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Forever Indebted to Women: The Power of Caribbean Feminism

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Abstract

The attempt to pigeonhole feminism to a specific group of those who work actively towards change in gender equality creates more barriers for the achievement of gender equality and is itself limiting to the success of feminism. It marginalizes those who assume they do not fit into some predetermined criteria. Feminism is not a club you join and to which you pay or are exempted from dues. If it is, then what exactly are its rules of entrance and expulsion and who created these? Is there a venue into which only feminists are allowed? Does one sign on as a lifetime member and can one's views change as the decades change the conditions of desire, pleasure and how one works and lives?

The attempt to date feminism is equally impossible. When exactly did the feminist movement begin and when does it end? Who was the first feminist and who will be the last? And might the feminist movement be taken over and driven by men and the contours be one day shaped by masculinity. How will we know when gender equality is achieved and do we know what gender equality looks like?

Introduction

I have started this lecture with a series of questions, not intending to answer them at all but to engage us all in a different kind of conversation from that we are used to when we consider the questions that gender and feminism are raising in society. The knee-jerk reaction to feminism is that it is about man-hating women who want to do away with men and that gender is a woman thing. Of course, it is a movement for transformation and change that was propelled initially by women, the same way that one expected black people to chart a movement against white supremacy — but change does not follow a predictable path and we are all architects of change during our lifetime. Caribbean feminism in particular has charted its own unique course and will continue to do so. We have adopted and adapted various global feminist ideas and shaped them in our own image, continuously responsive to our own histories and evolving cultures. One of the earliest gender differences that we understood about the region's history and culture was pointed out by Joycelin Massiah when she observed a preponderance of female-headed households, of course more in some territories than others. This was a direct product of African traditions of polygamy carried over and distorted through the process of slavery and its impacts on family and marriage arrangements. As a result, Caribbean gender relations were typified by certain features of independence on women's part and an assumption that the breadwinner and protector role could naturally be that of either sex and not the purview or requirement of one. One of the interesting things that we need to understand about feminism, also, is its specificity and the need to micromanage change and transformation despite commonalities across region or societies. Thus each society also needs to understand and work through the issues that it faces and come to terms with solutions that will work, the same way in which each household knows intimately its secrets and the strengths that each individual brings to its well-being.

In this lecture I want to make a case for us to look at feminism differently and without the clichéd or tarnished lenses that in general are attached to the territory of gender and to see how we are all unwittingly part of a movement that involves gender transformation in society for better rather than for worse. The future power of Caribbean feminism rests in the hands of the many rather than the few to select those aspects that are valuable and necessary to take forward.

The lecture is being given on the island of Dominica, so let me start with this society. This land and country has always held a great fascination for me for several reasons. Perhaps the first was through a default of naming, that it resonates with the name of the first new world city founded by Columbus, that is Santo Domingo, now the capital city of the Dominican Republic. The second is the parallel between Trinidad and Dominica, a first cousin-blend of British, French and African legacies that are evident in the French Creole patois and cuisine which lend a similarity that is comforting and easily recognisable. The third is again located in history in the pleasant discovery that the painter Agostino Brunias, the first resident expatriate painter to depict the Caribbean and the indigenous and early creole populations, had lived and died in Dominica. Brunias, who worked in the Caribbean between 1763 and 1796, has been extensively studied by

Dominican historian Lennox Honeychurch. Brunias was an Italian-born and Italian- and British-trained painter who was retained as a “court artist” by Sir William Young, on the latter’s appointment as first Governor of Dominica in 1763. Dominica and St. Vincent retain a significance for they represent in a sense the first creolization of groups in the English-speaking Caribbean, formed through the union of early Carib populations and African slaves. Brunias left two paintings of this population, *Chatoyer and his five wives*, and *A Family of Charaibes* in the Island of St. Vincent, vastly important in that, although they were processed through the eyes of the artist and the curve of the paintbrush, we see in them evidence of the first creolization of populations that had taken place on these islands, in the union of the Kalinago and Africans. Chatoyer, leader of the Black Carib population, is valuable for our understanding of masculinity in the region. Like Hyarima in Trinidad, a chief of the Carib population whose statue sits in a central position in the town of Arima, Chatoyer represents the collective struggles of masculinity to safeguard the lives and property of their family and community. The protection of family and community as a defined marker of the masculine role has undergone further transformation at present. Some blame this on the scourge of feminism. Others see it as the natural evolution of roles and responsibilities as economic necessity forces each sex to take on further challenges of leadership. Women’s roles as leaders of any sort were, however, virtually silenced in these periods. What we know now is that leadership and responsibility come in many forms and that we must equally privilege the work and labour carried out in the domestic space that bred and fed and reproduced populations.

