

EVOLUTION OF A LIBERATED AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF LYNN NOTTAGE'S *INTIMATE APPAREL*

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The mainstream media have portrayed stereotype images of the African American women, and the world has seen them only through the lens of those images. Those stereotype images have suppressed the real entity of the African American women, and they themselves have started conforming to the images that have been popularized by the mainstream media. The African American playwright Lynn Nottage has used the medium of theatre to urge the African American women to shed the identity that has been thrust upon them by the dominant patriarchal society. The present paper delves deep into Nottage's play, *Intimate Apparel*, and analyses how the playwright enlightens the African American women of the need to break the silence and assert their voice in a male dominated American society. The paper finds that Nottage has deconstructed the image of a disillusioned African American woman who can easily be exploited and deceived by the white as well as by their male counterparts. Nottage through the character of Esther has portrayed a resilient African American woman who comes out as a phoenix from ashes though she has been deceived by her partner and her bosom friend.

“Women of African origin in the United States have always been keenly aware of the impact of race, class, and gender oppression upon their lives. Since slavery, they have struggled individually and in groups, spontaneously and in formal organizations, to eradicate the multiple injustices that they and their communities face.” (Smith, 1998, pp.202-03)

Over the years, the African American women have been facing racial discrimination, gender oppression, and identity crisis in the American society. An African American woman remains invisible and unidentified in the mainstream society. African American women playwrights have used the power of theatre to free themselves from the dominant white community and their own male counterparts. The real struggle and fortitude of the doubly victimized get a space only in the plays of the African American women playwrights.

The pioneer African American women playwrights like Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy *et al.* have used theatre as a medium to construct and communicate African American women's sufferings, and thus brought the reality to the limelight. An African American woman's entity is ignored in the African American community in particular and mainstream society in general. These playwrights have penned to enlighten the African American women, and thus opened the vistas of liberation hitherto denied to the African American women by the American society.

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In an article entitled "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity" Michele Wallace states,

[...] black women writers not only make it possible to understand how a convergence of racism, sexism, and class antagonism marks the Third World woman's peculiar position in discourse, but their work calls into question the truth value of any unitary or dualistic apprehension of the world.(1990, p. 65)

African American female playwrights' works focus mainly on racism, sexism, and gender oppression that an ordinary African American woman encounters in the American society. African American women are projected as sexual objects not only by the white male, but also by their own male counterparts, and they are subjugated socially, economically, and psychically by the mainstream society. After the Civil Rights Movement, African American women confronted political and economical disadvantages, but the unwavering spirit of the African American women playwrights has made them to use theatre as a powerful medium to enlighten the African American women of the necessity of liberation.

Michele Wallace also comments on the society's perception of the identity of a black woman in the article:"Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity":

What most people see of the black woman is a void, a black hole that appears empty, not full. The outsider sees black feminist creativity as a dark hole from which nothing worthwhile can emerge and in which everything is forced to assume the zero volume of nothingness, the invisibility, that results from the intense pressure of race, class, and sex. (1990, p.55)

African American women are projected by the mainstream society as worthless. They objectify the black female body, and project it as a site of sexual gratification for the black men. The plays of African American women playwrights proclaim to the world that their fortitude can help them to overcome all the obstacles and traumas that they face in their lives. The plays of women playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress et al disprove the notion that African American women cannot produce anything worthwhile. Though many black feminist theorists like Miranda Fricker, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks have been instrumental in bringing a sea change in the submissive nature of the educated African American women, women in the grass root level have been denigrated and made to remain silent in the society. These feminist theorists stress that African American women should speak for themselves and should protest the cultural, gender, and sexual oppression that prevails in the American society.

