

Araştırma Makalesi- Research Article

Reading Bell Hooks's "Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism" through the lens of Triple Oppression Theory¹

Bell Hooks'un "Ain't I A Woman: Black Women And Feminism" Kitabının Üçlü Baskı Teorisi Açısından İncelenmesi

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ABSTRACT

The concept of triple oppression theory was first coined by Louise Thompson Patterson to introduce the stratified oppression of black women. Later the concept was developed by some black socialists one of whom was Claudia Jones who popularized it with the assertion that black women synchronously encounter three kinds of oppression based on race, gender, and class. As the theory underlines that there is a relation among these three types of oppression, it considers it necessary that all three types need to be overcome at once. Considering the triple oppression theory (also referred as double jeopardy, Jane Crow, or triple exploitation) and Bell Hooks's monograph, this article aims to underline how the three malign thoughts, namely racism, capitalism, and patriarchy cooperate with each other to subjugate, colonize, oppress, and exploit their others. It concludes that the incentive of oppression, subjugation, colonization, and exploitation, which is likely to be named as 'the imperial desire' is a primordial archetype in human nature. It is a matter of the greed for the power. Hence, it is likely to assert that all the malicious and catastrophic praxes are the resultant of the pursuit for power. Accordingly, to minimize the destruction and malicious resultants stemmed from that instinctive primordial imperial desire, (desire for controlling political, economic, cultural assets of the others), it is essential to disperse and diffuse the power. As postmodern scholars put it: 'if power is everywhere, then it is nowhere'.

Keywords- *Bell Hooks, Feminism, Oppression, Black Women, Patriarchy*

ÖZ

Üçlü baskı teorisi kavramı ilk olarak Louise Thompson Patterson tarafından siyahi kadınların yaşadığı çok katmanlı baskıyı gözler önüne sermek için ortaya atıldı. Daha sonra bu kavram siyahi kadınların ırk, cinsiyet ve sınıf temelinde üç çeşit baskıyla eş zamanlı olarak mücadele ettikleri düşüncesiyle Claudia Jones'un da aralarında bulunduğu bazı siyahi sosyalistler tarafından geliştirildi. Bu teori, bu üç baskı unsuru arasında bir ilişki olduğunun ve bu baskılarla eşzamanlı mücadele edilmesi gerektiğinin altını çizmektedir. Bu doğrultudan hareketle üçlü baskı teorisi ve Bell Hooks'un monografisini temel alan bu makale; ırkçılık, kapitalizm ve ataerkillik olarak adlandırılan üç kötücül düşüncenin, kendilerinden olmayana baskı ve buyruğu altına alıp sömürgeleştirmek için birbirleriyle nasıl iş birliği yaptığını vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale aynı zamanda, baskı ve buyruğu altına alma, sömürgeleştirme ve boyun eğdirme içgüdüünün, bir başka deyişle yayılmacılık ve kontrol altına alma arzusunun insanın doğasında en başından beri var olan ilkel bir arketip olduğunu kabul etmektedir. Tüm kötücül ve yıkıcı felaketler ve sorunların, gücü ele geçirme isteğinin bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıktığını vurgulamayı amaçlayan bu çalışma, içgüdüsel ilkel imparatorluk arzusundan (başkalarının politik, ekonomik ve kültürel değerlerini kontrol etme arzusu) kaynaklanan yıkımı ve kötü sonuçları mümkün mertebe azaltmak için gücü yaymak ve dağıtmak gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır. Post modern bakış açısını savunanların söylediği gibi; 'eğer güç her yerdeyse o halde güç hiçbir yerdedir'.

Anahtar Kelimeler- *Bell Hooks, Feminizm, Boyunduruk, Siyahi Kadınlar, Ataerkillik.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although most of the states and social institutions and organizations declare that women should have equal rights with men, in reality it is a fact that in all societies and social classes, women have been suppressed and forced to remain intact on social, economic and political issues. It is hard to imagine, not even one hundred years ago, that women lacked a voice not only in society but also in everyday life. Male dominance has consistently been practiced throughout the world, especially in the eastern world (Taş, 2011:417). Dictionaries such as Merriam Webster, Cambridge, Encarta and Oxford, define feminism as an organized activity on behalf of women's rights, and also as the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes (Taş, 2011: 415). Generally, the main concerns of feminism are considered to have equal rights with men in the fields of having jobs, education, the right of abortion, child care, male dominance, etc. Feminism, which is derived from the Latin word *'femine'*, is generally broken up into four waves: The first-wave feminism, which spans from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, was mainly engaged in equality in property rights and in women's suffrage, or women's right to vote. Second-wave, which spans from the early 1960s through the late 1980s, focused on discrimination and on cultural, social, and political issues, and this wave feminists broadened the scope from the early quest for political rights to fight for greater equality in education, in workplace, and at home. The third-wave which emerged in the early 1990s was a reaction to the second-wave for its lack of attention to the differences among women due to race, ethnicity, class, nationality and religion. The fourth wave³, which spans from around 2012 up to now, struggles with sexual harassment and violence against women is well known as 'Me Too Movement'. Bell Hooks, on that account, argues that:

Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice. (Hooks, 1989: 22)

On Hooks' account, the defining characteristic that distinguishes feminism from other liberation struggles is its concern with sexism. Hooks regards feminism as "a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression" (Hooks, 1989: 23), not as a movement to dismantle and dismiss the social institutions such as motherhood and marriage. It is obvious that feminism is regarded as a liberation struggle against patriarchy. But this struggle is exerted to construct an equality of both men and women in social, economic, and political spheres.

According to Burkett & Brunell, one of the first supporter of the feminist activities is philosopher Christine de Pisan who, in medieval France, challenged the social restrictions on women and pushed for women's education. Later, in 18th-century England, Mary Wollstonecraft's came to the scene with her seminal work "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" which has been considered as a referential piece of English-language feminist philosophy. Meanwhile, in the United States, some notable activists were Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved Black woman, and Emma Goldman, the nation's leading anarchist during the late 19th century, can also be considered as notable figures of feminist Movements in America. Wollstonecraft's "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" has a special place within feminist theory. It highlights that the women are not house keepers and they must be given the right to fulfill their education.

II. BELL HOOKS

Bell Hooks is best known by her influential and radical text, *Ain't I a woman*. As Claire Cook underlines, Hooks was the first woman who had written such a provocative text in which black women in America were the main interest of the analysis (2012: 1). From Cook, we learn that Hooks had violent experiences during her childhood and adolescent life because of her father's uncontrolled behaviors (2012: 1). Cook asserts that "the violent and gendered dynamics in Hooks' relationship with her parents became apparent once again when her mother was temporarily but ferociously evicted from the family home" (2012: 2). Cooks interprets this violence as a sign of masculine power. Hooks grows up in the South of America, which was characterized by separation of members of different races. First, she attends Black public schools for the majority of her secondary education, which fosters a sense of belonging and positive affirmation. Then, after she attends university, she faces classist and racist problems. Her peers mock her because of her having come from the South. As Cook asserts, "it was this mocking at Stanford that caused her to seriously begin contemplating class differences because [t]o be materially

³ Although debated, It is claimed that a fourth wave of feminism began about 2012, bringing forth sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture, among other issues. A key component was the use of social media to highlight and address these concerns (Burkett & Brunell, 2021).

underprivileged at a university where most folks (with the exception of workers) are materially privileged provokes such thought” (2012: 9). For example, “as hooks could not afford the travel to home during the first few holiday breaks at Stanford, she stays with the working class ‘black women who labored as maids, as secretaries’ who she had befriended in order to overcome her feelings of isolation during the semester” (Cook, 2012: 10). She remains silent in terms of race, class, and gender during her university life. One can suggest that these forms of oppressions lead her to write such a provoking piece, which lays down women’s triple oppression.

