

# Gender and Sexuality

Womanist Theology a Summary  
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SCM

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In the mid 1980's, three African American scholars —Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams—realised there was a need for a more inclusive theological and ethical framework concerning black liberation theology. Prior to the construction of a womanist ethic and reflection, there was no such construct in place to encourage black women to reclaim their identity, love their full selves, and use historical voices as encouragement towards dismantling the white, patriarchal, dominant narrative. Dismantling norms also included the critique of black liberation theology, as it remained focused specifically on social justice from the angle of anti-racism.

In response, womanist thought highlighted the need for a more robust focus on social justice not limited to male figures within the black church speaking on behalf of black women and therefore unable to connect with white feminism. Cannon, Grant and Williams, were the first wave of womanist scholars who connected with and appreciated Alice Walker's challenge to understand the false moral agency within the dominant normative approach, and the nature of tripartite oppression: crippling capitalism, gender inequality, and racial discrimination.

Walker's four-part definition of womanism calls for "radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement." Womanist thought helps to describe oppression and empower the oppressed in order to create change. In *Mining the Motherlode: Methods of Womanist Ethics*, Stacey Floyd-Thomas says, "Womanist ethical reflection provides descriptive foundations that lead to analytical constructs for the eradication of oppression in the lives of black people and, by extension, the rest of humanity and creation." womanist theology, which uses the voice and experience of black women, is a model for destroying oppressive norms which exist to silence the voiceless. In order for black women to reclaim their identity and tell their stories, the literary work of black women is extremely important. In *Zami*, Audre Lorde coined the term biomythography as a "deliberate amalgamation of autobiographical fact and mythically resonant form" that recognises the effect of social oppression on black women retelling their own stories as they struggle for moral agency and the rediscovery of a self-identity which has always been muted. Katie Cannon describes this lifelong experience as being

“repeatedly unheard but not unvoiced, unseen but not invisibly.” Instead, womanism “connects our cultural values, oral traditions, and social experiences to our spirit forces in the quest for meaning amid suffering.” There is no absence of suffering when doing womanist work. But there is also more to womanist work than responding to the evils and oppression of the dominant narrative spoken against black women.

Similarly to black feminist literary critics, womanist ethicists and theologians use the voices found in black, female, literary writing. But womanist theology expands the role of the literary work, offering a prophetic strategy to reclaim and restructure the role of black women for themselves.

Today, womanist work is experiencing a third wave of academic scholars. There is more intersectionality within womanist work than thirty years ago. Womanist scholars are engaging in ecology, ecofeminism, animal rights, speciesism, and more. Not everyone can be a womanist, but everyone can learn the methodology of womanist theology and apply it to how we see God in everything and every being around us.

For further reading see the Gender and Sexuality reading list.

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