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Kamla at the Apex: Reflections on Indo-Caribbean Feminism

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Abstract

May 2010: Kamla Persad-Bissessar is elected Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago; it was overwhelming for Indo-Caribbean women of my generation for we had not dared to expect that this could happen. Yet we realize that the ascendancy of Kamla (as she is known throughout the country) is the fulfilment of the steady progress of Indo women in all walks of public life. This is a moment to reflect on the group identity that has an outstanding figure at its apex, and on the implications for women's concerns under a female Prime Minister.

Physically located in rural communities that grew up in the plantation belts, ridiculed and discriminated against for cultural practices, demographically outnumbered in the region, people of Indian descent have been marginalized in the Caribbean and, because of patriarchal family and community structures, Indo-Caribbean women have had an added layer of subordination. Ironically, for many of my generation, advancements have come from this place of marginalization. We were goaded to excellence by constant reminders that we would “get nothing” easily in this country (Trinidad and Tobago). Business was dominated by white and off-white communities and the Afro-dominated government was partial to Afro communities. We had to work three times as hard, and females had to do it within the boundaries of gender roles. We internalized these messages to push ourselves forward and, in some cases, exceeded family expectations.

How do we now re-think identity as we move from the margins to the centre? How do we recognize the long-term effects of marginalization but at the same time not allow historical resentment and/or insecurity to inhibit us? How much of our baggage do we lay on the backs of our daughters and our colleagues? How can we contribute to charting trajectories of Indo-Caribbean feminisms relevant to contemporary contexts and concerns?

One way to think through some of these issues is within the frame of class. For the first time in our short but fast-paced history, there is discernible Indo-Caribbean class stratification. Some of us have pulled ourselves up by the proverbial bootstraps, and some of us are left behind—too traumatized by physical and mental challenges to free ourselves from the grips of poverty and its ill effects. One model of social work in Trinidad’s history is colonialist charitable organizations that maintained the status quo of privileged (typically whites and up-and-coming non-whites) and under-privileged (typically non-whites). This is certainly not the structure we want to adopt; in any case, the groups typically identified for assistance were urban Afro-Trinidadian groups. It is up to contemporary women activists to speak out on behalf of women who cannot, for a variety of reasons, articulate their needs or who do not expect that assistance can come their way. We need to organize ourselves, generate funds, and utilize our skills to develop networks that offer safety, life skills and tools of empowerment. Historically, Indo-Caribbean communities preferred to manage problems within the family. Unfortunately, the family structure can itself be a source of subordination; nevertheless, the centrality of the family in the community is enduring. Women’s issues cannot be separated from family and community. For example, analysis of and rehabilitation from alcohol-related domestic violence must be applied to the entire (extended) family within the history and norms of the community, and facilities (such as women’s shelters) must be culturally sensitive.

While I acknowledge the significant work done by women’s NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), it behoves Caribbean women’s organizations to draw also on state funds, integrating women’s issues into national politics. There is no better time than now to make gender a national issue.

As a public figure, Kamla does not downplay gender. From her attractive clothes, hair and make-up, to the attention she gives to the concerns of women and children, she is feminine and she is a feminist. Highly educated, professionally successful, with political savvy honed through experiences encountered from the grassroots up through the ranks of party politics, she is a self-made woman. Yet she is an Indian woman and her stature catches Caribbean feminism, historically propelled by Afro-Caribbean concerns, by the throat. Indo-Trinidadian women experience the schizophrenia of not daring to feel secure about Kamla's success and simultaneously confirming to ourselves that we always knew we had it in us. Some of us have developed the habit of distrust—always looking over our shoulders for indications that our ethnicity is being devalued, or that there is a racially charged backlash against us. However, cognizant of the fact that social structures to support women must include all women, we must reach across ethnic lines. Indo-Caribbean communities have been somewhat closed and, as we become more mainstream, issues arise such as: do we hesitate to reveal problems within our own communities lest they be used as evidence of our racial/cultural inferiority? Can we explain and celebrate how Indo women have been empowered by ethnic practices without seeming smug or triumphalist? How do we make efforts to understand other communities so that we can make intelligent and sensitive contributions to the welfare of all women?

