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Message from the Black Woman: Gendered Roles of Women in the Nation of Islam from 1995 to 2005

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Message from the Black Woman : Gendered Roles of Women in the
Nation of Islam from 1995 to 2005

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

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Message to the Black Woman : Gendered Roles of Women in the Nation of Islam from 1995-2005

In this thesis I argue that despite the traditional gender roles assigned to women members of the Nation of Islam, these women are able to assert and employ their power both within and outside of the domestic sphere.

Essential to understanding their roles is to identify these women and their narratives as told by them. Who are the women of the Nation of Islam? What do these women do? How are women members viewed by men in leadership roles? How are these women viewed by women who are not members of the Nation of Islam? How do these women view themselves? More specifically, what do these women see as their contribution to Nation-building historically and in the present? In closing, I attempt to examine and imagine the ways in which traditional notions of womanhood as outlined by the Nation of Islam can survive in the twenty-first century.

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“Any reflection on the Black woman's religious experience should include the Black women of the NOI,” declares Dr. Toni Sims-Muhammad. Unfortunately, this exclusion that she calls for a push back against is exactly what has happened to women in the Nation of Islam. Literature that details the figures and theology of the movement overwhelmingly focus on male leaders including Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan,

and the state of the Nation in the 1960s and 70s. Women of the movement such as Muhammad's wife Mother Clara receive little more than a sentence or two if that much! This is sexist and demeaning for variety of reasons including the absence of truth in these historical **recounting**. For instance, Mother Clara Muhammad assumed her husband Elijah Muhammad's duties during the several years he spent in prison (Gibson 32).

Very little work has been done on the role of women in the Nation and most of the work that has been done is by non-members and tends to focus solely on Islam and Black nationalism as a tool of the patriarchy. While it is imperative to be critical as a scholar, well-rounded research is needed in the field. Most of the literature that has emerged has been reactionary in nature and more concerned with more sensationalized aspects of the group and its leadership. More importantly, the opportunity for some of these women to tell their own stories is imperative to providing a voice for the subject. My perspective as a non-registered member of the Nation of Islam contributes to the recurrent theme of outsider analysis. However, as a native of the SouthSide of Chicago – the location of N.O.I. Headquarters – I bring a unique lens to the subject

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matter. These women are not nameless, faceless beings. They have been my teachers, relatives and friends. No longer will they be silenced by their communities or by the academy.

Islam in the Black American community was not a new trend that emerged in the twentieth century. Many Africans that were brought to so-called American shores to be enslaved practiced some form of Islam (Gibson 2). Cultural genocide and indoctrination of these enslaved peoples with Christianity by their masters prevented the religion from being handed down through the generations. Indeed Muslim immigrants in the early twentieth century

had some small successes with spreading Islam in Black communities in the 1920s but fell short because of the lack of connection with the unique experiences of being Black and Muslim in an American context.

A brand of African-American nationalist Islam was present before the advent of the Nation of Islam in the 1930s. The Moorish Science Temple of America - also based in Chicago – taught that Blacks were “Asiatics,” descendants of the biblical figure Noah's son, Ham(Gibson 9). Timothy Drew, known by his followers as Noble Drew Ali encouraged his followers to deviate from dreams of integration and instead to create their own closed society. As a result of its relatively large following, groups within the MSTA began to splinter and this dissent only amplified following Ali's death in 1929. Around this time period, literature becomes contradictory. While the Nation of Islam maintains that there is no connection between their organization and the MSTA, historical documents suggest otherwise. It has been reported that

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Wallace Fard Muhammad was a prominent member of the Moorish Science Temple of America known as David Ford El. El claimed to be the reincarnation of Noble Drew Ali and when this claim was rejected by many in the Temple, fled to Detroit : the birthplace of the Nation of Islam (Prashad 109).

Wallace Fard Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam during July of 1930 in Detroit. After relaying the tenements of the theology and implementing the Fruit of Islam, Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class, and Muhammad University of Islam, Muhammad disappeared four years later. His protege, Elijah Muhammad, assumed leadership of the organization. Under his tutelage two of the most prominent Black Muslim figures of the twentieth century emerged : Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X; the latter would dissent. Despite their constant bickering and his beliefs being in stark contrast with the doctrine of the NOI, Muhammad's son Warith

Dean would inherit leadership of the Nation upon his father's death. By 1977, three years after Elijah Muhammad's passing, what was once one Nation had split into two. Warith Deen Mohammed disbanded the Nation of Islam as it was and reorganized as the World Community of Islam in the West. Beyond the name change, Mohammed aligned the group with more traditional Sunni Muslims and refuted claims of W.Fard Muhammad being Allah (God) and his own father, Elijah Muhammad's title of prophet (Mattias 110). Louis Farrakhan and his followers would leave and reclaiming the original name of Nation of Islam, reclaiming

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beliefs and doctrine in the vein of Elijah Muhammad and W.Fard Muhammad. Under the leadership of Minister Louis Farrakhan, the NOI was able to repurchase the temple sold by World Community of Al-Islam leader Warith Deen Muhammad. This temple was eventually renamed Mosque Maryam in honor of the mother of Jesus.