In the early 1940's and 1960's, both the African American women and the white women were dominated and sidelined by the patriarchal mainstream society. Though Civil Rights Movement brought equality in the society, the movement overlooked the role played by the African American women. The plight of the African American women has remained the same even after the Civil Rights

Movement. Patricia Williams in her book entitled *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* states: "We live in an era in which women and people of color compose and literally define both this society's underclass and its most underserved population" (1991,p.103). African American men sidelined their women counterparts and perpetuated the notion that they cannot be given an equal status. It is stated that even Amiri Baraka has raised his voice against conferring an equal status to the black women. In the article "But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States" it is stated:

Baraka insists that men and women are unequal by nature. This is an attitude which considers healthy and worthy of promotion to other black men and women. Not only are men and women different, he says, but there is no reciprocity in their relationship to each other; hence, a black man is not 'for' his woman as a black woman is 'for' her man. The two do not submit to one another; rather, the woman submits to her black man. (n.d., para.7)

It is clear from Baraka's words that the African American women cannot expect that their male counterparts will strive for the upliftment of the black women. The urgency to begin a liberation movement for themselves springs from the patriarchal mindset of the African American men.

Though white women also fell a prey to the gendered oppression before the emergence of Civil Rights Movement, the magnitude of their sufferings was very minimal when compared to the afflictions that the black women have faced. Civil Rights Movement was a platform that proved the indomitable morale of the African American women. Ronda Racha Penrice in an article entitled "Arn't I a Woman, Too?" comments:

Between the civil rights and feminist movements, where did they fit in? They had been the backbone of the civil rights movement, but their contributions were deemphasized as black men, often emasculated by white society, felt compelled to adopt patriarchal roles. When black women flocked to the feminist movement, white women discriminated against them and devoted little attention to class issues that seriously affected black women, who tended to also be poor.(2007, p.191)

Though the Civil Rights Acts ratified in 1868, accorded full citizenship to African American, Jim Crow laws segregated them from the white. The Civil Rights Movement was instrumental in abolishing the Jim Crow laws. This movement helped in getting suffrage and banning the racial discrimination, but it did not cater to the needs of the black women. The resilient spirit of an ordinary African American woman received global attention, when Rosa Parks, an African American seamstress denied to give up her seat to a white passenger, which eventually led to Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, which lasted for more than one year. Ronda Racha Penrice in the article "Arn't I a Woman, Too?" remarks further: "Historically, black women have chosen race over gender concerns, a choice that was especially poignant during Reconstruction when African American female leaders such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper supported the Fifteenth Amendment giving black

men the right to vote over the objections of white women suffragists” (2007, p. 191).

To fight for equal justice, African American women historians and activists stood shoulder to shoulder. The second half of the twentieth century can be marked as the beginning of the black feminist movement. After having got the right to vote, white female liberationists and organizations continued to marginalize the African American women and did not do anything to empower them. White American women started taking up jobs in the 1970's and they deconstructed the notion of sitting at home and taking care of their kids. The white feminists in 1970's addressed the issues concerning the white women alone, completely ignoring their African American counterparts. This avoidance from the side of the white women compelled the farsighted African American women to start a movement for themselves that brought to the limelight, the hitherto unheard voice of the resilient African American women. Mary Ann Weathers in an article entitled “An Argument For Black Women's Liberation As a Revolutionary Force” remarks:

All women suffer oppression, even white women, particularly poor white women, and especially Indian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Oriental and Black American women whose oppression is tripled [...]. But we do have female's oppression in common. This means that we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary force we are now beginning to amass. (2010, para.14)

Weathers agrees with the fact that all women irrespective of their race, experience oppression in one way or other in a male dominated society. She adds that if all the oppressed women can unite, it would definitely improve their status in the society.

