Pg. 1665-1666. <: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2782115>>

²⁵ Ibid

development of the general role of leadership among organizations in movements. Since my research is based on the role of the African American women in the civil rights movements, let me mention those civil rights movement organizations where women were the most active, they are: the Women's Political Council (WPC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

Despite being a large part of the civil rights movement, women were largely excluded for the leadership roles of the movement. Black women were excluded from the leadership roles and were always shoved to the sidelines of the movement. The idea of women's rights and feminism was not a popular idea during the 50s and 60s, which is the same timeline as the Civil Rights movement. Men and women were still unequal and the idea of women working alongside men and holding the same designation as men was not welcome. The women's rights and feminism campaigns began to develop mostly in the 60s to 70s, which was decades later than the civil rights movement and that was why roles were divided and gendered during the movement. Before the feminist movements, women were always pushed to the periphery of every social phenomenon, however feminism did give women the chance to break free and embrace positions that were considered unconventional for them. Though lots of women were activists and took part in the movement, they were still outnumbered by the amount of men in the organizations, so women having a significant position in an organization was tough with so many men around. For example, the MIA was an organization which was formed as a church and had only one female officer when they first formed. Rosa Parks was the only woman who held a position in the committee when the MIA

constitution was written, as was Irene West was the only woman in a nine-member committee who were responsible for establishing a bank and savings association²⁶.

Most women who were associated with the modern civil rights movement organizations were mainly in charge of domestic activities such as fund raising, recruiting members and community service. It was unequivocally agreed upon that women were the ones who would be doing these tasks, not because they considered it inferior but because they assumed that it was the task suited for women the most, thus creating a gender division. Women themselves were not aware that they were being sequestered because in an interview with Belinda Robnett (1996), Johnie Carr, a member of MIA, an activist and also a friend of Rosa Parks, “agreed that, while women could chair a committee or hold office as a secretary, they would not be elected president: "Well, it was not a stated thing but just an understood thing.... Now of course when you spoke out against things like that, a lot of times you were even criticized by other women that felt like . . . this is not what we ought to be doing." She continued, "I think we just accepted the servant [role] and done what we could because we felt like togetherness was the point."”²⁷

This shows that women did not just humbly accept the role that they were told to play, but they were silenced because the majority believed in dividing the gender roles and were afraid of criticism which might lead them away from the main cause of their movement. One example is that, two of the most renowned and well-loved African American female activists Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King were often described and admired for their quiet and demure behavior who have won everyone’s heart with their gentleness. The underlying the implications of them being

²⁶ Robnett, Belinda. “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization”. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1996. Pg. 1669. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2782115>>

²⁷ Ibid

gentle and quiet is the fact that the Black people wanted a peaceful revolution while there was an “unspoken castigation and stereotyping of other Black women, for being outspoken and outraged, for being poor or overweight or loud or angry- and therefore not appropriate for national recognition” (Theoharis 408)²⁸. This was one of the main reasons that many women were excluded from the recognition and acknowledgment that they deserved, in spite of being active in the movements.

Despite the discrimination they faced because of their gender, class and race, some African American women stood with their head held high and achieved fame because of the remarkable literature they produced about the pain and sufferings of Black men and women. Literature was the tool that they used to spread awareness and tell their story to the world about the great injustice and brutality African Americans had to go through because of slavery and even after slavery was abolished. African American authors such as Angela Davis, Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and many more wrote about the American Civil Rights Movements and the experiences of a Black woman in America when the world was still ablaze with extreme racism and inequality, which still exists today.

²⁸ Theoharis, Jeanne. "Accidental Matriarchs and Beautiful Helpmates: Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and the Memorialization of the Civil Rights Movement." Crosby, Emily. *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement*. Athens and London: University Of Georgia Press, 2011. P 408. <
https://books.google.com.bd/books/about/Civil_Rights_History_from_the_Ground_Up.html?id=gwVbfvfYEZkC&redir_esc=y>

3. Racism, Gender and Female Sexuality as Explored in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *the Colour Purple*

The woman's side of the story is always forgotten as history often tends to overlook them. Women had and still have to bear the brunt of terrible injustice and violence. When we talk about African American women, the most famous people that come to our mind are Beyoncé, Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama and many more. They are all influential and have helped with female empowerment not just of African American women but of women in general. Raising awareness about female empowerment was not an easy task, it had to be done painstakingly, through the hard work and energy of countless women. The concept of intersectional feminism emerged during this time, which involves women of colour, especially African American women. One of the first occurrences of intersectional feminism, or maybe a significant point when white and black femininity collided was Sojourner Truth the first African American woman to have called out the discrimination against a Black woman. Being a former slave, an abolitionist, an author and a women's rights activist, who is considered to be the first woman who gave birth to the notion of intersectional feminism when she gave her famous speech "Aint I a woman?" at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851. The speech originally did not have a title and a variant of it was first published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* by Maruis Robinson²⁹.

