

# An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of Women's Oppression in Evie Shockley's Selected Poems

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**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary African American poetry passionately portrays the historical oppression of African American women. Through powerful verses, it explores their resilience and strength amid challenges, inspiring identity, empowerment, and unity within the community. One such writer is Evie Shockley, who attempts to showcase the oppression exercised upon black American women in her body of verses. Oppression includes but is not limited to gender, racial, and class oppression. The intersectional feminist approach is employed in analyzing and interpreting the oppression theme expressed in Shockley's selected poems. The paper's significance emanates from an investigation into the diverse oppression that African-American women have encountered throughout history and continue to face in the present. Through this exploration, a heightened awareness of the plight endured by these women is achieved, fostering more significant concern regarding the inhumane treatment they have been subjected to multiple oppressions.

**Keywords:** Cultural Oppression, Evie Shockley, Class, Race, Gender, Intersectional feminism.

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## 1. Introduction

The inherent purpose of human existence does not entail oppressing one another but rather involves collaborative efforts in constructing and enhancing the planet Earth to foster an improved quality of life. The oppression of individuals, particularly women, is deemed profoundly inhumane. Moreover, when such oppression is rooted in gender, race, and class discrimination, its egregiousness and lack of tolerance become significantly heightened. Poets, by nature, are more sensitive individuals, allowing them to perceive and sense disastrous actions more keenly than others. Consequently, they consistently endeavor to portray these oppressive phenomena in their creative works, aiming to foreground the profound miseries endured by the oppressed and raise awareness among the general populace. A black female poet who has experienced oppression becomes more sensitive to such issues. The heightened sensitivity allows her to depict oppression with greater realism and passion in her creative works, resonating with her audience and fostering understanding. Through her authentic voice, the female poet sheds light on the complexities of these challenges and inspires societal consciousness and transformative change. The paper proposes that by employing an intersectional feminist approach to analyze Shockley's poetry, a deeper comprehension of the hardships faced by women, especially African-American women, concerning gender, race, and class oppression can be achieved.

The intersectional feminist approach drives the research methodology. The intersectional feminist approach is a theoretical framework that acknowledges the interconnectedness of multiple social identities, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and more. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, this approach emphasizes the need to consider how these intersecting identities can create unique and complex experiences of oppression and privilege for individuals within various social groups (139). It utilizes ideas and concepts related to various types of oppression practiced against women as the basis for the conceptual framework within which selected verses from Shockley's poetry are investigated. Using feminist intersectionality to analyze Shockley's poetry provides a deeper understanding of her perspectives on women's inhumane treatment. This relatively new concept considers various social identities in shaping experiences of oppression women face and is applied in European countries, America, and sociological disciplines. Through this approach, Shockley's work is comprehensively explored, revealing her stance as both a human being and a poet against the mistreatment of women. This approach provides a theoretical framework and a perceptual sensitivity to the intertwined nature of social dominance dynamics. It endeavors to recognize the interrelationships between many dimensions of oppression, such as racial discrimination, class intolerance,

patriarchy, and sexism (Paulsen 2). This recognition shows that identities are always influenced by an individual's gender, age, sexual orientation, and racial background. Nevertheless, many interconnecting strands often characterize exclusion, oppression, discrimination, and privileges. Intersectionality examines how distinct dimensions of oppression generate and continuously express one another. It also demonstrates that the associated structures vary from one place to another, from one time to another, and from one culture to another (Dill and Kohlman 7).

The paper is divided into three sections gender, race, and class oppression. The first section deals with oppression based on gender, tracing the systematic subjugation of African-American women based on the social construction of gender roles. It sheds light on the power imbalances between genders regarding unequal opportunities and the internal and external factors that shape the African-American female experience in Shockly's poems. The second section delves into the enduring history of racial oppression and marginalization faced by African-American women. This section critically explores the themes of racism, shedding light on African-American women's distinctive experiences and ongoing struggles, both in historical contexts and within contemporary America. The third section centers on the class oppression experienced by African-American women, analyzing the intricate power dynamics that contribute to their disenfranchisement, marginalization, and limited access to opportunities within American society. This section highlights how certain social classes, particularly those who possess more incredible wealth and privilege, perpetuate structures that further marginalize and alienate African-American women, reinforcing systemic inequalities within the culture. It investigates the limitations perpetuated on African-American women by various institutions and systems of power.

