

**“THE PROBLEM THAT HAS NO NAME”: PERSPECTIVES OF RADICAL FEMINISM IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF ANGELOU, JORDAN AND WALKER**Muhammad Qasim<sup>1</sup>

Original Article

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**Abstract**

*Radical feminism, as a perspective of feminism, believes in radical notion of change and reordering of the social system which is all patriarchal and the bone of all contention because of being man-centric. Being traditionally and largely white-woman-centric, radical feminism strives to overthrow domestic violence, sexual abuse, injustice, economic inequality, and gender oppression being at daggers drawn with men. Thus, the aggressive tone of these radical feminists becomes a powerful sound that penetrates and reverberates even into the lives and writings of black women who themselves have their own issues of being black and being marginalized by white feminists. This study explores radical feminist perspectives in the selected poems of black female poets, Maya Angelou, June Jordan and Alice Walker to explain the difference between the patriarchal social system and the female reality and, at the same time, surfaces the fact how women get beyond boundaries of race, caste or group whenever there is a call to demolish that patriarchal system which, as found in the study, sets its own standards to exploit women. The concept or framework of radical feminism is defined with special reference to Adrienne Rich, Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone—which is, then, analyzed in the target poems.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, radical feminism, black feminism, race, gender, womanism

**Introduction**

Feminism as a movement as well as cultural, social, and critical theory has been evolving and mutating since its emergence resulting in many feminisms and waves. In spite of having many basic common goals and objectives, these feminisms have shown many differences. Coming out to raise their voice against men, these victimized and marginalized women found disgust and heavy sense of being oppressed even against women. Women of color, especially black women, felt marginalized even within the movement. Radical feminism is considered to be associated with the second wave which, along with the first, is mainly meant for the white women. So, black feminism emerged to address this double marginalization, especially of black women. So, it is very interesting to find how radical feminist perspectives get penetrated into the writings of black women. This study attempts to explore these perspectives in the selected poems of black female poets including Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and June Jordan.

Radical feminism focuses that society is patriarchal in which man has more social power than a woman. This causes oppression and suppression of women resulting in the form of social injustice, rape, domestic violence and other issues. So, these radical feminists, sometimes called radfems, are often accused of being man-haters because they intend to get rid of patriarchy. They think that gender roles, sex work, pornography, and BDSM should not be there because these are purely patriarchal. Owing to this radical notion to reorder society entirely, these radical feminists like Catherine Mackinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Valerie Solanas were often criticized. For example, Andrea Dworkin's two famous books on radical feminism *Intercourse* and *Pornography-Men possessing women* (1981) were criticized for being anti-sex. However, Radical feminism maintains that the oppression of women is the fundamental oppression as a main

radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson (1969) states that “The ‘battle of the sexes’ is a commonplace, both over time and distance” (p. 2). But more bitterness and harshness are represented by Valerie Solanas who wrote *SCUM MANIFESTO* in 1967 referring to society for cutting men. With bitter words, Solanas demands a better social setup through “destroying, looting, fucking up and killing” (p. 44). Aboudaif, in his article written in 2012, describes radical feminism and says, “Radicalism in the theory is considered the most dynamic and developing approach. What is astonishing about Radical Feminists is their exceptional boldness in bringing up the issue of sexuality to the field of discussion” (p. 11).

