

Singing of Resistance and Desire: Female Blues Singers' Reclamation of Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Sisterhood

Sumudu Nisala Embogama¹



Abstract

Blues music emerged as a unique musical genre recognizable to music connoisseurs globally due to its vivid expressions of human experiences and distinct musical structures. These songs were sung in a soulful manner by black artists living in post-slavery America. The purpose of this literary study was to critically evaluate the popular blues songs by two of the most renowned blues singers during the 1920s and 1930s through a feminist literary lens. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith moved their audience, not just with their powerful voices, but also through their blatant and unapologetic renderings of the black communal experiences living among a largely racist white majority, with special focus on the lived realities of black women at the time. Through these songs, we encounter doubly marginalized women; firstly by their racialized identity as black Americans, and secondly due to their gendered status as women in a male-dominating social system. Despite expressions of mental and physical abuse mentioned in these songs, most of them are radical assertions of female subjectivity and sexuality. Often, Rainey’s and Smith’s open articulations of female desire and radical deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality make these two singers female rights advocates as they subvert stereotypical idealized images of submissive and passive women through their depictions of empowered and autonomous black women fully in charge of their female subjectivity and sexuality. These songs not only entertain but also inform the Black community as well as other communities across the world that female emancipation involves dismantling male-serving social norms and creating female subjectivity through self-determination and sisterhood.

Keywords

Bessie Smith, Black American Community, Blues Music, Female Empowerment, Ma Rainey

¹ Department of English Language Teaching, University of the Visual & Performing Arts, Sri Lanka. Email: sumudu.e@vpa.ac.lk / sumuduembogama@gmail.com



Introduction

The blues lyrics are powerful, authentic, and unfiltered depictions of fundamental human experiences and sentiments based on themes of love, betrayal, sadness, empowerment, sexual desire, and pain. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a possible origin for the term 'blues' appears to be the eighteenth-century British expression "blues devils," referring to acute mental depression. Nevertheless, blues music does not essentially limit itself to a singer's musical expression of "feeling the blues" as a critical discourse analysis of the lyrics reveals broader implications of the multifaceted challenges faced by black American women living at the time when these songs were penned and sung.

Blues music emerged at a time when the Black American community was supposedly liberated following the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 (Fischlin & Heble, 2003). Despite the abolition of slavery, the persistence of Jim Crow laws perpetuating racial segregation in Southern America, the insistence on the "separate but equal" doctrine, and the continuance of racial terror instilled among African Americans by instances of racial discrimination even to the extent of public lynching evidence the lack of freedom for the black community living during the post-slavery period in America. In such a context, blues music emerged as a form of entertainment for the black community, whereby amidst their joyous expressions of the sense of newfound freedom, open expressions of sadness, frustration, and anger resulting from continued oppressive acts by the white community were unravelled.

Blues songs flourished around the 1920s and 30s, parallel to the Black Liberation Movement gathering momentum during this period. This musical genre was pioneered by Black American women, particularly two singers by the name of Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, credited for being the "Mother of Blues," and Bessie Smith, known as the "Empress of the Blues" (Davis, 1998). Both women, in their songs, selected as their foci black female experiences resonating from social and personal realities.

Considering their biographical details, it becomes evident that these female singers radically challenge normative conceptions of female subjectivity and sexuality, not only through their songs but also in their actual lives. Through their songs, the overarching message conveyed to the black community as a whole is to stand up for their rights as free people and to take ownership of their 'blackness'. At the same time, they destabilize the existing status quo of black women who were doubly subjugated due to the normative community's racism as well

as the sexism coming from within their own community. Thus, in a life mostly defined by racism, classicism, and sexism, the blues songs served as platforms for open articulations and celebrations of black women's self-discovery and self-expression. As Cone (1972) mentions, "The blues woman is the priestess or prophet of the people. She verbalizes the emotion for herself and the audience, articulating the stresses and strains of human relationships (p.107).