III. TRIPPLE OPPRESSION

The term triple oppression is a tenet brought forth by black women from leftist political parties of USA in 1920s. It asserts that black working-class women are oppressed by three different intersecting ways. First; by patriarchy because they are women, second; racially because they are blacks, and third; in the classic Marxian economic sense because they are workers (Martinez, 2003: 41). The term is also known as ‘double jeopardy’, ‘Jane Crow’, or ‘triple exploitation’. Louise Thompson Patterson, who coined the term ‘triple exploitation’ in her article *Toward a Brighter Dawn*, published in 1936, is considered as one of the first proponents of the theory. Later, Claudia Jones popularized the theory as triple oppression (McDuffie, 2011: 4). Claudia Jones was a staunch Marxist who “spent her entire adult life working within radical working-class and black nationalist organizations formulating an internationalist ideology that encompassed feminism, black nationalism, and Marxism” (Lynn, 2014: 2). She both combined and simplified the ‘triple oppression’ model to highlight black women’s oppression, and expressed in an articulate manner a socialist feminism that considered not just race, but the markedly different struggles of all working women. She visualized herself and other African people in a battle against capitalism and colonialism. McDuffie states that the theory emphasizes that since there are connections among racial, gender, and class oppression, the eradication of one form of oppression requires the concurrent dismantlement of all types of oppression (2011: 4). McDuffie also adds, “the conceptual framework now referred to by feminist scholars as intersectionality, is most commonly associated with black feminism of the 1970s” (2011: 4). Martinez, in her article *La Chicana*, underlines the close relationship and intersectionality of these oppressions saying that “the three types of oppression cannot be separated... they are all part of the same system, they are three faces of the same enemy” (2003: 43). Intersectionality means that people have multiple identities. Maria Egan claims it is simplistic to think of people only as women or men, black or white. As well as belonging to racial and ethnic groups, people have gender and sexual identities, and see themselves as part of a particular social class. You cannot properly understand a person without taking all these aspects of them into account (2018: 8). The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, but one of the first feminist thinkers to articulate the ideas was Bell Hooks. In her seminal 1981 treatise *Ain’t I A Woman?*, she details how the lives of black and white women in the USA differ because while white women face only gender discrimination, black women face prejudice based on both their race and their gender. Martinez is of the opinion that the path for the oppression of colored women has started with the colonization of both the native Indian women of the Americas and Latin-American women by Europeans. She asserts, “the coming of the European, with his Catholic Church and feudal social system, was a turning point. Our roots lie in the act of rape: the rape of women, the rape of an entire continent and its people” (2003: 41). Denise Lynn underlines that “while Jones helped to synthesize triple oppression for a communist audience, her focus concentrated on the convergence of race and class as distinctive in black women’s oppression”(2014: 7). Jones was of the opinion that black women were a social class, which has been oppressed than the other classes. Lynn asserts that Jones had been central in articulating and defining a program for women’s liberation within the Communist Party by insisting that anti-colonialism and black nationalism were central to black women’s liberation (2014: 7). Lynn adds that Claudia Jones was of the opinion that “as far as black women were not liberated, white women could never know equality; therefore, she was articulating a larger feminist emancipatory analysis. Additionally, in the post-World War II era, Jones insisted that racism and sexism were the continued hang-ups of a persistent fascism within American capitalism” (2014: 7).

The book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, written by Bell Hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), is a monograph. It examines the category of black women’s experience from the historical perspectives. Jessie Carney Smith asserts that the book documents the experiences of black women from the years of slavery, through Black Reconstruction in the late 1860s, to the present (1996: 298). Hooks somewhat compares the 1970s women movements to the movements of the nineteenth century. Hooks underlines that she finishes the first draft of the book when she was nineteen, but the book is published ten years later (2000: XI). The monograph takes its title from the speech of Sojourner Truth, delivered at a women rights convention in Ohio in 1851. The speech is as follows:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. (Brezina, 2004: 51).

The speech sums up the general perceptions of black feminist circles as regards the white feminist women's standing point and their attitudes towards black women. Sojourner Truth's speech indicates that while white women suffer from patriarchy and high-class stratum, black women additionally have to cope with racial oppression. Torres et al underline that "many African American women have long struggled against this exclusionary feminism and have long participated in what appear to be for-whites-only feminist activity" (1999: 131). They also add, "only in some cases, some of these black women challenge the racism within feminist organizations controlled by white women" (1999: 131). Smith, underlining Bell Hooks' standpoint, asserts that Hooks "castigates both the contemporary, mostly middle and upper class white women's liberation movement and the contemporary black liberation movement as ignoring African-American women" (1996: 298). Bell Hooks considers feminism as a movement which aims to end the sexual abuse, the sexual discrimination, and oppression (2000: 1) She writes her monograph to underline that the feminist circles pay no attention to racial oppression. The extract below, taken from her book, clearly indicates where Hooks stands:

I became disillusioned as I saw the various groups of women appropriating feminism to serve their own opportunistic ends. Whether it was women university professors crying sexist oppression... to attract attention to their efforts to gain promotion; or women using feminism to mask their sexist attitudes; or women writers superficially exploring feminist themes to advance their own careers, it was evident that eliminating sexist oppression was not the primary concern. While their rallying cry was sexist oppression, they showed little concern about the status of women as a collective group in our society. They were primarily interested in making feminism a forum for the expression of their own self-centered needs and desires (Hooks, 1981: 189)