The black feminist movement has aimed at challenging the male dominance and also the prejudices they face in the mainstream society. The white took the help of the medium of literature and theatre to propagate the stereotype images of African American women to demoralize them. Though African American men connived at the unfathomable potential of the African American women, the strong bond among the African American women has made them to protest the racism and gender oppression that they encounter in the society. The identity of the African American women has been suppressed by the mainstream society and their male counterparts have followed the same pattern of oppression in their households. In the article “Arn't I a Woman, Too?” Ronda Racha Penrice states:

While many black women remain active in mainstream feminist organizations only, other black women have created organizations aimed at addressing black women's unique concerns more effectively. The National Black Feminist Organization launched in 1973 with the specific goal of including black women of all ages, classes, and sexual orientation. [...]. In 1983, Alice Walker coined the term *Womanism*, a feminist ideology that addresses the black woman's unique history of racial and gender oppression. Women such as Angela Davis, law professor Kimberle Crenshaw, academics Patricia Hill Collins, Beverly Guy Sheftall, and bell hooks, and historians Darlene Cark Hine, Paula Giddings, and Deborah

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Gray White have greatly expanded the context in which black women and their history and activism is discussed by underscoring black women's issues related to race, gender, and class. (2007, p.192)

The people who belong to the oppressed community lack social power. They are oppressed, dominated, exploited, and made insecure in the mainstream society. The educated African American women, who are bold and confident like Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Paula Giddings et al through their writings enlightened the women especially in the academia to use their academic calibre to uplift the downtrodden African American women.

In an article entitled "But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States" the evolution of black feminism is delineated:

The Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed. All too often, "black" was equated with black men and "woman" was equated with white women. As a result, black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination. (n.d.,para.1)

African American literature is not simply a literature, which is written to entertain the readers, but it is the mouthpiece of the African American community. The above quotation underscores the fact that the feminist theory and the liberation movement only can help African American women to come out of their oppressed state. Most of the African American women suffer the devastating effects because of their inability to protest, and their conformity to the norms of the gender oppressed society. The black women activists namely, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and Alice Walker have questioned the discrimination that they have been facing since the days of trans-Atlantic slave trade. They have suggested through their writings that only a collective attempt from the part of the African American would bring them from invisibility to visibility. Barbara Smith, in the talk "Racism and Women's Studies" delivered at the first National Women's Studies Association Conference in 1979 defines feminism. According to her,

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women- as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self- aggrandizement. (Dicker, 2016, para.12)

Smith indicates that feminism should aim at giving absolute freedom to the black women, and any other movement that does not fulfil this parameter only contribute to the "female aggrandizement."

Robert Staples in the article “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy” points out: “While White women have entered the history books for making flags and engaging in social work, black women have participated in the total black liberation struggle”(1981, p. 32). The African American women identity is effaced by gender domination. After the suffragette and feminist movement, white women have been given priority and authority in the mainstream society. But the African American women have been completely ignored, stigmatized, and marginalized. Women activists who took part in the black women liberation movement dissented and explicitly refuted the white hegemony. This movement is a revolution to extricate the prejudices and the subjugation promoted by the white. The privileged white women have underscored their superiority and this in turn put the African American women’s lives at stake. The process of liberation, individual self-realization, and revolutionary transformation take place when one confronts the reality of oppression.

Barbara E. Johnson in her article entitled “Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice: A Genealogy of Afro-American poetry” posits:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. (1990, p.205)

Barbara E. Johnson states that through art and literature one can bring into the limelight the greatness of reality. It is true with Lynn Nottage, an icon who has taken theatre as an optimum medium to deconstruct the stereotypes, racism, sexism, and the gender oppression that prevail in the American society. The article delves deep into Lynn Nottage’s play *Intimate Apparel* and it analyses how Nottage deconstructs the typical image of a black woman popularized by the mainstream theatre. Lynn Nottage acts as the mouth piece for all the African American women who have been silenced by the society.

Esther, the protagonist of the play, isolates herself from the other African American women because of her unattractive countenance; nevertheless she hopes to open a beauty parlour for African American women. She is a thirty five year old illiterate seamstress who stitches corsets for customers who range from wealthy white women to a black prostitute. Though she stitches corsets for customers of different social standing, she does not like socializing, and when she is invited by her land lady [Mrs. Dickson], to attend the marriage party of one of her customers she refuses it. She feels diffident and tries to avoid being with people who are attractive. She considers herself a piece of furniture, a non-living thing that does not deserve any attention from anyone.