The Nation of Islam's stated goals are to improve the spiritual, mental, economic and social condition of Black Americans. In the early twenty-first century, membership was extended to all people of color. During this time period, women became more visible in the leadership of the Nation of Islam. For instance, Tynetta Muhammad - a former secretary and mistress of the deceased leader Elijah Muhammad – was able to shed her reputation as a so-called temptress and is now the most revered elder woman of that generation, earned the affectionate title of Mother of the Nation, and has her own column in the NOI newspaper, *The Final Call*. Minister Farrakhan's wife, Mother Khadijah Farrakhan has become an advocate for children and education in the Nation of Islam and the larger Chicago and Detroit communities. Sister Minister Ava Muhammad became the first woman to be appointed as a minister in the Nation of Islam in 1998 and became the first and also assume the role of student minister of the Atlanta mosque, one of the group's largest. One of Minister Farrakhan's daughters, Donna, would become the

second woman to receive the title. Besides their prominence in the Nation of Islam these women have a major reference point in common : they were all trained and were instrumental in revamping the Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class.

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Muslim Girls Training & General Civilization Class (MGT & GCC) is the all-female training program of the Nation of Islam. It is often considered to be the counterpart for girls and women to the all-male paramilitary group known as the Fruit of Islam. MGT and GCC are an institution founded in 1933 by Wallace Fard Muhammad, the founder of the NOI (Clegg 29). Today, these classes are generally held at least once a week at mosques throughout the U.S., Canada, Jamaica and the U.K., as well as being accessible online. MGT-GCC “was the name given to the training of women and girls in North America, how to keep house, how to rear their children, how to take care of their husbands, sew, cook and in general, how to act at home and abroad,” (Muhammad 122). Nutrition, sewing, housekeeping, religious instruction, personal hygiene, and self-defense combined with religious instruction are the basis of these courses taught for women by women.

Within the next several chapters, I seek to explore the significant contributions of Black women in the Nation of Islam. Who are the women in the Nation of Islam? What contributions have these women made in nation building and maintenance? In what ways have the roles of women in the Nation evolved over the past twenty years? Can the traditional gender roles assigned to and embraced by women in the Nation of Islam be revolutionary or modern?

Chapter 1

I Am Your Leader : Women in the Nation of Islam According to Farrakhan

Meet the Messenger

Residents of the SouthSide of Chicago view a constant sea of Black faces of all

shades. Distinct from the down-and-out, and immediately recognizable, are the African-American women—hair framed loosely by drape scarfs, faces set seriously yet warm. Immediately, it hits them : these women belong to the Nation of Islam, a Muslim group with a history that spans decades in the United States. Their leader is the controversial Minister Louis Farrakhan, head of the NOI since 1977. Now, nearly twenty years later, his name-recognition is still irrevocably attached to his ability to mobilize people for the October 16, 1995, Million Man March in Washington, D.C., which solidified his role as a premier political and religious figure in the Black community.

The analysis of this chapter will be based largely on Nation of Islam documents and speeches, as well as interviews with Louis Farrakhan. After reviewing the history of the group, I will discuss how the NOI has constructed its own notion of community and what this means in terms of relationships with others. To understand the role women in the Nation of Islam are expected to fulfill, it is imperative to understand the ways in which the ideal vision of gender roles presented within NOI discourse. Also, this chapter will examine how women's roles include serving as emblems of identity for the community.

Following the passing of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, surprisingly leadership of the NOI went to his son, Wallace Deen Muhammad. He who had questioned the teachings of his

father and been suspended from the Nation several times. He immediately began to transform the group, relaxing the strict disciplinary rules and dress codes his father had enforced and

even allowed women to go out alone at night. (Lincoln 227-228). In 1977, Farrakhan left to re-establish the Nation of Islam as it once was, promising a revival of the original teachings of Wallace Fard and Elijah Muhammad.

In the 1990s, Farrakhan's so-called revolutionary vision emerges in many addresses, including that of the Million Man March. It seems that a kind of Black capitalism and adherence to a moral code of behavior that equates nation-building with marriage are the solution to structural exclusion. Indeed, it is deviance from a strict moral code that is at the root of the erosion of a thriving Black community according to Farrakhan. He does not deny that economic problems in the Black community are "serious," but suggests that they are the result of a lack of discipline and scruples (Arizona Republic 4).