Sojourner Truth just barged into the white women's conference and demanded to be answered as an equal woman. She knew she was being doubly marginalized because she was a woman and that she was Black. Yet she wanted her answers bad enough that she marched down a place full of white audience and demanded that they consider difference between white and black women. She

²⁹ Chronicling America. *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. Library of Congress. 1851. P 160.

<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1851-06-21/ed-1/seq-4/>>

stated, “You need not to be afraid to give us or rights for fear that we’ll take too much, -- for we an’t take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion and don’t know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and, you will fell better”³⁰. She showed everyone else for who she really was, she was a working woman with calloused hands, who had faced many hardships in life unlike the white women. Her experiences will would never be the same as the ones who were there with her at the conference. She may be considered as the ‘Other’ woman, but the real point was that she was also a woman just like the others and deserved to have her voice heard. The subtle challenge towards the white women was what brought attention to her and showed that this was a woman, a former slave at that, who was actually really capable of doing work that only men were thought to do and changed the perspective of both the men and women who were present there. She asserted actual physical facts by pointing out the differences between her who was a hardworking woman and the white feminists, who had been subjugated and sheltered all their lives. It is not wrong to be believe that Sojourner Truth was the first person who planted the seed of intersectional feminism with her straight forward attitude and honesty about her own sex.

Even then, women had been fighting for years to achieve some semblance of equality. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, bell hooks talk about the injustices committed on Black women and criticizes white middle-class women for not including the African American women in their fight for equality. Hooks did not like the way feminism was defined by the white women as if t only belonged to the community of white women and no room for the Black women. She criticizes one of the pioneers of feminism in America back then, Betty Friedan on her book *The Feminine Mystique* for the lack of Black representation there. She said that most white

³⁰ Ibid

feminists had a hard time recognizing or acknowledging the plight of the African American woman, they only talk about their own problems, saying that the ones she did write about was “a select group of college-educated, middle-and upper-class, married white women-housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life” (hooks 2)³¹. The complete disregard towards women of colour especially Black women reflects the attitude of white feminists towards Black women. They’re not even acknowledged throughout the whole white feminist discourse. “White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politics, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state” (hooks 4)³². Modern feminism tends to believe that all women are oppressed regardless of their experiences of race, culture, religion and sexual orientation. Therefore, Black women or women of colour are grossly left out from any white feminist discourse as the second wave of feminism failed to comprehend the experiences of ‘other’ women. Therefore, if their positions are compared, black women are that minority group who have the lowest position in society. That is because while white women are subjected to sexism, they in turn use racism to mistreat and oppress the black women, and on the other hand while black men are subjugated through racism, they use sexism to mistreat and oppress black women. Black women are in a predicament as they are twice as subjected to oppression and thus their experiences of life differ vastly from the women who more or less enjoy white privilege.

The blatant domination over the African American woman is a very important topic for Black feminist writers of the 20th century, especially during or after the Civil Rights Movement. Authors

³¹ hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. Routledge (2015). P 2.

³² Ibid, P 4

like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker who had been activists knew about the gender discrimination the African America women had to go through. Their stories such as *The Bluest Eye*, *The Colour Purple* and many more, describe the status of Black women in segregated America. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a novel written by Toni Morrison, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. This novel is full of criticism against racism, female oppression and sexuality, also sexual violence; *The Colour Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker also deals with similar themes. Even though the books were written more than a decade apart, it is somewhat hinted that the time period for both the stories were somewhat the same. Both the books, it seems, had been set in the early 20th century around the time period of 1910-1940, before the Civil Rights Movement of America took place and black segregation was still prevalent.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is about three little girls, Claudia, Frieda and Pecola and their experiences regarding racism, sex and discrimination. The characters of this novel have internalized the idea that being "White" equals to cleanliness, beauty, virtue and value. Most of the characters have this obsession with the whiteness of their skin to the extent that it created a dysfunction among their families. The whiteness of the person was not just confined to the skin tone but also included the colour of the eyes, or the texture of one's hair. This internalization of a standard of beauty created the self-hatred that was evident among the characters. For example, Pecola wanted to have blue eyes so that she could be loved more by her parents. "Colourism" seems to be a very common theme in much of African American literature. Ruth Rosenberg says, "Because being dark meant never being considered beautiful, being other became a canonical part of black women's literature" (439) "In almost every novel or autobiography written by a black woman," writes Mary Helen Washington, "there is at least one incident in which the dark-skinned girl wishes to be either white or light-skinned with good hair" (Qtd in Rosenberg 439). Pecola's

life with her parents had not been a good one, her family was a dysfunctional one and her parents fought with each other all the time:

“Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other. He fought her the way a coward fights a man—with feet, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way—with frying pans and poker, and occasionally a flatiron would sail toward his head” (13).

