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The Predicament of African American Women in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*

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Letter of Recommendation

Shashi Bhushan Sah has completed his thesis entitled "The Predicament of African American Women in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*" under my supervision. He completed his research work in April 2023. I hereby recommend his research to be submitted for viva voce.

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Abstract

This research explores the predicament of African American women from the perspective of black feminism in Lynn Nottage's two-act play Intimate Apparel. This study argues that African American women like Lynn Nottage's protagonist, Esther Miller have to tolerate white males' ill-treatment. It further explores the racial and gender wage disparity that black women confront. African American black feminists tend to believe that due to male domination, their freedom and capabilities are often compromised and undetermined. To investigate the predicament of the African American woman in the play Intimate Apparel, the researcher has applied the idea associated with the theory of Black Feminism based on an extensive review of relevant literature, articles, and studies available through extensive library research and reading. In this study, the researcher claims that African American females are marginalized in diverse ways: historically, culturally, economically, and socially. If treated equally, they can be self-dependent and make their own social identity. Both white and black people have dominated them.

Key Words: Gender discrimination, Domination, Biased representation, Ill-treatment, Marginalization, Plight

This paper explores Lynn Nottage's two-act play *Intimate Apparel* from the perspective of black feminism. In particular, it brings ideas from prominent black feminist theorists like Alice Walker, Christian Jamie, Bell Hook, Davies Boyce, and Sherley Anne Williams. This paper focuses on how Lynn Nottage represents her African American female characters and how her characters are marginalized at a time of racial segregation in American society.

Black feminism centers on the idea that black women are inherently valuable. It maintains that black women's liberation is necessary, not an adjunct to somebody else, because of our human need for autonomy. Black women did not have an identity inside or outside of slavery due to patriarchy and racism. These two social ills ultimately created a space and community known as black feminism.

This research employs the theoretical paradigm of Black Feminism based on an extensive review of relevant literature, articles, and studies available through extensive library research and reading. It minutely examines their ideas. This research confines itself to the ideas of Black feminism. The study may become a trailblazer and inspire future researchers to embark on research on African American Females. This paper analyzes different images of the black women depicted in Nottage's play.

Black feminism explores the struggle of black women. It contends that black women have an acute understanding of the negative impacts of sexism, racism, and class discrimination. Furthermore, race, gender, and class discrimination are all aspects of the same hierarchy system. In a time of slavery, black women faced oppression and unjust domination from multiple sources. Alice Walker is an American novelist, short story writer, poet, and social activist. Walker argues:

At times enslaved but always oppressed, these adult women characters are abused frequently by multiple sources: spouses, parents, employers, slave-owners, and community members. Consequently, the women's mistreatment is then redirected toward others. While painful to absorb, this redirection can also be seen as an additional mothering lesson. (62)

Walker thinks that in the time of slavery, black females were massively abused. She has also written extensively on black feminist theory and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. So, she deals with female issues like gender discrimination, racism,

violence against women, sexual harassment, and motherhood. Walker's faith in black women's strength and creative powers is further revealed in the story.

Black feminism is directly related to the activities of black women whom white people and black males racially and sexually dominate. They try to seek their identity and existence through literature. Black feminism as a concept and movement came into being because black feminists felt that the feminist movement led by white women did not address their experiences, agonies, sufferings, and other serious issues they raised.

Black feminism protests the massive silence of feminist criticism about women writers and calls for an African-American feminist aesthetic that deals with racial and sexual issues. African-American feminists have been helpful, especially in revealing the political and theoretical limitations inherent in white mainstream feminists' neglect of cultural experiences different from their own. For example, African-American feminists have been observed not simply as a woman but because she is a black woman. The logic is circular and deadly. A woman whose racial economic situation forces her into hard labor and makes her the victim of sexual predators was defined as womanly and therefore unworthy of protection from those who exploit her. African-American feminist literature came into mainstream literary trends after the feminist movement of the 1960s. The great hegemony of western and white-dominant literary trends dominated black literary texts and female writers. Christian Jamie is a black feminist who claims:

Black Feminist theory is quite different from western form of abstract of logic, and it is often in narrative form, in the stories we create, in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, ..., my folk in other words have always

been a race theory- through more in the form of the hieroglyphs, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract. (275)

Jamie believes that black feminism is a unique theory that addresses the agony and pain of black women living in the USA. She calls a critical black abolitionist and a black feminist and considers her to have been one of the leading figures in the nationalist struggle; to free blacks from slavery, as well as a long-time spoke person for many black women who were not yet free to speak. She says that black feminism struggles to gain equality while staying in American society. They should believe, logic, and argument to show the negative aspects of racial and gender discrimination. Christian, therefore, calls critical black abolitionists and black feminists to consider themselves as a separate entity.

Black feminism is the strong voice of black women for their rights. They step forward for their liberation and emancipation. They protest against patriarchal norms and strive for black people's liberation. Black women fight to maintain their dignity and reputation in contemporary society, and they want to be identified as complete women, free race, and create a new world.

Black feminists usually focus on the interconnection between races, gender, and class. Besides racial and sexual discrimination, black feminist critical theory demands the inclusion of historical and philosophical issues. The black women's movement, made up of working-class and middle-class black women, came to counter racism and sexism for both economic improvement and social equality with the whites. Combining every inspiring element of the feminist movement, black feminists raised political and psychological issues.

Many black feminists try to show how females are massively oppressed in male writing. Male writers thematically debase females in their writing. Bell Hook is

an American author and theorist. She writes: "Thematically and structurally, the tradition of the Afro-American poetry is dominated by the struggle for freedom from all forms of oppressions and by the personal odyssey to realize the full potential of one's complex bicultural identity as an Afro-American" (341). The black feminist admitted their humanity in defining and developing themselves as an ethnic community.

In the late sixties, many Afro-Americans are encouraged by historical circumstances to continue resisting interpretations of manhood and womanhood. They turned to non-western or non-white communities and Afro-centric models to discover or create possibilities for autonomous selves and communities. Black women of this time are primarily concerned with power, autonomy, creativity, manhood, and womanhood in the black family and community. Carole Boyce Davies is a Caribbean-American professor of African Studies who argues:

Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific image with which to record their lives for purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space. Despite troubles with racism, African-American women are traveling to the country for love, and finding companies catering to black travelers and black women. (243)

Black feminists think that blacks have the quest to search for new language, symbols, and images to express their experiences. The existing language is not sufficient to address females' pain and suffering. The mainstream writing, from its beginning, systematically distorts and erases the African American presence in their contribution to the American literary tradition. Anglo-American master narratives fail to acknowledge the African Americans' investment, which is not less than that of Anglo-Americans in building American institutions. They place the black people even out of

circumference as virtual aliens even though African roots were planted during the sixteenth century in the New World. It is the whole people's misconception that black America is a burden to America's global prosperity. Master narratives are designed to establish and maintain a hegemonic hierarchy that legitimizes its power to define who is American and who is not.

Black feminism in Britain and America is a prominently debated issue. Black women have been pressing the issue of equality for a long time, and being a black woman presents a two-fold equality issue. Unlike the American tradition, Nottage's evolution is a new racial realism trend, which she passionately protests.

African-American feminism holds the view that sexism and racism are bound together. This form has taken on more political connotations with the rise of black activism in the USA since the 1960s, and now its usage implies solidarity against racism. The ideas of the black have been reclaimed as a source of pride and identity. In several, society perceives black women differently. They are not valued as equal to other white women. Sherley Anne Williams is an American poet, novelist, professor, vocalist, jazz poet, and playwright. She opines, "Black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways than white women" (99).

Williams believes that even though African-American women are fundamentally different from white women, they can still do what white women can do. She claims they should also study black woman's existence while living in black and white society. Modern black women are directly related to the activities of black women whom the people and black males racially and sexually dominate. They try to seek their identity and existence through literature.