The Chosen Few

While the Nation of Islam's request for the basic tenets of "justice, freedom, and equality" are listed in their set of demands, curiously there are also explicit demands regarding women. Among other things, they are singled out for "respect" and "protection" (Muhammad 161). This construction of gender roles and expectations of gender performance are directly commanded in a number of the Nation's documents.

During the Farrakhan era, it is made clear on many occasions that women are

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subservient to men. Statements such as "Allah says in the Qur'an that men are a degree above women...in the nature in which God created you. Brother, he created you a degree

above the woman. (Farrakhan 3). The very nature of women reveals the very superiority of men, according to Farrakhan, and attempts by women to challenge nature—by positioning themselves as leaders or by deviating from the role that they should realize best suits them—will backfire. They will create problems for themselves, such as domestic violence. In a sense “difficult” women get what they deserve in Farrakhan’s view—though they might be victims of abuse, the abuse is justified by their deviance. In a document specifically addressing the high incidence of domestic violence, Farrakhan clarifies his position:

The Qur’an teaches, ‘Men are the maintainers of women,’ a very weighty statement. There is no room for the trope of the independent Black woman in the Nation of Islam for according to Minister Farrakhan, “when we start getting away from the nature in which God created us, we start getting into problems,” (Farrakhan 2-3). And of course, the survival of the Nation is takes priority. Anything that gets in the way of such nation-building must be done away with.

Much of a woman’s value is derived from her reproductive capacity : this is what makes her sacred. “ ... Through her we are extended through the generations,” explains Farrakhan (Farrakhan 1). Women's wombs serve as a site to continue the legacy of men. As mentioned by a former member of the Nation, “In the Muslim school I have been taught that

motherhood was the most important job a woman could have, but also had been taught that I had a talent for writing, which perhaps could do some good. I felt it was my responsibility to

pursue this talent,” (Tate 184).

Unlike some other Black nationalist movements, the disrespect of Black women becomes a central issue. Of course, this centrality is merely symbolic in that it serves to propagate the idea of reproduction to ensure that the Nation of Islam will continue through the generations.

“This disrespect is the reason that the ... world is in the condition that it is in ... She is the cornerstone of the family and therefore is critical in the whole process of nation and world building ... Allah (God) speaks to us saying that, we should reverence the womb that bore us ... Since, the womb of our mother is sacred, then, this teaches us that the womb of every female is also sacred, for it is from her womb that all the Scientists, Prophets, Sages, Messengers, Kings, Rulers and Gods have come and will come,” (Farrakhan 1).

Refraining from premarital sexual intercourse serves as the basis for a lasting marriage, a principal reason that courtship is chaperoned. Furthermore, the classrooms of the schools of the Nation are to be segregated by gender so as to prevent any distraction from the mastering of the lessons. Both precautions are meant to “encourage sound, spiritual decision-making when it comes time to marry,” (Farrakhan 3). There is a reoccurring theme that women who do not heed these recommendations, bring problems upon themselves.

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Echoing the sentiments of many separatist movements, NOI guidelines declare “We believe that intermarriage or race mixing should be prohibited,” (Muhammad 162). Due to their reproductive role, women mark the boundaries of the community. As group markers,

women are to be protected because to gain access to the women is to penetrate the boundaries of the community, assuming control of the channel through which the new generations of “believers” will be brought forth. The protection of the women in the Nation are a serious matter! For “a man should die before he lets a stranger contaminate his woman. A man should kill. We ought to be the number one killers on the earth to keep any man away from our woman. A man is not worth anything if he will not protect the woman that gives birth to his own nation,” (Farrakhan 4).

Identical to traditional Western society, the ideal household would be modeled after a hetero normative patriarchal family. Divorce is forbidden by both the Holy Qur'an as well as supplementary Nation of Islam doctrine such as the Courtship Manual. “Divorce goes against the very basic unit of civilization, for divorce breaks up the family. Where there is no strong family, there is no strong community or nation,” (NOI Courtship Manual 14). Farrakhan accuses those who reject these ideals of being traitors to the nation.

A woman seems to have very little opportunity for self-determination within this essentialist idea of gender performance for the Muslim Girls Training. Great emphasis is placed on the men for “man’s duty to the woman is to preserve, protect and upkeep her and to

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keep her in the specified state that God has made her,”(Farrakhan 4).