'Ma' Rainey and Smith, through their singing, document the complexities of African American females' lives, granting the audience a more informed understanding of how the concepts of femininity, gender identity, and sexuality were viewed at a particular historical juncture. When critically evaluating their songs, we can observe recurring representations of a female who, in spite of being situated in a patriarchal social system, attempts to redefine herself through alternative modes of living. Their songs often portray psychologically and sexually emancipated black women who are self-sufficient, assertive, vocal, and emotionally and physically comfortable in their own skin as black women. Through this message of female empowerment, both artists, despite their role as entertainers, present counter-narratives of female subjectivity and sexuality that call for black female emancipation. Most of their songs refer to themes of abuse, problems of gender roles, the complexity of adult love, social injustice, economic discrimination, and sexual transgressions, all tackled with simple, uncoy and frank language.

In the book titled *Black Pearls*, Harrison (1988) provides an explicit description of the purpose and significance of the blues songs sung by women. She presents them as:

Pivotal figures in the assertion of black women's ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor. It reveals their dynamic roles as spokespersons and interpreters of the dreams, harsh realities, and tragicomedies of the black experience in the first three decades of this century; their role in the continuation and development of black music in America; their contributions to blues poetry and performance. Further, it expands the base of knowledge about the role of black women in the creation and development of American popular culture; illustrates their modes and means for coping successfully with gender-related discrimination and exploitation, and demonstrates an emerging model for the working woman - one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and trend-setting (xviii).

This literary study adopts a feminist literary lens to explore how Rainey and Smith articulate Black female subjectivity, sexuality, and resistance. The overarching objective of this particular study is to critically evaluate the blues songs sung by Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey and

Bessie Smith in light of the above citation, claiming them to be spokeswomen for Black American women who depict their lived realities during a post-slavery America. When perusing the lyrics of their songs, insights into the macro level comprehension of the societal oppression and discrimination meted out on the Black community at large, and at the micro level, how the larger social forces of racism and sexism impact the lives of black females are made evident. These songs reveal how patriarchal notions of femininity, female subjectivity, and sexuality are presented during this period.

Love and sexuality in the blues songs

The majority of blues songs are secular by nature and belong to the private domain. As such, they focus on personal and private themes such as love and sexual intimacy. Nonetheless, these personal expressions become shared communal expressions of freedom of expression in the private and public spaces. Trivial as it may appear, the ability to choose one's partner and openly express love to them was not available to the black community under the slave system. Stripped of this basic human right due to the economic management of procreation forcing slaves to engage in intercourse purely for breeding purposes, apart from being sexually exploited by their slave masters, emancipation from slavery also meant sexual emancipation. Open expressions of emotional and carnal love were probably one of the most unhindered and tangible forms of freedom granted to these people as segregation laws and other discriminatory practices continued to subjugate the black community overtly and covertly.

Frequently, the blues songs' explicit references related to sexuality range from themes of heterosexuality, homosexuality, infidelity, and erotica. These various manifestations of sexuality are often depicted uncensored and unashamed. Whether the experience is subjugating or affirming their sexuality, these women are not confined by patriarchal ideologies meant to restrain open expressions of sexual desire or sexual experiences. At a time when Victorian notions of sexual puritanism predominated in the Western world, such open articulations of black female sexual autonomy would have been a radical departure from the retrained literature available at the time.

When listening to the blues, one obvious premise of blues aesthetics is the celebration of physical intimacy, giving voice to the publicly unspoken topic by providing recognition and acceptance, and releasing the tension that exists during sexual acts. In Bessie Smith's song, "Baby Doll", she openly articulates her sexual desire and the need for sexual fulfillment.

Interestingly, she subverts the socially expected role of women as being 'dolls', serving as mere objects of male desire.

He can be ugly, he can be black, so long as he can eagle rock and ball the jack
I want to be somebody's baby doll so I can get my lovin' all the time,
I mean to get my loving all the time. (Davis, 1998, p.42)

Although the protagonist says that she is ready to be someone's 'baby doll', the condition is that the male partner can satiate her at any given time. Here, the traditional roles of the sexually active male as opposed to the sexually passive female are deconstructed.

"Baby, have pity on me", another popular song of Smith's, makes explicit references to female sexuality that subvert patriarchal ideologies:

Cravin' for affection, my cravin' is strong
Put your arms around me where they belong
Press me, caress me, oh, have pity on me. (Davis, 1998, p.116)

The need for sexual gratification is expressed poignantly through the use of action verbs such as 'put', 'press', and 'caress'. This reference exemplifies how the blues songs repudiate the puritanical notions of love and sexuality by suggesting that there is nothing unusual about a woman's need for intimacy, whether it is emotional or physical.