ESTHER. Please, Mrs. Dickson, I can’t, really. I’ll just stand there like a wallflower.

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MRS. DICKSON. Nonsense, I've danced a half a dozen times, and my feet are just about worn out.

ESTHER. If I had your good looks I'd raise a bit of dust myself. Ain't nobody down there interested in me.

MRS. DICKSON. Esther, you're being silly. You've been moping around here for days. What's the matter?

ESTHER. If you must know, I turned thirty-five Thursday past.

ESTHER. It's fine .You had all this to prepare for.And I been living in this rooming house for so long, I reckon I'm just another piece of furniture.

ESTHER. Well, I ain't going down there to be paraded like some featherless bird. I' m sorry, would you kindly take this down to Corinna Mae?

MRS. DICKSON. I'll do no such thing. You can bring it down yourself. It tough, Esther, for a colored woman in this city. I ain't got to tell you that.You nimble with your fingers, but all Corinna Mae got be her honey colored skin. And you good and smart and deserve all the attention in that room, but today's her day and all I ask is that you come toast her as I know she'd toast you. Put aside feelings-and don't say nothing about Sally's piano playing, the girl trying. For God's sake, this a party not a wake! (Nottage, 2006, pp.8-10)

The uneducated African American women are diffident and they remain subservient to their white counterparts. Esther, who is an uneducated seamstress, hesitates to attend the marriage party because of her conviction that she is bad looking. She has embraced loneliness and is not intimate to any characters in the play. She sews different kinds of apparels to different characters in the play, but she does not show any intimacy to her customers. Mrs. Dickson gives Esther a letter written by George, a labourer engaged in the construction of Panama Canal. He often writes letters to Esther, and Mrs. Dickson comments that, a man who writes letters often cannot be relied and she further remarks:

MRS. DICKSON. I know these kind of men. Sugared words, but let them stick to the page and go no further. He'll steal your common sense, he will, and walk away. It just don't seem like you, Esther, you're too practical a girl for this.

ESTHER. To who? Mr. Charles? Remember it's me you're talking to, not Doreen or Erma, or one of those other silly openhearted little gals. And yes, I'm writing letters to a man. And it may come to nothing. But I am his sweetheart twice a month, and I can fill that envelope with anything that I want. (Nottage, 2006, p.28)

The letters in *Intimate apparel* play a vital role in transforming the disillusioned protagonist to a confident woman, a woman of self worth and it adds to the denouement of the play. It can be compared to Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. In this novel Celie writes letters to God stating her own tormented experiences. In *Intimate Apparel* George and Esther exchange their love, aspirations, and dreams through the letters that they send each other. Through the play, Nottage also unravels the villainy of African American men who exploit their own female counterparts. Relationships play an important role in *Intimate Apparel*, and it also

manifests how the support and love of a man transforms a disillusioned African American woman to a confident woman.

GEORGE.

Dear Esther,

Thank you for your sweet words. Your pricked finger delivered the most unexpected lift. [. . .]. And if I told you it's been months since I've seen a decent woman, it wouldn't be a lie. There are caravans of sweet-faced Indian girls offering up their childhood for a half day's wage. Yes, many men leave here with less than they come. I shan't be one. It isn't appropriate, but I will say it. I crave a gentlewoman's touch, even if it only be to turn down my collar or brush away the dirt in the evenings. Indeed, I'd like to meet you as a gentleman. I think much about the suit I will wear, and the colors that your eyes find pleasing. I imagine your cobblestone roads and the splendid carriages on the avenues, and a dry place to sit. I think of you running silk thread between your fingers and find a bit of holy relief, for your letters arrive just in time to ward off temptation. (Nottage, 2006, p.27)

Esther is a character, who suppresses her feelings, frustrations, and desires. She falls in love with George, weaves dreams about a blissful marital life with a man whom she has never seen except for the letters that she has received from him. She has been portrayed as a detached woman, who never looks forward to a prosperous future. The influence that George wields on her through the letters, transforms her to an ordinary black woman who dreams about a peaceful family life.

