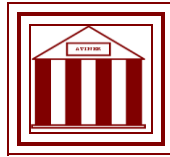


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LIT2010-1881

**Victimized Women in Sonia Sanchez's plays
The Bronx Is Next and Uh Huh, But How Do
It Free Us?**

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Abstract

*As one of the few female African American voices that were invited to join the Black Arts Movement, Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934) had a bold spirit to write militant plays which both celebrate and criticize the Black Arts Movement. Believing that the survival of the community must not depend only on efforts towards American racial justice, but also on sexual and social equality from within, Sanchez dramatizes the forms of oppression and subjugation that the black female was subject to. In *The Bronx Is Next* (1968), Sanchez dramatizes how the militant black male belittles an old woman's life in favor of their political destructive program. Depicting violent male and showing the actuality of their sexual politics were Sanchez's missions in this play. Challenging the traditional linear structure, Sanchez divided her boldest play *Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?* (1974) into three separate narratives. Such a structure enabled her to move to wider circles, dramatizing different facets of black female oppression. In scene 1, Sanchez considers polygamy -- a Muslim thought -- as a severe oppressive tool against women. Arrogantly black men believe that the right to use the black women's bodies is an essential part of their freedom and manhood; Sanchez refutes such a notion in scene 2, assuring us that black women are not sexual objects. In scene 3, physical and social oppression were Sanchez's main targets. Also, making a black mother chastises her daughter for ceasing to financially support her family; Sanchez focuses on two kinds of oppression: black male financial oppression and older generation oppression. Sanchez tackled also white women's oppression of black women. Penetrating courageously through a male dominated militant discourse, Sanchez raises vital questions asserting black female consciousness at a time when women's issues were scarcely addressed.*

Introduction

Sonia Sanchez (1934-) is one of the few female African American playwrights that were invited to join the Black Arts Movement. At a time when the African American woman was being relegated to domestic work and supporting her man, Sanchez spoke out in criticism of the misogyny of the Black Arts Movement and sought to empower black women by dramatizing the forms of oppression that the black women were subject to. Her work marks her progression toward enlightened understanding of what it means to be black and a woman connected to a larger world, and of how to maintain human dignity and emotional sensitivity in an impersonal, alien, and frequently threatening world.

The Bronx is Next (1968)

Reflecting the threatening environment that the black women experience, Sanchez portrays four male Black Nationalists who are trying to burn Harlem to the ground. The four black men are named Charles, Larry, Roland, and Jimmy, who likely represent Charles Patterson, Larry Neal, Roland Snellings and Jimmy Garrett who in turn exemplify Black Arts ideology. In a frightening and ruthless decision to avoid a delay in their political program of burning Harlem, they encounter an old African American woman who, having brought most of her belongings up from Birmingham forty years ago, cannot limit her packing to the bare essentials, urging her saying: "C'mon you mothafuckers. Keep moving. Git your slow asses out of here" (Sanchez 1968: 78). Charles instructs Roland to take her back to her apartment and to give her "hot tea", and tells her she can come another time when they have "room for [her] stuff" (Sanchez 1968: 79). The "hot tea" will be poisoned; killing her before her body is burned in the fire. Charles is unwilling to accommodate the old woman's desire to hang on to her old way of life, symbolized by her desire to keep her old belongings. Sanchez has crafted Charles to mirror the behavior of Johnny in Garrett's *And We Own the Night* (1968). Johnny is a teenage Black male who becomes a hero by killing a white policeman and later shooting his mother. Both Charles and Johnny are willing to kill older black women because "there ain't no time for anyone" other than themselves (Sanchez 1968: 79). The environment of women has become so toxic and full of violence and oppression by the selfish, unashamed black men.

Sanchez goes on displaying the hazardous oppression that black women live through. Many black men in the Black Power Movement believe that part of their freedom and manhood is their right to control women's sexual relationships. However, they maintain that there is no contradiction to have inter-racial relationships themselves. That is what makes black men utter sexist statements that are largely accepted without criticism. In "But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States", the author mentions such a statement by Eldridge Cleaver as a case in point:

I became a rapist. To refine my technique and modus operandi. I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto- in the black ghetto where vicious and dark deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day and when I considered myself smooth enough. I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. ("But Some of Us Are Brave," n.d.)