'Ma' Rainey's song "Farewell Daddy Blues," also illustrates brazen and assertive expressions of female sexuality that challenge conventional puritanical views held at the time. She, like Smith, presents an alternative to the Freudian dichotomization of male as opposed to female sexuality. Freud's perpetuation of concepts such as 'penis envy' insist that women by not having a male organ, is lacking and secretly desiring such an organ resulting in effecting female psychosexual development (Freud, 1925/1961). Feminists like Lucy Irigaray challenge this assumption that considers women is 'lack' and thereby 'absence' in a system that presents the penis as the symbol of potency and power. In her seminal essay "The Sex Which Is Not One" Irigaray (1985) argues that female sexuality is not symbolized by absence, but rather by multiplicity and abundance, as they have multiple erogenous zones that produce pleasure. In keeping with this premise, female blues music constantly strives to destabilize such male-serving notions concerning sexuality, which project men as the dominant, aggressive subject and women as the pliant objects of consumption.

Furthermore, the blues songs' unrestrained articulations of female desire constitute a challenge to the Eurocentric depiction of erotic love limited to visual and textual content. They present erotica through auditory channels as the audience gets to hear their sexually charged narratives of sensual adventures. This type of musical eroticism would have contributed to resisting and deconstructing social paradigms set by the white community that dictate what should be socially shared and what should not. By transgressing such boundaries, firstly, through the reclaiming of their voices, and secondly, through the repossessing of their sexual worth and right for pleasure forcefully subsumed during slavery, these singers present radical narratives worthy of appreciation. When Smith sings:

What's the matter, papa, please don't stall
Don't you know I love it and I want it all
I'm wild about that thing / Just give my bell a ring
You can press my button / I'm wild about that thing, (Davis, 1998, p.114)

There is no doubt as to her insistence on being sexually satiated. Although some argue that such blues songs border on the phonographic, this argument can be destabilized since phonography purely involves the objectification of sexual relations, often with the fulfillment of male carnal desire. Conversely, these songs openly repudiate sexual double standards and affirm female sexuality as potent and valid. Although certain critics have argued that 'Ma' Rainey's and Bessie Smith's songs obsessively focus on sex, Garon (1975) convincingly undermines such one-sided claims:

To those who suggest that the blues singers are preoccupied with sexuality, let us point out that all humanity is preoccupied with sexuality, albeit most often in a repressive way; the blues singers, by establishing their art as a relatively nonrepressive level, strip the 'civilized' disguise from humanity's preoccupation, thus allowing the content to stand as it really is: eroticism as a source of happiness. (p. 9)

Also, it can be further stated that given the repressed state of affairs for black people during slavery as well as the post-slavery period, the feeling of being potent as a community is metaphorically reflected in the powerful expressions of sexuality. Sex is one area that white racist laws could not control in their lives.

Apart from heterosexual relations, these two singers refer to homosexual ones as well. This is an even more radical move whereby such relationships, regarded as taboo and in fact, unlawful, are candidly depicted. What would have been conceived as 'unnatural' and deviant sexual behaviors, socially and religiously abhorred, are revealed in the public sphere. Concerning this

taboo theme, the most referenced song is “Ma’ Rainey’s ‘Prove it on me blues” where she defiantly expresses her desire for same-sex love:

They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men. (Davis, 1998, p. 39)

Here, the pronoun ‘they’ represents the community at large, and ‘I do it’ implies lesbian relationships. The defiance in the singer’s voice is evident as she challenges society to prove her preference for women over men, even though soon afterwards, she, herself, clearly states her lack of desire for male intimacy.

In addition to presenting lesbianism as a possible form of sexual expression, in “Sissy Blues”, the singer describes her male partner’s sexual transgression with another man. Likewise, Smith, in the song “There’ll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight”, tells her female lover, “You’ll be my man, or I’ll have no man at all”, further destabilizing the notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1980). According to Rich (1980) and other prominent feminists, this assumption is problematic as it marginalizes the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community that is unwilling to reveal their sexual identity due to the ideology of heterosexuality and the patriarchal institution of marriage which legalizes adult relationships only of opposite genders.

Along with the heterosexual ideology comes male sexual dominance over women and the acknowledgment of male desire as opposed to asexual womanhood. This subverts women’s existence as being solely to please their men. Such an imbalanced relation is defined by Wittig (1992) as “a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation [...], a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual” (Wittig, 1992, p.20).

