

Creating a Standpoint for African-American Muslim Women in Umm Zakiyyah's Trilogy *If I Should Speak*

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Abstract

As an African-American novelist, Umm Zakiyyah apparently affiliates with Collins's theory of black feminist thinking. Her viewpoint in the trilogy is Afrocentric. Sharing the same utmost that Collins coined her Black feminist thought for, to stand against oppression of African-American women, Umm Zakiyyah fights against oppression of African-American Muslim women.

This paper aims at analyzing Umm Zakiyyah's trilogy *If I Should Speak* in the light of Patricia Hill Collins' theory of Black Feminist Thought. As an African-American woman, Collins focused her theory on advocating Black women's rights in the American society through creating a standpoint to them. Likewise, Umm Zakiyyah is a Muslim African-American writer whose fiction, and most notably her trilogy *If I Should Speak*,

serves to create an emancipatory voice to a sect of American women who are Muslim and African-American.

In her theory of Black feminist thought, Collins provides an analysis of societal domination of femininity through her concept of matrix of domination. Collins assumes that there are various overlapping standpoints that mark one's position in the society rather than one standpoint. She sees that the dominant/dominated, or oppressor/oppressed relationship can be defined as power that operates from the top down by forcing and controlling unwilling victims to bend to the will of more powerful superiors (Edles and Applerouth 334). Collins asserts that:

depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. . . . Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives. (qtd. in Edles and Applerouth 334)

Through her approach of Black feminist thought, Collins attributes whiteness to mainstream feminist thought. She also reminds white women that they are not the only feminists.

Collins maintains that in the same way that European theorists have historically prioritized class over race or gender, and feminists have prioritized gender over either race or class, Afrocentric scholarship, although formally acknowledging the significance of gender, relegates it as secondary to the more pressing fight against racism (Edles and Applerouth 335).

Mary E. Swigonski builds on Collins' theory of Black feminist thought one of the main tenets of standpoint theory. According to Swigonski, one of the main tenets of standpoint theory is that many others are not just outsiders, but also "outsiders within" (392). Accordingly, it can be presumed that one can experience oppression and resist it, or is oppressor and oppressed at the same time, she refers to the sole individuals who are within the same community (the White and African-American women) in which the White women become the oppressor and the oppressed in the broader patriarchal society, while the black women remain oppressed all along.

According to AnikaMaaza Mann, a professor of philosophy, oppressed, or marginalized peoples have a privileged epistemological standpoint that can provide a privileged moral position (iii). Mann draws on Collins's approach of Black feminist thought to emphasize that marginalized groups, especially black women, have particular

systems of knowledge concerning the social world (10). She argues that the particularity of black feminist thought, which highlights the interlocking nature of oppression, can give rise to an alternative vision of an ethical society devoid of racial and sexual oppression (10). Mann elucidates the core notion of Collins's feminist standpoint theory, the matrix of domination. She stresses the assumption of Collins that intersections of race, gender, and class lead to oppression of black women. Collins's view is holistic in terms that oppression must be fought in all its forms. Collins is critical of those who prioritize one form of oppression and, then subsequently, insert other variables into their analysis. Building on Collins's intersectionality of race and gender, Mann demonstrates the consequences of separating race and class for African-American women:

The segregating effects of race and class have created a stronger sense of unification among women of color than is shared between women of color and white women. Since women are not segregated from men in the same respect that blacks are systematically segregated from whites, through housing, educational and employment discrimination, it is difficult to create the same bond shared by African-American women and men

across the racial divide. If there is to be a multiracial, multiethnic feminist standpoint, then racialized hierarchies must be addressed to a much greater extent than they are presently. (141)

More than what white women experience of sexual discrimination, black women's experience of discrimination is much tougher. Lying in a lower level of the hierarchal order of American society, owing to the intersection of class, gender, and race, black women's epistemic view is more comprehensive than white women. Segregation that black women are mandated to experience stirs them to work on raising the level of their identity. Hence, they have to fully see the circle of American society of which they are deemed an outsider so that they can find or create a space to get inside. And this is actually what Umm Zakiyyah works on through her trilogy *If I Should Speak*.