In addition, as for black men, she notes that historically, black men never viewed themselves as protectors and providers of black women. According to Hooks, "black men have always been primarily interested in self and stood idly by as black women were raped during slavery" (Hooks, 1981: 35). Looking at the twentieth century, she analyses all the women during the years of the civil rights movement and those of the emergence of the women's movement. Linda Hogan highlights that "her conclusions all point towards an alliance between sexism and racism, which ensured that black women remained outsiders to both the civil rights and the women's movement" (2016: 34). Hooks insists that black women have been the victims of the double oppression of racism and sexism by patriarchy. "This double oppression is evident even in our language. Black women are completely invisible; they are not included in either the term 'negro' or the term 'woman'" (Hooks, 1981: 91). Underlying that white feminists, in the past, drew comparison between women and blacks by saying that "The social status of women was akin to the position of blacks under slavery", she insists that "the term women refers specifically to white women and the term blacks or negroes refers to black men only" (Hooks, 1981: 147).

Hooks is convinced that she has been "disturbed by the white women's liberationists' insistence that the race and sex were two separate items" (Hooks, 1981: 12). She dismisses that insistence saying; "my life experience had shown me that the two issues were inseparable, that at the moment of my birth, two factors determined my destiny, my having been born black and my having been born female" (Hooks, 1981: 12). Hooks is of the opinion that "the battle to end racism and the battle to end sexism" are twinned together, so, to think of them as distinct issues is to overlook "a basic truth of existence" (Hooks, 1981: 12).

Thus, Hooks carries on the tradition that Sojourner Truth started in her speech delivered in 1851. Hooks juxtaposes four main ways that black women are brutalized and oppressed. According to Hooks, these ways are rape, then come flogging, reproduction and idealization of white womanhood. Hooks depict the case of rape of black women as an institution of control, for maintaining order and ensuring the obedience of black women. She claims that;

Black women's encounter with violent rape often occurred on the slave ships, which brought them from Africa to America. On these ships rape was used as a method of torture in order to subdue African women. They were considered to be available for any member of the crew who might wish to abuse them. The lot of the black woman did not improve once she reached the plantations. Again she was the target of physical and sexual abuse by owners, sons and overseers who frequently used rape or the threat of it to ensure the submission of black women (Hooks, 1981: 18).

Hooks goes on;

The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her masters and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owners or his sons or the overseer or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these failed to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will” (Hooks, 1981: 24).

One can imagine that no matter where these slave black women work, they do not feel safe anywhere from sexual violence. This frequency of rape, says Hooks, is “the assumption that African women were inordinately sexual” (Hooks, 1981: 28). In the *From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology*, Linda Hogan asserts that:

As originated from a religious tradition which views women to be seducers and temptresses, the notion of black women as the embodiment of sexuality and evil gained credence... and in contrast with which black women were thought to be sexual and lustful, white women were thought to be the embodiment of purity and virtue. Colonial women too accepted this description of black women. There are many instances recorded whereby colonial white women, on finding their husbands abusing a slave, would blame and brutalize the victim (Hogan, 2016: 35).

Hooks writes; “when an owner of a plantation was discovered by his wife to have raped a thirteen-year-old slave girl, the wife’s rage was directed entirely at the child who was flogged daily for several weeks” (1981: 37). Hooks associates this incident to the second tool of oppression of black female slaves. This second tool is flogging. Describing an incident of flogging and its reason as; “after he exhausted himself whipping her, he sent to his house for sealing wax and a lighted candle and, melting the wax, dropped it upon the woman’s lacerated back. He then got a riding whip and, standing over the woman, picked off the hardened wax by switching it” (1981: 38), Hooks claims that “flogging was used both with and without rape in order to punish or often simply to instill fear. Sadistic whipping of naked black women was a common feature of slavery (1981: 39). The third tool of oppression of black women is claimed to be reproduction. Although black women are expected to work all day in the fields or in the colonial house, their primary function was reproduction. A slave woman is valuable in direct proportion to the number of slave children she could produce (Hogan, 2016: 38). The children are either sold or raised to work on the master’s plantation. The fourth way in which black women were oppressed is the idealization of white womanhood, which was accepted as the “cult of womanhood” (Hogan, 2016: 45). Hooks thinks that white society in the years of reconstruction created and eternalized a myth, which divided black women and men. The myth is that of black matriarchy. Since black women in America have always been forced to work outside the home, this situation was manipulated as being a threat to black masculinity. Hooks underlines this as follows:

As black women were forced to work in low grade manual labour they were masculinized women who lacked the standards of womanhood. Black women were cast in a negative light. The casting of this image of the black female in sociological bold relief is both consistent and logical in racist terms, for the so called black matriarch is a kind of folk character largely fashioned by whites out of half-truths and lies about the involuntary conditions of black women (Hooks, 1981: 72).