## **2. Gender Oppression**

Gender oppression is discrimination based on a specific culture's sex roles, relationships, and work divisions. The development of the modern capitalist system and the country have specifically affected African-American women. Whereas manhood has been characterized by rationality, independence, action, aggressive behavior, and attractiveness, characteristics that have been decided to make men the perfect contributors in the evolving legislative domain of economic system and political order, womanhood has been characterized by emotionality, dependence, passivity, and nurturing (Lenskyj 3). Such characteristics of women have determined their position within domestic and public domains. These generalized conceptions of gendered identities have also been ingrained in psychology, anthropology, social science, and literature. Nevertheless, they have not been only founded on a binary understanding of sex and gender but also heteronormativity, class, and race. In this way, gender oppression is connected not simply to the weaker subcategories in the dichotomy of female sexuality but also to people who differ in some way from other cultural classifications.

Equality is a fundamental human right crucial for societal growth and harmony. Upholding equal rights, opportunities, and respect for all, regardless of gender, fosters a balanced and respectful society where everyone is valued. Shockley shows the distinctions between men and women in general and African-American women and men. As a human being, she shows that women worldwide, other than white women, are still regarded as inferior to men and hence not worth enjoying equal rights and opportunities. However, as an African-American, she demonstrates that African-American women are the best representatives of such gender oppression. For example, she focuses on marriage and its role in the oppression of women. Adrienne Rich assumes that the institution of marriage is centrally responsible for women's oppression (qtd. in Munro, 292). Through her poetic expression, Shockley skillfully vocalizes the plight of women, stemming from men's perception of them as inferior. Concurrently, she endeavors to rectify men's misconceptions about and maltreatment of the institution of marriage. Thus, Shockley asserts that women, who have experienced diverse forms of mistreatment, can forge an influential collective to pursue their rightful demands. Additionally, she strongly critiques the objectification of women by men, particularly in the context of satisfying their sexual desires. She rejects the negative stereotypical images of African-American women and the positive ones of men.

In the poem "the defense of marriage act, alternatives to," Shockley critiques men's attitude toward women in marriage. She claims that men use women as sex tools to satisfy their needs without having any respect or sense of accepting them as their partners. The poem opens with a strong emphasis on the necessity of men's commitment to

marriage and avoiding adultery or having illegitimate affairs. It reminds men that marriage is about loyalty and honesty; their wives are at home and wait for them to satisfy their sexual desire:

Act like you've seen breasts before  
act like you can have sex when you get home  
act like a commitment is a commitment is a commitment. (Shockley, lines 1-4)

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In Shockley's poem, the initial stanza portrays a directive to men to conduct themselves in a manner that acknowledges and appreciates the essential aspects of femininity. By employing language emphasizing the imperative "act," the poet underscores the significance of deliberate and conscious actions in shaping a relationship based on mutual respect and equality. The repetition of the phrase "act like a commitment is a commitment is a commitment" serves to amplify the poet's insistence on unwavering dedication and loyalty within the marital bond.

Shockley's verse implies that a comprehensive understanding of the female partner's multifaceted roles is imperative. This comprehension entails equitable recognition of their financial contributions and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, it calls for providing emotional support and empathy and fostering an environment of security and comfort. The poet advocates for a paradigm in which men perceive their relationship as a collaborative venture characterized by partnership rather than subservience.

Furthermore, the poet addresses the need to abandon the objectification of women and dismissive attitudes toward their intrinsic worth beyond their reproductive abilities. The call to refrain from regarding women as mere "nannies" underscores the aspiration for men to recognize and appreciate the entirety of their partner's identity. It encompasses valuing the time and energy devoted to home life instead of reducing them to mere domestic labor or emotional support providers.

Shockley urges both spouses to contribute financially to the household, fostering a sense of unity and teamwork within the domestic realm. By invoking the phrase "act like you know a tax break when you see one," the poet prompts men to appreciate and acknowledge the tangible advantages of equitable partnerships, thereby discouraging any inclination to overlook the contributions of women in relationships.

In essence, Shockley's poem inspires men to develop an awareness of women's intrinsic value and their potential within relationships. The poet emphasizes the importance of respecting and cherishing the essence of femininity, attributing significance to women's strength, resilience, and intellectual prowess. By embracing the multifaceted nature of women, men can cultivate a profound appreciation for their diverse contributions to society.

