

## African American Female's Exposure to Triple Oppression in Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel"

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### Abstract

This paper aims at studying how triple oppression of race, class, and gender intersect together to repress African American women in the American society. This paper reveals African American women's suffering in the male-centered patriarchal society. In addition to the burden of their arrival to the United States as slaves, African American women have experienced social injustice because of their race, class, and gender. Their predicament is reinforced by different types of oppression. They also suffer from other plights such as illiteracy and gender bias in education and work. The researcher applies the concept of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8). For Collins, "Intersecting oppression" have three different dimensions: political, economical, and ideological (p.4). In addition, the researcher uses the concepts of "interpersonal oppression" and internal oppression" (David & Derthick, 2018, p. 76) as two connected types of oppression. The researcher analyzes the three different dimensions of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" in the lives of the female characters in Lynn Nottage's play "Intimate Apparel". Nottage discusses the plight of Esther who is a representative of African American women in the American society. Through applying the concept of "intersecting

oppression of race, class, and gender" to Nottage's "Intimate Apparel", the researcher asserts the submissiveness of the female characters to such oppression. The paper sheds light on the oppression practiced by African American women among themselves.

**Keywords:** Internal oppression, Interpersonal oppression, Intersecting oppression, Lynn Nottage, Gender.

### **Introduction**

Basically, the objective of this paper is to highlight the triple oppression that African American women suffer from in the American society in Lynn Nottage's play "Intimate Apparel". To be a poor black woman living in the American society is to confront a desperate plight. Actually, feminism calls for the rights of white women only ignoring the rights of colored women especially the black ones. Adrienne Rich (1979) asserts that the major weakness of feminism is that it demands mainly "white solipsism-to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world" (p.299). As a result, Black feminist thought emerged to shed light on the dilemma of African American women. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) introduced Black feminist thought which came as a response to triple oppression. She also presents the concept of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (p.8). "Interpersonal oppression" and "Internal oppression" (David & Derthick, 2018, 76) are also core concepts in analyzing the plight of African American women in the United States. Originally suffering from "interpersonal oppression" and "internal oppression" leads to suffering from "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8). This results in keeping African American women in a subordinate position. This paper answers the following questions: does triple oppression help to suppress African American women? Does "interpersonal oppression" among African Americans in general and African American women, in particular lead to triple oppression?

### **White Feminism and the Emergence of Black Feminist Thought**

White feminism fought mainly to put an end to "sexist oppression" (Hooks, 1984, p. 24). It majorly called for the rights of white women (Hooks 1984). This major defect of white feminism was the main reason of the emergence of Black feminist thought which is basically concerned with the experiences of African American women in the United States (Collins 2000). It came as a

response to ignoring the experiences of African American women and their suffering as well.

### **Literature Review**

Jeon Yeon-hee has presented a paper entitled "Cosmopolitanism Philosophy Appearing in Lynn Nottage's Plays: Focusing on Intimate Apparel, Las Meninas, Fabulation, Ruined, and Sweat" in which she applies Kant's philosophy of cosmopolitanism to prove the subjugation of the subaltern who cannot speak. In another research entitled "Re-appropriation of Space and Perception in Lynn Nottage's Plays Ruined, Intimate Apparel and Sweat", Lee Yong soo uses the sociological approach to study re-appropriation and space as processes attempting to deconstruct the patriarchal standards so that a woman can be receive a fair treatment regardless of her race, gender and class. On the other hand, Sabah Diyaiy and Asmaa Saleh have written a paper entitled "Women's Confinements in Lynn Nottage's Intimate Apparel" in which they apply Simone de Beauvoir resistant approach which raises women's awareness of unfair treatment and violence against them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Oppression is regarded a keynote term in minority literature. It is defined as the unjust treatments of specific group of people resulting in forming a society that prefers some people while underestimating others (David & Derthick, 2018, p.18). The core of oppression is that there is one prevalent dominant group uses its power to inflict violence upon other groups. (David & Derthick, 2018, p.3). Moreover, oppression

describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States (Collins, 2000, p.4).