I was introduced to Caribbean feminism in the 1980s via the Caribbean Association for Research and Action (CAFRA). There, I was stunned at the ideology of Caribbean feminism as a moral responsibility to address the issues of lower income Afro-Caribbean women. It was as if women of Indian, European, Chinese, Middle Eastern or mixed descent had agreed not to put on the table the issues of women in their own families and communities. I rationalized that this might be okay for European, Chinese and Middle Eastern women (or any mixture thereof) since, generally speaking, they were not experiencing the extreme material, psychological and social long-term traumas of plantation labour. But why were the hardships of Indo-Caribbean women not a matter of concern? And why were the achievements of Indo-Caribbean women, historically and in contemporary times, not celebrated by the Caribbean feminist movement? I saw Afro-Caribbean women bringing Black affirmation from the global stage into a context of Afro victories in national politics and as the major ethnic groups jostled for cultural space. Was I, an Indo woman, expected to join the tide of Black celebration? Afro-Caribbean women could draw on burgeoning African-American feminist discourse; there was no parallel for Indo-Caribbean feminists.

Such was my passion when I embarked upon the collection *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women* (St. Augustine, Trinidad: University of the West Indies Continuing Studies, 1999, 2002)—a self-conscious coming into voice for Indo-Caribbean women. More recently, I conceptualized, recruited contributions and edited *Bindi: The Multifaceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2011) to document the on-going analyses on Indo-Caribbean women. At this point in time, I take stock of the Afro-Caribbean women who have been friends, colleagues and mentors, and who have genuinely listened to the protests of Indo-Caribbean women. They have made room for us and they have worked to dismantle ethnic divisions and omissions. On a personal level, I can assert that CAFRA actively

supported *Matikor*, just as non-Indo women at The University of the West Indies, at Women Working for Social Progress (Working Women) and at Redthread have consistently welcomed me and my ideas.

I would like to go a step further to ask about Afro-Trinidadian women's understanding of Indo-Trinidadian women as a group that has moved toward the centre. While Afro women have deliberated on the multiple aspects of their identity as Black women globally, I do not recall articulations of how the Indo presence has influenced the construction of Afro-Trinidadian women's identity even in locations where Afro and Indo communities have co-existed for generations. I ask: are we to be included only when we claim marginalization? Is our role that of being the group that other groups can be "better than?" Is there anything about Indo women that Afro women find admirable or inspirational? We must be doing *something* right.

Perhaps we need to articulate more openly the sources of our strength and support. As minorities in a predominantly Afro-creole region, we have been confused and silent about the very aspects of Indo-based culture that heal and empower us. Indo women have not known what to do with the shame heaped on the foremothers whom they knew to be strong and creative. We have not adequately acknowledged males who supported and mentored us and, in some cases, took risks to challenge Afro-creole structures and discourses. Encouraged to disparage our ancestral teachings and practices, our context has been a community in the shadows, our cultural streams stymied, and our attempts at self-representation sidelined. However, resistance has been on-going, with increasing self-assertion and confidence within the community during the last 20 years or so. Now we have the figure of Kamla, openly embracing Indo-based practises. Whatever the political risks as Prime Minister of a multi-ethnic country, she has not left behind the Indo identity which propelled her into power. She holds her own on global platforms, confirming to us that we need not give up performance of ethnicity to make our way in the world. The Indo-Caribbean identity was born when the first ship carrying indentured labourers docked in Guyana in 1838. It is an identity that is geographic, historical and economic. We own this identity; what feminist praxis can we develop from this place?

As a writer, I place importance on the discursive for it reveals not only what we think but *how* we think. Can we develop a way of thinking and expressing ourselves that rejects colonial poetics and instead evolves from our identity as Indo-Caribbean? In an e-mail to me, Dr. Gabrielle Hosein, Lecturer, Gender and Development Studies, UWI, St. Augustine, says of Kamla "she is the ultimate warrior-mother-goddess figure, destroying her rivals like Kali, bringing the wisdom of Lakshmi, being the ordinary mother and grandmother we all grew up with in our homes" (August 30, 2011). Observe Hosein's analysis of Kamla in terms of Hindu mythology. What is demonstrated here is Hosein's spontaneous use of metaphors not drawn from the Western literary tradition—similar to the way I used matikor and bindi as critical lenses through which to explore Indo-Caribbean women's reality. These are examples of bringing Indo-Caribbean poetics into feminist discourse. We can think of all Caribbean feminists as "jihajee" sisters. Literally translated as kinship forged during the indentured labourers' passage from India, the term "jihajee" articulates concepts such as the rupture from ancestral