The letters which George sends to Esther sound as if he pours out his heart for her. There is a deliberate attempt from the part of George to picturize him as the best gentleman ever lived in the world. He himself extols his virtues, which he claims not to be found among other working class men. He succeeds in convincing Esther that she will not get a better partner in life than him. She is overwhelmed by George's letters and his words make her hopeful.

Nottage has used theatre as a medium to educate and enlighten the African American women who do not assert their rights in front of the dominant whites who try to suppress and denigrate them. Gaining an equal foot hold with their white counterparts is not a cake walk for the African American women and they normally tolerate the insults they experience in the American society. Esther interacts with the white characters in the play, and she is disparaged more than once by the white character, Mrs. Van Buren. Though Mrs. Van Buren likes writing love letters on behalf of Esther, she does not want other whites to know that she helps a poor black illiterate seamstress in putting down her thoughts for her lover.

MRS. VAN BUREN. Mercy, if my friends knew I spend the day writing love letters to a colored laborer, they'd laugh me out of Manhattan.

ESTHER. People do a lot of things that they don't ever speak of.

MRS. VAN BUREN. I smoked opium once, with the most proper of women. She dared me and I did it. And you? What have you done? (Nottage, 2006, p.33)

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Mrs. Van Buren ridicules Esther stating that she has done “great deeds” like smoking opium which an African American woman like Esther cannot even think of. She indirectly points out that African American women can never do anything that the white women consider as an adventurous act. She tries to demoralize Esther if at all she has gained a little confidence because of the moral support that she gets from George. Mrs. Van Buren is a little different from other white women of her class, and she enjoys spending time with Esther.

Mrs. Van Buren has an unsatisfied marital life, and she hopes to have a lesbian relationship with Esther. It cannot be interpreted as a genuine love for Esther, but she hopes to get some sexual gratification from Esther, expecting that Esther would reciprocate her lust. She thinks that Esther would give in before her because of her racial status, but contrary to her expectations, Esther does not reciprocate her sensual approaches. When Esther asks whether she loves Mr. Van Buren, she replies that “such a question is romantic” (Nottage, 2006, p.59). She takes it as an opportunity to tell Esther of her frustrated marital life, and her wish to have a lesbian relationship with Esther.

ESTHER. Do you love Mr. Van Buren?

MRS. VAN BUREN. I am a married women, such a question is romantic.

ESTHER. But I fear my love belongs someplace else.

MRS. VAN BUREN. And why is that?

ESTHER. I shouldn't say. No, I can't. Perhaps I'm wrong.

MRS. VAN BUREN. Perhaps not.

(Mrs. Van Buren pulls Esther close and plants a kiss on Esther's lips. For a moment Esther gives in to the sensation of being touched, then abruptly pulls away, shocked.)

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry. Please don't go. I just wanted to show you what it's like to be treated lovingly.

ESTHER. Don't say that. You don't love me.

MRS. VAN BUREN. How do you know? Please. We will forget this and continue to be friends.

ESTHER. Friends? How we friends? When I ain't never been through your front door. You love me? What of me do you love?

MRS. VAN BUREN. Esther, you are the only one who's been in my boudoir in all these months. And honestly, it's only in here with you that I feel... happy.

Please, I want us to be friends.

ESTHER. I'm sorry. I can't.