According to David and Derthick (2018), oppression has two basic types which are the interpersonal and the internal (p.76). The "interpersonal oppression" occurs among individuals and it "involves relatively more powerful and privileged individuals (or persons) engaging in biased thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors toward other individuals (David & Derthick, 2018, p.77). This type of

oppression is applicable to Mayme, one of the female characters in the selected African American play "Intimate Apparel".

Another type of oppression is the "internal oppression" (David & Derthick 2018, p.76) which is defined as "turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from ... the oppression of the (dominant) society" (Lipsky, 1977, p.6). "Internal oppression" and "interpersonal oppression" (David & Derthick 2018, p.76) work together to permeate against African American women in the American society. Indeed, Esther, the protagonist of "Intimate Apparel", suffers from both "internal oppression" and "interpersonal oppression" (David & Derthick 2018, p.76). These two types of oppression lead to "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8) which is mainly suffered by African American women in the American society. Collins (2000) comments on this type of oppression stating "[r]ace, class, and gender still constitute intersecting oppression ... they are now organized to produce social injustice" (p.15). This means that oppression can never be limited to only one major type.

In addition, political, economical, and ideological dimensions constitute the basic components of "intersecting oppression" (Collins, 2000, p.8). To be racially segregated in the ghetto represents the economic dimension of "intersecting oppression" (Collins, 2000, p.4). Keeping African American women illiterate and forbidding them from their political right to vote defines the political dimension of "intersecting oppression". African American women are also deprived from occupying high positions. Furthermore, Collins confirms "[f]orbidding Black women to vote, in addition to excluding African-Americans and women from public office. ... all substantiate the political subordination of Black women" (Collins, 2000, p.4). Unfortunately, African American women are hardly treated properly, and they are treated as inferior creatures who have no rights at all.

Perpetuating negative stereotypes against African American women in the American society depicts the ideological dimension of "intersecting oppression" (Collins, 2000, p.5). Collins (2000) comments on this dimension stating that "... [N]egative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression" (p.5). Some of these negative

stereotypes are "the mummies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes" (Collins, 2000, p.5). They are always stamped with these controlling fake images in the American society. All African American female characters in "Intimate Apparel" suffer from the ideological dimension of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8). They are also frightened of being labelled either spinsters or divorcees.

### **Lynn Nottage (1964- )**

Lynn Nottage, a well-known African American playwright, and feminist, was born in New York in 1964. She is the graduate of Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn and the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. The playwright received her Bachelor degree in Arts from Brown University in 1986. She got her Master's degree in Fine Arts from Yale University in 1989. (Zhong, 2018). At the beginning of the twentieth century, she started writing plays which discuss the domestic violence directed to African American women. This distinguishes Nottage's plays among her contemporaries. In 1993, Nottage presented her first play "Poof" which premiered at the Actors Theater in Louisville, Kentucky. It was the winner of Heideman Award. One of her best plays is "Crumble from the Table of Joy" (1995) which was produced by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. (Hill and Barnett, 2009, p.370). As a matter of fact, Nottage is the winner of Pulitzer Prize two times for her most successful plays "Sweat" (2017) and "Ruined" (2009) (Zhong, 2018). Nottage has professionally written "Intimate Apparel" to record the history of her African American ancestors after she has found the picture of her grandmother in a book. Nottage comments on this point stating "... my play is not specifically about great grandparents, but rather inspired by their lives. They are no longer anonymous people. Their lives now resonate in my work. I write their names, Ethel Boyce Armstrong, and George Armstrong, so they can finally become part of the historic record (Nottage, 2003, p.6). This illustrates that African Americans in general and African American women in particular have not been referred to in history. Nottage's plays are considered multicultural because they are crossing the borders of cultures, histories, races and customs and traditions. In an interview with Alexis Greene (2006), Nottage declares that:

Crossing borders is about crossing from the familiar into the unfamiliar, which is a challenge that I've set up for myself. I love traveling, literally and figuratively. So I find myself seeking out different kinds of territories, and that territory can be a remote village in Africa, as in *Mud, River, Stone* (1996); a Jewish tenement on the Lower East Side, as in *Intimate Apparel* [2003]; or Europe in the 1600s, as in *Las Meninas* (2002). All of those places, until recently, were equally unfamiliar to me. But I feel that I should be able to explore them, because that's part of my creative journey and part of trying to answer the questions that I have about this world. (p.116-117)

Nottage focuses on the self-defining roles of African American women. The female characters undergo bitter experiences ending in self-discovery.

### **"Intimate Apparel" (2003)**

Moving to "Intimate Apparel", it is one of the most successful plays written by Nottage and it is an exploration of Esther's Journey from self-illusion and denial to self-discovery. "Intimate Apparel" is a semi-biographical play. Actually, Esther, the protagonist of the play, is a mirror-image of Nottage's grandmother who worked as a seamstress sewing undergarments for women. Besides, the character of George, in "Intimate Apparel", is similar to Nottage's grandfather who worked in Panama Canal. The theme of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8) with the three dimensions takes place throughout the whole play. In "Intimate Apparel", Nottage also stresses a main theme which is that African American women have to stop practicing "interpersonal oppression" against each other to be treated fairly by the American society.

Concerning "Intimate Apparel" (2003), it was the winner of the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play (2004) (Gans, 2005). Throughout the play, Nottage confirms that African American women have clear voices in the American society and that they are a basic part of this society. During an interview with Nilo Cruz (2010), Nottage clarified that the link between "Intimate Apparel" and her own historical perspective. She stated that she wrote the play in the period following her mother's death. She comments "... I feel like Intimate Apparel is my most deeply personal play. It's a play that I began writing shortly

after my mother died (p.23). Commenting on "Intimate Apparel", Nottage declared that she wanted to dedicate a play to her mother, a play that was simple, honest, and emotional; she created a play that she knew that her mother wanted to see (Tichler and Kaplan,2012, p.95).

"Intimate Apparel" introduces the plight of African American women living the United States in 1905 through the professional delineation of the female characters in the play. It also sheds light on the issue that the main reason of triple oppression is that African American women oppress each other and do not treat each other in a respected fair way. This occurs because they are oppressed by African American men who are basically oppressed by white men. Thus, the circle of triple oppression continues working to repress African American women. Additionally, James Herbert (2019), in his review, comments on the plot of the whole play in general stating that "The story that unfolds in Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel" is a delicate tapestry woven from hope, longing and a wistful acknowledgment of disappointments reckoned with and limitations faced". Literally, the play is perfectly written with a glimpse of hope focusing on the protagonist's longing for love and passion. She is really disappointed and limited due to her status as a poor African American woman living in the American society.

### **Depiction of Triple Oppression in "Intimate Apparel" on the Four Female Characters: Esther, Mayme, Mrs. Dickson, and Mrs. Van Buren**

#### **Esther**

Esther, the protagonist of the play, is a poor African American seamstress who sews customized lingerie for colored ladies and white ones as well. She endured a great extent of oppression rather than Mayme, Mrs. Dickson and Mrs. Van Buren. The story starts with the issue that she is thirty-five years old and is still single at the beginning of the play. She longs for love and compassion and she wants to get marry George, a Barbadian worker in Panama Canal. Esther suffers from being ignored and she seeks attention and love. She rhetorically asks "Ain't nobody down there interested in me (Nottage, 2003, p.10). Actually, the

protagonist gets married to George, a man whom she has never seen because she is scared of the American society which can label her as spinster. Esther states "As much as you can love a man whom you ain't seen. I'm thirty-five, Mayme, and he wants to marry me. And there ain't gonna be no more opportunities I'm afraid. I've told him yes" (Nottage, 2003, p.39). This indicates how the American society oppresses women directing their choices in life. Thus, Esther is forced to sacrifice her independence and dream project to marry a man whom she didn't even see. In addition, Mrs. Dickson has attempted to convince Esther to marry Mr. Charles who cares for her. However, Esther refuses to marry Mr. Charles and marries George instead. Besides, Esther does not choose but certain choices are imposed on her. She has married George because in a male-centered society, a single lady is regarded incomplete. Commenting on this issue, Mrs. Dickson states that "sometimes we get to a point where we can't be so particular" (Nottage, 2003, p.12). During an interview, Nottage comments:

I am concerned about telling stories about women whom I knew in a way that touches audiences... In the case of *Intimate Apparel*, I wanted to bridge the gap between women at the turn of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. They were very focused, very hard-working women, and because of the choices that they made, they were being punished, which I think is what's happening to a lot of African American women today who have taken a career path. (Shannon, 2007, p. 197).

Getting married to George only just not to be marked as a spinster signifies the "ideological dimension" of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8) suffered by Esther. She has a major dream which is to "own a quaint beauty parlor for coloured ladies" (Nottage, *Intimate Apparel*, p.27). This dream is a symbol of her goal in life. She saves the money she earns from sewing putting them in a quilt. Her goal expresses the dilemma she suffers from in American society. She wants to establish this parlor to be treated equally and pampered like other white ladies. She states "The smart set. Some place east of Amsterdam, fancy, where you get pampered and treated real nice. 'Cause no one does it for us ... But what I'm talking about is some place elegant (Nottage, 2003, p.27)". Esther wants to be treated as a woman who has rights in the American society and "not just be treated like mules" (Nottage, 2003, p.27). Treating

African American women like "mules" (Nottage, 2003, p.27) also marks the ideological dimension of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8).

Unfortunately, Esther is betrayed by both her husband George and her African American friend Mayme. George has a relationship with Mayme whom Esther confronts with her betrayal.

ESTHER: Cause there's some poor woman out there waiting, getting up every five minutes, each time a carriage pass the window, or the dog bark, who thinks a great deal of her husband, think so much of him that she don't bother to ask questions, she just know that there are places that he go that gentlewomen don't belong ...  
MAYME: I don't want to hear it (Nottage, 2003, p.67).

Esther pities herself because she is so loyal to her husband. She is shocked realizing that he takes her money spending it on gambling and womanizing. Both George and Mayme prove to be treacherous deceptive characters as they make use of Esther. Mayme, the African American prostitute, succeeds in oppressing Esther giving an accurate description of George. She frankly states that "He ain't like a lot of coloured men who pass through here with anger about his touch" (Nottage, 2003, p.66). Mayme's betrayal to her friend Esther is perfectly delineated by Nottage to pay attention to the oppression African American women practice among themselves. This is mirrored in the words of Esther speaking to Mayme stating "I pity your heart. You are the worst sort of scavenger" (Nottage, 2003, p.68). This recalls David and Derthick's (2000) "interpersonal oppression" (p.76). Nottage asserts through the play that African American women have to stop bullying and oppressing themselves to be respected by the American society. George's betrayal to Esther also indicates the "interpersonal oppression" (David & Derthick, 2000, p. 76) as he oppresses his wife successfully. George is originally oppressed by his white manager in Panama Canal, hence he practices oppression against his wife, the poor black woman.

In addition, there is a line of religion implicitly running in the play through the portrayal of Mr. Marks's character. Nottage portrayed a very significant

relationship throughout the play between Esther and Mr. Marks, a Romanian Jewish immigrant. She comments on the personal connection between her and the characters of the play stating:

My husband is Jewish, and his family name was Marcus—they were Romanian— and the name became Marks when they came to the United States. And my family name is Armstrong. Both names appear around the same time on the passenger lists at Ellis Island. So the characters in *Intimate Apparel* are named after our two families. And when I sat down to write the play, I imagined, if my husband and I had met a hundred years ago, what our relationship would have been then. It would have been an impossible relationship (Greene, 2006, p.116).