landscape and culture; reconstruction of kinship for material, social, and psychological well-being; the courage to survive and to maintain dignity in the hardships of plantation and post-plantation life; embracing of the Caribbean environment in spite of the circumstances that brought us here. Since these concepts apply to Caribbean peoples of diverse ancestries, jihajee sisterhood prompts us to honour each other's pains and hopes as foundations for collaboration.

As a mother/grandmother figure, Kamla brings inflections of female domestic/spiritual roles, as defined in many Hindu and Hindu-influenced families, into the public arena. The Hindu home, more so than the mandir, is the central location of religion, and typically, the mother/grandmother is the spiritual and moral guide. She carries the power of Hindu goddesses as she passes on ancestral stories and rituals, offers emotional and physical sustenance and, in many cases, holds the family's purse strings. Yet her power has been de-legitimized through the colonial and postcolonial processes that gave us Christianity as the state religion and secularized Christianity as the cultural norm. Indo-Caribbeans know too well the stigma of paganism accorded to our ancestral religions, and the history of discrimination against practitioners of these religions. Even if we are not currently aligned to any religion, we understand the symbolic significance of Kamla's open practice of Hinduism and we admire her courage. She legitimizes the use of religion-impelled practices and networks to deal with women's issues.

Also, since religions are global, Indo-Caribbean women can contribute to and draw from the rich resource pool of global women who are subverting religious practices for gender liberation. In connecting with religious-based groups across the Indian Diaspora, Indo-Caribbean women defy and dismantle the boundaries of colonial empires. I am suggesting neither a pan-Indian-ness, nor an Indian nationalism where India is the "homeland". I am defining a Diaspora that is marked not by a scattering from India, but by a recognition that hybridized consciousness cannot go back to a pure Indian-ness. We are globalized Indians who can syncretize the traditional and the modern at our own pace and according to our own needs.

Kamla does not mimic male leadership styles nor that of other female leaders. She publicly works out how to handle herself as an Indo-Caribbean woman in national, regional and global arenas. But since neither female-ness nor Indian-ness is the norm in Caribbean leadership, Kamla is constantly under scrutiny. The racialized hostility against her and her Indo-dominated government saddens and shocks us. Even when racial undertones cannot be proved, we suspect that some of the vitriolic dissent to what she says and does is race impelled. Additionally, there is gendered hostility (from non-Indos and Indos, from males and females) against her. Verbal attacks on her Indian female body have been horrific.

The double-edged sword of gender and race is vicious. Does Kamla repeatedly have to prove her legitimacy (and that of her government) in a way that does not apply to Afro-Trinidadians? Is a woman's body to be the site of violence in a way that does not apply to a man? Is a woman never "absolved" from the "shame" of her womanhood? Are Indo-Trinidadians not entitled to walk the hallways of power?

For those of us who have lived most of our lives under Afro-dominated governments, the historical pain of marginalization takes on new intensity now that the race-inclined attacks have found a high profile target. However, we, as Indo-Caribbean women, must caution ourselves not to make excuses for Kamla when her policies seem unjust or illogical. We must keep in mind that we betray our Caribbean sisters if we give Kamla a free pass. We need to do more than give her a “buff”. If Kamla counts on the ethnic and gender loyalty of my demographic, it is up to us to be critical of her from that place of loyalty. If we psychologically enjoy insider status, then let us critique from the inside. We must let her know that we have not given up our ability to think and to speak out. We will not be blinded and/or gagged by overt ethnic and gender markers. If we see her as bringing herself as Indian and as female to the office of Prime Minister, then we must examine the extent to which she genuinely draws on her grassroots identity.