As Alice Walker has said in her essay, ‘In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens’ that every Black American woman should remember the story and background of their mother and grandmother’s story (Walker 402). So, in relation to that, a girl is always influenced by her mother. Pecola’s mother’s surrender to Western ways greatly affected Pecola’s psyche. On the other hand, Claudia was very different from Pecola. Claudia comes off as a very fierce girl when she openly protests the prejudice against ‘colourism’ by outright disliking the new girl named Maureen Peal because she said she wanted to “kick her”. Her attitude towards the new girl shows “Claudia’s ability to survive intact and to consolidate an identity derives from her vigorous opposition to the colourist attitudes of her community” (Rosenberg 440). Even though she refused to fall prey to the internalized fear that has seemed to be preconceived knowledge among most African American women, she also has the constant fear and dislike for that “*Thing*”. The “*Thing*” is a recurring word in the novel. “And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us”

(Morrison 74). However, the “*Thing*” that constantly comes up in the narration is a fear that runs deeper than the fear of racism and that is the fear of ugliness³³.

In this novel, being black has been associated many times with being ugly, the helplessness the African Americans feel when they cannot stand up for themselves against the Whites, against injustice. Their constant fear of being ugly and unclean because of their skin colour is manifested in various ways in the novel, the most notable of them all was the rape of Pecola by her father. His childhood hatred towards his mother as he was abandoned and then at the white police officers as he was forced to have sex with Darlene in front of them all culminated in the climax of the book, when he raped his own daughter. This was shown as the ultimate oppression of a man over a woman with an underlying connotation that it was also the result of the oppression the Afro-Americans were subjected to. Whether it was because of racism or sexism, the ultimate victim of the act was Pecola herself, an innocent Black girl caught in the middle of everything. Furthermore, to prove that child-rape and violence is often a problem for women in an African American family, Alice Walker’s novel “*The Colour Purple*” also demonstrates the violence a girl had to suffer at the hands of her stepfather who she had believed to be her own father. The most ironic part about the rape scene is that the violence has not been inflicted by a White male on a Black woman, rather the person who committed the crime was Black himself, indeed the father of the girl.

Whenever the case of rape comes up involving the Black community, it is always assumed that the victim must be a white woman, who must have been rape by a Black man. The fear of rape by a Black man among the white population was a very common occurrence. Even if there were cases where a white woman had happened to have been attracted to a black man and made sexual

³³ Bump, Jerome. “Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism”. *College Literature*. Pg. 153. <www.jstor.org/stable/20749587>

advances towards him, no one in the white community would believe it because even imagining such a thing was impossible for them as they could not fathom why would anyone be attracted to a Black person. As we have seen in Harper Lee's best-selling book *To Kill A Mockingbird*, where a Black man Tom Robinson was accused of raping a white girl even though it was proven that it was the girl who made advances towards him. Tom was convicted of rape despite his innocence and then killed. Then, on the other hand, we see a different case of White men violating the Black woman, a great example of it is young black woman slaves being violated by their masters and its modern representation where there are many accounts of young black woman activists being raped by policemen and men in uniform. As Angela Davis stated, "young activists often stated that nothing could protect Black women from being raped by Birmingham police. As recently as December, 1974, in Chicago, a 17-year old Black woman reported that she was gang-raped by 10 policemen. Some of the men were suspended, but ultimately the whole thing was swept under the rug" (101)³⁴. It was often assumed that white man could not have raped a Black woman because the Black woman herself was bad and seductive so she must have had seduced the man. Angela Davis, in her book *Women, Race & Class* said, "The myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women. Black women perceived this connection very clearly and were early in the forefront of the fight against lynching.⁴ (101).

Rape had always been the way to subjugate women and a key feature of racism, the way to silence women through sexual violence. It was evident that Black women were victims of sexual violence by white men which had sparked the anti-rape movement as can be seen from the case of

³⁴ Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. Vintage Books. New York: (1983). P

Joan Little who was accused of murdering a white jailer in North Carolina where she was the only inmate. She revealed that she was raped by the guard which sparked a huge protest³⁴. Thus, these are the only two dynamics of the rape cases involving the Black community that we know. However, Black women had to suffer sexual violence from not only White men but also men of their own community. And the men were not always the unknown evil men who hunts defenseless woman and rapes them, these men are usually very close relatives of the victims as it often is heard in rape cases, but in these circumstances the perpetrator is not just any relative but the victim's own father or a father figure. For example, the author Maya Angelou herself was raped in her childhood by her mother's boyfriend, when she spoke up about it, her uncles went and killed the man which caused her to stop speaking for years. There are many instances where African American women had been silenced through violence and sexism.