Mr. Marks is emotionally attracted to Esther who does not reciprocate his love because of some religious restrictions. He plays an important role in the play as he attempts to make Esther feel her worthiness and that she is talented and she has to make use of this talent. He loves Esther and supports her. Mr. Marks states "When I see something of quality, I like to share it with my favorite customers. Everybody want the same thing. But you want different. I like that" (Nottage, 2003, p.23). Mr. Marks keeps supporting Esther asking her to make beautiful garments for herself. However, she answers him stating that "It will be wasted on me" (Nottage, 2003, p.23). Esther's words reflect that she despises herself internalizing the feeling that she is an inferior woman within herself. Esther also says "And I been living in this rooming house for so long, I reckon I'm just another piece of furniture" (Nottage, 2003, p.11). Her words are expressive of her miserable experience as a poor black woman who is considered worthless in a male-centered society. Esther is internally oppressed because she does not feel her self-worth at all. Hence, she is oppressed by the patriarchal society which represses her giving her only a low wage. Actually, she does not appreciate her talent. Thus the American society does not pay attention to her as a seamstress. This also signifies the economic dimension of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8).

Moreover, the economic dimension of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" is signified through the setting which is "Lower Manhattan" (Nottage, 2003, p.9). African American women segregated in housing represents such the

economic dimension as previously referred to at the beginning of the paper. Likewise, keeping Esther illiterate and excluding her from high positions represents the political dimension of "intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender" (Collins, 2000, p.8). Being illiterate, Esther cannot write romantic letters to George. Therefore, she asks both Mrs. Van Buren and Mayme to write such letters to George. Esther wants Mrs. Van Buren shyly to write a letter to George.

MRS. VAN BUREN: Would you like me to help you write to him, Esther?

ESTHER: I couldn't ask.

MRS. VAN BUREN: You needn't, I insist (Nottage, 2003, p.18).

Mrs. Van Buren is a helpful woman and she agrees to help Esther writing letters to George. Unlike Mrs. Van Buren, Mayme makes use of the details in the letters and she also agrees to write letters to George.

ESTHER: Cause I'm asking you my friend.

MAYME: No, my writing ain't perfect.

ESTHER: Do not bother about handwriting, we'll tell him I pricked my finger while sewing. He will understand. Please. (Nottage, 2003, p.30).

Innocently, Esther addresses Mayme calling her "my friend" (Nottage, 2003, p.30). It is noticed that while Mayme or Mrs. Van Buren are writing love letters to George, they wear undergarments which is sewed to them. This is so delicate and intimate. George declares that he suffers from racial oppression in one of his letters written to Esther and that he is also ignored by the American society as he is a colored man. He confirms this idea in a question and states "But when the great oceans meet and the gentlemen celebrate, will we coloured men be given glasses to raise?" (Nottage, 2003, p.19). As a matter of fact, George is sure that he is racially oppressed and he believes that this oppression will continue even after the construction of Panama Canal. Oppressing coloured men is one of the main reasons that results in oppressing African American women. In other words, oppressing George racially leads to the triple oppression directed to Esther. Towards the end of the play, Esther realizes how fake George is. She discovers that the letters she receives from George are not written by him.

ESTHER: .... But you ain't the man in these letters, because that gentleman would have thanked me. Who wrote them letters, George? Tell me!

GEORGE: An old mulatto man. I paid him ten cents for each letter, ten cents extra for the fancy writing.

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 is a good decent woman and worthy. Worthy! (Nottage,2003, p.73).

Esther is shocked discovering that George is not the real writer of the letters sent to her. After this bitter hard situation, Esther recognizes her worth and remembers Mrs. Dickson's words at the beginning of the play that she deserves to marry a man who appreciates her not one who deceives her.