The poem also advocates for celebrating femininity, recognizing that women should be acknowledged as independent and autonomous beings, deserving respect for their unique perspectives and contributions to the broader social fabric. This perspective underscores the imperative of comprehending women as more than mere sexual objects, fostering an environment where women's intellect, creativity, and power are recognized and valued.

The above stanza serves as a call for men to embrace a consciousness of gender equality and to approach relationships with women in a manner that upholds dignity, respect, and genuine partnership. Through this paradigm, men and women can celebrate and honor the diverse dimensions of femininity, creating a more equitable and enriching society. In addition, the temporary relationship between men and women leads women to accuse men of being untrustworthy and undeserving of being life partners. The improper understanding of women has degraded their value worldwide (Settles et al. 798). Shockley believes that women's body worldwide is exposed to the public only to please men through books and DVDs; this way of displaying women's body becomes a business for men. She demonstrates the patriarchal society's influence on women. She supposes that though this way of treating women degrades and dehumanizes them, women unwillingly endure this kind of maltreatment. Shockley states:

hold them still for the camera the visitor the voyeur the man even the woman of the north-south-east west who will leave this exhibit feeling at best equal parts desire and disgust for the sad and sexy and vulnerable and plaintive and open and apathetic and inviting and inaccessible and yours for the taking a book or dvd (Shockley, lines 20-26).

The historical exploitation of African-American women's bodies and reproductive capacities within the United States has been a significant source of oppression. During the era of enslavement, these women were often perceived as instruments of production and sources of financial gain for their owners. Consequently, they were frequently subjected to coerced childbearing, institutionalized sexual violence, and stigmatized for their inability to reproduce. Gabriele Proglia, in "The Horn of Africa Diasporas in Italy: An Oral History," highlights the experiences of African-American women, shedding light on their oppression due to their gender. Proglia's observation reveals that these women have been dehumanized and objectified, reduced to objects of flesh and desire without recognition of their personhood, intellect, or historical identity(106).

Gender, as a defining aspect of identity, has posed many challenges for African-American women, resulting in various forms of oppression. In contrast to men who primarily labored on plantations, African-American women faced the burden of toiling in the fields and within their households. The persistent gender-based inequality has perpetuated disparities and limitations for women, evident even in contemporary societies, particularly in job opportunities. Shockley contends that gender inequality has constrained women's choices in the job market and curtailed their potential.

The gender identity of African-American women imposed undesirable circumstances upon them, subjecting them to systemic disadvantages. The enduring legacy of this historical oppression continues to reverberate in modern times, impacting opportunities and prospects for these women. Societal structures perpetuate gender-based inequalities, restricting African-American women's agency and progress. According to the poet in "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the U.S.A.," a crucial factor that enhances the sex trafficking of African-American women is the belief that they are just used to meet men's sexual needs. Shockley mentions that Black women and girl sex trafficking victims are not prostitutes but poor people who are obliged to do so:

The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me  
that they had on other young girls; they had made me pre-  
maturely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world.  
sold me from Boston to Miami and back, Graves was one of thousands  
of young girls sexually exploited across the United States, often in  
plain sight/ (Shockley, lines 27-33).

The poem's persona eloquently delineates the enduring plight of modern African-American women, drawing a poignant parallel to the historical suffering of their enslaved counterparts. Systemic sexism has pervaded American society throughout the centuries, perpetuating an environment rife with inequality and marginalization. Despite the passage of time, the oppressive gender dynamics persist, a stark reminder of the pressing need for heightened comprehension, visibility, and representation to advance genuine strides toward gender parity. Yuval Taylor, in "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics," states that the profound impacts of the past cannot be undone, the legacy of slavery, lingering in the collective memory, casts a somber shadow over the nation's historical struggles, setbacks, and triumphs (xv). The ignominy of slavery, present even before the founding of America, ultimately culminated in one of the nation's most significant conflicts. The ramifications of this painful chapter in history have left an indelible mark on contemporary society, engendering a sense of oppression that reverberates through time. As the persona contemplates the enduring burden of this historical trauma, it becomes evident that white and black communities are affected by its legacy. White individuals grapple with the burden of acknowledging and apologizing for the past, recognizing the injustices perpetrated by their ancestors.