Michelle D. Byng elaborates on Collins's Black feminist thought to refer to the African-American Muslim women's experience with racial discrimination as one form of oppression. She draws on Collins's matrix of domination to describe how African-American Muslim women suffer discrimination. According to Byng, it is the intersections of race, gender, and religion that structures their encounter with discrimination (Byng 474). In addition, as Collins assumes in her theory,

people's experiences and identities are shaped by a both/and, as opposed to either/or, reality (Byng 474). This means that it is not possible to experience one type of oppression based on one axis without the others; oppression is experienced through all the axes that compose the matrix of domination. Byng explains the details of an interview she had with an African-American Muslim girl who had been veiled since puberty and who had also experienced discrimination:

I have a lot of friends who say," Well it's probably race but then it's more so your religion." But I mean, a lot of it has to do with my religion. There were jobs I haven't gotten and I'm sure it was because I was [voice trails off]. And it might have been because [voice trails off].It's so hard to tell which one it is. It might have been because I was Muslim but it also may have been because I was African-American. So I really never know. All I know is that I'm being discriminated against and I don't quite know why. I know that it could be because I'm a woman. Maybe because I'm all three. (477)

So, how do African-American Muslim women handle this discrimination in the United States? In fact, in resisting

discrimination African-American Muslim women speak from the perspective of the Sunnah, totally away from the codes of the Nation of Islam who have deviated from the teaching of Islam. As a form of oppression, they recognized it and also resisted it (Byng 482). Through their resistance, they could mediate this discrimination through obtaining self-definition, determination and valuation (Byng 480). According to Collins, an important condition for resisting oppression is a safe social space where the oppressed can find their voice (Byng 482). They managed to create such a voice only when they embraced Islam.

In *If I Should Speak* UmmZakiyyah gives a lively and practical picture of black feminist thought. Tamika Douglas is a sophomore black girl who studies religions. She experiences oppression in her college when she has an altercation with Jennifer, her white roommate. Even though Tamika took the defensive position in her squabble with Jennifer, she is mandatorily proved to have committed physical assault against Jennifer. Mandy, the resident advisor, insists on considering Tamika guilty and she has got to move out to the dormitory. The Conduct Board hearing that Tamika subjugates to is a clear example of what Collins names as matrix of domination. Racial discrimination that Tamika experienced then reflects the

intersection of race and class as two social phenomena through which black Americans always become victims of the oppressing white community.

That incident led Tamika to change her dorm to live with Aminah and Durrah. With these two flat mates, Tamika started to experience a new context in which that intersection of sex, race, and gender which leads to domination of one sect over another was absent. When she started to learn about Islam through her conversation with Aminah and through reading about Islam, Tamika knew that what Collins conceptualized as the matrix of domination did not exist in Islamic sociology. In her dialogue with Aminah, Tamika knew the very reality that she had always sought:

"I can't accept any religion where the men can oppress the women."

Aminah stared at her incredulously, squinting her eyes, blinking. "Excuse me?"

"Don't the Muslim men oppress their women?"

Tamika now asked it carefully, as if she wanted to know, having realized how the original statement must have sounded to Aminah.

"Before I answer that, let me ask you something."

Tamika shrugged in agreement, self-conscious all of a sudden, ashamed for having offended Aminah.

"Okay."

"Do men oppress women?" Aminah inquired.

"Some do," Tamika admitted nonchalantly, shrugging.

"Do Christian men oppress women?"

"Some," she replied impatiently.

"Do Jewish men oppress women?"

She sighed. "Some."

"Do atheist men oppress women?"

"I'm sure some do."

"Now," Aminah said calmly, intently, "to answer your question." She repeated, "Do Muslim men oppress women?" She nodded. "Yes, some do. Just like other men. But," she said, emphasizing, "if your question is, does Islam tell them to? Then the answer is no. And quite the contrary." (*If I Should Speak* 105-06)

Actually Umm Zakiyyah used that quote in a speech entitled "Feminism in Islam: Fact or Fiction" to explain how she could handle stereotypical questions and comments on Islam as an oppressive religion. Then she concluded: "To me, that's

equivalent to being asked as an African-American: " how does it feel to be part of a group of people who're genetically inferior to white people?"(Umm Zakiyyah "Feminism in Islam"). She means to respond to those who see that Muslim women are oppressed in a way that if African-Americans are oppressed in the United States, so Muslim women are oppressed as well. Here what Umm Zakiyyah says is juxtaposed with Collin's concept of "matrix of domination". Umm Zakiyyah is in fact a critic of the attitude of the oppressive policy of the American society. That is to say, in her point of view, if one thinks that African-Americans are oppressed, then it can be said that Islam oppresses woman as well. Her comparison is an attempt to clear away the stereotypes the West has about Islam as an oppressive religion.