Black women have to endure domination in terms of race and gender in society. Sadly, black women's oppression is somehow a tolerated common

experience. Even though black women have displayed a sense of resistance to white dominance, they seem helpless and incapable of fighting against the several suppression. They cannot be free from the chain of domination. The play depicts a social structure under which black women are deprived of their fundamental human rights. They experience unfair domination and unkind treatment in a white-dominated society.

Black women have experienced double oppression and segregation due to the black race and sex. Crave for freedom from harsh situations imposed by white men's dominant society. They mention the term womanish and believe it refers to "black women" or colored females who aggressively fight against discrimination and oppression. Black females in Nottage's play are very confident because they are proud of their looks, accept their physical features, embrace them as their strength, and represent themselves as confident and strong women. Nottage represents the idea of the sexuality of black females that is opposite from the idea of her young age.

Black women do not have a significant position in literature. They are marginalized because of sexual as well as racial discrimination. They influence literature as the primary tool to protest racism and sexism in contemporary society. The African writers refused to continue their deference to the white gods of European culture and sought to destroy the myth of white supremacy. They also tried to revive the beauty of blackness to foster self-pride and win respect for cultural pluralism and human equality.

African-American women's movement is entangled with black men's liberation, and their emancipation depends on the emancipation of the black race. They have to fight against racism continued by white women. White feminists think that feminism belongs to the well-educated. Bell Hooks further writes: "Shaping

feminist theory, comments that no feminist speaks of those women without men, without children, without homes" (33). The existence of all non-white is ignored in both critical and literary works. Thus, a feminist movement is made one-dimensional for white women's sexual oppression.

Many critics study Nottage's play *Intimate Apparel* differently. They can be viewed via Marxism, Existentialism. The researcher will study the stories from black feministic perspectives. Critics often suggest that Nottage excelled in the art of short plays more than in his longer works. Laura Hitchcock is an American cartoonist who argues, "Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* is paly about female domination that prolonged discomfort with quite so many funny and sad moments. Nottage writes simply and gently is the connection between Social insecurity and male domination. Hovering past given to female by male always makes their status pathetic" (25). She means that females are suffered historically. The play is a mirror of male domination. Male domination of females is not new because it happened in ancient times. Similar practices even can be viewed in the 21st century. Females have to do low post job while male handles high posts from which they can get name and fame.

Similarly, Graham Hough is an English literary critic and poet who tries to explain the imbalanced relationships between men and women in Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*:

Intimate Apparel is the study of female's mind where relations between men and women are always relations of conflict, and lovers rarely seem ever to have any ordinary human understanding of each other; all the stress is on bonds other than the conscious one. It can be described as a woman's passive existence in male world that reinforce Nottage protagonist to feel toil. (225)

The above lines tell that the play exposes the male and female mental conflict in which female characters like Esther Miller want to be independent and run their own business. Black Wolf claims: "The play, *Intimate Apparel* has a few problems of female characters where females are presented as whore and major protagonists in low world" (99). He means that males always define females and spell negative words like witch, siren and whore. Similarly, the female has to engage in low work like nursing, washing, and tailoring.

Many critics think that Nottage's plays are written for eccentric people. Some of them also believe that while reading her plays, readers can get entertainment and forget or escape mental pain. She also used a straightforward style to express her ideas. An American literary critic, Thomas LeClair, defending such an accusation, argues:

Nottage in her plays keeps the cleansing mode in which there are some sorts of healing and revelation; there is a whole lot of space between, and her inclination is in the tragic direction. The characters in her plays are adventurous in search of their original names connected with their ancestors. Once they get the names, they will have power. She takes in acute and candid style so that reader grasps the implicit meaning of the text. (375)

Thomas thinks that while reading Nottage's plays, one can feel refreshed. So, for him, her plays work as healing medicine for an anxious mind and mood. Nottage's plays are peasant literature for black people, which is necessary and legitimate but also allows her to get in touch with all sorts of people. She says she thinks long and carefully about what her plays should do. The reason for this absence of black people was the marginal impact that blacks had on the lives of characters in work and the creative imagination of the white author. So, the major focus of black feminism is on

political, economic, psychological and religious equality. It opposes gender stereotypes and discrimination against women based on the assumption that women are passive, weak and physically helpless. In this context, British author and critic Rebecca West claims:

I myself have never been able to find out precisely what black feminism. I only know that other people call me a feminist, whenever, I express sentiments that differentiate me from a door mate or prostitute to that of a woman of voice and status. To be called feminist is ok, but what actually it stands for, is a challenge that has been a query to me. (219)

Here, for Rebecca, the term black feminism itself is very vague. It is difficult to define what feminism is and who black feminists are. According to her, the person who stands for female rights and favors female sentiments is the feminist. However, all types of feminism have many challenges to be faced.