Erasure

Absent from much of the theology and history of the Nation of Islam are the work that

the women contributed outside of their roles as wives and mothers. For example, although Clara Muhammad tended the Nation of Islam in its early days during the incarceration of her husband Elijah Muhammad and while he was alluding the authorities, her narrative is largely missing in the many recounting of Nation of Islam history (McCloud 146). These patterns of omission have improved slight in the 2000s. As the national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, Ava Muhammad is the highest-ranking woman in the history of the group. Serving as national spokesperson, she joins the ranks of Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan who both served in this position. More shocking, she was the first female member honored as a minister and since 1998 she has served as the head minister at the Atlanta mosque, one of the largest in the United States. She remains one of only two female ministers in a religion founded in 1930. Minister Muhammad is not unaware of the significance of her position. When questioned about gender inequity within the Nation , she responded by saying “Christianity, Judaism and Islam all suffer from a similar affliction of being overly male-dominant, even in the interpretation of scripture. As the world becomes more conscious, and the Internet and other things level the playing field of knowledge, that's going to continue to change,” (Fleischer). Ava Muhammad's role as a woman in power in the Nation of Islam is

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multidimensional. She embraces her role as wife, mother and caretaker while demonstrating her finesse as a community leader, a minister and a lawyer. While there intense gender inequity remains and much improvement looms ahead, several more appointments have been

granted to women members of the Nation of Islam. In 2003, Dora Muhammad was named as the first female editor on the staff of the Nation's Chicago-based newspaper, "The Final Call," and is now that paper's managing editor. Subsequently, Donna Farrakhan – the eldest of Louis Farrakhan's daughters – was named as a student minister in the NOI.

How resonant then, is such a message that champions such gender roles, within the context of Black American communities? Is deviance from a subservient role as dutiful wife and mother perceived as a problem or a strength? Is it tolerable or unacceptable behavior for a black woman living in the context of the U.S. in the 1990s? Much of this depends on which members of the community are reacting to the discourse.

In response to affirmative action policies such as hiring quotas for marginalized groups to combat structural inequality, some black men have misguidedly suggested that black women have benefited from such policies, by fulfilling two categories at once, at the expense of black men's progress. hooks notes that this ignores "the reality that this acceptance (when it occurs) is rooted in the assumption that black females can be more easily subordinated and subjugated than their black male counterparts ... for years conservative black males have insisted that the black female's proximity to whiteness is always an advantage. They refuse to look at the ways this closeness has resulted in

exploitation and abuse" (hooks 96).

Such statements are harmful to Black women and detract from the issues and that affect the community as a whole, delaying the production of useful remedies. What emerges

is a perception that the plight of black men is more deserving of attention than that of black women. “ ... There is an almost fascistic insistence in the African community to put aside one’s process of individualization for the supposed good of the race. This is particularly true for many women,” writes Williams (Williams 133). Hooks characterizes this as “an endless, meaningless debate about who has suffered more” (hooks 98). The prioritizing of male struggles over female, in the hierarchy of concerns is an echo of Black leadership in the United States for hundreds of years. Such views are further reinforced by the theology of the Nation of Islam. Men lead and maintain women, and powerful women who deviate from a subservient norm create problems instead of viable alternatives that lead to solutions.

Given an environment which denigrates the strategies of black women to survive and succeed, it seems surprising that the patriarchal component of the Nation of Islam’s central tenets has not been more widely attacked beyond lingering criticisms of the Million Man March as an event that largely excluded women and their voices. Perhaps this occurs because the Nation of Islam draws its members from within a marginalized community, currently with limited political influence.

As demonstrated, the message of the Nation of Islam is nationalist and constructs a

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traditional past, present and future, firmly based on time-honored expectations including the control of women’s sexuality. This gospel, and reaffirmed by the current leadership, is offered up as the remedy for a deteriorating Black community.

While many Black people outside of the Nation of Islam also believe that a fatherless home lives are a contributing factor to the detriment of the Black community, hooks counters with a very different explanation of the “reality” of black women in contemporary society: “Most black females have not been socialized to be ‘women’ in the traditional sexist sense—that is, to be weak and/or subordinate. Had we been socialized this way historically, most black communities and families would not have survived,” (hooks 70). “It would be liberatory both to black males and females for us to rethink whether appropriation of conventional sexist norms has advanced black life. To expect black men to act as ‘protectors’ and ‘providers’ as a way of earning the status of patriarch seems ludicrous given the economy, the shift in gender roles, the inability of many black males to provide either economically or emotionally for themselves, and their inability to protect themselves against life-threatening white supremacist capitalist patriarchal assault, with which they are all too often complicit—for example, black on black homicide.”

Self-help and other ideology that centers around maintaining strong morals, echoes mainstream ideals of nationalism in a U.S. Context. The Nation of Islam’s emphasis on traditional gender roles which favor two-parent families headed by a male provider and managed by a woman who fulfills the duties of faithful wife and devoted mother echo the

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message of the predominantly white Christian right. How then is this agenda Black? What is most problematic about this agenda can be most eloquently summated by bell hooks : “It should be more than clear if not from black life then from the experiences of white folks,

documented in feminist writings, that the patriarchal family presents no model for liberation,” (hooks 71).