The very first line of the book, *The Colour Purple* starts with "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 3). The most effective way of silencing a woman even if she was having to suffer extreme violence through the hands of a relative, in this case Celie's stepfather. Lindsay Tucker in her article writes, "These words, uttered by the presumed father who is also the rapist of his daughter and who has twice impregnated her, establish not only the primacy of a male text, but also convey the essence of patriarchal repression-a silencing of the young Celie that leaves no recourse but communication with a transcendent white male deity" (83)³⁵. The fourteen-year-old Celie who was raped and impregnated twice by the supposed father had no way to express her pain. Her status in the society was basically non-existent as she was a woman and a Black woman at that, so the only out let for her pain was writing letters to God, a very white God

³⁵ Tucker, Lindsey. "Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text". *Black American Literature Forum*. Spring 1988. P 83. <www.jstor.org/stable/2904151>

by the sound of it. That is because, in every depiction of a Christian God, He has always been portrayed as a big White man who is kind but also formidable. The epistolary method of the novel is also a way for Alice Walker to break the conventions of the patriarchal pattern in the narration in novels. The epistolary form of writing is especially important because it is a fairly private narrative which shows the reader the conversation between only those characters who were writing the letters, such as Celie and Nettie and Celie's one-way conversation with God. However, it also shows how the dialogues between two characters can be disrupted, which happens when Albert intercepted the letters and hid them from Celie until Shug found out about those letters. Lauren Berlant in her article suggested that, "Alice Walker has said that her intent with *The Colour Purple* was to supplant the typically patriarchal concerns of the historical novel-"the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men"-with the scene" of "one woman asking another for her underwear"' (833)³⁶. The desire to supersede the patriarchal notion of how historical novels should be written prompted the creation of the novel. Walker also incorporated her idea of a "womanist" in the novel. Womanist is a term from her *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* where she says that it is a variant of feminism that includes the Black women's experience including racism, sexism and nationalism, also a women's sexuality.

Female sexuality is a very important marker in this story. Celie's sexuality was horribly repressed to the point that she could not bear to be touched by any man as she believed that it would only hurt her. Her rape by her father was also sexually repressing to the point that it did not only repress her sexuality but also her body's naturally feminine functions. Firstly, her rape is a classical sign of patriarchy silencing a woman when she was told by her supposed father that it

³⁶ Berlant, Lauren. "Race, Gender, and Nation in "The Colour Purple"". *Critical Inquiry*. Summer 1988. P 833.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343674>>

would kill her “mammy”, if she did not keep quiet. By saying this, the father created a rift between the mother and daughter by imposing a sexual jealousy between the two and severing the bond that should be there between the mother and children³⁷. The traumatic experience made Celie hate sex with any other man and that included Albert. Albert was no better than her father, who would beat and abuse her physically and emotionally. Her sexuality was repressed to the point that she could not menstruate, which after her two pregnancies. Her own body started to defy her, menstruation is something that is exclusively a female bodily function that is related to childbirth. A young healthy woman’s menstruation only stops when the woman is pregnant with a child. According to Tucker, the reason Celie’s menstruation stopped is because, in a metaphorical way “Celie is pregnant with her own story. If autobiography is a self-mothering, then Celie's body language bespeaks a gestation period, a condition necessary to the creation of an identity which will come into being through her letters. Celie will offset the silencing and suppression by writing herself (85). Every instance of Celie’s life can be written as a story, her personality had been repressed for so long that the only way to express herself was through her writing. A woman’s writing resonates with her inner self, it is as if she was freeing herself from the clutches of the being that was holding her back and pouring all her emotions onto that piece of paper. It is almost like regaining what had been lost from the person. Celie’s letters are form of her writing, every time she writes a letter to God or Nettie, she bares her heart out in those letters which she otherwise could not have done in reality. To write means to be heard, when Celie decided to write she knew that someone was listening to her, she was reclaiming everything she had lost, her personality,

³⁷ Tucker, Lindsey. “Alice Walker's The Colour Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text”. <*Black American Literature Forum*. Spring 1988. P 83 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2904151>>

sexuality and connecting herself with her inner strength by writing because at least someone is listening to her even if that 'someone' is God.

To write about herself, Celie needed someone who would serve as a counter to all the violent and victimized people such as Albert, her father and mother. The essential character in the story who was not ashamed of her sexuality and was very open about it was Shug. Celie could not help but be attracted to Shug because she was the opposite of everything that she had ever experienced. "What Shug possesses instead is a freedom which has always been involved with mobility and sexuality. In fact, Shug's sexuality suggests that untranslatable French word *jouissance*, an experience beyond pleasure, beyond orgasm, not phallogocentric but concentric" (85)³⁸. Shug did not have a father, so there was never a male influence in her life. Time and again she had said that she enjoyed sex. Celie was inexplicably drawn to her because she exudes a sense of independence that Celie had never experienced herself. Shug is the kind of character that poses a threat for every male entity in the novel. She has a carefree disposition that would not conform to all the boundaries that has been set by the society for women. She was misunderstood and hated so much that even the preacher talked about her in his sermon when she was sick. "He take her condition for his text" (Walker 42). Even though he did not specifically refer to her or say her name, it was pretty obvious to everybody there who he was talking about. "He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin...Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner" (42). With all the names he used to describe Shug Avery, it was no wonder that the community despised her. Even a preacher, who was supposed to teach forgiveness and guide people towards religion did not hesitate to talk badly about her behind her back. This just shows how men despise woman who are independent or have the courage to do whatever they want.