It is likely to claim that all these four types of oppression have common relationship with the notion of power. According to Hamilton & Sharma, “violence in societies is caused by imbalances in power relations and wrong conceptions and applications of power” (1996: 21)

In general, “power is considered as being the capacity of a social entity to impose its will over the will of the powerless, or the capacity to force the others to do things they do not wish to do” (Balan, 2010: 56). In this way, power is perceived as an asset, as something owned by those in power. However, according to Foucault, “power is not an asset that can be owned, on the contrary it is something that reveals in a particular way. It is rather a strategy than a possession”. Foucault defines that strategy saying; “power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain... [It] is employed and exercised through a netlike organization” (1980: 98). In this regard Sergio Balan underlines that “conceiving power as strategy and not as possession means to think of it as something that has to be exerted and not something that can simply be acquired. It is not localized exclusively in certain institutions or individuals, but it is rather a set of relations dispersed throughout society” (2010: 58). Considering this definition, it is likely to conclude that the more one builds the network of social relations, the more s/he gets power. Each discourse (or thesis), legitimizing and relying on his own versions of realities, tries to have the control of the necessary tools which pave the ways to the power. This vicious circle is evident in every stratum of social life. The history of humanity has shown us that the inclination towards the power is primordial in living creatures. It is this primordial instinct that has led the idea of imperium, which paved the way to colonize and subjugate more than half of the people living in the world. In other words, one can claim that although the techniques and methods of controlling the other peoples and their territories may have been different, the primordial instinct, the thought of imperium (the instinct to command) has always been existed through the history of humankind. As a result, imperialism, colonialism, or neocolonialism have always been performed consecutively, the latter (colonialism and neocolonialism) as being methods or techniques

of the imperial thought. It is a matter of the greed for the power. Hence, it is likely to assert that all the malicious and catastrophic praxes are the resultant of the pursuit for power. Accordingly, to minimize the destruction and malicious resultants stemmed from that instinctive primordial imperial desire, (desire for controlling political, economic, cultural assets of the others), it is essential to disperse and diffuse the power. As postmodern scholars put it: 'if power is everywhere, then it is nowhere'.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is evident that the study of colored people, especially of black women had not been fostered, in other words, had been neglected by the theorists, scholars and academics of the field till Hooks published her treatise. Feminist circles were much engaged with the patriarchal and classist problems and oppressions. It was Sojourner Truth's famous speech, which brought forth that black women, beside patriarchal and classist oppressions, were oppressed by racism, too. This is the reason that Hooks decides to title her treatise with Truth's question which reads *Ain't I a Woman*. The book explicitly lay down the social status of black American women. In this book, Bell Hooks underlines that black women have been decentralized and devaluated first by both black and white men and later by white women. The book is consisted of five chapters. In the first chapter, Hooks highlights the days of slavery, and goes on the black women's experiences up to the modern days. She furnishes the book with an outstanding vision, which analyses the ongoing degradation of black women in society. Throughout the chapters, one can see that Hooks is in search of providing an understanding of oppressed and disgraced black women's struggles in feminist movements.

Hooks' conclusion is not that feminism is irrelevant to black women. She feels that the majority of black women, historically and today, sympathize with and wish to belong to some kind of feminist movement. In other words, they consist of women who wish merely to be the staunch followers of the men who block their way instead of devising alternative social structures. They have ignored the condition of the women who belong to some other classes or different ethnicities. In fact, looking at the timeline of feminist agenda, it is obvious that the feminist movements have been conducted mostly by white middle and upper class women or some white men from the same social classes. Moreover, lower class women, in other words, black women have never been the main interest and focus of this upper class women or men. So, logically, it can be claimed that feminism, to some certain degrees, have been both racist and classist. Another indication for the claim that feminism is racist and classist might be the fact that white "American women are socialized to be racist, classist and even sexist due to the patriarchal thoughts within the class they belong" (Hogan, 2016: 37). They have mostly been engaged by the problems they encounter within their class. Hooks propounds that instead of acting as surrogates of men, white women should seek further growth and change, and should consider all women irrespective of their class and ethnic identity. As Hooks finally suggests: "the sisterhood that is necessary for the making of feminist revolution can be achieved only when all women disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy and competition with one another that has kept us vulnerable, weak and unable to envision new realities" (1981: 154).

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