Cleaver reveals nothing but a misogynist attitude. He exposes how black men disregard the humanity and equality of black women. Sanchez was tentative enough to depict such a belief clearly in *The Bronx is Next*. While off duty, a white cop comes to have sex with his black mistress "Black Bitch" who lives in Harlem. Black men's feelings and treatment of the black mistress show frustration and anger with her. They claim to be clearing the Harlem tenements and burning them down "for black bitches like her" (Sanchez 1968: 79). According to "But Some of Us Are Brave", it is mentioned that Bell Hooks comments on the BPM in 1960s saying: "black men overemphasized white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a way to explain their disapproval of inter-racial relationships" ("But Some of Us Are Brave," n.d.). That is why Charles verbally abuses her: "I could fuck you right here if I wanted to. You know what a Black man is don't you bitch? Is that what happens when you fuck faggoty white men?" (Sanchez 1968: 82). Charles feels that by degrading her, he will remind her of his dominance. The abuse directed to her not only takes a verbal shape, it also extends to take the physical one. He sexually assaults her kissing, touching and eventually hitting her for her unforgivable crime of sleeping with a white man. When the black man calls her a "black bitch", the black woman proudly reclaims it:

A smart- assed- black bitch- that's me. Smart enough to stay clear of all black bastard men who jump from black pussy to black pussy like jumping jacks ... yeah. I know what I am. /look around/ ... But all you revolutionaries or nationalists or whatever you call yourself. Do you know where you at? (Sanchez 1968: 82)

The black woman's bold question challenges the agency the men have given themselves to solve the problems of black people. The black woman's question calls into question the men's understanding of themselves. Charles furiously knocks her to the ground. When Jimmy attempts to help her to get up, she proudly decries:

No. Watch this boy. You still young. Watch me. Don't touch me. Watch me get up. It hurts. But I'll get up. And when I'm up the tears will stop. I don't cry, when I'm standing up. All right I'm up again. (Sanchez 1968: 82)

Sanchez makes a powerful statement in the black woman's refusal to accept help from the people who are hurting her. Her message is clear: the same people who are bringing you down cannot be the same people helping you up. Men cannot be the people liberating women. Sanchez empowers black women in the person of "Black Bitch". She shows black women that they are strong enough to overcome abuse.

Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us (1974)

In this play, Sanchez proceeds to a wider view. Boldly reviewing the male values that were coming out of the BPM, Sanchez offers different samples of destructive black men who ostensibly seek the supposed liberation of the black race and constructive black women who have potential role in the community. Consequently they feel degraded and that provides the chance for black men to oppress them. Challenging the traditional linear plot structure, Sanchez divides the play into three separate scenes. In between each of these scenes, Sanchez inserts dancers who interpret the action that has just taken place.

Joining the nation of Islam¹ and leaving it because of feminist issues left its indelible marks on Sanchez. In scene 1, looking at polygamy as an influence of Muslim thought, Sanchez portrays a Black Muslim family of three characters: Malik, Waleesha, and Nefertia. Malik is a twenty-year-old brother whose first wife, Waleesha, is twenty-one years old, and pregnant, and whose second wife, Nefertia, is eighteen-years old, and newly pregnant. The action takes place in their bedroom. They are dressed in "traditional clothes" as they are Black Nationalists.

Within their polygamous relationship, Nefertia and Waleesha quarrel over how to best attract Malik. Waleesha, whose name has a Muslim root "wala" or "wala" which means faithfulness and truthfulness, finds her loyalty is the cause behind attracting Malik. She responds to Nefertia when she tries to start an argument, saying:

Why should I be mad at you? Just tell me why, Nefertia. Malik brought you here--you were his choice. His decision. And since I love him I have to abide by his choice, no matter how unwise it may be". (Sanchez 1974: 170)

¹ Between the years of 1971-1975, Sanchez belonged to the Nation of Islam. In *Black Women Writers at Work*, she explains the reason behind leaving the Nation, saying: "it was not easy being in the Nation. I was also speaking on campuses. In the Nation at that time, women were supposed to be in the back ground. My contribution to the Nation has been that I refused to let them tell me where my place was. I would be reading my poetry some place, and men would get up to leave, and I'd say, 'Look, my words are equally important.' So I got into trouble". She added, "I had to fight a lot of people in and outside of the Nation due to so-called sexism. I spoke up. I think it was important that there were women there to do that." (Tate 1983: 139-140).