It would seem that the gender roles as established in Nation of Islam doctrine erase women's agency and self-determination. Life sentences to the domestic and subservience to men masked as liberation, all done in the name of this vague greater good. However, the true empowerment is visible when some of these women perform these gender roles while manipulating them, creating a site for revolutionary feminist politics.

Chapter 2

Behind Every Great Man : The Million Man March and the Women Involved

“The Nation supports and promotes the end of male
chauvinism and gender oppression.”

- Dr. Toni Sims-Muhammad

“Where do Black women go now that Black
men have Marched ahead?”

- Beverly Hall Lawrence

The Million Man March was a rally held on the National Mall in Washington D.C., October 16, 1995. Activists, social and political figures gathered to organize and execute the event. Its purpose was to address Black men in America and bring to light many of the issues that plague them. Uniting in self-help and defending themselves and their communities from social and economic ills were intended goals. Although the march won support and participation from a number of prominent African American leaders, its legacy is plagued by controversy over several issues. The leader of the march, Louis Farrakhan, is a highly contested figure whose commentary on race in America has led some to wonder whether the message of the march can successfully be disentangled from the controversial messenger. There are also those who would question whether they would want to remove Farrakhan from the memory of the event as he is revered by many.

The Million Man March is frequently cited as an event that ignored the input and even the presence of women. However, a diverse group of religious leaders, community organizations, and activists including the M.G.T. were members of Million Man March local organizing committees. More importantly, several women were featured prominently as speakers. A breakout session entitled “Mothers of the Struggle – Behold Thy Sons” featured Civil Rights icons Rosa Parks, Dorothy Height and Attorney Faye Williams as deliverers of the keynote address. Renowned author Maya Angelou delivered the “Appeal to our Brothers.”

While male leaders were in many ways at the forefront of the event and definitely the

marketed face and targeted audience, female leaders organized the National Day of Absence. Recognized on October 16, 1995, it was to serve as a sacred day of self-reflection and spiritual reconciliation. All black Americans were encouraged to stay home from their work, school, athletic, entertainment activities and various other daily responsibilities on the Day of Absence. Instead of partaking in their usual routines, participants were instructed to gather at places of worship and to hold teach-ins at their homes in order to meditate on the role and responsibility of blacks in America (Gibson 247). Further, the day was intended to serve as an occasion for mass voter registration and contribution to the establishment of a Black Economic Development Fund.

Despite the change in social conditions, the roles of women and their behind-the-scenes existence in the Million Man March were strikingly similar to women activists in the Black Liberation movement of earlier years. For many women this was a source of dissatisfaction with the march and they were very vocal about expressing this sentiment. Like any issue, opinions on the acknowledgment of women by the March – or lack thereof - varied greatly. Both female members of the Nation of Islam and supposed outsiders banded together to endorse the ideals and execution of the March. It is significant to note that a much smaller minority of women within the Nation aligned themselves with other women activists outside the ranks of the NOI in opposition to the Million Man March.

The reasons for critique and endorsement alike varied widely. Some women were

inspired by promises that the March would bring peace to their communities and elation that

Black men were gathering together and professing intentions to serve their communities. On the other hand, many women believed the March symbolized a regression in gender relations within the Black community. For instance, Sonia Sanchez, an outspoken activist and former member of the Nation of Islam, supported the March. While she notes that it is important for the Black community to distance itself from a discourse that says “the people who are going to cure us are only men,” she acknowledges that she also “thought that it was a real display of unity...for all of us,” (Sanchez 52).

Feminists such as bell hooks, however, were in staunch opposition to the March. However hooks' critique was not one based on the Million Man March speaking specifically to Black men or even the call for women to participate in the Day of Absence. Rather she had a valid concern with the “reinforcing of certain notions of family,” (Smooth & Tucker). hooks' rejected the idea of the nuclear family and reinforced patriarchy as the answer to the ills of the Black community. By speaking only to Black men about their supposed absence and slack behavior, the Million Man March insinuated that the work that Black women were doing was not enough. Further, this proved historically inaccurate as Black men had been apart of Black liberation movements since the antebellum period. Such dualities were evident in both groups of women, those who supported and those that opposed the March. This calls to memory a gendered expression of DuBois' theory of double consciousness, the idea that “one ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro,” (DuBois). Kimberle Crenshaw expounded on this idea with

her theory known as the ordering of differences (Crenshaw 142). Crenshaw's theory serves to fill in the gap and ignorance of intersectional identities that is often not addressed by antiracism or feminist groups.

Nameless Recognition

While the Million Man March was not unanimously supported by women in the Nation of Islam either, there is a historical record primarily of endorsement. In an interview celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the March in 2010, Sister Minister Ava Muhammad positively reminisced stating that “it was nothing short of a miracle...men that did not see themselves in the role of protector or provider but now do,” (Muhammad & Muhammad).

