



Autoethnography As Black Feminist Standpoint Methodology

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ABSTRACT

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African Americans found it important to enter white debates and challenge White discourses by learning the language of their oppressors and since then, the memoirs, autobiographies and life narratives has been the most effective tool for creating and defining Black selfhood and viewpoint. Since the African American writers could not comprehend an ideology of self that separates the self from the culture or community, the personal narratives of African American also serves as a historical document demonstrating the politics of socio-cultural reality. The claim of the “I” standing for “Us” forms the very nucleus of African American autoethnographical genre of writing. The African American women autoethnographers occupy a significant and distinct place within the African American autobiographical genre which subsequently leads to the formation of Black Feminist Standpoint.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Autobiography, African American, Black Feminist Standpoint

Autoethnography was introduced as a research tool by Carolyn Ellis¹ who defines it as “a self reflective form of writing that connects personal to the cultural, social and political”². Ellis aims to convey that the Autoethnographies are tailored or personalized accounts that describe the experiences of the author/researcher for the aim of expanding sociological understanding. In the similar vein, various other theorists appreciate the conceptual and theoretical framework of Autoethnography. Brodkey³, Adams⁴, Goodall⁵, Trinh⁶, Reed-Denahay⁷ asserts that lived experiences lie at the heart of Autoethnography and it delves into the personal life of the author/researcher, thereby, summoning rich and contextualized information about various subjects which “acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others....Shows 'people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles'”⁸. They essentially describe it as an interpretative phenomenological approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences as it “helps readers understand the culture I encountered- It is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context”⁹. Brodkey

¹ Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological novel about Autoethnography* (Rowman Altamira, 2004).

² Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological novel about Autoethnography* (Rowman Altamira, 2004).

³ Linda Brodkey, (I-site. Literacy and Numeracy Studies (1996).

⁴ Tony Adams and Ellis Carolyn, “Trekking through Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Research: An Introduction to Methods and Designs*, ed. Lapan S, Quartaroli M and Riemer F (San Francisco CA, 2012).

⁵ H.L. Goodall, *Notes for the autoethnography and autobiography panel* (1998).

⁶ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the moon waxes red: Representation, gender, and cultural politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁷ Deborah Reed-Denahay, *Autoethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (New York: Berg, 1997).

⁸ Tony Adams and Ellis Carolyn, Trekking through autoethnography. In: Lapan S, Quartaroli M and Tony Adams and Ellis Carolyn, “Trekking through Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Research: An Introduction to Methods and Designs*, ed. Lapan S, Quartaroli M and Riemer F (San Francisco CA, 2012).

⁹ Deborah Reed-Denahay, *Autoethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (New York: Berg, 1997).

defines autoethnography as a methodology that helps marginalised groups to present personal story in relation to their society and culture. He states “Autoethnography invites writers to see themselves as and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones”¹⁰. Similarly, Trinh remarks, “it obscures aspects of subjectivity and cultural experience; –It interrogates the realities it represents”¹¹.

The most significant tool of Autoethnographic study is autobiography as “autobiographer writes about “epiphanies”- remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend and to analyze lived experiences”¹². The Postmodern condition of many ways of knowing and inquiring, of relative truth being the only truth, validates the case of autoethnographic studies. “It distrusts abstract explanation and holds that research can never do more than describe, with all descriptions equally valid...[Any] researcher can do no more than describe his or her personal experiences”¹³.