By blurring the boundaries of imposed sexual dichotomy, the female singers under review display no moral approbation in their portrayal of homosexual love. Considering the period in which the blues were sung, the content of these lyrics would have outraged not just the white puritans but the black community, mostly followers of Christianity, because of the societal belief that such relationships were abnormal and immoral.

Black female subjectivity

Despite the fact that both Smith and Rainey predominantly sang about the theme of love and sexuality, they did not romanticize it. No knight in shining armour would come and save these black women “in distress”. Hence, for these women, a different approach was needed to obtain emancipation. It is in the blues sung by black female artists that a new image of a black American woman is created; this woman fought for what she believed in and backed down for nobody, and was proud to be in her own skin as she flaunted her womanhood and sexuality. The attitude of positive self-affirmation found in lines such as the following is intended to strengthen black female subjectivity and give her the necessary strength to become an autonomous human being in her own right:

I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand
I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand
I'm gonna hold it till you men come under my command. (Davis, 1988, p.39)

Often, their rejection of sexual passivity as a defining characteristic of womanhood and the need to be subjects of their own experience rather than as mere sex objects makes the protagonists of these songs female liberationists.

Significantly, except for one or two songs, references to marriage, children, and domestic affairs are rarely present in the blues sung by Rainey and Smith. At a time when the private sphere of home and family was being idealized as sites in which women discover fulfilment, these songs celebrated single and free women who chose to live their lives as they wished. In "Young Woman Blues," Smith talks about a woman who rejoices in her status as an unmarried woman whilst unashamedly celebrating her promiscuity:

No time to marry, no time to settle down
I'm a young woman and ain't done running' round

[...].

I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down
I'm gonna' drink moonshine and run these browns down. (Davis, 1998, p.32)

At a time when women were expected to consider marriage as their ultimate objective in life, here stands an alternative attitude, one that rejects the romanticized institution of marriage in which, once a woman has met her partner, they ‘live happily ever after’. In "Misery Blues", for instance, Rainey sings about the plight of a woman who had been given false promises of

marital bliss and becomes thoroughly disappointed as she realizes that her husband has taken away all her money and abandoned her.

Physical and mental abuse

Moreover, in the blues songs sung by these two artists, women who find themselves domesticated are often depicted as being abused by their partners. These songs range from sadomasochistic forms of abuse to depictions of shocking brutality conducted against females. Often, they reveal physical or mental abuse at the hands of male lovers. However, a considerable amount of the blues depicting abuse refrains from being too explicit when describing the terrible nature of these crimes. While many refer to a "mistreater" who is "wronging" the female protagonist, the speakers nevertheless decide to stay with their partners, finding consolation in the fact that these males can satisfy them sexually. The song "Out side of that" starts by stating: "I've got the meanest man in the land" and goes on to describe how the man physically assaults the narrator and uses her not only for material but for sexual gain as well. The claim "out side of that, he's alright with me" keeps repeating throughout. Here, we cannot help but pity this woman who bears mistreatment and abuse by convincing herself that the fleeting moments of sexual gratification consolidate her suffering. Though one might find such songs problematic in their uncritical and forgiving attitude towards violence, they should not be judged at such a superficial level. It is worth noting that such lines are in keeping with the Afro-American tradition of signifying, which contains double entendres, requiring the audience to read between the lines. The blues also constantly engage in the process of signifying. Thus, one has to be able to register the irony that oozes from the statement "out side of that, he's alright with me".

As per the social climate that prevailed during the early twentieth century, women rarely discussed issues of rape or domestic abuse as they were assumed to be topics that were relegated to the private sphere. Abuse was supposedly a private matter, and much was done to keep it that way. Nevertheless, this did not prevent either Rainey or Smith from presenting us with chilling descriptions of violent male behaviour conducted against women. For instance, Rainey's "Sweet Rough Man" can be regarded as a blatantly shocking example of violence as depicted through song:

I woke up this mornin', my head was sore as a boil
My man beat me last night with five feet of copper coil.
(Davis, 1998, p.32)

These two lines alone speak volumes as the narrator gives an explicit account of the form of abuse she has been suffering for five years. Nevertheless, she further declares: "the way he loves me makes me soon forget". This is a characteristic of a considerable number of the blues songs depicting violence, since the woman in question would generally stay with an abusive male, although she is repeatedly beaten, abandoned, and cheated on or ignored only because of his sexual prowess. It is an anti-feminist stance to accept male violence in such a manner; one can note how, in real life, regardless of ethnicity and class, the abused woman usually tends to remain with her man at the slightest manifestation of affection. This type of blues reveals the psychological state of an abused victim, whose sense of insecurity generally makes her reluctant to leave her man despite repeated abuse.

