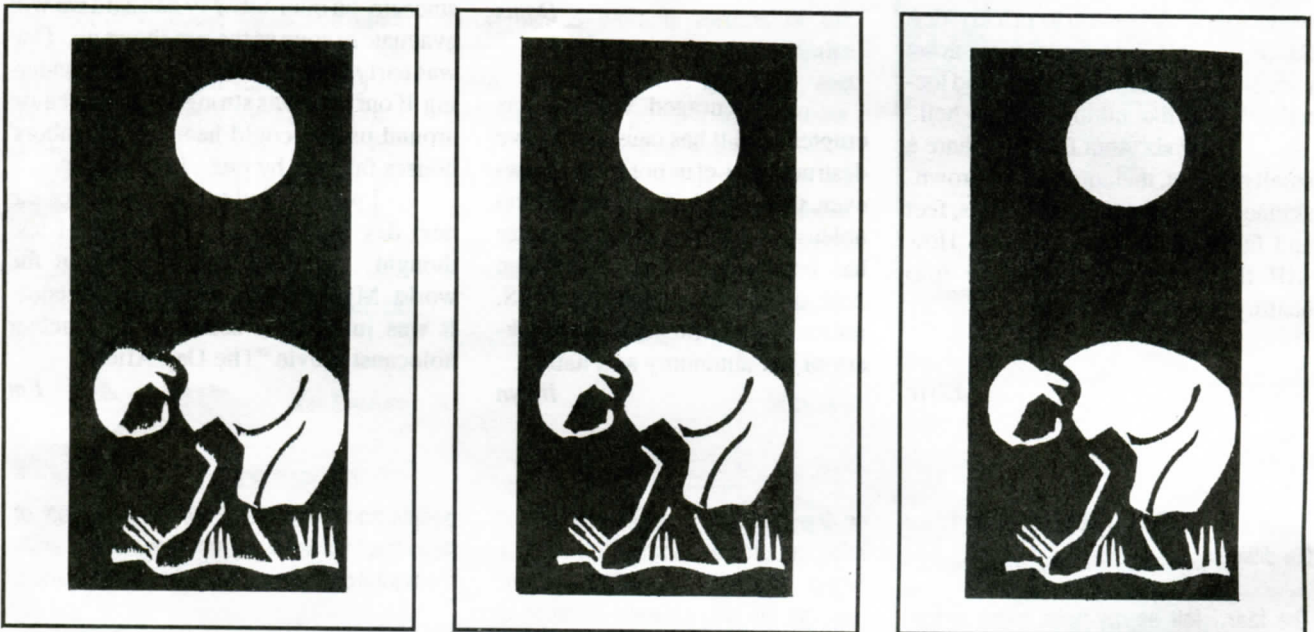


# The Caribbean Feminist Tradition

by Rhoda Reddock

The title may come as a surprise to those of us who have been led to believe that feminism is a foreign ideology introduced to our region by interest groups bent on subverting the national interest or a pastime for "idle metropolitan housewives." In order to clarify what I mean by the term feminism I would like to put forward a definition of feminism as: The critical consciousness and awareness of women's subordinated and/or exploited position in society and the commitment to do something to change it. In this vein, two aspects to feminist struggle can be identified:

The historic origins of the Caribbean people in situations of forced labour migration through the system of slavery of African women and bonded or indentured labour of Indian women for a while afforded women (not by plan or design) the possibilities of a life of relative freedom from the patriarchal control of individual men. And women, like men, were subordinated to the dictates of capital and the ruling class.



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- The day-to-day acts of struggle of individuals or groups of women to attain and maintain a degree of autonomy and control over their lives and the resistance against attempts to undermine this autonomy; and
- The movement of women at a local, national, regional or international level for certain commonly defined goals, aimed specifically at the emancipation of women, i.e., the transformation of their subordinate position.

Caribbean history shows that women have been involved in both aspects of the struggle.