An Afro-American critic Maggie Sale writes, "*Intimate Apparel* is about women who are able to stand in their place in life regardless of what that place is, and they stand in it and they stand strongly"(42). She means that the play represents the lifestyle of a working-class Afro American woman.

African-American feminists believe that the situations and experiences of black women are different from the experiences of white women. Black American writers have tried to establish autonomy and originality in their writing. The social and cultural change in American society has also influenced a lot in shaping the form and content of African-American literature during its development. Many critics think Nottage's plays represent African culture, heritage, and tradition. In this regard, Hazel V Carby argues:

Nottage's narrative plays address the nature and forms of this connection between African self and other, individual and group, that may ambiguously shape people's values and impede their capacity to express them within the community's norms and her plays the prejudices of race and gender discover her inner self, where matters such as gender, sex, race, culture, domestic. (95)

Carby is trying to clarify that Nottage's plays represent the outer reality of African-American women. So, they expose the experiences and problems of both individual and typical American women. People regard themselves and are concerned about how they are regarded. This juxtaposition permeates every relationship and suggests the intangible boundaries that arise between individuals and groups.

Unlike white women, African-American women are not only subject to a sexual role in patriarchy. However, they must deal with a second set of problems compounded by their ethnic status and circumstances.

Feminist theory is not one but many theories or perspectives. Black feminists usually focus on the interconnection between races, gender, and class. Black feminist also exposes how Negro women were dominated from ancient time. Christina Davis argues:

Black feministic writers undergo their ancestry and owing should be understood to know negro stance that it is their job to recover the annihilated black history. In this adventurous job of unearthing their history, a single person can do a tiny part. The concept of ancestors, as an abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding presence, grants them shelter and energy to complete the job. (415)

Christina Davis is trying to analyze how black feminist writers use the idea of ancestry to reclaim their lost history and identity. It suggests that black women have

been erased and silenced by the dominant culture and that they need to trace their roots and connections to their foremothers to understand their position and role in society. This connection to the past provides a sense of purpose and continuity, allowing them to persevere despite obstacles and challenges.

The play *Intimate Apparel* is a typical representation of African American women. It reviews their historical importance through a current understanding of the link between race, gender, and class. Most of Nottage's plays expose differences by emphasizing the complex communities African American women have historically belonged. Nottage's plays rearrange African American female characters from positions of racial loneliness into positions where development requires intercultural cooperation.

African-American women have low dignity and reputation in contemporary society. Although the play character Mrs. Dickson romantically envisions Esther with a gentleman, he does not connect that fantasy with marrying for love. Mrs. Dickson offers her familial history as a warning against allowing romantic desires to outweigh the importance of securing economic and cultural status within the community:

Mrs. Dickson: I suppose. He give me some laughs. But you see, my mother wanted me to marry up. She was a washerwoman, and my father was the very married minister of our mission. . . . Marry good. She didn't ever want me to be embarrassed of my fingers the way she was of hers...She wouldn't even let me help her, she didn't want my hands to show the markings of labor. I was going to marry up. Love was an impractical thing for a woman in my position. (39)

Mrs. Dickson demonstrates that a woman worker does not occupy a safe position and further suggests that a woman's social status can diminish her opportunity for security. Her family's history exposes the obstacles African American women encounter when

trying to establish secure bonds within their racial communities. Mrs. Dickson's protected status belies the sacrifices made to ensure social stability.