On the other hand, African-Americans contend with the burden of a painful history that engenders deep-seated resentment and detestation of the atrocities endured by their ancestors. The ongoing gender oppression in American society mainly focuses on failing to protect African-American women from sex trafficking. The speaker expresses

deep disappointment in the commodification of citizens, especially marginalized groups, and highlights how such exploitation violates basic human rights, perpetuating a cycle of violence and oppression across generations.

### **3. Racial Oppression**

The prevailing belief that racial oppression is harmful may not fully acknowledge the diverse manifestations of racism. Throughout history, racism has persisted in various cultures and societies, despite legal and political efforts in the United States to combat it. Presently, racial oppression endures through deliberate and concealed practices strengthened by cultural imperialism. Misguided notions among legislators, officials, academics, and others suggest that racial plurality alone mitigates oppression, while multiculturalist reforms have proven ineffective in reducing discrimination and transforming racist attitudes. As such, a comprehensive examination of oppression's reality becomes imperative, especially for specialists engaged with diverse social groups.

The idea of the white hierarchy, inferiority, and integrity is manifest in racial oppression. Similar to biological traits, it is believed that social and cultural traits also differ across races. In "Children of Crisis," Robert Coles mentions that racial oppression refers to the uneven socioeconomic dynamics resulting from one race's sociocultural dominance over another in the context of institutionalized oppressive actions (63). Thus, a racist is part of the politically and socially dominant community that maintains dominance. Sometimes, racism implies that a person has to be White in the United States of America. In other words, racial oppression may continue since its practitioners hold the majority of positions of authority in governmental, legal, and legislative administration establishments.

Shockley adopts a pessimistic stance when addressing the racial oppression faced by African-American women, expressing concern over the limited progress made in combating it. She contends that despite the passage of time, African-American women continue to experience oppression akin to that endured during slavery. Moreover, she lacks optimism about any substantial improvement in the future. Shockley sheds light on historical instances of racial oppression directed at African-American women and draws connections to contemporary racially oppressive acts to support her argument regarding the enduring nature of racism against them. Within her poetry, Shockley portrays the detrimental impact of their complexion, effectively conveying the suffering endured by African-American women due to this aspect of their identity. She emphasizes that their varying skin color has been the underlying cause of diverse forms of oppression persisting throughout centuries.

Shockley shows the similarity between the past and the present to explain the alarming situation of African-American women in America. Some indicators in her poems reveal women's terrible condition in modern times compared to the past, with many undesired predictions for their future. Milton Meltzer's "Slavery: A World History" recognizes the undesired expected future of Africa-Americans. Although he argues that black skin color is the main reason for their oppression, and there is hardly hope for a brighter future, "at home [America], a dark skin automatically meant the denial of opportunity. And the darker the skin, the darker your future" (84). Through her words, Shockley suggests that the current challenges faced by African-American women will remain, and perhaps even worsen, in the years ahead. She thinks this is an especially concerning sentiment given the long history of discrimination and oppression they faced in the United States. The tone of "notes to my nieces (or, essays in fortune-telling)" is gloomy and dark while expressing what the newer generations of African-American females expect. However, the past is not entirely delightful and contains agony and woes, but it still looks better:

when i was younger, trees  
were green, money was green, money  
grew on trees, or trees grew up  
and become money, now, money is clearly  
plastic, spreads like cancer, getting it  
is genetic. (Shockley, lines 1-6)

Shockley expresses a somber outlook on the future for African-American women, believing it to be more ominous than the past. She strongly emphasizes skin color as the central issue and primary cause of their oppression. Despite historical enslavement being overtly tied to their skin color, Shockley contends that life was, in some ways, comparatively better during that period. She argues that racial oppression, unlike slavery, inflicts more profound

harm, disregarding an individual's determination and efforts, as societal arrangements are primarily dictated by skin color. Shockley laments that racial oppression seems inevitable for African-American women, and she suggests that financial success is inherently innate or passed down through genetics, implying that an individual's economic prosperity is predetermined by their race rather than their exertion or education. This notion contradicts the American belief that success stems from diligence and dedication.