Radical feminism as a theory is a vast field. For tracing its perspective in the selected poems of Maya Angelou, June Jordan and Alice Walker, this study relies on the key concepts of Adrienne Rich expressed in some of her essays and articles, Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). In an article written in 1979, Rich states that the point of radical feminism is “not to pass on a [patriarchal] tradition but to break its hold over us” (p. 19). In another work written in 1976, she states “in order to live a fully human life, we require not only control of our bodies—we must touch the unity and resonation of our physicality” (p. 13). In her book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Shulamith Firestone reflects that “sexual class system” is predated and is the most fundamental type of all oppression and the target of feminists must be “not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex extinction itself” (p. 11). Mary Anne Warren (1980) sums up Firestone’s concepts in these words: “Firestone argues that the biological sexual dichotomy, particularly the biological division of labor in production, is the root cause of male domination, economic class exploitation, racism, imperialism and ecological irresponsibility” (p. 155). The key text of radical feminism is Kate Millet’s (1970) book *Sexual Politics*, in which she discusses the role of patriarchy played in gender relations and criticizes Norman Mailer, Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence because of their sexist and patriarchal way. According to Millet, “Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy” (p. 25) in which there are racial, economic, and sexual differences. So, overall, what is derived and taken from the concepts of Rich, Millet, and Firestone seems to represent “The Problem That Has No Name” (Friedan, 1963). Although Betty Friedan uses this phrase as the title of the chapter of her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to describe the unhappiness and frustration of so-called happy, middle-class, suburban housewives of the 1950s and 1960s who, contrary to their appearances, were really frustrated sleep walking through the meaningless lives, yet this problem leaps beyond and haunts Rich, Millet, and Firestone peeping again and again through discussions in their writings, along with many others. It also penetrates into the poetic and creative imagination of poets like Maya Angelou, June Jordan and Alice Walker.

#### **Aspects of Radical feminism in Alice Walker’s poems “Be Nobody’s Darling” (1973) and “A woman is not a potted plant” (1991)**

Alice Walker, born in 1944 in America, is a poet, author and activist. Her fiction, essays and poems focus on race and gender. This Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner, black author and poet affected the literary scene, took an active part in the movement and inspired many feminists with her strong voice she raised against patriarchal social setup with moving poems and powerful fiction. Though her specific brand of feminism includes her advocacy of the women of color for which she coined the term womanism in *In Search of Mothers’ Gardens* (1983) in an attempt to create harmony between men and women at the intersection of class, race, gender oppression, and violence, yet her writings also show themes and main concerns of radical feminism including the idea that patriarchy is the main source of oppression, violence and injustice. It is interesting to note that poetry as well as fiction of Walker rings with the louder and more outrageous cry against men and she, in this regard, stands in the club of the radical feminists whereas she forwards an idea in the form of womanism in order to take up issues of gender without going or crying against men. Because of this multiplicity of themes, her writings

have attracted the attention of critics and researchers. But no research or critical reading of Alice Walker's poetry, in this regard, is found. So this study focuses on Walker's two poems owing to their thematic relevance and aptness to it.

Alice Walker's poem "Be Nobody's Darling" (1973) rings with radical feminist's tone even from the title. In a very imperative way, the poem starts thus:

Be nobody's darling;  
Be an outcast  
Take the contradictions  
Of your life  
And wrap around  
You like a shawl, to parry stones  
To keep you warm (Walker, 1973, p. 57)

To be somebody's darling suggests the idea of romantic love and Walker means to reject it in a similar way as Kate Millet does in *Sexual Politics* (1970) and says, "the concept of romantic love affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit" (p. 37). Walker herself grew up as an outcast. She is well aware of the fact that women are outcasts in a male-dominant society. She seems to suggest that it is better to be an outcast instead of being exploited sexually and emotionally by being a darling. Radical feminists focused on this bitter aspect of women's lives because they were considered to please and satisfy their husbands. Further, she suggests women take their contradictions because all institutions and society, according to radical feminists, are patriarchal and there is no justice for them. If these contradictions are taken out to the society which is prejudiced, these will be more contradicted. So, by wrapping them around themselves women may be able to distance themselves from men and 'parry stones' which are constantly thrown at them.