A fourth reason for my affinity with this island has to do with the coalescence between a literary appeal and the geography of Dominica. A fascination with its wild, natural and almost impenetrable beauty has inspired many writers over the ages; two among them stand out for readers of Dominican literature — Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey. Allfrey’s work and commitment to Dominica combine the marriage of geography with that of the political in one of her poems. “*Love for an island*,” she writes, “*is the sternest passion*.” Writer, poet and left-wing politician, perhaps the first woman in politics that Dominica might claim, she left in her teens for America and England, returning in 1953 after having received literary and political recognition in England. In 1955, she founded the Dominican Labour Party and was Minister of Labour for a short time. As a writer she also stimulated the growth of early journalism, editing the *Dominican Herald* and *The Star*. Would we confer the title of early feminist to Phyllis Shand Allfrey these days for her visibility and presence as a woman in politics, the latter being now a measure of gender equality in a nation, as determined by the United Nations.

The writing and unsettling genius of Jean Rhys, born Ella Gwendolyn Rees Williams in 1890 in Dominica, has drawn many, including myself, to contemplate this island. Rhys was seven years older than Phyllis Shand Allfrey. They maintained a close correspondence with each other. Rhys’s creativity and depiction of Dominica as the unfathomable ghost in her life that refuses to depart are remarkable if only because she invests the reader with a similar sensibility to search for this lingering past in the present. Her relationship to the island is a brooding one, but nonetheless key to her creativity. Antoinette’s voice in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the voice of her mother’s generation and that of her own, a white creole exactitude of difference as she describes Tia, her black

childhood friend. “Soon Tia was my friend and I met her nearly every morning at the turn of the road to the river... Sometimes we left the bathing pool at midday, sometimes we stayed till late afternoon. Then Tia would light a fire (fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry). We boiled green bananas in an old iron pot and ate them with our fingers out of a calabash and after we had eaten she slept at once. I could not sleep but I wasn’t quite awake as I lay in the shade looking at the pool — deep and dark green under the trees, brown-green if it had rained, but a bright sparkling green in the sun” (20). Tia betrays her by stealing her clothes, a metaphor for the way Antoinette Cosway is later betrayed by her Caribbean heritage. Yet the same island provides a sanctuary: “I lay thinking, ‘I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers” (23).

What legacy has Jean Rhys to offer to us today that renders her a feminist or a space in feminist history. Her contribution is qualitatively different from that of Shand Allfrey’s or say Dame Eugenia Charles’s, the latter who by definition can boldly wear the mantle of feminism. Yet Rhys’s contribution, like that of the Trinidad-born writer V.S. Naipaul, is responsible for creating the metaphors by which we come to understand the inner life of a culture, the body politic in another way, its corruptions, self-deceptions and its ambitions. Rhys, in my view, is one of the first feminist authors and theorists that we have produced in the region. Her protagonists, largely weakened and disenfranchised by the cold and solitude as they move out of the tropics, demonstrate the difference of gender and gender norms that existed in the region. By inverting and rewriting the underlying logic behind the madness that is depicted of Rochester’s wife in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Rhys anticipates the post-modern feminist tongue with which we speak today as we continue to claim ownership of our gendered nuances as a region. Dominica has therefore already produced one of the leading inspirations for those of us who write and record our history of feminist thought and it should be proud of and claim this particular definition of its heritage.