As a result of being oppressed, Esther suffers from a state of denial. She insists on achieving her dream which establishing a beauty parlor. She tells George "That money for my beauty parlour, I told you" (Nottage, 2003, p.57). In addition, Esther lives in an illusion and she is self-blinded in the sense that she wants the beauty parlor, then she gradually surrenders and gives George the money she has saved in the quilt. She is trying to buy love with money. She allows herself to be manipulated by her husband. She gives him the money he wants although she knows well that he will not bring it back. She also knows that he cheats on her with Mayme and she still does nothing.

Esther proves to be a submissive character who has a negative response towards triple oppression and their dimensions as well. Although she realizes that she is being oppressed, she never takes action. Towards the end of the play, the protagonist easily gives up her main goal giving George the money she has saved in the quilt. Esther says to Mayme "Do you know what I done? I tore a hole in my quilt and give him my beauty parlour. Half my life bent at the machine, and I give it to him just like that" (Nottage, 2003, p.75). Unfortunately, Esther puts her dream aside opening the quilt which she has stitched long time ago and she gives her money to George. This mirrors her desire to feel loved by her husband even if she sacrifices her money. Tearing a whole in Esther's quilt represents the destruction of her hopes as well (Coley, 2009, p.834).The play ends with Esther returning to the rooming house of Mrs. Dickson.

### **Mayme, Mrs. Dickson and Mrs. Van Buren**

As for Mayme, she experiences the same ideological dimension of triple oppression. Basically, she is an African American pianist, but she is stereotyped as a black prostitute. She does not want to be a prostitute and she suffers from oppression from all the clients she meets. She declares "[a]ll the pawing and pulling. For a dollar they think they own you" (Nottage, 2003, p.23). This indicates the triple oppression she endures from all the male clients whether they are colored or white. She is treated as an inferior creature and as a piece of stuff that can be moved from one place to another. Indeed, Mayme wants to have a respected honored life away from prostitution, but she cannot escape stereotyping in a male-centered society. Mayme admits this and states that "You think I ain't tried to make a go of it. You think I just laid down and opened my legs cause it was easy. It don't look like nothing, but this saloon is better than a lot of them places – ask anybody" (Nottage, 2003, p.28). In addition, Mayme suffers from physical abuse by her father and she has become a prostitute to leave her father's house. While she is playing piano, she remembers the physical abuse practiced by her father.

ESTHER. Oh, pretty. Did you write that Mayme?

MAYME. Yeah... My daddy gave me twelve lashes with a switch for playing this piece in our parlor. One for each year I studied the piano. He was too proper to like anything colored, and a syncopated beat was about the worst crime you could commit in his household... I woke up with the sudden urge to play it (Nottage, 2003, p.24).

The words of Mayme are so expressive and representative. She regards physical abuse as a crime that can never be forgiven. She suffers a lot because of the violent treatment she has received from her father.

Concerning Mrs. Dickson, she sucks the ideological dimension of triple oppression. Like Esther, she married Mr. Dickson not to be stereotyped and marked as a spinster. In addition, she feels that it is very difficult to marry a colored man in the United States. She describes her marriage as an inconvenient marriage which basically depends on economic securities rather than emotions.

She confesses this issue stating that "I married him because I was thirty-seven years old, I had no profession and there wasn't a decent coloured fella in New York City that would have me" (Nottage, 2003, p.43). She is frightened of the American society which can mark her as a spinster as well. The words of Mrs. Dickson reflect that male-centered societies always lead women to make wrong choices in their lives. Such societies regard women as just breeders of children or producers of money.