In the U.S., there has been a large system of suppressing Black feminist thinking by denying African-American women their credentials to become literate in order to exclude them from being a part of American intelligentsia. African-American women have always been kept in an assigned, subordinate place (Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 5). Therefore, the inclination for getting education is often posited by Black feminists as the best way to create Black women's epistemology. Tamika's conversion to Islam can be seen as a transition from an

oppressed group to a more oppressed group. She was raised as an African-American Christian girl by a mother who was strongly committed to Christianity and respecting her Black identity. Then Tamika became a member of the Muslim community who was more oppressed than African-American Christians. In both communities, Tamika experiences women's insistence on getting education.

The idiosyncrasy of gaining a standpoint within a society controlled by the male dominant is what urges women to seek education. Tamika is seen by her mother, Thelma, as the access through which she can create a standpoint of her own. She holds her hopes on Tamika to go as far as possible in her education to amend for her disappointments with her husband, and Latonia and Phillip, her children. Tamika is her mother's weapon which she is loading to reinforce herself in her resistance against "the injustice of the so-called "justice" system of America" (*If I Should Speak* 16). In Black feminist thought, one of the most important tenets of feminist standpoint theory is that less powerful groups who experience hegemonic practices in society tend to empower themselves through education. Tamika's mother, Thelma, counts on her to be a real something in society in order to make her proud: "You gotta get an education if you wanna be anything" (*If I should Speak* 20). Thelma renders

Tamika her means of realizing the ideal Black feminist model only through getting a proper education that will enable her to be an attorney or even a senator who will speak for black people and seek their rights. Actually, Thelma drew for Tamika and Latonya, Tamika's sister, the route on which they could embark:" From adolescence, the expectations of Tamika and Latonya were clear. Don't get pregnant, get a college degree, and never depend on a man. These were the keys to success in life..." (*A Voice* 215).

Tamika's conversion to Islam amalgamated her into a community which is comprised of various Muslim minorities from Asia, Middle East, Latin America, in addition to White American and African-American Muslims. Education and establishing a career for Muslim women was a priority if they were to be respected and independent in society. The trilogy *If I Should Speak* actually abounds with many Muslim female figures that all got highly proper education and successful professional life as well. Tamika's meeting with Zahra's mother during the party Zahra holds in her apartment also reflects how the Pakistanis, as a Muslim group consider education an indispensable issue:

"Finish school," a voice commanded with such authority that Tamika momentarily wondered if the

comment was meant for her..."Marriage will come. Don't ruin your life. Finish school. Many girls don't have the chance you have to go to school. Do you know how many girls in my country want the opportunity you have?...You take care of yourself, then marry... I came to this country nineteen years ago to give my children the opportunity they couldn't have in Pakistan. Americans take this for granted. You are young, and you don't know life. Life is not love and all these happy things". (*A Voice* 285)

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Most scholarships define Black nationalism as a political ideology, one of many (e.g., socialism or integrationism) that historically have framed African-American politics (Collins *From Black Power to Hip Hop*76). Adopting political ideologies and adherence to religion is a focal point in establishing Black

nationalism. Individuals who believe in Christianity, capitalism, Islam, Marxism and similar systems of thought use the main ideas of these systems of belief to guide everyday decision-making and group mobilization (76). In fact, most African-Americans were forced to adopt the religious faith practices of their White slaveholders (Kennedy 1). The Whites tried to exploit the scriptures of Christianity to come up with justifications of oppression of African-Americans as slaves. Nonetheless, the African-Americans found their salvation through adhering to religion as they started to understand it differently. As C. Eric Lincoln points out:

For African Americans, a people whose total experience has been a sustained condition of multiform stress, religion is never far from the threshold of consciousness, for whether it is embraced with fervor or rejected with disdain, it is the focal element of the black experience. (qtd. in Collins 79-80)

In Umm Zakiyyah's sketches of the non-Muslim characters, the discrepancy between the white characters and the black ones is obvious. Besides her being racist and anti-black white girl who deranged from a slave-trading family from the south, Sarah was atheist. On the contrary, Ismael was a strong

Christian. Breaking the ice with Sarah was to question her about her theological identity when he asked her "Do you believe in God?" Ismael's strong faith that was reflected in his question was Sarah's turning point to review her life and reshape her way of thinking. Even after their conversion to Islam, Ismael's strong commitment to Islam is what makes Sarah feel secured and tranquil.

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