Although racial relations have improved in America, most white people still ignore African-Americans and do not want authentic relationships. This thinking is often based on racism and directly results from the country's history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Shockley reveals that African-American women do not always comply with the ingrained oppressions in their culture and are thus compelled to fight everyday racial oppression with much hesitation and fear. Although prevented by the guards from entering the club, a woman and her man insist on going in. The barriers do not deter the woman and her man on their way to the club; their assertion eventually results in their entering the club. Despite staying there till midnight, they are unhappy and must act carefully because "they knew it spelled trouble." The waiters have not served them well; when she orders a drink, "they brought her a stepmother's special," which means even though it is business and they get more money, the waiters do not wish to serve them because they are not white. They understand they are in the wrong place, and she feels sorry for what she has seen, "they learned what they already knew. They know better they lived to tell the scary tales" (Shockley, line 32). Shockley speaks to the powerful truth of racial oppression that many African-Americans have experienced. She reflects on the harrowing experiences of the couple who have gone through difficult times, suggesting that they have learned lessons they may have previously known about racial oppression. As a result, they learned more about the injustice of racial oppression and the experiences of those who have lived through it, and they could tell their own stories of fear and oppression. This situation serves as a reminder of the importance of recognizing and fighting against these injustices. It also serves as a warning of the continued presence of racism in American society and its effects on African-Americans who experience it. K. Lindsay, in "What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists (Music of the African Diaspora)," insists that African-American women have been given an inferior position in society and poses some questions about their anguish. Lindsay emphasizes the need for the protection of African-American women from racism. They do not feel safe in their communities and need to be provided with security and support. She believes racism is a pervasive problem that must be addressed to ensure African-American women's safety and well-being. It is essential to recognize their discrimination and prejudice and act to ensure their safety:

Who will revere the Black woman? Who will keep our neighborhoods safe for Black innocent womanhood?  
Black womanhood is outraged and humiliated. Black womanhood cries for dignity and restitution and  
salvation. Black womanhood wants and needs protection, and keeping, and holding (qtd. in Porter, 188).

People who have been going through hard times for an extended period often lose hope in having things improved soon. Despair can be tough to overcome and manifests itself in many ways. It can be hard to remain positive when the present situation is so difficult, and many people find it difficult to imagine a brighter future. Shockley argues that the problem of racial oppression is not easy to be resolved, and African-American women have suffered for centuries. Therefore, they have lost faith in eradicating this oppression because all the attempts for equality have been futile. She acknowledges a substantial disparity between African-Americans and Caucasians and contends that endeavors to eradicate oppression are futile. In "dear ace bandage," the poet addresses a bandage to elucidate the issue of racial persecution against African-American women. She hopelessly announces that achieving equality between African-American and white women is impossible. She does not hide her despair towards everlasting racial oppression and asserts that it is hard to be handled now:

the wound is hard to place  
the wound is not your job  
i thought i needed you, but  
things are already tight (Shockley, lines 1-5).

Shockley paints a powerful image of the devastating effects of racial oppression, depicting it as an open wound that is difficult to heal. Such oppression inflicts pain and suffering on those affected, leaving them with deep

emotional and physical scars that can be hard to overcome. Gerda Lerner's "Black Women in White America: A Documentary History" remarks that African-American women's records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed, and seldom interpreted; their victimization has extended from life to national mythology and literature (167). Shockley asserts that the portrayal of racial oppression in the poem serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring injustices permeating American society and underscores the considerable efforts necessary to attain genuine equality. Shockley's choice of words further highlights the gravity of the situation, suggesting that racial oppression is not a mere inconvenience but a genuine impediment to progress and harmony.

Beauty has deeply ingrained in society, and women worldwide feel immense pressure to meet specific beauty standards. This concern for beauty is pervasive, affecting women of all ages, races, and backgrounds. Not only does it influence how women view themselves, but it also plays a role in how they are viewed by society. Shockley discusses another vital concern and oppression of African-American women in "from topsy in wonderland," namely, their disrespect and humiliation due to their skin color. She mentions that complexion is one of the main reasons they receive frequent mockery and "uglification," which is always regarded as the worst standard of beauty. Robbins Wolfrey, in "Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide," states that fair skin and straight blonde hair are often considered beautiful. The media also keeps pushing this idea of an ideal woman mainly dominated by men, which makes African-American women more likely to be limited and hurt by the beauty standards shown in the media, which are different from those of poorer black women. The race disparity within the social order has left these women disadvantaged. Wolfrey shows that the scope of women's oppression is extensive, which is clear from what has been said above (50).