Afro-Caribbean women, like men, came to our region as labourers, not as housewives. Their labour, mainly in the fields and not in the houses as is commonly believed, also contributed to the accumulation of capital on which European industrial capitalism was built.

The experience of slavery has bestowed on Afro-Caribbean women a number of qualities which have afforded them a degree of social and economic independence, which subsequent colonial and neo-colonial ideological agents such as the church and the educational system have successfully sought to destroy. The independence of Afro-Caribbean women was evident in their acceptance of the need to earn an income for themselves and their children regardless of whether a man was around or not. The





*It is variously alleged in the Third World by traditionalists, political conservatives and even by certain Leftists, that feminism is a product of "decadent" Western capitalism, that it is based on foreign culture of no relevance to women in the Third World, that it is the ideology of women from their culture, religion and family responsibilities on the one hand, or from the revolutionary struggle for national liberation and socialism on the other.*

*Feminism was not imposed on the Third World from the West, but rather... historical circumstances have produced important material and ideological changes which affected women; for example, there were debates on women's rights and education in 18th century China, movements for women's social emancipation in early 19th century India, while feminist struggles originated between sixty and eighty years ago in many countries of the Third World. The fact that such movements for emancipation and feminism flourished in several non-European countries during this period has been, in a sense, "hidden from history."*

*Kumari Jayawardena, **Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World***

colonials taught them that dependence on one man was more prestigious, had a higher status and was morally superior, although this was realistically impossible for the majority of working class women.

Sources reveal that while many women did not marry for economic reasons, for many, it was deliberate steps for fear of losing ownership of children or for fear that "after marriage the man would treat you bad because then he know yuh can't leave him."

It was these women in the streets and in the fields who were leading participants in the anti-colonial and labour struggles and movements of the early 20th century. Their lack of "femininity," the feminine softness and dependence of the protected housewife, made it imperative that they fight their battles on the street and not depend on their men to do so for them.

In the case of the Indo-Caribbean family many myths perpetuated over the years, have contributed an ideology of the naturally subordinate and docile Indian woman. In

addition, it has been contended that while the African family unit had been torn apart in slavery, the Indian family was not destroyed. The reality however as recent research has shown was that:

- Family migration was heavily discouraged until slightly before the end of the indentureship system in 1917;
- The sex proportion (lower number of women recruited) prevented up to 50 per cent of the men from forming permanent relationships; and
- The majority of women did not come as wives but as labourers.

The majority of women recruited were already of an independent character - for example, many were women who had been deserted or had left their husbands, women pregnant without being married, Brahmin widows who were unable to re-marry in India; or prostitutes seeking a new life.



Many of these women refused to submit themselves to the dominance of their men who in their quest for upward mobility sought the secluded subordinate wives suited to the class and cast to which they aspired. In addition to their already dependent character, the shortage of women placed these women in a position where they can maintain an increased autonomy over their lives, marry if and who they wished or leave one man for another.

The response to these attempts in all Caribbean territories of Indian indentureship was violence. Murders of wives and female lovers became synonymous with the plantation and its weapon was the machete or cutlass.



Drawing by Abyssinian

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The late 19th and early 20th century Women's Movement spread to the Third World; for example, in Cuba during the early 20th century a feminist party was formed among the middle-class women while the Nationalist Movement of the early 20th century among colonial educators in Europe was strongly influenced by the feminist movement of the time. Early struggles for women's rights were supported by the Nationalists and male reformers of the period, and feminist demands of the time were incorporated into their programmes.

### THE NEW MOVEMENT

Today the Feminist Movement in the Caribbean is emerging once more; but not out of nowhere. The tradition of consciousness of oppression and struggle for individual and collective autonomy is part of our history and our tradition. Today the movement is not confined to the educated middle-class and does not use social work as a guise to hide its intent. But it is important for us to recognise this tradition, learn from its mistakes and build on it for a future where sexism as well as race and class oppression are removed.

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