As the poem moves on, there is a more pointed message for the outcasts when it says, "Let them look askance at you/and you askance reply" (Walker, 1973, p. 57). This grim element of out-casted life brings to light the fact that women are looked down up and, similarly, they stare back at men suspiciously. It shows their misery of being a woman. The poem moves to the second stanza and the speaker says:

Make a merry gathering  
On the bank  
here thousands perished  
For brave hurt words  
They said. (Walker, 1973, p. 57)

So, while walking alone to the bank to "make a merry gathering", the outcast is reminded of the deaths of those, most probably women, who met their ends for speaking their truths because, according to Kate Millet (1970) "our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy" (p. 25) and it is killing for those who try to go against its tide. This severe image, of course, haunted radical feminists. The last stanza ends thus:

But be nobody's darling;  
Be an outcast.  
Qualified to live  
Among your dead (Walker, 1973, p. 57)

This last suggestion for living among the dead instead of being somebody's darling shows a victimized and oppressed woman's frustration on one hand, and her urge to cut herself off from men on the other. This is what earned radical feminists a blame for being male-haters.

Alice Walker's second poem "A woman is not a potted plant" (1991) is replete with the speaker's affirmation that a woman is supposed to carry out household affairs, raise children, please men and do nothing else. The poem opens thus:

A woman is not a potted plant  
Her roots bound  
To the confines  
Of her house (Walker, 1991, p. 68)

The poem further states that "a woman has her leaves trimmed/to the contours/of her sex" (Walker, 1991, p. 68). So, "In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service" (Millet, 1970, p. 26) and often makes women "feel like crying out" (Friedan, 1963, p. 49). The poem ends with the radical realization of the woman that "a woman/is wilderness/unbounded" and she is not "--- creeper vine/or neither tree" and "nor even honey suckle/or bee" (Walker, 1991, p. 68). After lamenting over a woman's fate who is confined to the house, victimized and discriminated, the speaker's sudden realization that woman is neither plant nor animal or insects is a clear-cut warning to patriarchy that this victimized and oppressed woman is powerful enough and may become wild and "unbounded" if men keep on subjugating and marginalizing her. It may take her to "armed struggle" (Millet, 1970, p. 33) for her freedom. Alice Walker seems disgusted with a woman's status as a housewife who is deprived of all other rational and social activities like men and denounces, in Millet's way, family as "patriarchy's chief institution" (Millet, 1970, p. 33).

So, both of the speaker women of Walker's poems stand side by side with radical feminists in their desperate campaign against men with determination not to follow or "pass on a [patriarchal] tradition but to break its hold over" (Rich, 1976, p. 19) them.

### **Aspects of Radical Feminism in Maya Angelou's poems "Men" (1986) and "Woman Work" (1978)**

Born in 1928 in St. Louis, Maya Angelou is America's prominent figure and a celebrated poet. Like Walker and Jordan, she started experiencing issues of patriarchal society in her childhood. The major one was her parents' divorce, which forced her to live with her grandmother and her brother. She also became a victim of rape when she was only eight. These events haunted her imagination and shaped her thought patterns making her bold enough to raise a powerful voice against patriarchy as a foundation of all female problems like domestic violence, social injustice, and gender discrimination. Being conscious of the racial and gender issues where she grew up, Maya wrote and spoke with great self-confidence and perseverance. Her rape at eight and childbirth at sixteen burned an outrageous passion which is quite obvious in the writings of this black feminist activist and these works can stand, with prominence and dignity, in prime literature of radical feminism. This is testified by analyzing her two target-poems dominated by radical feminist notes.

Maya Angelou's poem "Men" (1986) is a radical feminist piece because it is a story of a girl who has been abused and victimized by men because, in this patriarchal society, there is a "birthright priority whereby males rule females" (Millet, 1970, p. 25). It is a sad experience of a young girl who was very curious about men but they transformed this curiosity into pinching pain and agony by raping her. The poem opens thus:

When I was young, I used to see  
Watch behind the curtains  
As men walked up and down the street. Wino men, old men  
Young men shaped as mustard. (Angelou, 1986, p. 35)

The speaker further says that she used to watch them sitting under the window while "Men are always/going somewhere" (Angelou, 1986, p. 35). She was only fifteen, they knew it, and "they

would pause” there with “their shoulders high” (Angelou, 1986, p. 35). This scene in the first stanza shows a harsh and bitter aspect of our society where men are active and mobile whereas women are confined, restricted, and passive. This radical feminist perspective is deepened by the description of masculinity. So this masculine-patriarchal view in which the role of the girl is limited and minimized forces Adrienne Rich (1979), a radical feminist, to announce that, “in order to live as fully human life” women need to take control and “touch the unity and resonance” of their bodies (p. 13). This “biological sexual dichotomy” (Warren, 1980, p. 155) greatly touches up Firestone as well as all other radical feminists who think that biological privilege encourages men to rape and abuse. The second stanza proves this:

One day they hold you in the  
Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you  
Were the last raw egg in the world. Then  
They tighten up. Just a little.  
The First squeeze is nice.  
A quick hug (Angelou, 1986, p. 35)

After this, she further states that “the hurt begins” and “Air disappears” (Angelou, 1986, p. 35). This sad experience of intercourse indicates a girl’s innocence which becomes the victim of men’s lust, and they sexually abuse and emotionally exploit her. This sexual abuse and emotional exploitation were of the main grievances which flamed up radical feminists to draw part or go against these brutes who call themselves men. So, the scene ends with further moving details when the victim says, “your mind pops, exploding fiercely, briefly/like the head of a kitchen match, shattered” and “your body has slammed shut forever/no keys exit” (Angelou, 1986, p. 36). So, this abuse leaves long-lasting effects on her psyche and creates deep wounds. In the last and final stanza, she is left alone and goes back to the curtain where she was before this injury. She is, somehow, able to stand up and watches men walk “knowing something/going someplace” (Angelou, 1986, p. 36). This ‘knowing’ any ‘going’ of men is contrasted with the girl’s passivity and uncertainty in these ending lines “But this time, I will simply/stand and watch/may be” (Angelou, 1986, p. 36). Thus, girls’ sexual abuse, fragility, passivity, and innocence in the world of knowing and going men indicate and affirm radical feminists’ claim that society is itself patriarchal and women suffer because of being women.

Maya Angelou’s second poem “Woman Work” (1978) is about a household’s boredom and frustration who wants to leave this house where she has to do all of her work alone without being helped by someone else. The poem opens thus:

I’ve got the children to tend  
The clothes to mend  
The floor to mop  
The food to shop  
Then the chicken to fry  
The baby to dry (Angelou, 1978, p. 52)

She goes on and counts other duties that she has to fulfill. Along with cooking food, cleaning the house and tending to the children, she has to wash and press clothes, pick cotton, cut the cane, and see the sick. It is all because men consider that women are meant only for these tasks. It is the violence that women face in their homes. According to Kate Millet, patriarchy assigns women this “attendance upon infants” by restricting them to the four walls of the house to ensure man’s unbounded freedom and privilege to do all other rational, intellectual, and social activities (Millet, 1970, p. 26). While describing the so-called happy life of the American women of 50s and 60s, Betty Friedan says in her book *The Feminism Mystique* (1963), “each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopping for groceries, matched slipcover material” and “chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night” and so miserable “she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--‘is this all?’” (p. 44). The problem of

suburban housewives and Angelou's speaker is the same; both face victimization of domestic and family life. Suburban housewife may not be able to name her problem and may "feel as if" she does not "exist" (Friedan, 1963, p. 48). But Angelou's speaker is bold enough to show her strong urge to get rid of her this damn housewifery. After calling nature and its objects like sunshine, rain, dewdrops to come to her rescue, the fed-up household becomes more aggressive and says in the last stanza:

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind  
Let me float across the sky  
Till I can rest again (Angelou, 1978, p. 52)

This yearning to float across the sky leaving her husband, children and home behind shows radical feminists' radical denouncement of roles as mothers and wives. Kate Millet concludes her thoughts in *Sexual Politics* (1970) by maintaining that there must be an end to the patriarchal system and new myths be created to represent "the female principal" (p. 109). Although she ends with an optimistic note, yet she warns of the possibility of "violent tactics" (p. 33) which women can turn to. This is all that Angelou's speaker suggests. If there is no end to domestic violence, sexual abuse and gender exploitation, women can go with storms to raise storms.