Moreover, the blackness of the skin is considered unwomanly. Most women who encounter this type of segregation are unaware that they are regarded as ugly until they are told, like Topsy, who has no idea what the concept means. She says that she knows ironically that to beautify means to whiten something, but she is surprised when she hears "uglification":

yours wasn't a really good school  
said the mocking person. i took  
the different branches of arithmetic-  
ambition, distraction, uglification,  
and derision. <i never did hear of  
uglification,' > Topsy ventured to say.  
<what that be?> never heard of ugly-  
fying! He exclaimed. you know  
what to beautify is, i suppose?  
<yeah,> said topsy doubtfully:  
<it mean-to-make-somethin'-  
Whiter.> (Shockley, lines 10-21)

Shockley argues that African-American women are perceived as neither beautiful by black nor white individuals, as they are subject to the imposition of Western beauty standards that place them paradoxically between attributes of masculinity and femininity. Their skin color leads to being considered ugly while simultaneously being sexualized. White women's beauty standards are further promoted and crystallized through cosmetic companies that offer products to whiten the skin and straighten hair. While some racial prejudices are shared between African-American women and men, "uglification" disproportionately affects women without a clear resolution. Shockley expresses dismay at the devaluation of African-American women and the imposition of beauty standards by white women, as this process has long served as a tool of oppression and fostered internalized racism. Through her words, Shockley seeks to challenge conventional beauty standards and empower African-American women to reclaim and redefine beauty. She highlights the detrimental effects of "uglification," which damages self-esteem and perpetuates a limited and false perspective on beauty. Shockley calls for recognizing and celebrating the natural beauty inherent in all women, regardless of their skin color or other physical attributes, in advocating for a more inclusive and diverse view of beauty.

#### 4. Class Oppression

A social class denotes an individual's position in society, determined by various factors like education, occupation, property ownership, and income source. Social classes establish a hierarchical structure, ranging from high to low. Each group's members generally share similar status, income, and consumer behavior. Social class significantly influences the decision-making processes of both groups and individuals (Goldthorpe 140).

Class oppression refers to class-based bias and discrimination. Class oppression may result in denying essential requirements and, consequently, a sense of inferiority toward higher-class individuals (Pincus and Sokoloff 10). For example, in the United States, the racialization of a class has left a significant proportion of African-Americans in hardship. Although class discrimination is pervasive within the dominant class in American culture, it might appear undetectable at times. Nevertheless, it is an important topic that has caused much hardship. Richard Gelles and Ann Levine, in "Sociology: An Introduction," clarify that "discrimination refers to the denial of rights and respect to individuals because they are members of a group" (125). Thus, being a member of an underprivileged group in a specific society, one is liable to various oppressive discriminations. Class oppression is a pervasive socioeconomic concern in several developed and developing countries. Such oppression may result in unemployment, extremism, racism, class differentiation, sexual assault, domestic violence, sex trafficking, rape, kidnapping, political disharmony, and abuse of power. However, despite great challenges, enormous attempts have been exerted to enhance societal awareness and women's living conditions by promoting equality and eliminating oppression. Ali Mazrui, in "The Politics of Gender and the Culture of Sexuality: Western, Islamic, and African Perspectives," opines that the primary function of feminism is to raise awareness against inequality; it is "a revolutionary movement and an academic discipline historically comes from a female collective experience of diverse histories and contexts but shares a common method of consciousness-raising, an ethics of care, and the politics of reform to close the gender gap, to eliminate oppression, and to promote equality" (XIII).

Financial insecurity can significantly impact an individual's life, resulting in limitations and challenges concerning housing, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Individuals lacking financial stability may struggle to attain their aspirations and experience anxiety and stress. Moreover, the lack of necessary resources can lead to a sense of helplessness, hindering their ability to improve their circumstances. Within her poetry, Shockley endeavors to illuminate various forms of unjust discrimination experienced by African-American women. One manifestation of these women's class-based oppression is the disparity in opportunities presented in marketing and business domains. Symbolically, Shockley employs the color pink to represent the alluring privilege white women enjoy, highlighting their access to wealth and luxurious living standards. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh in "(Pink 1979-)," confirm that there exists a relationship between pink color, femininity, and economic activity since "pink represents a particular kind of femininity- one that is passive, innocent, asexual, and immature... terms such as 'pink economy' and 'pink dollar' refer to the economic activity... The association of pink with femininity has been strategically used in gendered terms to convey strength and pride" (6). Shockley insists that only the pinks are fortunate and can gain money. However, women other than whites are economically deprived:

Sunk in pink of wealth: stinky in  
pink: rolling in bank that doesn't account  
for an interest in violet. (Shockley, lines 1-3)

The poet describes the optimistic view of white women about their future concerning the economic situation and the carefree white women as they are busy with cosmetics rather than the necessities of life. They can quickly obtain money to live a more prosperous life. The poet claims their luxurious condition is reflected in every aspect of their lives. In "pink think (a primer for girls of other colors)," she uses expressions like 'rare meat,' 'half moons,' 'cuticles' and 'tera firma' to highlight the fact that the impact of economic dissimilarity has reached every single spot or side of their lives. According to the poet, there are two different views about one's expectations about the future, and each belongs to a separate group of women in the U.S.A. The first group is white women who hopefully foresee economic security in the future without hesitation, and the second group is African-American women who live in poverty and are desperate for their future. They are either lower-middle-class people or poor; very few blacks have been rich and enjoyed the luxuries of life. Patricia Hill Collins, in "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment," emphasizes the importance of African-American women's role in the business world, "a



crucial factor in contemporary African-American civil society is not simply Black men's marginalization from work but changes affecting Black women's paid and unpaid work" (60). Collins argues that African-American women's work allows African-American communities to thrive, and it is a testament to their strength, resilience, and dedication to their families and communities. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize African-American women's invaluable contributions and ensure they are given the respect and support they deserve.

Social exclusion can have enduring and profound consequences for individuals, families, and communities by creating societal divisions and unequal access to resources, opportunities, and social connections. This instability can impede the development and well-being of affected individuals and communities as they struggle to access necessary resources and support. Vulnerable or disadvantaged groups are particularly susceptible to the damaging effects of social exclusion. To combat this issue and its far-reaching impacts, collaboration between governments, organizations, and communities is necessary to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for all.

Shockley's portrayal emphasizes the pervasive social exclusion that African-American women experience, which prevents them from feeling a sense of citizenship or belonging in America. She underscores that they are consistently treated as outsiders, marginalized, and denied the same resources, opportunities, and respect afforded to other members of society. This exclusion hinders their ability to participate fully in public life and organizations, limiting their engagement and rights. Due to their lack of inclusion, African-American women face disempowerment, while a select few hold economic, occupational, political, and privileged advantages. Shockley believes this exclusion is an injustice perpetuating a cycle of systemic inequality and oppression, as presented in a poem entitled "elocation (or, exit us)." In addition, they encounter segregation and discrimination in numerous fields as outsiders. By describing an African-American woman in an American city, Shockley explains how African-American women think of themselves and their attitudes toward America:

the city is american, so she  
can map it. train tracks, highways slice through, bleed  
permanently parted, the middle she's  
pass through, like the rest, in a wheeling rush  
beneath the crashing waves of human hell. (Shockley, lines 1-9)

Shockley conveys the isolation and exclusion experienced by the African-American woman who feels like an outsider, alienated from most of the population, and her feelings of displacement and marginalization have been compounded by the city's division. She is like a stranger in her home, surrounded by a culture that does not recognize her and her experiences. The poem represents the ongoing struggle for acceptance and respect that many African-American women face daily. The narrator introduces the female character as a displaced person familiar enough with the city to know the directions well, but she feels like a stranger. Peter Townsend's perspective on poverty in "Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living" is that it should be seen beyond the basic necessity of subsistence and should also consider people's ability to participate in the social life of their community. He argues that people and families could be classified as impoverished when their resources are significantly below average, thus excluded from standard living patterns, customs, and activities (32). Shockley emphasizes that this separation has been concentrated to a great extent since a long time ago; it exists perpetually and facilitates the oppression of African-American women. She compares the destructive force of the separation to "waves of human hell" to explain how destructive the power of segregation is. Hooks in "Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism," on the other hand, asserts the exclusion of African-American women stating that "many black women in the United States are broken-hearted. They walk around daily carrying so much hurt, feeling wasted, yet pretending in every area of their life that everything is under control" (19).