This ongoing relationship with the island of Dominica also encouraged me to work on two gender-related projects which allowed me closer contact and familiarity with the evolving culture of its people. *Caribbean Women and the Crossroads*, published in 1998, was based on a comparative survey of women and decision-making in Dominica, St. Lucia and Barbados, and between 2004 and 2006 the opportunity arose to assist the Women’s Bureau of Dominica in preparing the National Gender Policy on Equity and Equality for this country. This policy is now in its implementation stage and the Women’s Bureau, led by Rosie Browne, must be complimented on its passage from drawing board to actual implementation. Again, the fact that a gender policy was seriously, collectively and consultatively developed with representatives from the trade unions, education, health, social, religion and media sectors, to name a few, must not be understated. Both the serious engagement with gender and the passion to work towards change are a second element of a feminist consciousness that marks out the people of Dominica. Perhaps as Jean Rhys has felt, the fierce and impenetrable beauty requires constant comprehension and protection.

The passage of gender policies, not only in Dominica but in other societies such as the Cayman Islands and Belize, is a welcome feature of contemporary feminism. At the same time, there is the gnawing feeling among many that woman time has come and that it is no longer necessary to have either policies or programmes that are geared specifically for women. The equation of gender with woman a decade or two ago might have been understandable in that feminism itself was viewed primarily as the domain of man haters and female misogynists. It is both puzzling and instructive that the shift of feminism itself, in particular Caribbean feminism, toward openly embracing the concerns of masculinity has not been recognised by society. It is read in a popular sense as if this is another ruse of women to hoodwink men so men must remain wise to the wiles, not be caught in the biblical trap as defined by Eve's temptation of Adam through the intervention of the serpent. I would say that two dominant discourses co-exist. First, that the gender thing, as it is called, is still about women only, for women and on behalf of women. Second, that once an issue is raised under the rubric of gender or feminism, it suffers from an immediate trivialization or, at worst, humouring with unspoken sentiments of let's pacify this constituency by giving them a few concessions. As Thalia Grey, President of the Media Association in Dominica, so nicely put it, somehow feminism has not got across that reading of gender is "an invisible factor which can make a difference to us all". It is the invisibility of how gender works and how it underpins the systemic parts of our lives, such as who rules us, what decisions are made about the welfare of each sex, who determines who is educated and employed and for which jobs and so on. It is also about the personal and individual well being — who looks after our daily needs, who determines our psychological states, who feeds and clothes us with love and affection that is needed in the household and private domain long before we can look for or give this back into public spaces. By and large, the importance of feminism and its goal to achieve gender equality and equity have remained largely unarticulated to many because they are not easy to translate into the common give-and-take language of film, media, public discourses and management structures in institutions. This is why gender and feminism have had closer affinity with institutions that have dealt with so-called gender issues as, for instance, family planning, social work, education — arenas of caring and teaching and nurturing, and so on.

Having said this, it is both unfair and untrue to argue that there has not been significant change in the lives of both women and men because of feminist interventions over the last century and that we have not entered an era where gender difference and distinctions are ignored. At the same time, the problems created by gender differentiation by both men and women persist with alarming continuity and in some cases increased intensity. As we speak, thousands of women are still being herded across borders as sex slaves, most evident but not restricted to women from Africa, Asia and South America. Masculinity is deemed to be in crisis. There is an ever increasing flow of young male gangs with networks that run through continents, increasing levels of violence among young men who feel dispossessed by their countries and by a previous generation. As we also speak, what has been described as a silent tsunami wave of food shortage is sweeping through many societies. For the rich, this simply means an inconvenience of changing tastes, for the poor it means the difference between a hungry or a full belly.

What does this have to do with feminism and gender equality? How have the goals of feminism and what is at stake expanded outside of the normative boundaries that were imposed in the 20th century. In 2000, five years after Beijing, the site of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the goal to eradicate gender inequality had been finally inscribed on the political agenda of most nations of the world, with a fifty percent female participation in political decision-making set as the target for measuring gender equality. But what does it mean to have fifty percent of the leaders in your society being visibly women? I think this question remains one that we must all engage in as Caribbean feminism continues its course.