MRS. VAN BUREN. Coward! I'm sorry. (Nottage, 2006, p.59)

There is an indirect hint from Esther's side that she would have begun a relationship with Van Buren, had she treated her as an equal. She does not want to have a relationship with a woman who does not even permit her to enter through the front door of her house. This is the beginning of Esther's realization of her self-worth. The sporadic presence of the white characters is a stark reminder of the racial

oppression prevalent in the American society. The play is a silent revolution because Esther denounces Mrs. Van Buren's approaches and asserts her stand point. She longs for love, care, and affection but she does not get what she expects in life. Though it is denied to her in both social and marital life, she objects Van Buren's sensual approaches. Mrs. Van Buren exploits Esther racially and sexually, vainly hopes to make Esther her lesbian partner, but she boldly resists the attempt, and asserts her individuality as a resilient African American woman.

Esther expects to have a peaceful life with George, and she hopes to get all supports from her husband's side to start a beauty parlour for the African American women with the money she has saved from the minimal wages that she gets. Marriage takes the white women to a different phase of life, where they can enjoy the pleasures of life. Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the book entitled *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* remarks: "Marriage is the woman's proper sphere, her divinely ordered place, her natural end. It is what she is born for, what she is trained for, what she is exhibited for. It is, moreover, her means of honourable livelihood and advancement" (2015, para.3). Though Mrs. Van Buren belongs to the class that Perkins has referred to, she too is not satisfied in her status as wife to Mr. Van Buren. African American women on the contrary cannot expect any improvement in their life conditions once they get married. Instead it multiplies her responsibilities and she never gets the luxury of having a space and time for her own in her husband's household. African American women strive hard to balance her various roles and also to free themselves from the shackles of suppression.

The love she has for George is not physical but an emotional one, where she finds solace in his honey coated words. Esther never hides anything from George, and she expects the same from George. George appears to be honest as they talk about their family history.

ESTHER. I come here from North Carolina at seventeen after my mother died of influenza, [...]. My father died two years later, he was a slave yousee, and didn't take to life as a freeman. He'd lost his tongue during a nasty fight over a chicken when I was a baby, so I never heard him speak: no complaints, no praise, no gentle words, no good-bye. He was ...silent. Broken really. I come to this city by myself, worked my way North little by little, picking berries in every state until I get here. An old woman in the rooming house teach me to sew intimate apparel, saying folks'll pay you good money for your discretion. It was just about the best gift anybody give me. It was as though God kissed my hands when I first pulled the fabric through the sewing machine and held up a finished garment. I discovered all I need in these fingers. [...].

GEORGE. My parents were chattel... born to children of chattel. We cut sugar cane and die, and that our tale for as long as anybody could say. Nothin' worthy of a retelling, really. I come here so the story'll be different, that I hopin'. Now if yuh don' mind, I spent many nights on a hard, wood floor, a bed be long overdue. We married. I ain'gonna commit no crime 'ere, a man and wife don't 'ave no quarrel in the bedroom. (Nottage, 2006, p.48)

Esther and George start their marital life happily. Esther completely trusts and relies on George. In reality, George is a person who squanders money on liquor and women. Leiner, Compton, et al in an article entitled: "Intimate partner violence, psychological distress, and suicidality" point out: "Although women from all ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic levels experience intimate partner violence, women who are African American, young, poor, divorced, or separated are the most frequent victims" (2008, pp.473-481). To bring out the real portrayal of American society during the era in which the play is set, Nottage presents the character named Mayme, a pianist and prostitute. Mayme and Esther are portrayed as close friends. Though Esther is a seamstress, she has a dream of opening a beauty parlour for African American women. She expresses her dream to Mayme and says that she has saved money to open a beauty parlour where African American women can expect to be treated with respect. She says:

ESTHER. The smart set. Some place east of Amsterdam, fancy, where you get pampered and treated real nice. 'Cause no one does it for us. We just as soon wash our heads in a bucket and be treated like mules. But what I'm talking about is some place elegant. (Nottage, 2006, p. 24)

African American women have experienced heinous discrimination in comparison to the other women of low social standing. They are discriminated due to their kinky hair, skin colour, and the poor economic status. They have undergone unimaginable oppression both in the mainstream society and in their patriarchal household. Even in the beauty parlour, they are treated like mules; whereas white women are treated as queens. This is the main reason for Esther's wish to open a beauty parlour for African American women. She believes that African American women deserve respect as much as their white counterparts.