By openly articulating the existence of this problem, Rainey and Smith manage to represent it as a social problem that has to be addressed publicly. At a time when there was limited focus on the subject of violence in the literature and even the female activists of the time hesitated to openly voice this issue as a result of its taboo nature, the very fact that Smith and Rainey publicly sang about it is testimony of their bravery and radical way of thinking that was advanced for their time. By the very naming of the problem and the graphic evocation of violence, these singers make it a shared problem and one that needs to be addressed openly.

Subverting the status quo of women and promoting sisterhood

In fact, on certain occasions, these two artists themselves provide ideas for possible ways of changing this situation. This is where the theme of revenge in the female blues has to be considered. Here, what they do is to represent an alternative to the passive, resigned woman who unquestionably accepts abuse as a part of her life. These female protagonists would either pack up their bags and leave, or throw the men out of the house, or threaten them with a return of violence, and in some cases, go to the extent of actually taking revenge by murdering their abusers.

Clearly, the female subjects of these songs are not willing to passively endure the violent behaviour of their male partners. For instance, in "Sleep Talking Blues," the protagonist decides to take revenge by declaring that she will inflict violence on the abusive man that is way more severe than what has been inflicted on her. Rather than passively accepting her fate as a wronged woman like the females in some popular blues songs, the narrator in this song threatens to murder him: "If you speak out of turn, your friends will hear of you being dead"

(Davis, 1998). This song presents a strong indictment of men who cheat on their partners. The subject of Smith's "Them's Graveyard Words" and "Sing Sing Prison Blues" also depicts a similar theme. In the later song, we find that the narrator has been sent to prison as a result of murdering her lover after a fight:

The judge said, "Listen Bessie, tell me why you killed your man."
[...].
I said, "Judge, you ain't no woman, and you can't understand."
You can send me up the river or send me to the mean old jail
[...].
I killed my man and I don't need no bail. (Davis, 1998, p.336)

Instead of proclaiming her innocence, this woman is not ready to plead for mercy. Her refusal to provide explanations to justify her action arises as a result of the incapacity of men and indeed the whole patriarchal system to recognize the second-class status attributed to women due to the existence of various male-serving ideologies that do not acknowledge the marginalized status attributed to women. This conceptualization of strong females who can stand up for themselves would have destabilized the dominant ideology of passive and submissive women enduring abuse. Therefore, the blues lyrics contain both possible and plausible alternatives to male aggression in post-slavery America, as they point to an alternative definition of empowered womanhood.

In most cases, instead of taking on the subordinate role, these women often pack up and leave the unhappy relationship. This is an inversion of the trend of the male walking out on the female, as he is generally in a position to express his autonomy by engaging in travel. Thus, the theme of travel is considered by both Rainey and Smith from a different angle as found in songs such as "Weeping Woman Blues", "Leaving This Morning", "Mama's Got the Blues", "Lost Wondering Blues", "Runaway Blues", and "Traveling Blues". Some of these songs describe women who roam the world simply for the sake of adventure, others on a quest to find their partners, and some, in fact, make references to metaphorical journeys undertaken: an internal quest for self-discovery.

Here, the common theme that runs across all these female traveling blues is that of the emphasis on movement and agency as opposed to immobility. Moreover, as Davis (1998) points out, this type of blues lyrics "provide a powerful refutation of the blues cliché that when a man gets the blues, he hops on a train and rides, but when a woman gets the blues, she lays down and cries" (74). Here, then, is a redefinition of the domesticated black woman who is depicted as assertive,

active, and most importantly, free to exercise her autonomy whenever, however, with whomever she pleases.