³⁸ Ibid

The topics of sexuality and rape are very closely related in both these novels which demonstrated the way women were discriminated against and violated in their own homes, the only place where she was supposed to be safe, and by the hands of her own father or a father figure who was supposed to protect her. This is definitely the ultimate breach of trust and the most abhorrent form of violation. Incestuous rape has been a common occurrence in the African American literature, these authors were not afraid to enlighten the world with the sufferings of the African American women even if they were greatly criticized for using such taboo topics in their novels. Doane and Hodges in their book talks about the significance of using this taboo trope. According to them, the segregation demanded by the Jim Crow laws of the Black community played a significant part which led the father to sexually assault his daughter. As the Jim Crow laws forbade interracial mixing and rendered the African American community virtually powerless, the men in the community struggled to maintain the little semblance of power that they held and that was dominating the weaker individual in his own home and thus the women fall victim to their power struggles, especially if there is a daughter who is the most vulnerable among them. Therefore, the man turns against the people who are closest to him but also the most vulnerable. The man suffering from social castration at the hands of white men, and therefore manifest their emasculation and by violating his own daughter, who is the vulnerable person in his home to feel powerful again³⁹.

Black Literature in American will always be an assortment of stories involving sexism, racism, sexual violence, discrimination and nationalism. Especially, when an African American woman

³⁹ Doane, Janice., Hodges, Devon. *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*. The University of Michigan Press. 2001. Pp 35-37.

<https://books.google.com.bd/books/about/Telling_Incest.html?id=Vs2X6ZVs3XQC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>

writes, her story echoes the lives of many black American woman who had experienced similar things. As community is very important for African Americans, the Black experience in America is parallel and writing can be therapeutic. These stories depict the condition of women in the pre-Civil Rights era, when the African Americans had little to no rights, especially women. However, after the Civil Rights Movement, a new Bill was signed which was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Jim Crow laws were repealed. In the novel *Meridian*, Alice Walker takes the reader to a journey through the Civil Rights Movement and its effects on women.

4. Women, Law and Literature in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement

The experiences prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement, has been an inspiration for many African American women to write novels, especially authors such as Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and many more who wrote fiction and non-fiction, to portray the experiences of women before the movements and during the post-Civil Rights Movement era. The blend of women's literature with these socio-legal movements also brings the stature of two wholly different streams into a standpoint where they are melded together to create an interesting genre of law and literature. Though the Civil Rights Movement had been a successful campaign to acknowledge the African Americans, the woman question was left out in many aspects. Many Black American women participated during the Civil Rights Movement because it would enhance the position of the African American community. Community has always been and will be a big part of the African American culture, because they had been segregated from the White for so long, that they formed an extremely strong bond. And due to the strong commitment towards the community, many African Americans, men and women alike, joined the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, here the question remains whether these African American women really achieved equal rights through the success of the Civil Rights Movement.

Alice Walker, is termed as a 'womanist' because of her fight against female oppression and for raising awareness among African American women to be stronger, both emotionally and socially. One of Alice Walker's most famous novels is *Meridian* (1976), which talks about the African American Civil Rights Movement in the US. The story revolves around a young Black woman named Meridian Hill and her quest through life being a Black woman in America during the Civil Rights Movement and her involvement with the movement. The novel is considered to be an honest account of the Civil Rights movement because the timeline of the novel coincides

with the time when the movement's peaceful history had been forgotten and it was portrayed as a violent uprising. In this novel, Alice Walker was criticizing the movement itself because by turning violent it had sort of lost its purpose and deviated from its early goals. The story can be interpreted as the critic of the revolution itself where you see how the movement is changing according to the author's experience but through the eyes of the character Meridian. This novel reflects the beginning, development and the demise of the Civil Rights Movement.

The novel *Meridian* is an essential part of African American Literature because it is one of the few novels that has been written about the experiences of the Civil Rights Movement in terms of fiction by a woman. It revolves around the major issues of Black woman role in the movement, black motherhood, black women's identity, gender discrimination and more importantly how the nature of the Civil Rights Movement itself has changed. It talks about the struggle of a Black woman and her attempt to embrace her womanhood. In her novel, *Meridian*, Alice Walker endeavored to show that the Civil Rights Movement with all its attempt to bring equality among the races forgot the importance of individuality thus it only succeeded in oppressing woman and suppressing individual autonomy. Walker shows in *Meridian*, through the journey of Meridian Hill, what became of the Civil Rights Movement and how the cause of the movement shifted away from its ultimate goal. In the beginning of the novel, the readers are shown a gruesome image of a black woman named Marilene O'Shay being killed and mummified for having an affair with another man. It's notable that when Whites and Blacks usually have holidays on separate days because of the extreme segregation imposed on the African

Americans, here the mummified body of Marilene was on display for everyone to see. She was a possession of the patriarchal and racist society as she had been finally being 'silenced' by men for acting on her desire and having an affair with someone else. Lynn Pifer in her article states, "She

[Alice Walker] also examines patriarchy's ability to "kill" women, using the Marilene O'Shay exhibit as a visual reminder, as well as a parody of society's idolization of dead women as the perfect women (patriarchy's version of "The only good Indian's a dead Indian")" (79)⁴⁰. The death and preservation of the corpse of Marilene O'Shay screams out the fact that society actually likes a woman who has been frozen into compliance. The death is not merely a literal death but the symbolic death of a woman's individuality, the society only wants a woman when the woman's voice has been squeezed into silence. For the society, a woman is only perfect when she has been petrified into silence and obedience.

