



**IDA B. WELLS AND KAWAIDA WOMANISM:
CONSIDERING THE MISSION AND MEANING OF WOMAN**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

PART 2. NOW THE LIBERATIONAL AND expansive concept of Nana Ida B. Wells' "womanly woman" and her mission and meaning begin with a critical questioning. She asks, "What is or should be woman?" The use of "is" and "should be" suggests both an existential and moral dimension to the question, i.e., how woman exists and is experienced and how she should understand and assert herself in the world. Her concerns in the development of her definition suggest a focus on the "should," although she frames it as what a womanly woman "is" through self-conscious sensibilities, thought and practice.

She defines the meaning of woman first by explaining what it is not. Thus, she says, woman is "Not merely a bundle of flesh and bone, not a fashion plate, a frivolous inanity, a soulless doll, a heartless coquette. But a strong bright presence, thoroughly imbued with a sense of her mission on earth and a desire to fill it; an earnest, soulful being, laboring to fit herself for life's duties and burdens, and bearing them faithfully when they come; but a womanly woman for all that, upholding the banner and striving for the goal of pure, bright womanhood through all vicissitudes and temptations."

Thus, she speaks first against both a sexist reductive translation of woman and woman's cooperation in her own oppression by being a mindless body of useable and exploited flesh; of focusing on fashionable clothes rather than character and righteous resistance; of being frivolous and foolish rather than serious and thoughtful about vital issues; of lacking the soul that sustains and defines Black people, and reducing oneself to a plaything and toy. And finally, she rejects

the definition and practice of woman as a flirt and flatterer of weak men, without moral sensitivity and consideration for others or rightful concern for how she is perceived and treated and how this will affect the perception and treatment of Black women as a whole.

Nana Ida B. Wells-Barnett is deeply aware of the context of oppression and resistance in which Black women and men live, work, struggle, die and yet endure. And she is concerned that Black women and men, but especially women, not misrepresent themselves and offer stereotypical evidence to the oppressor in his racist indictment of Black people. The issue here, then, is not one of "respectability" in the interests of Whites or the "cult of womanhood" of the dominant society, but one of Black self-respect and of how Black women should define themselves in self-determined thought, moral sensibilities, and social practice. Thus, she rejects these deformed and deforming concepts of woman and her mission, and instead offers a dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-encompassing conception. And we are asked to understand woman not as those racist and sexist caricatures, but in more agency defining and expansive ways.

Now, the first characteristic Nana Ida offers for being a womanly woman in the world is being "a strong bright presence." Again, this is stress on agency, being present in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-encompassing ways. She is to be strong, strong in heart, mind, will and spirit and to have moral courage and commitment as her own writing and practice demonstrate. And she is to be a bright presence, bright in the sense of being intelligent and radiant - a brilliant, lively, luminous, light-giving

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(knowledge sharing), inspiring and joy-bringing presence. This speaks to being rightfully hopeful and having faith in the reality and ultimately triumph of the pursuit and practice of the Good.

She believes in education and truth-speaking as practices of freedom, liberating understandings and assertions of self, equally for both Black women and men. It is again for her important to turn on the “light of truth” as a central way to right wrong and expose and end injustice and oppression. And she, herself, strives to practice what she teaches and to teach through a sincere and sustained practice. This is what is called in Kawaida “liberated and liberating practice,” practices that are not only free of the imposed restraints and distortions of the dominant society, but also are contributive to the freeing of the heart, mind, spirit and bodies of the people, making them self-conscious agents of their own life and liberation.

Moreover, she speaks of the need for woman to be “thoroughly imbued with a sense of her mission on earth and a desire to fill it.” She speaks here of a woman’s deep, developed and world-encompassing sense of her mission and uses the phrase “her mission on earth” rather than the focus on simply the domestic sphere as was the dominant emphasis during her time. I draw here a parallel between this world-encompassing view of mission and Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune’s telling us all as women, men and a people, “Our task is to remake the world. It is nothing less than that.” And I note Nana Ida’s emphasis is not only on discovering one’s mission, but also having the desire to fulfill it. For what a great loss it is when one knows one’s mission but does not have the will or see the way to fulfill it!

She also calls for “an earnest soulful being.” This earnestness translates as a sincere and eager commitment. It is a sincerity which Haji Malcolm X would cite as a central

and defining virtue for him. Humbly minimizing his impressive knowledge and analytical skills, Nana Malcolm says that he is not “an expert in any particular field, but I am sincere, and my sincerity is my credentials.” It is the virtue of sincerity which requires us to be free, free of hypocrisy, dishonesty, deception and pretense which Both Nana Ida and Nana Malcolm abhorred and condemned. And it is also thus, the condition and companion of speaking and living truth, a liberating and life-enhancing truth.

Nana Ida B. Wells’ soulfulness as a defining feature of a womanly woman speaks to the centrality of soul as a defining feature of Black people as a whole. We attach the word to everything we do well, for it is a measure and standard of excellence. It expresses itself as creativity, sensitivity and improvisation, reflecting depth of feeling and thoughtfulness, and rightful attentiveness to the spiritual and ethical. Thus, we speak of soul food and feelings, soul music and soul moves, soul preaching and teaching, and soul sisters and brothers, soul woman, soul man, soul people and Soul Sessions. Moreover, soul is not only a standard and measure of excellence, it is a central source and expression of our resourcefulness, resiliency, adaptive vitality and *internal creative capacity* as a people, i.e., our capacity to create spaces of freedom, meaning and creativity regardless of the conditions in which we find ourselves.

Continuing with her definition of the womanly woman, she speaks of their “laboring,” i.e., working diligently to do the difficult and demanding, striving and struggling to prepare themselves for “the duties and the burdens of life, and bearing them faithfully when they come.” It is again a stress on agency, capacity-building, striving and taking responsibility for the task before her.

Nana Ida B. Wells ends her defining characteristics of a womanly woman by

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assigning her the task of “upholding the banner and striving for a goal of pure, bright womanhood through all vicissitudes and temptations.” This is not catering to the “cult of true womanhood” of middle class White America in the 1800s which stressed the virtues of piety, domesticity and submissiveness, as some claim. It is rather, again, a reaffirmation of Black women’s own concept of living an ethical life, defending against the savage sexual, physical and reputational attacks by White men and women, and yet not being restrained or restricted in ways that denied the dignity, rights and agency of woman as Nana Ida taught in her own writing, speech and public practice.

CALLING FOR A PURE WOMANHOOD IS A complex conception and act of

resistance. For in the context of her time and even now, it means not simply appropriate sexual relations, but also resisting being raped and defiled bodily, intellectually and spiritually by oppressors. And her sense of pure also means, in its essential sense, authentic, natural, unadulterated and not false or manufactured by the racist and sexist impositions and oppression of the dominant society. Indeed, in a deep cultural reading, Nana Ida B. Wells’ pure womanly woman can be compared to Aretha Franklin’s “Natural Woman,” real woman, a beauty and goodness without adulterating additions and alterations, celebrating and reaffirming her divine dignity and unfolding of her sacred selfhood in the midst of the righteous struggle of her people to bring and sustain good in the world.▲

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