Believing that her life must be completely devoted to Malik, Waleesha must forever have unconditional loyalty to his decisions, no matter how inconvenient they may be. Continuing the competition between the two wives in their attempts to monopolize their husband's admiration and affection, Nefertia¹, whose name, not only highlights her physical grace and beauty, but also her power and Afrocentric roots, tells Waleesha of the causes behind attracting Malik and how Malik said she had rescued him from the boredom that he experienced with Waleesha:

He used to tell me about you. You and yo/knitting and going to the movies. And hardly ever interested in him, he said. He said you never saw him, never. He said you never read anything, not even a newspaper. We love each other becuz we have everything in common. Theatre, school, poetry. Ours is not just a physical love, he says. It's mental too. So it's you who don't really stand a chance here. (Sanchez 1974: 171)

Nefertia embodies the prototypical idea of what men in general and black men in particular find attractive in women. It is not only loyalty, but also intellect, education, and shared interests that attract men. For Malik, the Arabic name which means king, Waleesha and Nefertia supplement each other. He as a black man reaps the harvest. Though Malik thinks he has a settled life with his two wives, each woman seems sure she will be able to remove the other from the picture. Waleesha predicts polygamy will not work anymore. She says, "Just you wait and see, sister. Just you wait and see ..." (Sanchez 1974: 171). Commenting on such a situation, Audre Lorde claims: "Black women are programmed to define [them]selves within ... male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon [their] common interests" (2007: 48). Black women always have some negative outlook about themselves.

However, victimization could take another shape. When Nefertia reveals to Waleesha that she is hiding her three-month pregnancy to perform in the play with Malik, Waleesha castigates her: "But, Sister, you should tell everyone, after all, it is an occasion for rejoicing. Is it not so, my husband?" (Sanchez 1974: 168). Considering the question within her polygamous relationship, it reveals Waleesha's lack of self-worth. She spontaneously puts Malik's desires above hers and Nefertia's. Sexual discrimination against women in BPM was somehow urged on by them. As it is revealed in "But Some of Us Are Brave", Elaine Brown recalls on an organizational meeting of the Black Congress in which she and other women were forced to wait in order to eat until the men were served food for which they had all contributed

¹ The name of his second wife Nefertia is derived from the name "Nefertiti", an Egyptian queen. The name has many translations such as "a beautiful woman has arrived", "Ruler of the Nile", "Daughter of Gods", and "Empress of the Mediterranean" (Thousands of Muslim Baby Names with their Meanings 2008).

money. The "rules" behind such a behavior were then explained to them: "it was not only 'unsisterly' of us to want to eat with our Brothers; it was a sacrilege for which blood could be shed" ("But Some of Us Are Brave," n.d.). It must be stressed that it was not only a lot of men but also a great number of black women in the BPM who were enforcing strict gender roles on black women. Consequently, black women in BPM society do not resist but encourage sexism.

According to Anne Moody, another reason why Black women were oppressed more is because of certain stereotypes attributed to black women (1968: 43). Waleesha's statement that Nefertia should not conceal her pregnancy causes Malik to recall the size of Waleesha's stomach when she was three months pregnant. Because Waleesha will be a mother, she discloses that she was eating a lot during these three months which made her lose her figure. There is a kind of correlation between Waleesha and the Mammy stereotype. The Mammy stereotype is portrayed as an asexual, bandana-clad, obese, dark-complexioned, older woman with large breasts and a broad grin. Her primary role is that of a subordinate, self-sacrificing, domestic servant. Waleesha surrenders to this image. Consequently, she becomes unattractive to Malik, giving him an excuse to find another woman, thus disregarding her feelings.