Meridian's march towards the dead body with a group of children shows her defiance towards the white community. She walked up right to the dead body after facing an angry mob and a tank to make a clear statement that a black woman has the right to see the dead body of another woman and show the band of children the traumatic result of defying the patriarchy. Karen F. Stein in her article claimed that, "The scene is a poignantly ironic illustration of the Civil Rights dilemma: The Movement sought to break down social barriers to claim equal access for all individuals, but the society which it opened up often proved to be an ugly one. Thus, Walker suggests that a primary reason for the Movement's failure was its lack of a sustained sociopolitical critique" (131). Walker makes a very strong criticism of the Civil Rights Movement and its deviation from its primary goals. According to the author, from her experiences, the movement lost its momentum when it failed to raise the motif of black womanhood. A revolution which had started with the idea of liberating men and women from racism to gain equal rights had its cause defeated because it turned a blind eye to the oppression of the black women through racism and sexism simultaneously.

⁴⁰ Pifer, Lynn. "Coming to Voice in Alice Walker's *Meridian*: Speaking Out for the Revolution". *African American Review*. Spring 1992. P 78. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3042078> >

Furthermore, when Meridian's activist friends asked her to kill for the revolution, which in turn horrified Meridian. Walker portrays the turn of events through the distaste of Meridian at having to choose between killing for the revolution or leave the activism. As Stein has explained "...we find that Meridian's radical friends eventually assimilate into white capitalist America, thus defusing the revolutionary potential of their early ideals" (131)⁴¹. By allowing violent acts in the movement, they were doing exactly what whites had been doing to black people. They were resorting to violence to fight the very abuse that whites had been imposing on them, which went against the very foundation of the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, the activists were giving in to the ways of the capitalist idea which they at first been set to fight against.

Meridian promptly rejects everything that made her feel like she had been moving away from the very core of what the Civil Rights Movement stood for. She gave up her motherhood and sexuality to become a full-fledged activist for the cause of the African American people, only to find that the movement that started out to be a peaceful way of gaining equal rights for the African American and fight racism had been turned into something else, which caused Meridian to suffer. She had given up a lot for the sake of her nationalism. She gave up her motherhood by giving her child away for adoption and later she had an abortion and got sterilized, for which she feels terribly guilty about. However, on the other hand, Meridian grew up individually, "she insists on her own subjectivity. But those who do not share Meridian's ability to grow and to transcend stereotypical naming may be locked into stagnation" (Stein 132)⁴². Because Meridian was able to reject the conventions of the society imposed on women, she was able to grow internally on her own,

⁴¹ Stein, Karen F. "Meridian: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution". *Black American Literature Forum*. Spring/Summer 1986. P 131.

⁴² Ibid.

surpassing the barriers imposed on women, the woman who had not been able to, stayed dormant just like the mummified body of Marilene O'Shay.

Through Meridian's journey of self-growth and her ideals for the Civil Rights Movement, Alice Walker speculated the outcome of the movement had there been female leaders like Meridian with tremendous consciousness and morals, if the society had not been adamant on imposing some stereotypical conventions on women. Throughout the novel, the readers are shown glimpses of independent, defiant Black women, who Meridian drew inspirations from. While studying in Saxon College, Meridian learns the history behind the iconic huge magnolia tree that was situated in the middle of the campus named The Sojourner. There are many tales and folklore that goes around involving The Sojourner because the Saxon College is located in a place which used to be a plantation where Black slaves worked under Master Saxon, just like in Saxon College where young Black woman were turned into decent little 'slaves' of the society by teaching them how to be a proper lady; therefore, the women in the folklore absolutely fascinated them. The first woman whose story is really popular was called Louvinie, she was a slave in the plantation who planted The Sojourner herself and an expert storyteller. But, one day, one of her master's children passed away out of fear after Louvinie tells them a story which she had been requested for. In return as punishment, the master cut off her tongue, which she planted under The Sojourner. After that incident, The Sojourner was said to have magical qualities, other slaves in the plantation believed that. ". They claimed it could talk, make music Once in its branches, a hiding slave could not be seen" (Walker 44). By transferring Louvinie's power of speech and storytelling The Sojourner became the symbol of an African American, who had been silenced but stands with her head held high and silently encourages fellow Africa American women to speak out and not be afraid about it.