Black women are marginalized because of sexual as well as racial discrimination. In defining African-American women's resistance to sexism and racism. Deborah McDowell, a scholar, author, and member of the University of Virginia, asserts:

Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* is a voice of the Negro woman with her head erect and spirit undaunted, is resolutely marching forward, ever conscious of her historic and noble mission of doing bit toward the liberation of her people in particular and the human race in general. They make the literature main tool to protest racism and sexism existed in the contemporary society. (145)

Similarly, while reading the play, one can notice that Nottage delves deep into the black past and tries to establish its connection to the present to pave the way for the future. To show how black women are exploited, Nottage explores mythical connections.

The cultural codes of the African-Americans remain the most influential in shaping the literary sensibility of blacks. African folklore, residues of African oral forms transmitted from generation to generation, their myths, legends, songs, language, and the experience itself are the roots from which African-American literature stems. The disagreement between the whites and the blacks reveal blacks' endurance of oppression. Southern plantations, black oration for early American writing and migration, northern ghettos where they had to live, depression, and wars are other matters that helped the emergence of black literature. The blues and jazz enhance the musical basis for its new shaping. Mrs. Van Buren's experience represents immobility. As a young married woman, she is expected to produce

offspring for her husband. So Mrs. Van Buren's inability to fulfill this obligation undermines her marriage:

I've given him no children. (Whispered.) I'm afraid I can't. It's not for lack of trying. One takes these things for granted, you assume when it comes time that it will happen, and when it doesn't who is to blame? They think it's vanity that's kept me childless, I've heard the women whispering. If only I were that vain. But it's like he's given up. (14)

The above extract is trying to say that from time to time, racism and black males dominate females. Mrs. Van Buren could not give birth to children, so her husband was cruel to her. Dickson underscores stating, "It's tough Esther, for a colored woman in this city. I ain't got to tell you that"(10). Esther's relationship with Mrs. Dickson symbolizes a mother-daughter connection, where Mrs. Dickson consistently uses her personal experience to instruct Esther about the realities of marriage. African female writers share the common racial marginalized position, and therefore critics find commonalities in their literature. One can explore how the commonalities manifest differently in black women's writings. In black men's writings, the negative images of women are depicted due to their conscious superiority. The complex shapes African-American women's existence, experience, and culture and needs revision to the traditional practices. For Afro-American women, the situation is even more difficult due to the ambiguous cultural definition of gender. The white feminists never appealed to black women in the first place.

Through Esther's reflections on Mrs. Dickson, the owner of her boardinghouse, Nottage highlights the tension women felt to adhere to this expectation. The characters' honest conversations highlight Esther's fears about being

single. For Esther, marriage reflects an ultimate status level that she has not achieved.

Esther express her insecurities about her marriage prospects:

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

Twenty-two girls later, if you count Lerleen. That's how many of these parties I have had to go to and play merry. I should be happy for them, I know, but each time I think why ain't it me.

MRS. DICKSON: Your time will come child.

ESTHER: What if it don't? Listen to her laughing. God forgive me, but I hate her laughter, I hate her happiness. And I feel simply awful for saying so. And I'm afraid if I go back in there, she'll see it all over my face—and it's her day.

Esther's question displays her deeply felt fears about fulfilling traditional expectations. As long as Esther remains unmarried, her position within the community remains unstable. The ultimate goal of black feminist criticism is to show Negro women's experience while living in a white and black male world. Maria Mies argues: "Women's Confinements in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* massively can be viewed" (15). She means that in the play, females are massively dominated by the males. In the play, female characters are marginalized and dominated by males. Ester reflects on this:

Esther: My father died two years later, he was a slave you see, 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. (48-49)

Esther is describing her father, a formerly enslaved person who lost his tongue in a nasty fight over a chicken and could not hear his voice. She tells George the story of their wedding ceremony during nighttime, hoping to percentage an exchange of intimacies. However, George is involved simplest in consummating their marriage bodily.