Sanchez points to how black women are subject to financial abuse¹. Audre Lorde claims: "All too often the message comes loud and clear to Black women from Black men: 'I am the only prize worth having and there are not too many of me, and remember, I can always go elsewhere'" (2007: 48). Black men are proud of themselves. They consider themselves a prize for Black women. Consequently, they demand financial support. In the scene, Malik asks Nefertia if she can give him money from her student loan check. She tells him she has not cashed it yet and all she has is two dollars. Ironically, he decides to take them and leave. Such an interaction indicates that Malik, the supposed breadwinner of the family, maintains a lifestyle that he cannot support and must resort to exploiting Nefertia's education fund. Having such a lifestyle can be read as Sanchez's severe criticism of the black men who are unashamedly financially dependent upon black women. Nefertia and Waleesha are examples of constructive black women in the community.

The whole Black community is always kinder to men than women. Boys are welcomed and preferred to girls. Sanchez herself has passed through such an experience. In an interview with D.H. Melhem, she says:

My father's name is Wilson. I guess he was so disgusted with having another girl. I have no name. "We were going to call this boy coming 'Wilson'" [my father said], ... [a relative] said, "Well, name her 'Wilsonia'". (1985: 76)

¹ Financial abuse takes more than one form. It could be preventing her from getting or keeping a job, taking her money, not letting her have access to family income (West 2008).

This experience has left its ineradicable marks on Sanchez. She puts a great emphasis on such a problem when she dramatizes the two wives' argument about who will bear a "male/child" and whose child Malik will love the most. Their desire to have male children reveals internalized sexism as well as an understanding that Malik and the community prefer male offspring. Sanchez presents both Nefertia and Waleesha as examples of the black women in patriarchal society. Rather than attempt to change the world's perception, black women are victims of the same doctrine that men adhere to. Black women thus have done nothing but remain subjugated and suppressed.

Immediately following scene 1, Sanchez outlines an interpretive dance that assures Sanchez's message in the previous action. Below is an extract from her instructions:

HE lines them up behind him and begins to preen. HE returns to get the other two SISTERS, the KNITTING SISTER behind him and the READING SISTER behind the KNITTING SISTER. The READING SISTER keeps trying to move in front of the KNITTING SISTER but is blocked each time. And the MALE DANCER never looks around. As the MALE DANCER walks, HE keeps turning his head as HE sees other sisters, beckons, like as to "I'll see you later" look, spruces up. Stops at mirror again and does a preening dance. The SECOND MALE DANCER on the floor laughs rolls over the floor and laughs. Laughs. Laughs. (Sanchez 1974: 172)

The fact that the Male Dancer does not bother to turn around and look at the Sisters fighting to get closer to him is a metaphor for Malik's polygamy. The Male Dancer's wandering eye is an indication that Malik is still looking for women to add to his collection, and that he was probably going to meet another woman when he took Nefertia's dinner money. The Male Dancer's obsession with looking in the mirror and grooming himself points to both Malik's self-obsession and his disregard for women. The second Male Dancer's laughter implies camaraderie among the men; the women's fight for the man's love is humorous to them. It illustrates a lack of respect for the women and insinuates that Malik is not alone in his maltreatment of women.

In scene 2, Sanchez was brilliant enough to counter another imposed stereotype of the black woman: the Jezebel. Before the 1960s, the Jezebel stereotype was so strong that white people took pictures of little black girls who talked or acted like they wanted sex. When white men first came to black Africa, they saw half naked women. That part of Africa did not conceive of modest dress, but the whites of the time drew a different conclusion; black women were loose and wanted sex. Then masters forced black slave women to sleep with them. Those masters, who knew deep down within themselves that slave women had sex with them out of fear not desire, chose to tell a lie about black women. Reflecting what the whole community believes about the Black whore, Sanchez portrays a Black Whore's responses to a Brother Man's

attempt to engage her in a conversation by asking her what her name is. She says:

Ain't got no name. Lost my name when I was eleven years old. I became just a body then so I forgot my name. Don't nobody want to know a Black woman's name anyway. You gon' take me home with ya to keep? Put me in your pocket to hold/touch when you need some warmth? No? Well, since you ain't, then there ain't no reason to tell ya my name. All ya need to know is on my face and body. If you can read a map you can read me.