E. Faye Williams and Linda Greene are just two women outside of the Nation of Islam that assumed major leadership roles in the Million Man March. Williams served as cochair of the local organizing committee in Washington D.C., the site of the Million Man March. In this role she was charged with the coordination and development of “logistical committees such as the hospitality and voter registration committees,”(Smooth & Tucker). A reason for her taking such a large role in the March? Williams genuinely believed a major goal of the March was to enhance male-female relationships and honor women. Similarly, Linda Greene served as the director of fundraising. In the months leading up to the March, she traveled extensively with Louis Farrakhan and former NAACP President, Benjamin Chavis, in efforts to solicit funds from corporations, celebrities, and other donors (Smooth & Tucker). Greene oversaw the fundraising

efforts of three hundred smaller committees throughout the country, most of which were also headed by women. Women were also the sole organizers and participants of the March's public relations committee!

The event's Health Task Force provides a portrait of how necessary and instrumental women of the Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class were to the execution and success of the Million Man March. While then NOI minister of health and human services, Dr. Abdul Alim Muhammad served as spokesperson of this committee, the volunteer corp was overwhelmingly female (Smooth & Tucker 9).

The narratives of E. Faye Williams, Linda Greene, the Health Task Force corps and all other women that participated have been erased from the collective consciousness of 1995's Million Man March. While the presence and work of these women was imperative to the success of the event, none of them were regarded as key figures or even associated with the event. Though they served in roles essential to the March, none of them were recognized as having been leaders in any capacity.

The women who supported the event willingly subscribed to the model of gender where men are the public face of the family and community while women in their nonetheless important roles are enabling supporters. The Million Man March was less about the patriarchal values espoused by some of its organizers and more about creating hope and an affirmation of Black life.

Chapter 3

Black Muslimahs : Women in the Nation and Their Roles at Home & Abroad

“The woman is not only created by Allah(God), she is created from
the deepest core of the Mind of Allah(God).”

- Minister Dr. Ava Muhammad

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Islamic tradition has adapted to the changes of modernity to be able to accommodate non-controversial gender relationships, especially when it relates to women. Women in Islamic society have in the past years contributed to vital changes in societal and social progress. Most Islamic countries have committed to ensuring continued commitment towards ensuring gender equality as long as the practice does not contradict the principles of Sharia Law. However, the reaction to equality and relation of women in the Islamic context is subject to ritualistic, family or public perception. These pressures are felt by women in the male-dominated Nation of Islam and thus, these women have learned to navigate the landscape accordingly.

Essential to understanding this thesis is the establishment and acknowledgment that historically, Islam is also a community that believes in gender differences in the society. These differences are believed to be vital to the structure and function of the treatment of men and women. The public and family perceptions of gender equality according to Islam are affirmative to the relations of women in their families and communities. Just like traditional concepts, gender equality is highly respected. Unfortunately, this ideal often does not match the ways in which women are awarded – or overlooked in regards to - the opportunities they equally deserve. Sharia law allows for gender equality based on the similar ritual obligations that both men and women are expected to conduct (Lichter, 2009). Inequality is most evident on instances where women are forbidden by the ritual to perform certain activities due to their female nature. A

dominant example was when Muslim women in North America tried leading mixed-gender

prayers but could not take place due to ritual conformity.

First Lady

Mother Khadijah Farrakhan (birth name Betsy Ross) is one of the many women who made a lot of contributions to the Nation of Islam. She is the wife to one of the supreme leaders in this organization, Minister Louis Farrakhan. Although her primary role was being wife to one of the supreme leaders in this organization, she “did not allow men of the Nation intimidate her to allow the men in the group to take the torch that would later lead to democracy and equality for all in the world,” (Gibson 201). On the contrary, she stepped up and assumed such a prominent role to help her husband in this organization's activity to a point where people referred to her as the First Lady of the Nation. Looking at the history of Mother Khadijah and her husband, the pair had only been married for two years before they decided to register with organizations that recognized the need for equality for all in the United States of America. This was after they had converted to Islam and adopted Islamic names. For Louis Farrakhan, he dropped his former name, Louis Eugene Walcott, while Khadijah Farrakhan dropped Betsy Ross in 1955.