Considering the various issues that are discussed above, one can realize how the shaping of a black feminist agenda would have been positively influenced by the female blues singers, of which Smith and Rainey are undoubtedly the most influential and radical activists who helped perpetuate this discourse. They gave new expressions to black womanhood and alternative definitions to femininity by challenging and subverting existing stereotypes through the depiction of positive identities and new subjectivities that help to shake off the oppressive legacies of black womanhood, which have lasted for centuries. Often, these two singers deconstruct the singularity of the creation of a monolithic black female identity by constraining black women as dynamic subjects who are socially and historically constructed rather than genetically programmed. Smith and Rainey rarely sing of the black woman as the ultimate victim; rather, these lyrics are often manifestations of the complexity and heterogeneity of the black woman's subjectivity - her resilience and her capacity to come up with innovative ways of living and being, and a celebration of blackness and its multifacetedness.

Despite the focus on the subject of a wronged woman's anger with the unfaithful male partner, the hostility expressed toward the "other women" does not stop the blues singers from offering them words of advice. As such, these advice songs would have played a notable role in educating the black females with divergent definitions of the dominant ideologies of femininity, sexuality, and motherhood. Both Rainey and Smith presented beautiful examples of female bonding and black sisterhood that supported a strong communal spirit. When Rainey's "Trust No Man" begins: "I want all you woman to listen to me/ Don't trust your man no further 'n your eyes can see" (Davis, 1998), she highlights the fickle nature of masculine fidelity; thus, subverting the conventional notion that women are the ones who are sexually promiscuous. Similarly, in Smith's song titled "Safety Mama", she goes so far as to tell her female audience just what kind of action they should take if they find their man betraying them. We discover how she punishes her "no-good man" by confining him within the home, just as a woman suspected of infidelity is generally forced to do. Instead of placing herself in sexual and economic subordination, the female in question inverts these accepted gender roles.

Moreover, in "My Man Blues," we discover yet another potent example of black sisterhood. The song is in the form of a dramatic dialogue between Smith and another female blues singer named Clara Smith. Initially, both women are antagonistic towards each other as they realize

that they both love the same man; however, they soon realize that it is the man who is ultimately responsible for this situation, and make a compromise to "have him on cooperation plan" since there "ain't nothin' different' bout all these two-time men". The recognition and understanding that arise along with the female bonding that takes place here are highlighted in the instance when each one respects the other's autonomy by calling out each other's names, whereby they mutually acknowledge each other, emphasizing sisterhood and female solidarity. These songs represent a change from the depiction of competition that supposedly exists between women and men.

In relation to the various issues that are discussed above, one can realize how the shaping of a black feminist agenda would have been positively influenced by the female blues singers, of whom Smith and Rainey are undoubtedly the most influential and radical activists who helped perpetuate this discourse. They gave new expressions to black womanhood and alternative definitions to femininity by challenging and subverting existing stereotypes through the depiction of positive identities and new subjectivities that help to shake off the oppressive legacies of black womanhood, which have lasted for centuries. Often, these two singers deconstruct the singularity of the creation of a monolithic black female identity by constraining black women as dynamic subjects who are socially and historically constructed rather than genetically programmed. Smith and Rainey rarely sing of the black woman as the ultimate victim; rather, these lyrics often evoke the complexity and heterogeneity of the black woman's subjectivity, her resilience, and her capacity to come up with innovative ways of living and being, and a celebration of blackness and its multifaceted nature.

Concluding remarks

Rainey's and Smith's blues songs often depicted autonomous female subjects who were fully in control of their subjectivity. This attitude is most effectively emphasized by Rainey in "Don't Fish in My Sea," where she gives voice to an unabashed, striking articulation of female freedom:

If you don't like my ocean
Don't fish in my sea
Stay away from my valley
And let my mountain be
(Davis, 1998, p.41)

Here, then, are fully emancipated women who are not ready to change for anybody. There is no question about the fact that most songs sung by both Rainey and Smith contested existing patriarchal assumptions, notably that of gender roles, both in the dominant culture and within the African American community. While these songs reflect the collective woes of black American women, they also represent females who were determined to overcome their misery through self-determination, self-realization, and sisterhood. Thus, the blues provided a space for black women to express themselves without being bound by the ideological trappings of a male-serving system: By so doing, they redefined a woman's 'place', they forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings (Davis, 1998, p.41).

If someone were to ask the question: "Can Rainey and Smith be considered feminists?", I would say that they certainly can be, since I believe their music gave a voice to not only African American women but also to oppressed women in any community.

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