(Sanchez 1974: 177)

"Black Whore" expresses a feeling of indifference and a strong sense of awareness of how others perceive her. She realizes the fact that nobody wants to know who she is. She refuses to accept that any interest in her is genuine because in her experience people are paying attention to nothing but her exterior. "Brother Man" on his part refuses the tired explanation of child abuse and child prostitution as excuses for her current profession. He says, "You a whore cuz you wants to be, now aint that so?" (Sanchez 1974: 178). Believing that she is the determiner of her life path, "Brother Man" describes her life the way he imagines that of a typical black prostitute, living with an old woman, prostituting herself while bringing her kids presents during the holidays. Black Whore confesses that that is her lifestyle. "Brother Man" remarks that the described woman sounds just like his momma. Although the "Black Whore" is prostituting herself, she is a responsible woman. She feeds her children whose father knows nothing about them. She suffers physical and psychological oppression for her children's sake.

The interpretive dance that follows provides Sanchez's view of the cycle of abuse that has led to prostitution in black communities. The dance involves children being mentored by older figures, insinuating that extremely dysfunctional childhoods have led these women to destabilized sexualities:

The OLDER MALE DANCER comes over to MALE DANCER [sitting down] and offers him YOUNG GIRL. The three DANCERS dance a new/orgiastic/blue-bird-blue-bird through my window dance and the LITTLE GIRL DANCER goes mad and becomes a WOMAN and we'll never know the exact moment her childhood ends. The three DANCERS move down the street and the two MALE DANCERS turn the YOUNG CHILD WOMAN DANCER over to another FEMALE DANCER who begins to console her caressingly.
(Sanchez 1974: 186-187)

The dance seems to clarify Sanchez's position that the abuse of a little girl will lead to a troubled adulthood.

In scene 3, drawing attention to the oppression of young black women by older black women, Sanchez portrays a young black revolutionary Brother and

a Black Nationalist Sister who are in the middle of a conversation discussing the drama that occurred when her parents found out she was going to move in with Brother, who is unable to support her because he is in the process of getting his master's degree. Sister explains:

I told them that the new/Blk/woman didn't worry about a man taking care of her. She and her man work together. If he had no job she worked and let him do the work of organizing the people. Since the money came from the oppressor, it didn't matter who made it.
(Sanchez 1974: 166)

Sister presents a progressive picture of what a Brother- Sister relationship could entail if they wished to support each other. Her explanation suggests that money will be irrelevant for the happy couple. However, her mother is skeptical. She warns that if a Black man thinks he does not have to take care of her, she will land herself in trouble, saying: "we Blk/women been fighting a long time just to get Blk/men to take care of us now you and yo/kind gon' to take us back" (Sanchez 1974: 188). The mother feels that black men were never interested in black women, so black women had to fight hard to gain their attention. It seems as if some African-American mothers are too focused on trying to construct their daughters into the person they want them to be instead of valuing and appreciating them for being the unique people that they are. As the generations pass, most black women are having a hard time with the fact that their daughters are going to find their own way in life. Therefore, a decision like Sister's, to be independent of her Brother, could jeopardize the hard work of the previous generation of black women. Sister's idea of progress represents her mother's idea of regression. Sanchez encourages black women to be themselves, shaping their own lives, and refusing to be sculpted by others.

Bringing into the picture a "plain-looking" and rich White Devil/Woman spacing problem, Sanchez indicates that under the influence of White women, black men provide black women with an unreliable and deceitful life --a fact highlighted by Brother's costume. The brown suede with big yellow sunflower refers to a white, hippy, youth culture, while the dashiki with a map of Africa refers to the Black Nationalist culture. Brother cannot juggle this double identity, showing one side of it to Sister while allowing White Woman to see all of who he is. Consequently, black men are not honest with black women. This is again spacing problem. Brother moves to the white woman's space/home. She is aware that he is trying to start a family with a black woman and tells him that she understands; as he is moving up in the organization, a black female counterpart is essential. Devil/Woman equates the Sister to an accessory necessary for "her man". Without a black woman, Black Nationalist would struggle to attain credibility. Brother thanks her for being so understanding and gives her accolades about being a "rare woman" (Sanchez 1974: 191). White Woman gives Black Man a check but he refuses it. He tells his white girlfriend that they are going to live off Sister's check. Once the white

woman leaves the room to cook food for him, he picks up the phone and dials Sister. The stage is split in such a way that we can see them in their respective spaces talking to each other. Brother explains that he will not make it home tonight because of a meeting. They exchange sweet words and he hums in her ear with words such as: "Don't you forget that you my woman. My Black woman. The woman I'm gonna show to the world. My choice for the world to see" (Sanchez 1974: 192). He means this literally since she is nothing more than a tool for him. Sanchez reveals an insecurity that black women endure based on the actions of black men.