Kamla has stepped from the cane fields and rice paddies of rural Indo-Trinidad to inherit the infrastructure of mostly Afro-dominated governments that centralized national development in urban locations. If Kamla is the “country bookie” come to “town,” then she has done so in grand style. But we must also demand that she facilitate bringing the “town” to the “country” in terms of improved facilities such as health, education, potable water, telephone and Internet connectivity, credit and banking services, recreation and cultural venues, and government services. Simultaneously, we must value the ethics and skills of rural Indo-Trinidadian women who were the foundation of the group’s advancement. These women must be brought out of the shadows to stand side by side with professional women in contributing to national development. For example, rural women can be pivotal to grassroots agriculture that lessens our dependence on imported foods. “Making garden” literally put food in the mouths of families, and an entire cuisine evolved in the hands of women. Chances are that Kamla ate from the kitchen gardens of her mother/aunts/grandmothers; now let us put it to her government that national food policies must be informed by grassroots knowledge and skills.

Twenty-first century Trinidad and Tobago reaps the benefits of a petroleum-driven economy, yet we are an unevenly developed society under a siege of crime. We are vulnerable to global power structures and influences (formal and informal) that do not always bring positive growth. We wring our hands in despair. We agree that the ideologies and practices of Western capitalist democracy were not developed for societies such as ours. Where do we look for ideas? In our own Afro and Indo grassroots histories, there are (sometimes overlapping) pools of resources from which to draw as we try to figure out how to know and how to be.

From women in our families we get ethics such as respect for family and community; satisfaction deferred for future generations; emphasis on education; entrepreneurship in the face of tremendous odds; thrift and financial planning; dignity and endurance in all of life’s challenges; and the boldness to achieve more than what is expected. These were the qualities that helped us move from margin to centre. Nowadays, there is a critical mass of educated Indo-Caribbean women who can also draw on what women activists are thinking and doing globally. If we find ourselves in positions of privilege and leadership, we can work with our Caribbean sisters to organize and institutionalize grassroots practices, giving them power through funds and technology.

Last but not least, I invoke domestic violence as a measuring rod of the social and emotional progress of the Indo-Caribbean community (and, by extension, the Caribbean region). I use the term domestic violence to include all types of physical and mental abuse that happens within the home, with varying levels of complicity from the extended family and community. Domestic violence, in particular alcohol-related domestic violence, has plagued the Indo-Caribbean community since the days of indenture. Historically, women developed coping mechanisms within the home and community, and educated their daughters to escape the possibilities of domestic violence. In recent times, factors such as the increasing numbers of self-sufficient women, gender-sensitive laws, women's organizations and feminist consciousness-raising in the Caribbean region contribute to a climate in which women are less likely to tolerate bodily harm for themselves and their families. Undoubtedly, Indo-Caribbean women have benefited from the gains made by Caribbean feminism. However, as long as there is one woman applying salve to her wounds or one child traumatized by incest, we are forced to look inward (at our community) and confront the necessity of collaboration among male leaders and women activists. We need male leaders to speak out against violence against their sisters, mothers and daughters; to work with women activists in programmes to dismantle domestic violence; to mentor young men in developing gender relations of mutual respect; and, generally, to construct an Indo-Caribbean masculinity that is not based on gender domination, and community structures not based on hierarchy. For example, if a teenage girl becomes pregnant, instead of beating the young woman, or throwing her out of the home, or marrying her off, we can develop co-parenting arrangements between the young couple and older folks. We also need a network of community attorneys, medical professionals and counsellors to work with victims of rape and other bodily crimes.

Let us not hide dirty secrets of gender and other types of abuse that were bound up in group survival. We cannot use marginalization as an excuse for nasty behaviour. The community has mainstreamed and prospered, yet there are some of us who tear each other apart with petty jealousies and malice, like stray dogs fighting for scraps. Some of us are in the throes of ostentatious living and would rather show off on each other than lend a helping hand. Kamla cannot "fix" our problems but her presence at the apex of our community compels us to see the broken, bleeding, hungry woman as her alter ego. This metaphor extends to all of Trinidad and Tobago. Let us assiduously critique ourselves; engage in moral and compassionate practices; assume the dignity that we have earned; and temper individual, professional and economic ambitions with the development of community networks. From that place of honour, we can contribute to the wider Caribbean community.