

**TITLE : SELF, IDENTITY AND GIRLHOOD IN BELL HOOKS' *BONE BLACK*.**

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**Abstract**

bell hooks in her autobiography *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* discusses the dearth of materials on the lives of Black girls. hooks finds out that it is important to know and explore the lives of Black girls who are always in the background; they act as props and not much attention is given to them. She explores the intersectionality of race, class and gender on Black girls growing up in a discriminating White capitalist American society which pushes them to the margins to the extent of becoming invisible.

[keywords: Black, White, girls, boys, education, integration, race, class, sexism]

**Introduction**

bell hooks joined the academics who wrote their autobiographies with the publication of *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* in 1996. But her autobiographical memoir is not only about recounting her life as a young black girl. It is not only an account of her personal life. But the memoir proves to be a significant analysis of black girlhood. Her memoir *Bone Black* illustrates the intersectionality of race and class on a black girl growing up. In her foreword, hooks mentions about the dearth of materials present on Black girls. She likens her memoir to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) which concentrates on the lives of Black girls.

The aim of this paper is to examine how race, class and gender affect the young Black girls. bell hooks memoir *Bone Black* shows how white supremacy and patriarchy interacted to form a

particular kind of experience for black girls. Young Black children had difficulty pursuing education even after integration of schools. It was imbibed in young Black children like bell hooks the value of hard work in the face of limited opportunity, education and economic hardships.

## Discussion

bell hooks writes in her foreword that she eagerly wanted to read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* because the book dealt with young Blacks girls like her. Before the publication of this book Black girls were always overlooked and added to the background. She says,

“indeed, one of my favourite novels in the whole world is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. When the book was first published she explained that it was her desire to write about the people who in all literature were always peripheral- little Black girls who were props, background; those people were never center stage and those people were me.” (*Bone Black*, xii)

When bell hooks read this book it affected her to the core. In the fictional narrative of Morrison she found fragments of her own girlhood. hooks always felt that not enough have been written on the lives of Black girls. She found dearth of materials on the lives of Black girls. So Black girlhood has remained in dark and not has been explored. hooks says that Black girls have always confronted issues on race, class, gender and have tried to cope with these issues. She says, “And most of all she gave us black girls who were critical thinkers, theorizing their lives, telling the story, and by so doing making themselves subjects of history.” (*Bone Black*, xii)

bell hooks also points out that there might be differences in the experience of black girls. She says, “There is no one story of Black girlhood.” (*Bone Black*, xiii) Their experience is diverse. So their diverse experiences have to be heard/ considered. Black girlhood is affected by class. Those girls who have economic security have different experiences than poor Black girls. She says, “Certainly, class shapes the nature of our childhood experiences. Undoubtedly, Black girls

raised in materially privileged families have different notions of self-esteem from peers growing up poor and/or destitute.” (*Bone Black*, xiii)

bell hooks memoir is not only about one girl's coming-of-age story. But the text also shows how the tender minds of young boys and girls of marginalised communities get affected by racism. bell hooks recounts how she learnt not to believe White folks. She says,

“She has learned to fear white folks without understanding what it is she fears. There is always an edge of bitterness, sometimes hatred, in the grown-up's voice when they speak of them but never any explanation..... She and the other children want to understand Race but no one explains it. ” (*Bone Black*, 31)

bell hooks realises that when one is born as a white, one has access to various opportunities. She says, “They learn without understanding that the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that black people who most resemble white folks will live better in that world.” (*Bone Black*, 31)

Western tradition manipulates history. History is written from the white men's perspective. The Black autobiography was a counterweight to the White historian's caricature of Black life. bell hooks says that she and other Black children learn about savages in school. But she does not relate it to herself or her family. She says,

“When she learns of slavery in school or hears the laughter in geography when they see pictures of naked Africans- the word ‘savage’ underneath the pictures- she does not connect it to herself , her family.” (*Bone Black*, 31)

Her grandmother tells her that children are sent to school to learn the ways of white men and to deny parts of themselves. hooks' grandmother calls Indians as the People of the First Snow. When bell hooks tells her grandmother that they are called Indians in her school textbooks. Like the Africans they too are savages. Her grandmother does not believe her. bell hooks says,

“Saru calls them the People of the First Snow, I call them Indians. I tell her we learn at school that they are Indians, that like the Africans, they are called *savages* in our books. She tells me we go to school to learn the white men’s way, to learn to deny parts of ourselves. She is proud of the fact that she is taken out of school to begin work while she is still a young girl. Her world is outside.” (*Bone Black*, 52)

Black children faced racism in schools also. bell hooks had to leave their all-black school and go to white neighbourhood to attain white schools. bell hooks had to attain white school because of desegregation of schools. bell hooks says,

“We cannot believe we must leave our beloved Crispus Attucks and go to school in the white neighbourhoods. We cannot imagine what it will be like to walk by the principal’s office and see a man who will not know our name, who will about care about us.” (*Bone Black*, 154)

The Black boys who were smart and bright were not allowed to sit in class with White girls. Because making Black boys and White girls sit together was considered to be a threat to the security of White girls. bell hooks says,

“some of us are chosen. We are allowed to sit in the classes with white students.... We are the good servants who will be looked to..... We are not surprised that black boys are not in the smart classes, even though we know that many of them are smart. We know that white folks have this thing about black boys sitting in the classes with white girls.” (*Bone Black*, 155)

bell hooks’ memoir is not only an account of her own experiences but it is also relevant to other Black children particularly Black girls. She often uses second and third person in addition to first person narrative. The use of this technique extends hooks’ private experiences to public sphere. Other Black girls can relate to bell hooks’ experiences. bell hooks says,

“Sometimes memories are presented in the third person, indirectly, just as all of us sometimes talk about things that way. We look back as if we are standing at a distance. Examining life retrospectively we are there and not there, watching and watched.” (*Bone Black*, xv)

Robin M. Boylorn in “On Being at Home with Myself” uses the metaphor of home to discuss and situate a way of experiencing a world through a raced and gendered lens. The impact of racism on black girls makes them to doubt their worth. They feel devalued when they are judged by the white standards of beauty. bell hooks says that many feminists thinkers writing on girlhood feel that Black girls have better self-esteem than White girls. They feel that Black girls are more assertive and confident. But bell hooks says that in traditional southern- based Black life it is expected that Black girls speak and behave in a dignified way. So it has nothing to do with the confidence of Black girls. bell hooks says,

“An outspoken girl might still feel that she was worthless because her skin was not light enough or her hair the right texture. These are the variables that white researchers often do not consider when they measure the self- esteem of black females with a yardstick that was designed based on values emerging from white experience.” (*Bone Black*, xiii)

## Conclusion

From the above discussion it becomes evident that bell hooks in her memoir *Bone Black* points out how the social evils of racism, classism and sexism affect young Black girls growing up in America. Black children faced racism while pursuing education in schools. Bright and smart Black boys were refrained from attending classes with White girls. The Black children in white schools felt themselves to be under constant surveillance.

Teenage Black girls felt themselves to be worthless because their skin was not light enough or their hair the right texture. Black children knew that the world belonged to the Whites. They had

fewer or no opportunities at all. In such a situation small Black children like bell hooks in her memoir were taught the virtues of hard work in the face of racism, oppression and economic crisis. bell hooks' memoir *Bone Black* is relevant to Black children particularly to Black girls.

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