George has returned to Panama to embrace the myth of the American dream. When someone in the salon tells him that the stables are sold cheaply, George buys them to save Esther's life. He persuades Esther to give him money by spinning imaginative fantasies where the stables give them financial security and social status. Her father defeats her with his crop. Mayme gives up the American dream. Esther's ambition to open a beauty salon for African-American women seems more realistic than George and Mayme's dreams. It is not that grand, and she has a clearer vision. She has saved for this for almost 20 years. She does not give up even after succumbs to George's flattery and gives him savings to buy her stables. She has hope and determination of work ethic- the two elements necessary to fulfill the American dream.

If one analyzes the activities of Esther, one finds the failure of the American Dream. Her hard work and determination do not make her rich. The government should enhance new policies to uplift woman's economic status.

Esther being black, does not get an excellent job. Her dream is to open a beauty parlor by collecting money from her present job, tailoring, but her dream has yet to be fulfilled at the play's end.

Nottage is sometimes accused of having written the plays of eccentric people in her play, but she defends herself by saying that what applies to the ordinary can be found in them. She argues that she is personally enchanted with extraordinary people.

Nottage plays have a complex relationship to history and find some aspiration. During her life, there have been significant changes in civil rights for black people in America and broader public recognition of African American women writers:

ESTHER: No. That half my life. Thousands of tiny stitches and yards of fabric passed through that old machine.

GEORGE: And for what, huh? For it sit?

ESTHER: No.

GEORGE: Stop sayin' no! Ain't you see. If 'e own wife ain't willin' to believe in'e, who will? (65)

After George knows that Esther has saved the money to open a beauty parlor and does not want to give him any money, he shows his rage toward her.

During slavery, African-American women were treated as properties and wealth producers for their owners, often encouraged to have children, systematically raped, and punished for reproductive failure. The economic value of an enslaved woman was related to her fertility. However, despite expecting children, enslaved black women had no right to claim motherhood and care for and protect their offspring. Black women are more likely to experience unnecessary pregnancy-related health complications, resulting in severe illness or death from childbirth, regardless of educational or financial opportunities. While working hard with the machine, people become selfish and self-centered. They only think of being rich. For them, money and wealth are more important than love and marriage. In the play, Esther utters:

ESTHER: I ain't really Mrs. Armstrong, am I? I been holding on to that, and that woman ain't real. We more strangers now than on the eve of our wedding. At least I knew who I was back then. But I ain't gonna let you hurt that woman. No! She's a good decent woman and worthy. Worthy!

GEORGE: Esther!

(George reaches out to Esther.)

ESTHER: No, don't touch me! (Backs away from George)

GEORGE: Please. I ain'a thief. No. They warn't my words, but that don't mean I ain't feel them t'ings. I go now, and I gonna bring yuh back them horses (68).

As Esther reveals that she cannot invest any money in him and that he is not rich, George changes his mood. Now, they become strangers to each other. He loves her, thinking that she is rich because of tailoring. He defends himself, saying he is not a thief but wants her money to invest in his work. He is an ambitious money seeker guided by the American dream. Knowing his money-minded decision, Esther calls him to remain far and does not allow him to touch her. Through these lines, Nottage uses the female voice to demand her right as a black woman and to talk in the name of other black women against the inequality and racism they had tolerated. The reiterated two lines confirm the theme of equality and freedom that become a myth like the American dream that many Americans wanted. This notion affirms the need for a revolt against racism.

It is a well-known fact that in the time of Jim Crow Low, blacks were not allowed to attend school. In the play, Esther is illiterate, so she has to take the help of others to read and write a letter to her lover. Only a few females are educated. So, Esther takes the help of her landlady to send and read the letters. A line taken from the play *Intimate Apparel* shows the same thing:

MRS. VAN BUREN: Esther, you're jumping a bit ahead of yourself.

(*Light fade on Mr. Marks*)

Shall we begin with "Dear Mr. Armstrong —"

ESTHER: Yes. That's good. "Dear Mr. Armstrong —"

MRS. VAN BUREN: "I received your letter ..."

(Lights cross fade. George enters in his work clothing. The cross fade should allow time for Esther and George to dwell on the stage together for a few moments.) (15-16)

The above lines suggest that a white, educated woman, Van Buren, is helping to write and read a letter to Esther's lover. It indicates that, being black, Esther is deprived of her right for education. During racial discrimination, blacks were not allowed to study in school.