Mrs. Dickson's mother was a washer woman and she was oppressed by her husband who was mainly oppressed by the American society. This case recalls "interpersonal oppression". Mrs. Dickson's mother was ignored and worked a simple profession, but Mrs. Dickson does not want to be like her mother. Mrs. Dickson sacrificed and married Mr. Dickson who was an opium addict just not to be marked as a single woman. Concerning Mr. Dickson, Mrs. Dickson says "Bless his broken-down soul. He had fine suits and perfect diction, and was too high in opium to notice that he was married" (Nottage, 2003, p.44). In addition, Mrs. Dickson is also proud that her mother has saved her not to work as a washer woman as well. As a result of undergoing a negative marital experience, Mrs. Dickson does not want Esther to marry George, the Barbadian worker in Panama Canal. She wants her to wait for an awesome gentleman. She does not prefer love which depends mainly on love and emotions. She tells Esther that she "deserve[s] a gentleman. Why gamble it all away for a common labourer" (Nottage, 2003, p.44). Esther's need for love leads her to make a mistake which is marrying a person whom she has never seen.

Even, Mrs. Van Buren, the only white woman in the play, is also scared of the American society and she marries Mr. Van Buren and she cannot break up with him only not to be stereotyped as a divorcee. She suffers a lot after she gets married Mr. Van Buren who always ignores her. She moans "Has he spent an evening home? Or even noticed that I've paint the damn boudoir vermilion red?" (Nottage, 2003, p.14). Just Like Esther, she seeks attention, love and passion. Having lost compassion and tenderness in her marital relationship, she attempts to find it through her friendship with Esther. Mrs. Van Buren also internalizes oppression and endures the patriarchal society marking her as a childless woman. She states "I've given him no children...I have heard the women whispering" (Nottage, 2003, p.16). This refers to the issue that women are always blamed and

they are always stereotyped whatever their color is. She is not a courageous woman because she cannot confront the American society.

Triple oppression work together to make African American women suffer from subordinate position. They are always treated as inferior creatures who have no social rights. The American society considers women in general and African American women in particular as inferior and everything related to women is also underestimated such as being pregnant, childbirth, breastfeeding, abortion or having a menstrual cycle. Mrs. Van Buren admits this issue stating that "We all bleed, Esther. And yet I actually felt guilt, as though a young girl again apologizing for becoming a woman" (Nottage, 2003, p.35). Having lost the compassion from her husband, Mrs. Van Buren searches for love and tenderness through her friendship with Esther. All the female characters in "Intimate Apparel" have the feeling that they are enslaved by the triple oppression practiced against them by the patriarchal society. Being victims is the bond that connects all the female characters together. (Ozieblo and Hernando-Real, 2012, p. 2).

### **Important Symbols related to Triple oppression in "Intimate Apparel"**

The title of the play is really significant, expressive, and symbolic as the title "Intimate Apparel" refers to the undergarments Esther sews to her female clients. Esther states that she "sew[s] intimate apparel for ladies, but that ain't for a gentleman's eyes" (Nottage, 2003, p.18). Thus, the title symbolizes the profession of Esther as she stitches undergarments for women. In addition, the ideological dimension of the triple oppression is indicated when Esther gives Mayme a corset like the one she has sewed for Mrs. Van Buren, the only white woman in the play. "ESTHER: I made one just like it for a lady on Fifth Avenu" (Nottage, 2003, p.24). This is an attempt to feel equal to white women.

The corset plays a very significant role in "Intimate Apparel". It symbolizes the triple oppression suffered by all the female characters in the play. Women, in "Intimate Apparel", wear corsets as a form of obedience to triple oppression. In an attempt to obey the patriarchal society, Esther sews different embroidered corsets to restrict herself and her female clients as well. (Shannon, 2007, p.197). Esther wears a beautiful "white satin embroidered with orange blossoms wedding corset" (Nottage, 2003, p.49) during her wedding night. Furthermore, Mrs. Van

Buren purchases expensive "pink-silk-and-crepe-de-Chine-[gardenia ball corset]" (13) from Esther. Moreover, Corinna Mae, the bride who lives in the rooming house in which Esther works, wears "white satin, with pink roses wedding corset" (Nottage, 2003, p.9) during her wedding night. Mayme also wears a splendid blue corset like the one of Mrs. Van Buren. In spite of the fact that women do not like corsets, they maintain this dress code from one generation to another.