The theoretical and methodological foundations of Feminist Standpoint theorists and scholars, such as, Dorothy Smith¹⁴, Sandra Harding¹⁵, Donna Haraway¹⁶, Nancy Hartsock¹⁷ and others, accentuates the intersection of everyday praxis of social, cultural and political power structures into the formulation of a new epistemology. These critics also emphasize the requirement of a sociology in which women can answer back from the viewpoint of their everyday lived experiences by “creating a way of seeing, from where we actually live, into the powers, processes, and relations that organize and determine the everyday context of that seeing”¹⁸. They further ascribe greater relevance to the standpoint of women by condemning patriarchal ideology for “women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point that can ground a powerful critique of the phallogocentric institutions and ideology that constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy”¹⁹. Feminist Standpoint critics also highlight that the multiplicity of feminist subjects and lived experiences constructs the concept of ‘situated knowledges’²⁰. Harding suggests “Standpoint Theory is not just an explanatory theory but also a methodology. It insists on acknowledging feminist concerns as valuable”²¹. She also emphasizes that “the Standpoint of the oppressed includes and is able to explain the standpoint of the ruling class...Standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be termed into epistemic, scientific, and political advantage”²².

Furthering the theoretical framework of Feminist Standpoint, the Black Feminist Standpoint was introduced by Patricia Hill Collins who argues that African American women are “outsiders within”²³ who can provide a much better understanding of socio-political realities and knowledge about the oppressors because of their “experienced realities”²⁴ and that, the convergent processes of race, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity build African American women’s individual and collective consciousness. bell hooks, as well, accords greater

¹⁰ Linda Brodkey, (I-site. Literacy and Numeracy Studies (1996).

¹¹ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the moon waxes red: Representation, gender, and cultural politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹² Richard M. Zaner, *Conversations on the edge: Narratives of ethics and illness* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

¹³ W.L. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1994).

¹⁴ Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. L. Alcoff and E. Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and The Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (1988).

¹⁷ Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985).

²⁰ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and The Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (1988).

²¹ Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate,” *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

²² Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate”.

²³ Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black feminist thought," *Social Problems*, 33 (1986).

²⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs*, 14: 4 (1989).

significance to the standpoint of African American women and asks for re-examining the dominant feminist thought “as a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group”²⁵ hence presenting a clear picture of the subjugation and marginalization of African American women.

Black Feminist critics in the U.S. asserts that there exist a powerful Black Feminist Standpoint which emanates from everyday realities and experiences of African American women and its most striking characteristic is that African American women are discouraged not only by men in general, but also by women of the ‘superior’ class and race who fail to realize their ignored stance in the world. The earlier research suggests that the African American women are not only a minority, but they stand at the margin of the margin, more specifically oppressed not only by their male counterparts but as well by white female counterparts, “with the lowest income, lowest rate of completion of college education, highest proportion of adolescent pregnancy, and greatest likelihood of relying on aid payments for subsistence, black women are for many white women the quintessential victims of sexist oppression”²⁶. Tapan Kumar Basu²⁷ proposes that African American movement is ruptured over the issue of gender for its patriarchal orientation and it fails to qualify for success as it does not take into consideration the viewpoint of African American women. The Civil Rights Movements in the history of United States led by African American male leaders have clearly failed to acknowledge the existence of African American women as the male leaders were more concerned with their respective inclusion into the brotherhood and to put African American men on their feet with a job and status so that they can become valuable and control their families, thereby completely ignoring the existence of their female counterparts. The question of gender did not even find mention in the agendas of the important African American initiative as they were rather concerned more about abridging the vast gulf between middle class and underclass of African Americans where both, African American women’s perspectives and problems, were thoroughly neglected. Thus it becomes important to trace Black Feminist Standpoint as all the realities are white and male centred. Criticising the same, Black Feminist scholars emphasize upon the need of acknowledging the standpoint of Black women into the mainstream. With the works of Black Feminist Standpoint critics, such as, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, the stance of African American women can be divulged and analysed. Patricia Hill Collins states “the unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationship they have with others suggest that African American women, as a group experience a different world than those who are not Black and female”²⁸. Collins values everyday experiences of African American women as “a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group”²⁹. Collins argues that African American women are “outsiders within” who can provide a much better understanding of socio-political realities and knowledge about the oppressors because of their “experienced realities”. Not only the everyday lived experiences of African American women are important but also their social locatedness shapes their standpoint. From a marginal location “the oppressed can see with the greater clarity not only their own position but...indeed the shape of social system as a whole”³⁰. The contextualization of African American women lived experiences is important for they are at the end of the social hierarchy, who bear the repercussions of sexist, racist and classist oppression as they are triply repressed by White men, White women and Black men. bell hooks accords greater relevance to the standpoint of African American women and asks for re-examining the dominant feminist thought for “as a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group”³¹. Audre Lorde points out “the oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences...beyond sisterhood is still racism.”³² Hence, such accumulated layers of oppression provide a clearer standpoint.