Undoubtedly, Nottage continues her play by rendering specific and concrete images to suggest how white people regarded black women as weak, filthy, and uneducated. To win the heart of a Negro girl, a white uses sweet and attractive words. White people see Negro as sex objects. After physical attachment, white people do not care about their previous promises. In the play, George does the same:

Dear Esther,

Thank you for your sweet words. Your pricked finger delivered the most unexpected lift. It quiet now. The only motion is the rain. The only sound is the rain. It is the white season, and the work all but stop. The rum shop be the onliest business that do prosper. (27)

George is, so money minded and sees Esther as a beautiful girl. To win her heart, he uses the words like "Sweet" and "Dear". George loves her for the sake of money. He knows that Esther cannot invest her money in him, so he does not write letters to her from Panama. Now it turns out they knew not anything in any respect. Any attempt she has made to attain George over the months of their marriage has been based totally on those letters.

Nottage, in her narratives, places the black past, which was erased and distorted in mainstream fiction, at the center of the American chronicle. She negates those mainstream histories and fictions that marginalize, trivialize or exclude the African-Americans from their accounts. African-American Feminist black women's existence, experience and culture, and the complex system of oppression are invisible to them. Many books, magazines, and articles have been written on separate pages, neglecting them categorically. Before holding any theoretical framework of the black feminist approach, we must know the history of black literature and culture.

In *Intimate Apparel*, Nottage introduces Esther, a younger African-American seamstress residing in 1905. Her expertise in fashioning lovely undergarments connects her with a diverse forged of characters from her clients Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren, the previous a younger African-American prostitute and the latter a properly-to-do white married woman, to Mr. Marks, a Jewish Romanian immigrant fabric distributor. Esther's expert relationships allow her to establish connections with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, Nottage creates complicated personal relationships between Esther and folks that belong to similar.

All play's characters suffer from the restrictions imposed by the society based on race, class, and gender. Due to these restrictions, the American dream of hardworking to be rich has become a failure. Most characters are African-Americans, and George is a black West Indian. In the play's first scene, Mrs. Dickson tells Esther that Mr. Charles has been promoted to bellboy at a luxury hotel. She thinks this is a good position. However, Esther points out that he still carries someone else's luggage. By 1905, when the play was set up, most African-Americans ended up in a service jobs. Even George, who helped build the Panama Canal, needed help finding a construction job in New York. Despite being young, strong, and experienced, site

managers hire older Europeans. However, George tells Esther he is unhappy with carrying someone else's luggage. "I want to build t'ings, not polish silver or port luggage" (53). Mrs. Van Buren married a wealthy man. She lives in a big house and can hire Esther to make beautiful lingerie. She attends operas and other social events and does not need to work. In contrast, Esther works full-time, lives modestly, and saves as much money as possible.

Their race and gender increase the class distinction between the two women. Mrs. Van Buren considers the idea of being socially seen with Esther "surprisingly scandalous," but she does not dare. However, she is pleased with the idea of taking Esther to a friend of Lennox. There Esther can get extra work. She can spend time with Esther, but her social role is maintained. Esther's dream of owning a beauty salon where black women can be as spoiled as white women reflects her consciousness of the class and the racial divide. In the play:

ESTHER: Do you think there's something wrong with a woman alone?

MRS. VAN BUREN: What I think is of little consequence. If I were

(Whispers) brave, I'd collect my things right now and find a small clean room someplace on the other side of the park. No, further, in fact. And I'd....but it isn't a possibility, is it? (14).

This conversation reveals the point that the life that women wanted was not the life they were able to have. Women were permitted the life that men decreed they were allowed to have. Mrs. Van Buren is not happy in her marriage and would very much like to leave her husband, start again on her own, and do a lot of other things independently that she knows she cannot do because she is a woman and women do not get to choose the direction of their own lives. A woman cannot live alone and be independent because she wants to, so she stays in the marriage. Esther is afraid to be

alone, so Esther accepts George's proposal. She is in conflict and asks Mrs. Van Buren for her opinion about a woman without a man because she is in love or not married because she especially wants. However, because she knows that society is feeling this, it is time she gets married and has a social obligation.