The choice of Angelou's titles "Men" and "Woman Work" is itself patriarchal: men alone and independent but women fastened tightly to household work.

#### **Aspects of Radical Feminism in June Jordan's Poems "Poem for One Little Girl Blue" 1971) and "Poem About My Rights" (1978)**

A prolific and highly-acclaimed Jamaican American writer, June Jordan, is famous for her committed involvement in civil rights, women's rights and sexual freedom. As a playwright, essayist and poet, she wrote for the oppressed and marginalized in general, and for women in particular. Born in New York on July 9, 1936, Jordan experienced oppression and marginalization even in her childhood. Her parents were Jamaican immigrants and her father was always cruel to her as a child. So her poems are often autobiographical in nature representing her lived experience. This experience of Jordan becomes an accurate representation of countless women who are oppressed and victimized by male dominance. Moreover, her writings cover a variety of themes including issues of family, political oppression, social discrimination, bisexuality, and memory. Her poetry has been a subject of interest for many critics and researchers. Philip Metres (2007) analyzes Jordan's poetry in the following words:

As Jordan situates herself among the voiceless and powerless, her writing becomes at once an (self) exhortation to the voiceless and a cry for outrage against those who silence voices with their force; in other words, righteous certainty is not a proclamation of fundamentalism that proposes to know the truth for everyone. Rather it is a performance of self-worth in the face of physical and psychological brutalization. (p. 184)

In a 2019 article "June Jordan: A Poet of solidarity", Anan Alkass Yousif finds that June Jordan's poetry is a voice of solidarity and it "makes a connection between the silence in response to the political atrocities inflicted on countries in conflict and the need for action on the part of American people" (p. 2). Brandi Stanton (2009), while exploring the nature, function and characteristics of Jordan's poetry, reflects that Jordan tries to posit poetry and art "as an alternative genres and as a locus for new political mappings and revisionary readings" (p. 591). Although Jordan's poetry is replete with problems faced by women in a patriarchal society yet critics and researchers have rarely looked at June Jordan's poems through the lens of radical feminism as a critical framework. So, this study explores and investigates traces of radical feminism in the two poems of Jordan.

June Jordan's poem "Poem for One Little Girl Blue" (1971) is a sad story of a girl who is a victim of a patriarchal society. The girl in this short poem is shown facing the shattering effects of some unknown event of twenty years back and the painful experience of her family. The first stanza of the poem opens with a clear note of radical feminism:

She hangs onto sadness  
The way somebody else treads water Waiting for the world  
To see how much she hurts from family  
Madness pierced her rib cage  
Twenty years ago (Jordan, 1971, p. 73)

So, the event without a name that took place twenty years back, does "burst like a boil through the image" (Friedan, 1963, p. 50) of this sad girl whose pains and sufferings have risen to the level of madness. She wishes the world to know the injuries and pains inflicted upon her by her family which represents patriarchy. The way madness and frustration "pierced her rib cage" (Jordan, 1971, p. 73) seems similar to the pains of the victimized and marginalized women of the whole world as well as American housewives of the 1950s and 1960s who suffer from "the housewives syndrome" and "feel like crying" (Friedan, 1963, p. 48-49). The narrator continues to narrate the story of the victimized and the second stanza of the poem reads thus:

And she'll continue to compete as Victim  
Absolute  
Until she finally receives a gold  
Medallion for her suffering  
Or a truly purple heart complete  
With ribbons  
So that she can hang that up. (Jordan, 1971, p. 73)

So, the victim is supposed to go on suffering until there is some change in society and the oppressed woman finds remedy for her pains. The poem ends with a radical feminist's urge which is represented in the hope for the liberation of the victim—she may be able to uproot her sufferings "and then/move right along" at last "to someplace/ really new". It (Jordan, 1971, p. 73) represents deep sense of alienation and marginalization. So, patriarchal power and oppression, the key concepts of radical feminism, echo in the sad story of the victim in the poem whose poor "rib-cage" (Jordan, 1971, p. 73) has been aimed at by the arrows of patriarchy.