There came a time when her husband, Louis Farrakhan was promoted to take over the position of the minister in Boston's temple No. 11. The couple went to work together in this mosque and even developed this region to become one of the strongest Nation of Islam centers in the

years of between 1956 and 1965 (Gibson, 2012). Consequently, Louis Farrakhan was again

promoted and relocated to another mosque in New York (Mosque No. 7) where he was to work as one of Hon. Elijah Muhammad's National Representatives. Mother Khadijah relocated with her husband and went to work of improving the livelihoods of the people of New Rochelle all the way to Harlem. Mother Khadijah's star in the leadership of Nation of Islam started to shine in 1977. This was after she had relocate to Chicago with her husband two years earlier in 1975, when Louis had decide to rebuild the organization from the ground on the basis of Elijah Muhammad's teachings. Therefore, in this transition, Mother Khadijah became the new Nation of Islam's treasure as well as the new secretary (Tate, 1997). This was after the couple had decided to host "religious study groups" in their Chicago home.

At this time, her husband's reputation as one of the most remarkable leaders to ever lead the nation of Islam continued to grow. Consequently, Mother Khadijah's role in this leadership also took more ground in humanitarian aid, registration of new members, fund-raising as well as distribution of food to the homeless in the society (Lichter, 2009). On top of that, she was also entrusted with heading NOI delegations oversees where she oversaw activities like opening of schools, mosques, as well as spearheading other missions in Africa and the middle east more so on foreign policy basis. On top of that, she represented her husband in many occasions when he was loaded with work (Lichter, 2009). For instance, there was even a time she received and

hosted all the first ladies of African countries. She also made a remarkable speech in 1996 when

she addressed the infamous Million Woman March event. On top of that, she made many other contributions to the Nation of Islam, becoming one of the most influential women in the NOI.

Her current role

From Mistress to Madonna

While the most visible, Khadijah Farrakhan is far from the only woman lending her talents to the survival of the Nation of Islam. Tynetta Muhammad, affectionately known as Mother Tynetta, also made so many contributions to this organization as well as to society at large. A prominent female figure in the Nation of Islam's history, her story goes beyond the moral code of the Nation. While serving as one of his several secretaries, Tynetta became the mistress of former minister Elijah Muhammad and bore him several children. This scandal rocked the very foundation of the Nation of Islam in the years leading up to his death and Malcolm X's dissent. In the shadow of his passing, she claims to be the widow of Elijah Muhammad, a claim that has gone undisputed in the rebuilt NOI under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan.

Tynetta Muhammad is a professional commentator as well as a journalist who has written many columns in publications that have been featured by the Islamic community (Gibson 275). She was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan as Tynetta Nelson until her conversion in 1958, where she assumed the name of Tynetta Deanar. After her conversion to

Islam, she secured a job as the secretary of Elijah Muhammad and she went ahead to write many popular articles on the activities of the Nation Of Islam as well as the messages that their leader,

Elijah Muhammad needed to pass to the people (Tate, 1997). She claims that as Muhammad secretary, she also bore him children under the names of Ahmed, Ishmael, Christopher, and Madia Muhammad. However, there are people who say that there is no evidence that Elijah had another wife and children, other than Clara Muhammad.

While working as Muhammad's secretary, Tynnetta wrote many articles touching on different issues in the society including an infamous issue of the now-defunct NOI publication "Muhammad Speaks" where she was condemning the immodest mode of dressing that her peers in that era. Her concentration was mostly directed to Islam women's mode of dressing, behavior as well as matters of proper deportment (Lichter 2009). She continually urged Black women not to lose their dignity in pursuit of the immodest Whites' way of dressing. She also wrote on other contentious Biblical and Quran quoting where she branded Elijah Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets", but not as the Arab prophet Muhammad who the whites did not want to believe in. Following Louis Farrakhan's rebranding of the Nation of Islam, she sided with him and continued to write on issues that affected both the blacks as well as the white populations in the world. In fact, she praised Louis Farrakhan as one of the greatest visionaries to have ever graced the face of the earth.

Tynnetta Muhammad's transformation is not one that can be easily ignored. Within a matter of five years, her reputation as a so-called whore and mistress of the leader of the Nation of Islam was virtually erased as she assumed a hyper-visible leadership position in the Nation of

Islam. Reverence that many of the younger generation of Nation of Islam members share for her speaks to the strength of institutional memory and narrative. These members have no recollection of Muhammad as a figure of scandal or disgrace but rather as a champion for protecting and preserving the moral and sexual virtues of Black women.

Rewards for the Exceptional Only

There is another key woman figure in today's Nation of Islam by the name of Ava Muhammad. She was born a Muslim in the year 1951. She remained a faithful and involved participant in her Islamic faith in her youthful years, something that made her become recognized by senior members in the Nation of Islam (Gibson, 2012). In fact, by 1988, she was made the first female figure to ever lead a mosque as well as preside over the region that used it in the history of the Nation of Islam. On top of that, she also at one time held the position of the national spokesperson, for the Louis Farrakhan, which is one of the most prestigious positions in the Nation of Islam movement (Gibson 2012). In fact this post had previously been held by prominent faces of democracy, for instance, Malcolm X who served in this position under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad. On top of that, she was given jurisdiction to several mosques in the United States of America including the states of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and some parts of Tennessee. She is also the person in charge of overseeing the day to day activities in

Muhammad's Mosque of Atlanta.