It is no coincidence that I have also placed the above, fairly lengthy but necessary, preamble into a public lecture hosted by the Trade Union Institute and the Fourth Campus of the University of the West Indies. That women and men in the 21st century have to be conceived equally as workers and intellectuals and are equally apportioned the roles of breadwinner and protector, of nurturer and leader: that is the mutually agreed perception of change that we have again come to take for granted and that I continue to focus our attention on today. I do not think that we have the luxury of differentiating a domestic existence for the male and a public one for the female again. One might argue that this never really existed in practice, but simply in theory, but the two have caught up in this case. For example one of the earliest disturbances in Trinidad that led to the eventual setting up of the Moyne Commission in 1948 and the emergence of Trade Unionism in the Caribbean was that in 1934 by sugar workers. Protesting prolonged unemployment, a group comprising mostly women and children and said to be one that was difficult to control by police was reported in the Port-of-Spain Gazette (Reddock 1994)ⁱ. They were demanding work and food. In the 1930s, the majority of workers in the sugar cane industry were East Indians and thus one might surmise that this vociferous and feisty group were in fact Indian women and children. Similarly in St. Vincent, in 1938, disturbances were as a result of the increase in customs duties. One woman identified as Brenda Bertamatt led the protest in stoning the Kingston courthouse. A reporter described the riot as consisting of fifteen women armed with sticks and stones who were later joined by about two hundred men armed with stones, sledgehammers, cutlasses and knives (Reddock 1990, 90). In Jamaica, in 1938, a large number of working-class women were also involved in strikes and disturbances. Women were active in the waterfront strike on May 21 and were joined by the street cleaners by May 23, and then eventually by the entire city. The *Jamaica Standard* elaborated on the extent of participation of women. Factory workers and packers left their stalls and joined the strikes. They included large numbers of women and girls who joined the demonstration and tried to outshout the men for higher wages and a better standard of living (Reddock, 1990, 95).ⁱⁱ

What I would emphasise, therefore, in sharpening the focus and changing the lens on feminism is that we do not enter this dialogue by positioning women primarily as victims of male patriarchal control. For too long this has served unwittingly or wittingly to keep people in boxes that someone else made. For instance, I have inherited the notion that Indian women are subservient and passive when the lived experience and history of Indian women in the Caribbean goes totally against this grain. To continually depict women as outside the margins of power keeps someone else's power in place. To depict

men as victims of a proscribed, fixed and predetermined masculinity also keeps them and the male sex as vulnerable rather than proactive. For instance, a feminist rereading of the origin story of Christianity questions Adam's role in being duplicitously persuaded by Eve. Did he not have the capacity to make another choice? Let us agree that the vision of gender equality begins with affording each sex the probability of equal choice even while understanding that choices are always curtailed by the possibilities available.

One of the earliest debates that surfaced in feminism when we considered what gender equality might look like is the matter of the division of labour in the domestic space. This discussion, referred to as the Domestic Labour debate, could not be reduced to who did what in the household — rather it brought to light the fact that the sexual division of labour that assumed that housework was the domain of women and work outside the house that of men, was a false dichotomy that affected women's and men's chances in the workplace. One example is that for years men were restricted from the component of midwifery in the nursing profession. That false dichotomy that women only are capable of nurturing has also made for the acceptance of maternity leave as a normative requirement of women, not of course won without a struggle from employers. But it has also militated against the question of paternity leave. When the question of paternity leave is brought up, invariably the response is either that it will be abused by men or that they do not need to be given leave for the birth of their children. In fact, and as an aside, the issue always raises a certain amount of levity in the Caribbean, on the assumption that men are entitled to many partners and thus may have more than one child within a normal calendar year. These are not superficial concerns. What they mean in terms of a philosophy of gender equality is that one is restricted by choice as a result of biology. We must recall that biology also provided an argument for the enslavement of Africans, that black brains were smaller than European ones. Writ differently by contemporary philosophers Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the question that is being posed here is what are the rights and freedoms that must be available to each human being, that are dependent on their capabilities and needs, and not restricted by their biological sex or social circumstances. The domestic labour debate raised many issues that have remained unsettled and that underpin feminist discourses, among them not only who does what job, but what value is accorded to various tasks in society. I think it is time we return to this debate seriously and reconsider some of the old tenets and see their continued if not greater relevance to some of the issues that remain unresolved today.