In the past, slavery provided a means for white people to accumulate wealth and power, and as a result, African Americans were forced into a system of oppression and subjugation. The system of racism and exploitation was then used to justify and enforce the economic structure of slavery, creating a vicious cycle of oppression; consequently, slavery and its attendant racism have had a profound and lasting impact on African-Americans in America. Kwame Nkrumah argues that the introduction of capitalist economic practices in African nations led to a master-servant dynamic, which gave rise to racism, color prejudice, and apartheid. In addition, the capitalist model of economic

penetration exacerbated existing social divisions (29). Shockley assumes that African-American women have no position and recognition in their communities; others represent them against their will. According to her, American society has not changed its attitude toward African-Americans yet. Topsy identifies herself more by explaining her relationship with others, namely, the whites she calls her 'master.' She mentions that she is enslaved and owned by white people; as a result, she never feels accepted as a free and recognized individual in the brutal reality of America. She states that she has been dehumanized to the extent that although she does not have the right to own her body organs, her humanity, too, is not confirmed. Shockley explains that African-American women feel like enslaved people or properties, not humans, owned by a master:

i'm my master's flesh and blood ~ he tends  
to me, to them, as if they were his own (raw-  
hide, quick kiss, intimate, hit it), as tenderly  
as if i were legal tender ~ but pound for pound,  
he'd never take the likes of me for human. (Shockley, lines 11-16)

Economic status can be a source of division, creating a feeling that people belong to different worlds. For example, people often think wealthy people have access to certain privileges and opportunities that people with less money do not. On the other hand, people with less money may feel like they cannot join certain social groups and have fewer chances in life, which consequently causes feelings of isolation, alienation, and resentment. Therefore, knowing the differences between different economic classes and working toward equality and inclusion is essential. In "hartwell dam," Shockley wants to know why there is a vast difference between African-Americans' and whites' lives as if they belonged to two entirely separate worlds. The reader senses the evident pessimism in her tone while she describes the dissimilarities between the conditions of the two groups of people. She announces that the first group is neglected and believes it is impossible, even in dreams, to live a prosperous and respectable life like the second group. Eric Williams, in "Capitalism and Slavery," argues that "racism was the result of the exploitation of the African's labour" not the cause; he believes that racial difference has justified the lower social status of African-Americans and helped secure a superior position for the white people (18). The speaker in the poem is puzzled by the inequality and thus supposes that skin color is the cause of the considerable difference between African-Americans and other people. She mentions things that are owned by a white family who invited her to a birthday party and wished that one day so she would have such things:

i wondered if effortless lives were inherent  
property of whiteness, wondered if i might  
marry into it. (Shockley, lines 1-4)

The persona in the poem is lost in deep thinking when she confirms that white people's privileges are the presence of their whiteness. African-Americans conceive themselves as inferior because they have been drained of a deserving life at present and in the past. Shockley pauses for moments and visualizes the presence of two famous African-American figures, William Edward Burghardt du Bois and Jessie Redmon Fauset, at the party to indicate their disenfranchisement from the same happiness and equal rights. She reminds the reader that privilege has been determined genetically by white people. She assumes the possibility of living in a different place with different people; she thinks of a dire need for a new, fear-free society by undoing the existing system. Frances Beal also confirms that "the new world that we are attempting to create must destroy oppression of any type. The value of this new system will be determined by the status of the person who was low man on the totem pole" (qtd. in Fahs 291).

## **5. Conclusion**

As it can be seen, throughout the study of Evie Shockley's poems, the poems capture the nature of the interconnection of multiple dimensions of oppression that have been causing the suffering of African-American women throughout centuries. Shockley's poems reveal the complexity of African-American women's identities that has historically led to disempowering women; therefore, the poems validate the interlocking agents of gender, race, and class oppression. She exposes perpetual oppressive factors in American society and highlights their devastating impact on different aspects of the life of African-American women. The poems demonstrate that one category of women's identity does not provide adequate and fair recognition of African-American women's oppression in

America, mainly because there is a strong connection between the past and present forms of oppression. Although African-American women share similar experiences of oppression, Shockley's poems screen the distinct nature of intersectionality in that women have unique experiences of oppression that cannot be additively observed.

The paper has shown that intersectional feminism can provide a more comprehensive interpretation of women's painful experiences and consequently make the reader more conscious of women's suffering. Such heightened awareness potentially motivates exploring alternative approaches to safeguard women's rights and secure a dignified quality of life for them.

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