On top of the above-mentioned credentials, Ava Muhammad remains an influential

member of the nation of Islam, on several dimensions. She is a lawyer by profession after receiving her doctorate from Georgetown University in 1975. On top of that, she retains her position as the national spokesperson for Louis Farrakhan (Lichter, 2009). She has also written several books on the Islamic faith, civil rights, and has participated in several research expeditions. She is also one of the persons who make up the New York Bar Association. Therefore, one can see that Ava Muhammad remains a significantly influential member of the Nation of Islam. Her contribution to the successes that this organization has continued to enjoy in society is indisputable.

In 1999, Ava Muhammad was named as the first female minister in the Nation of Islam's history. There is little literature that surrounds this appointment. One thing is painfully clear : her excessive credentials placed her in the position to be considered a viable candidate for her position. Ava Muhammad's existence serves as a compromise to a Nation struggling to remain true to its family values and rigid gender roles in ever-evolving modern interpretations of womanhood. She is an every-woman, having secured a successful career while maintaining an unwavering commitment to her husband, children and Nation.

Conclusion

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Conceptions of gender issues vary by community. One's sex and gender has been a major challenge in terms of the human species development in all three primary aspects of life. That is

the economical, political and social spheres. The female gender has been constantly constructed as inferior to their male counterparts even in all the three aspects. It is evident that Islam has allowed women to participate in all the aspects of life more than before the introduction of the religion (Gibson, 2012). In the past societies, this was not the case. Women were left out in economical, political, and even social matters. There were countries that would not allow women to participate in elections, or even have one of their own represent them in positions of power.

Discrimination against black women is multi-pronged, multi-sectoral and trans generational. Black women are discriminated by White supremacy; they have to contend with male prejudice fed by patriarchal notions, they suffer abuse from White women who are also beneficiaries of white supremacy. At the same time, they are expected to form alliances with these women to defeat male privilege. They are expected to be in solidarity with their male folks to fight racial oppression. In this regard they have little choice. They cannot sit on the sideline and watch the black male being reduced to an endangered species. After all, these men are the fathers of their children, the lovers, and their sons. In short, there is no other species that understand oppression as Black women do.

With a Black Nationalist Islam such as that of the Nation of Islam, the focus shifts and is complicated by the intersectional identities of many of its members. While it is preferred that women remain in the domestic sphere, the Nation's knowledge of the poor economic condition of

the Black community at large makes accommodations for educated and working women.

Accessibility to the doctrine of the Nation of Islam has been central to its beginning and

continued survival on both a national and global scale. Many Muhammad Mosques are located in low-income neighborhoods and are thus a stone's throw away from the “lost-found” struggling and downtrodden Black folks that they are trying to reach. While members of the Fruit of Islam and Muslim Girls Training regularly engage in community outreach and recruitment for their ranks, access to the Teachings of the Nation have become more transparent in recent years. Guiding texts such as the *Book on Femininity* can be accessed for free online. From a simple visit to a local Muhammad Mosque, the MGT-GCC manuals can be procured, a major feat considering that these . Furthermore, upon joining the Nation of Islam, Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class can be completed online, allowing any woman to participate in this sisterhood from anywhere in the world.

There has been a steady globalization of the Nation of Islam in the twenty-first century. While not at all totally inclusive or free from prejudiced and sexist doctrine, membership in the NOI was extended to people of all races in 2007. Furthermore, many women have been encouraged to take on leadership roles in their communities and abroad, a most recent initiative being one to send women to nursing and medical school in Cuba. At the same time, an ever-problematic theme of the Nation of Islam is the upliftment of women through so-called morals. This kind of thinking is dangerous because it reinforces patriarchal ideals that tie a woman's worth to what is perceived to be her sexual discipline or lack thereof. Constant insistence that women primarily occupy the domestic sphere leaves little room for mobility for women outside

of the nuclear family structure.

While Ava Muhammad is the top female spiritual leader in the Nation, other women have

recently moved into prominent roles, both inside the religion and without. Dora Muhammad, who in 2003 became the first female editor on the staff of Farrakhan's Chicago-based newspaper, *The Final Call*, is now that paper's managing editor. As Ava Muhammad and other women become more prominent, they're attempting to place a new face on their religion. Further, the Nation prohibits the abuse and brutalization of women allowed under select interpretations of Islam. While far from liberal, the groundwork has been laid to ensure that women in the Nation of Islam will continue to be recognized for their contributions and that their roles continue to expand. Whether this newfound visibility will continue to be sustained at such a slow pace has yet to be seen.

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