Jordan's second poem "Poem About My Rights" (1978) is a clear evidence of radical feminism. This poem refers to a victimized woman who faces sexual violence while law behaves like a patriarch when excuses are given by the offender to justify the rape. So, injustice and inequality is based on gender. The poem opens with powerful idea of gender discrimination:

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear  
My head about this poem why I can't  
Go out without changing my clothes my shoes  
My body posture my gender identity my age (Jordan, 1978, p. 61)

The speaker woman of the poem, thus, represents the women who have been sexually discriminated, abused and shunned by men who are considered physically and socially stronger. The speaker further proves by saying "the point being that I can't do what I want/ to do with my own body because I am the wrong/sex the wrong age----" (Jordan, 1978, p. 61). This idea of 'wrong sex' and 'wrong age' is repeated several times to emphasize the fact that women are the sufferers and victims, they are Martians on this planet which belongs to men only. This place is right for men and wrong for women. Of course, these are the core issues addressed and focused by radical feminists. The speaker imagines and yearns to go out on the beach, in the woods by

herself, "thinking about God/or thinking" (Jordan, 1978, p. 61), but, at the same time, recalls the barriers and restrictions laid on women and laments, "I could not go and I could not think and I could not/stay there" (Jordan, 1978, p. 61). Thus, this subjugated, repressed and oppressed woman deprived of the freedom to think even declares:

I am the history of rape

I am the history of the rejection of who I am

I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of myself (Jordan, 1978, p. 61)

So, the rejected, raped, terrorized woman of Jordan's poem joins the advance guard of the battalion of radical feminists fighting against men who are dominant in almost all aspects of life. Standards set by men are bitterly questioned and show disgust and anger of biologically, socially and racially victimized woman when she blurts out, "Who in the hell set things up/like this (Jordan, 1978, p. 61). It implies that the hell is the patriarchal society that sets up violence, abuse, gender and racial discrimination and oppression. The speaker goes on lamenting all this raising her voice louder and more aggressive. The poem ends with these words:

But I can tell you who the hell set things up like this

But I can tell you that from now on my resistance

my simple and daily and nightly self-determination

may very well cost you your life. (Jordan, 1978, p. 61)

These last lines show a desperate cry for liberation. It shows radical feminist's determination to stand up against negligence, prejudice, abuse and violence in the society where men "set up things like this" (Jordan, 1978, p. 61).

The title of Donna Spalding's 2007 article "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" seems quite relevant to the conditions of Jordan's speaker women who feel to be at the same terrible margins. According to Shulamith Firestone (1970), this situation may become so alarming and threatening that women's desperate attempt for "elimination of male privilege" may lead to "sex extinction itself" (p. 11).

### Conclusion

Being radical, measured by theoretical and logical yardsticks of Rich, Millet, and Firestone, all female speakers or narrators of the target poems of Maya Angelou, June Jordan and Alice Walker grumble and cry suffering from "The problem that has no name" (Friedan, 1963, p. 46). Here, the irony creates a great impact because this unknown problem bears quite a famous or notorious name. Millet, Rich and Firestone, along with all other radical feminists, call it the patriarch who is the root cause of their sufferings which result in injustice, social violence, inequality, gender discrimination and oppression. Even in Betty Friedan's case, there is irony because the unnamed problem seems to be diagnosed as "housewife's syndrome" by some "Cleveland doctor" (Friedan, 1963, p. 48). Be it some "Cleveland doctor" (Friedan, 1963, p. 48), Millet or Firestone, the problem has been diagnosed and calls for an immediate solution. It is found that women in these poems of Maya, Walker and Jordan are on the run, along with other radical feminists, to chase men and force them out of their domains where these women don't want to be their darlings. Moreover, they, as this study contends to suggest, seem to inspire and invoke other women to join this campaign and seem to stimulate readers and critics, both men and women, to ponder over this interesting battle of radical feminists which, instead of being historically and traditionally focused on white women, has attracted black women like Angelou, Jordan and Walker who were otherwise busy in sorting out and settling their own racist issues.



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