The African American women’s literary movement, started primarily as a social movement, was created to bring out fundamental changes in the U.S. social order. African American women literature is a quest for social parity and identity which primarily communicates the subjugated history of a community that is triply

²⁵ bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” *Feminism and Race*, ed. Kum-kum Bhavnani (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Phyllis Marynick Palmer, “White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States,” *Feminist Studies*, 9:1 (Feminist Studies Inc, 1983).

²⁷ Tapan Kumar Basu, “Beyond the National Question: Shifting agendas of African American Resistance,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29:7 (1994).

²⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs*, 14: 4 (1989).

²⁹ Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought”.

³⁰ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1993).

³¹ bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” *Feminism and Race*, ed. Kum-kum Bhavnani (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984).

marginalized on the account of race, class and gender. The genre of autobiography has been an integral part of African American literary tradition, which evolved over centuries with the publication of slave narratives by African American men. However, all these narratives were from a male's viewpoint and did not acknowledge African American women's story. But the research initiated by African American academic feminism examines and presents women's unique experiences by bringing women into theorizing. As the traditional paradigms were constructed and shaped with suitable and biased opinions of a group of powerful race and gender, the conundrum for the feminist scholar is to present her perspective within some disciplinary tradition with the aim to transform the tradition with intellectual revolution (Stacey and Thorne, 1985)³³. The autoethnographies written by African American women, narrating their lived experiences introduced a new literary revolution in African American literature with the formation of women's Standpoint in mainstream literary discipline. It started with the publication of Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by herself* (1861)³⁴ when for the first time a woman's account of slavery and lived experiences found a voice among crowded male viewpoints. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)³⁵ became the most significant text to spark off a literary movement by African American women writers to rediscover and reclaim their ancestry which was followed by publication of various African American women's memoirs and autobiographies that emerged as pathbreaking texts in the context of creating new knowledges about African American women's individual selves and that of whole community. In *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (1990), Henry Louis Gates Jr. remarks that African American women writers emphasize to "overhear a black woman testifying about (what) the twin scourges of sexism and racism, merged into one oppressive entity, actually do to a human being, how the combination confines the imagination, perplexes the will and delimits free choice. What unites these texts, what makes them cohere into the imaginary metatext we call a tradition, is their shared structures and common themes"³⁶. Hence such autoethnographies introduced Black feminist viewpoint as distinctive approach to challenge the established procedures of disciplinary exercises tied to the schema of the dominant and powerful race, class and gender.

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³³ Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne, "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology," *Social Problems*, 32:4 (1985).

³⁴ Written and published in 1861 after Jacobs' harrowing escape from a vile and predatory master, the memoir delivers a powerful and unflinching portrayal of the abuses and hypocrisy of the master-slave relationship. Jacobs's book derives its power from its representation of the lived experience of enslaved people, particularly women. Her narrative includes graphic descriptions of auctions of enslaved Africans, the everyday brutality of slavery, and the cruelty of enslavers.

³⁵ Hurston penned *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937, a time when novels written by African-American women authors were rare. Not only was it unusual for an African-American women author to have a novel published, but also it was uncommon for novels written during this time period to contain an African-American female as a novel's heroine. Through her writing, Hurston served as one of the first African-American female voices of the twentieth century.

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Anne Julia Cooper (New York: Penguin Group, 1990).

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