The American dream does not work in the play. Esther loves Marks, but Marks does not allow her to touch him because he only loves rich and beautiful girls.

Lines are taken from *the Intimate Apparel* show:

ESTHER: Oh, I see.

MARKS: It is the rabbinical law, not mine.

ESTHER: Your wife must be a happy woman.

MARKS: I am not married. Not yet. My fiancée is in Romania. Um, my family made the arrangement years ago. (20)

In race practice, there appears to be a channel of preconception. Marks pretends that he cannot make love with her. It is just his pretension because he loves a beautiful girl from Romania. If she is beautiful, he may love her.

In this way, Nottage wrote several plays on injustice and discriminatory behavior against African-American in the USA. While mostly plays talk about the issue of individuality, racism, and gender discrimination. She is the woman who used the approach of feminism in her plays that expresses racial segregation, discrimination, and male dominance. She uses feminist voices in plays that disclose her association with what she has done as a black feminist playwright. Her writing style states the feminist aspect she longs to proclaim in her plays. As she is the victim of the sexist and racist male-dominant culture, her identity and civil right as a woman are eclipsed and robbed.

To show the true nature of race, gender, and class practices, Nottage criticizes mainly the white world by portraying her mouthpiece protagonist in *Intimate Apparel*. She also uses black feminists' voices in her plays through figurative language, which emphasizes the powerlessness of black women who experienced severe mental conflicts because of the dominant hegemonic culture of whites. She skillfully manifests the status of African-American women's condition in a white-dominated culture. She tells through her plays how African-American women have been deprived of being entirely accepted as human beings by the mainstream of American culture. She and other African-American women are in-between characters of the dominant culture of the male world. She included her voice in most of her plays to recount the tragic story of the black woman in the world of whites.

Nottage portrays black women to be strong and confident through their resistance to slenderness. She challenges the traditional perspectives that present the female gender as pathetic and passive to give a new outlook that black women are resilient and competent. Her identity as black and female infers double domination that race is one cause of her suffering and female is vulnerability. The play depicts the American society in which black women are suppressed and oppressed by the racial and patriarchal notion of society. The play explains black women's experiences in American society. The social structure creates black women's sufferings.

Little work is done on the black feministic narrative in English, especially in Nottage's work. Discrimination towards black people, predominantly female in America, is a considerable concern. It denotes the most critical influence on society. The postmodern work of American playwright Nottage highlights the African-American feminism of her community in a way to present it as affectionate female.

The contribution of this paper is to enrich future studies with facts about the reality of American society and how the mythical dream, which is the American Dream of achieving equal rights in America, is doomed to failure. The recommendation for future studies is to focus on the effect of the latter events in America on the literary style of Nottage and how she defeated racism through plays. Nottage highlights a black woman's voice and explicitly critiques the injustice and discrimination through her play.

The researcher has tried to find out the image of the black female in the play. Black women did not have an identity in a time of the slavery system of the 1860s. Even after the slavery system was eradicated, racial discrimination persisted, where whites and blacks massively dominated black women. It means that they got double-dominated by white as well as black males.

To conclude, the play *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage exposes African American women's social and economic marginalization during the early twentieth century. Nottage highlights the intersections between race, gender, and class, which impact these intersections have on the lives and opportunities of Black women. Through the lens of Black feminism, this study exposes the systemic barriers and inequities that African American women faced in their quest for economic, social, and sexual freedom. Nottage's depiction of the protagonist Esther's struggles with self-love, respect, and personal fulfilment amidst the harsh realities of racism and sexism highlights the intersectionality of oppression and the need for a multipronged approach to liberation. She effectively captures the intersectionality of race, gender, and class and highlights how these factors shape the lives of African American women. Although progress has been made toward equality, the obstacles faced by African American women continue to persist in many ways. By examining the play

through the framework of Black feminism, one can gain deeper insight into the struggles and triumphs of African American women and move towards a more just and equitable society.

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