“Named The Sojourner, the magnolia conjures up the presence of an other leader of black women, who, like Louvinie, used language in the struggle for liberation. In this way, Walker builds a network of women, some mythic like Louvinie, some real like Sojourner Truth, as the context for Meridian's affirmation and radicalization (114)” (Qtd in Pifer 79)⁴³.

The tree has its significance in the story because it gives strength to the young African American woman who go to Saxon College as if to tell them that they were not alone in the struggle. There had been many before them who had also striven for their independence. The novel *Meridian* depicts all the problems that women had to face. Not only are they oppressed through racism but they're oppressed by sexism as well. That very sexism manifested itself in the Civil Rights Movement. While Meridian wanted to an activist and was ready to give her life for the movement, she was set aside and asked to do menial tasks by fellow activists such as her own lover Truman Held, and they expected her to fully oblige their demands without any questions asked, keeping the important tasks for themselves. Throughout this whole novel, Alice Walker showed how sexism and sexual politics had tarnished the very essence of the Civil Rights Movements, which had always been about equal rights. Participating in the fight for Civil Rights, Meridian discovered the blatant discrimination that Black women were living with. She finally figures out that for the African Americans to truly elevate their status they need to change the very foundation of their society and rise together as a community and it will not happen until they stop treating women like a second-class citizen in their own community. In figuring that Meridian elevated herself to the position of her maternal ancestors, the Black woman leaders, who truly fought for the betterment of the community.

⁴³ Pifer, Lynn. “Coming to Voice in Alice Walker's *Meridian*: Speaking Out for the Revolution”. *African American Review*. Spring 1992. P 79. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3042078> >

African American women had no rights or laws passed by the state that would protect them from discrimination. The African American community itself did not have much rights to begin with hence the journey of the Civil Rights Movement. However, finally, in 1964, a bill for the Civil Rights Act was passed which is said to have given adequate rights to African Americans. There is even a section that is Title VII in the Civil Rights Act which talks about equal employment opportunity, that includes women, both black and white as the women's rights activists merged their demands with civil rights. But the main question remains whether the law is as it seems that is to eradicate discrimination or maybe there is more than that meets the eyes. Before moving on to the laws laid down as per the provisions of the Civil Rights Act, it should be noted that the history behind is quite long and critical. It did not emerge overnight, but the African Americans had to fight their way against all the oppression and racism that bound them. As Clifford Lytle wrote:

“While in 1962 and 1963 the public had already been awakened to the fact of discrimination, the climax to this movement of political agitation came on August 28, 1963, in the form of the March on Washington. It was reported that nearly 200,000 persons gathered on that summer day to protest against racial discrimination. It was here that Martin Luther King moved the nation with his stirring speech, with his vision of a colourless society. Perhaps the most successful aspect of the March rested with the fact that the support of the social revolution was now truly bi-racial” (284-285)⁴⁴

In all the years that the African Americans had to struggle for equality, the year 1963 was the most significant because that was the year when Martin Luther King Jr gave his famous speech of “I

⁴⁴ Lytle, Clifford M. “The History of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964”. *The Journal of Negro History*. Oct. 1966. Pp 284-285. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716102>>

have a Dream” and that truly opened the eyes of everyone to face the social injustices that was happening against the Afro-Americans. Even though the march was successful there was still no tangible improvement on the treatment of African Americans, and the worst brunt of it was suffered by the women.

The Civil Rights Act was passed, signed by President Lyndon Johnson on 2nd July, 1964. The Act prohibited any sort of discrimination, advocated for the desegregation of schools and other public places, made gender discrimination for employment illegal and also gave the African Americans the constitutional rights to vote. Even though, the Civil Rights Act was the result of the equal rights movement by African Americans, in the whole act there is only one law that paid homage to women’s rights, and that was “Title VII - Equal Employment Opportunity”⁴⁴. The segment where it talks about women goes as:

“(k) The terms "because of sex" or "on the basis of sex" include, but are not limited to, because of or on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions; and women affected by pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions shall be treated the same for all employment-related purposes, including receipt of benefits under fringe benefit programs, as other persons not so affected but similar in their ability or inability to work, and nothing in section 2000e-2(h) of this title shall be interpreted to permit otherwise. This subsection shall not require an employer to pay for health insurance benefits for abortion, except where the life of the mother would be endangered if the fetus were carried to term, or except where medical complications have arisen from an abortion: Provided, that nothing herein shall preclude an

employer from providing abortion benefits or otherwise affect bargaining agreements in regard to abortion”⁴⁵

This part is under the section “Definitions” where it explains a woman’s position in her job and how she shall be treated as such when there is an emergency in regard to pregnancy, childbirth and any other medical conditions relating to them and what sort of health benefits women might receive because of these distinctly feminine issues. This amendment to the act was introduced by a Virginia Democrat named Howard W. Smith, who was initially opposed to the idea of the legislation. The idea of this amendment came by during the 1950s when the talk of Civil Rights legislation had been bubbling on the horizons of the U.S, a leader of the National Women’s Party, Alice Paul, tried to unsuccessfully to include women’s equal rights in the decree⁴⁶. The NWP saw tried to draw a connection between black rights with women’s rights as both were minorities, but they could not succeed. However, when the discussion of the Civil Rights Act was brought up by the then President John F. Kennedy, the NWP again tried to promote women rights with Black Rights.