Later, Sister is pregnant. Brother refuses to go watch her poetry reading; instead he stays home and phones White Woman, who ignores his phone call but finally calls him back, confessing her jealousy because of Sister's pregnancy. Panicked, Brother leaves Sister's house and crosses over to White Woman's. While trying to reassure her that they will be together forever, he says:

Why, lady, you've made me all that I am. I'm almost finished with school because of you. I can travel whenever I want because of you. I never want for money because of you. I'm a man because you've allowed me to be a man. (Sanchez 1974: 200)

He reassures her that she is behind all his success. In saying so, he gives her power over him. She convinces him to stay, so he calls Sister telling her to pack his bags for him as he will not be home. White Woman and Brother exchange vows, reflecting the extent to which white women can manipulate and control black men, which represents part of the threatening world that the black women face.

Brother returns home to a confrontation with Sister. She knows he has been cheating on her. They have a harsh verbal exchange in which he accuses her of being a "bourgie/black/bitch". The argument escalates and Brother violently tells her who he thinks she is:

(slaps the right side of her face)
You a black woman bitch.
(slaps the left side of her face)
You the same as every Black woman.
(Slaps the right side of her face)
You were born to cry in the night.
(slaps the left side of her face)
You ain't no different from any black woman.
(Slaps the right side of her face)
You're my mother, and my mother's mother every Blk/man's mother I've ever seen.
(slaps the left side of her face)
You like all Blk/women, ain't no difference.
(Then he kisses her. Long and hard)

Now pack my bag like I told you to ... (Sanchez 1974: 210)

He verbalizes his feelings about her and all black women, revealing the little respect he has for them as well as the power and control he can command over Sister. In *Talking Black: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black*, Bell Hooks mentions men's power to "transform a woman's reality- to turn her from a good woman into a bad woman, to make her a whore, a slut. Even 'good' women suffered, were somehow always at the mercy of men, who could judge us unfit, unworthy of love, kindness, tenderness, which could, if they chose to, destroy us" (1989: 44). Sanchez makes it clear that there is no liberation for the black woman in a world such as Brother's. Brother leaves Sister crying, praying, and rocking herself "in the knowledge of womanly blackness" (Sanchez 1974: 213).

As the scene ends, the black dancers take over the stage. They re-enact the scene that has just taken place with one female dancer wearing a white mask and the other a black mask. When the black female dancer wearing a black mask is left alone on stage beaten and confused, Sanchez illustrates the way the black woman reacts:

Finally SHE rises and straightens out her black mask. Her long dress, her natural. And SHE begins to march at first in a tired manner, but as SHE passes, SHE becomes upright in her blackness and SHE smiles, slightly.

Stage darkens

There is no beginning or end. (Sanchez 1974: 215)

The dark stage is a metaphor for the black woman's consciousness. The lack of a beginning or end points to the cyclical nature of the plight of the Black woman, the endlessness of their struggle; there is no black woman who does not have to fight against maltreatment from black men. Despite marching tired and suffering from abuse and neglect, Black Woman is able to stand proud in her Blackness. Sanchez's final message is that the new black woman can and shall overcome.

Conclusion

Black women are vulnerable to many forms of oppression on the part of black men: physical, psychological, financial, and on the part of themselves. Believing and surrendering to the community's oppressed beliefs, Sanchez's black heroines deteriorate until they lose sight of themselves. When their self-esteem deteriorates, they become more and more trapped in destructive relationships. Sanchez's message is obvious. Self-esteem must be black women's main target. She demands her women regain control over their lives. Women should realize that their sense of pride and well-being must first emanate from within themselves before it can be shared with another person.

Their awareness of themselves, first as human being and second as women will provide them with security. These women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves i.e. to celebrate their womanhood. Only then will they be able to become involved in mutually fulfilling relationships.

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