Esther enters into the threshold of marital life with full of hope, but it gets shattered when she confronts the real character of George. There are unrecorded instances of oppression that the African American women experience in their household, but the intolerable oppression is the domination by their own male counterparts. When she shares with George, her idea of opening a beauty parlour, he mocks at her, commenting that she is unattractive.

GEORGE. Yuh a squirrel, for true. That's what yuh call them city rats, no?

ESTHER. A squirrel ain't a rat. That money for my beauty parlor, I told you that.

GEORGE (*Laughs*). That funny.

ESTHER. Why's that funny to you?

GEORGE. You ownin' a beauty parlor.

ESTHER. Yes.

GEORGE. Look at yuh. How yuh know pretty from the lookin' glass? (Nottage, 2006, p.53)

Intimate partner abuse is very common among African American women and in some cases, they go insane because of the unbearable torture and partner's extra-marital relationships. Beth Richie in her book *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered, Black Women* remarks: "By far, the majority of the detainees are women of color from low-income communities. Over fifty percent are African American. While the "official" sources report that at least half of the women there are battered women, my experience as an activist and advocate in anti-violence programs had me convinced that far more than that have been abused by their partners" (1996, p.3).

MAYME. Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over this room. Esther, I ain't waiting for anybody to rescue me. My Panama man come and gone long time now. It sweet that he write you, but, my dear, it ain't real.

ESTHER. Yes, he here in my pocket in a cambric walking suit. He has a heliotrope handkerchief stuffed in his pocket and a sweet way about him. He so far away, I can carry him in my pocket like a feather. (Nottage, 2006, p.25)

Esther blindly trusts George, but when she confronts the reality, she is completely devastated. George reveals that the letters are written by a mulatto boy and that he is not even aware of the contents of the letters. Though both of them are illiterate, Esther's words come from her heart, whereas, George gives money to a mulatto boy and he simply writes whatever that comes to his mind. Esther comes to know about Mayme's and George's relationship when she finds the silk jacket that she presented to George on their wedding day in Mayme's house.

Though she is shattered by his extra marital relationship, she however tries to please George by dressing herself like Mayme. Even then she fails to attract George as his only intention is to squander her money. She thinks that it is because of her failure to satisfy his lust that George maintains a relationship with Mayme. Charlotte Perkins Gilman has commented that a married woman's life is no different than that of the life of a prostitute: "Pleasing a man therefore becomes a woman's job in life, which means that the married woman, viewed economically, differs very little from the prostitute; both exchange sexual service for support" (Ammons, 1980, p.347).

Male domination is ingrained in the African American community, and it is not an easy task for an African American woman to assert her identity. Nottage, through the character of Esther, portrays a strong resilient African American woman, who is entirely opposite to the meek and worthless women characters popularized by the mainstream media. Though she is shocked when she comes to know about George's relationship with Mayme she overcomes it. African American women are sometimes cheated on by their partners, and at times they also fall a prey to their deceptive female friends. Nottage deliberately creates the character of Mayme to warn the African American women of the betrayal that they may experience from their bosom friends.

Poverty and unattractive physical features can disillusion an individual, and it may even hamper the fulfilment of one's dreams. Women playwrights have utilized the power of theatre to expose the depravity and disparaging position of African American women. Nottage, through the play, *Intimate Apparel*, ignites the minds of the African American women that they should not fall a prey to the oppression and psychological colonisation of their male counterparts. Esther, the protagonist of the play, is exploited both economically and sexually by her husband. Though she is trampled by the racial and patriarchal dominance, Nottage has presented the protagonist as a recalcitrant woman who liberates herself from all shackles and starts her life anew.

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