Brauer wrote, ““So much of the racial discussion, even that on the most elevated and inspired level,” Mary F. Anderson wrote Alice Paul, "seems to assume that everybody but the Negro in this country has full equality." She hoped to see two birds, the "woman problem" and the "Negro problem," killed with one stone” (39)⁴⁷. It did not matter to them whether it annihilated racial

⁴⁵ FindUSLaws. “Civil Rights Act of 1964 - CRA - Title VII - Equal Employment Opportunities - 42 US Code Chapter 21” <<https://finduslaw.com/civil-rights-act-1964-cra-title-vii-equal-employment-opportunities-42-us-codechapter-21#1>>

⁴⁶ Brauer, Carl M. “Women Activists, Southern Conservatives, and the Prohibition of Sex Discrimination in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act”. *The Journal of Southern History*. Feb 1983. P 39.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2209305>>

⁴⁷ Ibid

discrimination, the priority of the NWP was including equal rights for women in the constitution of America, however they did not care if it gave any rights to Black women. As Brauer stated in the article, “In other respects, however, NWP tended to look backward rather than forward. Its overwhelmingly and perhaps exclusively white membership evinced little concern for racial or economic equality” (40)⁴⁷. The women’s rights seem to have excluded the rights for Black women making them the most marginalized group. Cynthia Deitch, in her article stated that “King (1988) suggests that the race-gender analogy historically has helped white women mobilize for their rights, but it has also made Black women invisible in social theory, political strategy, and public policy (184)⁴⁸. However, even though Alice Paul wanted to include equal rights for women with sincerity in the legislation, the amendment was not made because it would help women, it was done purely to prevent the Act from passing in Congress. In his article, Brauer claimed that, “Butler Franklin has also recalled that Paul fully expected Smith to welcome the opportunity to subject the civil rights bill to ridicule by adding sex to it” (Brauer 41-42).

The Senators never intended Congress to take the equal rights for women seriously, rather it was added to mock the Act just to show the government how ludicrous of an idea it was to bestow the same rights the White men have to Black people and women. The idea of women’s rights did not matter to them, as a part of the patriarchy they rather wanted women to be subjugated the way they were, the Senators were hoping that the Congress would realize just by looking at the word “sex” how laughable it was to give women rights and the Black community was even below that, so they could not fathom that the Act would actually be signed. When the amendment was first

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Deitch, Cynthia. “Gender, Race, and Class Politics and the Inclusion of Women in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act”. *Gender and Society*. June 1993. P 184. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/189577>>

proposed to the Congress, it “was met with laughter. Although it was introduced as a joke and a tactic to defeat or weaken civil rights legislation, the inclusion of the word sex in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act became the legal basis for most gender discrimination policy in the United States (Brauer 1983; Hoff-Wilson 1987; Robinson 1979).” (Deitch 183).

Even though, the amendment was first introduced to the Civil Rights Act very reluctantly, it is believed that the inclusion of women in the act became the foundation for including women’s equal rights in the Constitution of America. Many women supported the act and the Black women also joined the cause, but the discrimination against Black women still remains. Women, black and white are still discriminated against, more often in case of a Black woman despite Section 2 of Title VII in the Civil Rights Act saying that it will be unlawful for an employer to discriminate an employee in regards to sex. Therefore, it is evident that the intention behind including women’s rights in the Civil Rights Bill was not to enhance the position of all women but to ridicule the act by using the analogy of racism and sexism.

5. Conclusion: Black Women in Post-Civil Rights America

When we talk about the rights of Black women in America, we need to consider the extent of human rights and women's rights condition of the country during the 20th century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) itself was announced in 1948, moreover in the postbellum America, the African American community was living a horrendous life under the existence of the Jim Crow laws. Therefore, a close look at the African American community made me realize that though the community itself was suffering under the domination of the white supremacists, it was the women who suffered the most as they had to endure both racism and sexism from the people around even from fellow women, albeit they were white.

Through the racial and gender discriminations, these African American women had to endure double the pain of their white counterpart. While they were dominated and oppressed by the men inside their own community and outside, they were also sexually discriminated against. Moreover, when women were actively taking part in the Civil Rights Movement, they were given menial tasks and kept away from the centre of the movement. After a few years, when the 2nd wave of feminism shook the whole world, the female voices that were heard were only of white women as the feminist movements were led by them mostly. The white women showed no form of solidarity or sisterhood towards the black women which shows that they were racially discriminated against by women as well.

In this research paper, I've tried to show how the African American women progressed throughout the years from having little to no voice in their own community, to having been activists in the Civil Rights Movement and then having judicial laws including women in one of the law in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, where women were given equal opportunity of employment as men and these women include both blacks and whites.

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