ESTHER. Most gals don't like 'em, even fine ladies like yourself. Truth is I ain't known a man to court pain for a woman's glance.

MRS. VAN BUREN. You're not one of those suffragettes, are you?

ESTHER. Oh God no, Mrs. Van Buren (Nottage, 2003, p.15).

Mrs. Van Buren regards any trial to leave the tradition of wearing corsets as improper and she referred to women's rights' movement in the previous quotation asserting that they are not resistant women and they are submissive ones.

Playing cards and gambling symbolize the oppression practiced by George towards Esther. He left her penniless and deceived her. He is a deceptive man who never keeps his promises. He never reciprocates Esther's love and passion. Finally, he proved to be a treacherous husband.

## Conclusion

Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel" has investigated the suffering experiences by African American women living in a male-centered societies. It has focused on the triple oppression imposed on African American women in the United States especially in Manhattan. The play has highlighted the daily life of Esther Mills which is very complicated. Esther's simple profession together with her living in Lower Manhattan as well as the difficult experiences of Mayme, Mrs. Dickson and Mrs. Van Buren constitutes the three dimensions of triple oppression. It is crystal clear through the play that being a poor black woman living in a male-centered society is like a crime. The sewing machine is a very important element in the play because it appears at the beginning of the play as a symbol of the triple oppression Esther has endured and it exists at the end of the play as a symbol of

hope in the future. The play has also navigated the life stories of Mayme, Mrs. Dickson, and Mrs. Van Buren. It has clarified that they are victims of oppression in a male-centered patriarchal society. Finally, "Intimate Apparel" has explored the different experiences of four female characters: Esther, Mrs. Dickson, Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren illustrating the repressing circumstances surrounding them in a male-centered patriarchal society.

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## تعرض النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي إلى القهر الثلاثي الأبعاد في مسرحية لين نوتتاج "الملابس الحميمية"

### المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة كيفية تداخل القهر القائم على العرق و الطبقة و النوع معاً مستهدفاً قمع النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي في المجتمع الأمريكي. ويوضح البحث أيضاً معاناة النساء الأفرو أمريكيات في المجتمع الذكوري. بالإضافة إلى عبئ الوصول إلى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية كعبيد، عانت النساء الأفرو الأمريكيات من الظلم الاجتماعي بسبب عرقهم و طبقتهم و نوعهم. وإشدد مأزق النساء الأفرو أمريكيات بالمعاناة من أنواع مختلفة من القهر. وعانوا أيضاً من محن أخرى مثل الجهل و التحيز ضد المرأة في التعليم و العمل . و تطبق الباحثة مفهوم " القهر التداخلي القائم على العرق و الطبقة و النوع" ( كولينز ٢٠٠٠) . وللقهر التداخلي ثلاثة أبعاد وهم البعد السياسي و الإقتصادي و الفكري. علاوة على ذلك تستخدم الباحثة أيضاً مفهومي "القهر الفردي" و " القهر المكبوت داخل النفس " ( ديفيد & ديرتاك ٢٠١٨) كنوعين من القهر متصلين ببعضهم البعض . وتحلل الباحثة الثلاثة أبعاد المختلفة "للقهر القائم على العرق و الطبقة و النوع" في حياة النساء في مسرحية لين نوتتاج " الملابس الحميمية". و تناقش نوتتاج مأزق إيستر التي تمثل النساء الأفرو أمريكيات في المجتمع الأمريكي. و من خلال تطبيق مفهوم " القهر القائم على العرق و الطبقة و النوع " على مسرحية لين نوتتاج " الملابس الحميمية"، تؤكد الباحثة خضوع النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي إلى ذلك النوع من القهر. ويسلط البحث الضوء على القهر الذي تمارسه النساء الأفرو أمريكيات ما بين بعضهم البعض.

كلمات مفتاحية: "القهر المكبوت داخل النفس" ، " القهر الفردي" ، " القهر التداخلي" ، لين نوتتاج، النوع