It is an apposite time to pay homage also to the work of a Caribbean woman who spent the greater part of her adult life ensuring that the issue of housework remained on the agenda. In 1965, Clotil Walcott began her activities in the Labour Movement by joining the Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers in Trinidad. Her experience of the lack of agency that workers suffered in their bid to gain recognition, both in national legislation and representation through the trade unions which represented them, led her to become further trained in trade union bargaining and to take on positions of leadership. She undertook an overseas correspondence course in Industrial Relations, gaining certificates in Trade Union Law, Shop Steward Duties, Industrial Negotiations, Industrial Law and Collective Bargaining. On March 13, 1974, she was elected shop steward by the union members in her department for the National Union of Government and Federated

Workers which she had by this time joined. She combined her union activities with an active political one, seeing them as indivisible in the struggle for rights and freedoms. During the period 1969–1972, she became a member of NJAC — the National Joint Action Committee and participated in the Black Power and black consciousness movement which swept Trinidad (Reddock 2007)ⁱⁱⁱ. In 1974, Clotil along with her close friend and comrade Brother James Lynch, Salisha Ali and others established The National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) as a section of the Union of Ship Builders, Ship Repairers and Allied Workers Union (USSR). The bulletin announcing its formation stated, “Calling all persons serving in the capacity of cooks, kitchen helpers, maids, butlers, seamstresses, laundresses, barmen, babysitters, chauffeurs, messengers, yardmen and household assistants”, heralding the union’s concern with low-income workers more generally in addition to domestic workers, broadly defined. In 1982, NUDE registered as a union in its own right under the Trades Unions Ordinance. Although she and others had won the right to organise a trade union for domestic and related workers, to this day household assistants are not recognised as workers. Nonetheless, some gains were achieved, among these (1) the passing of the Minimum Wages and Terms and Conditions of Service for Household Assistants Order, under the Minimum Wages Act November 1982, which allowed for minimum wages, a 44-hour work week, overtime rates for public holidays, maternity leave and vacation leave for those workers represented; and (2) the passage of the Unremunerated Work Act, 1995, which allows for the counting of unwaged work in national statistics. This made Trinidad and Tobago one of the first countries in the world to pass such legislation and the Trinidad and Tobago wording for the Act was used as the model for the Beijing Declaration on Women. Clotil had taken this debate to an international level and gained recognition for Trinidad and Tobago in the 1995 World Conference of Women in Beijing as a leader in societies that had begun to recognise the importance of accounting for domestic work and related household services deemed unpaid work in their Gross Domestic Product.

Clotil died in late 2007, leaving another tremendous legacy and a body of unfinished work. It is useful to pass this baton on to Dominica which has so seriously engaged in the quest for gender equality and equity in this society. The Protection of Employment Act Chapter 89:02 of the Revised Laws of Dominica provides protection for all categories of workers at present but Section (4) states, “Parts II and III do not apply to or in respect of the employment of a person as a domestic servant.” This means that domestic servants, who are still predominantly female, are excluded from receiving pay as a result of termination on the grounds of redundancy. This remains, therefore, a discriminatory act. The Labour Contracts Act Chapter 89:04 of the revised Laws of Dominica, Section 3, provides that every employer not later than fourteen (14) days after assumption of employment, must enter into a labour contract with employee detailing the terms and conditions of employment. However, Section 2 (3) (g) and (h) exclude home assistants and agricultural workers from this provision. Again, this Section of the law is gender biased as the bulk of persons employed as home assistants and agricultural workers are women. Furthermore, home assistants and agricultural workers are not unionized and consequently cannot act in concert to advocate changes for their conditions of

employment. The National Gender Policy on Gender Equality and Equity¹ calls for investigation and subsequent informed strategies to deal with the situation of home assistants and agricultural workers, a class of employees who are most vulnerable to abuses of employment. Among its recommendations are the following:

Policy No 18 calls for an urgent review of the two above-stated pieces of legislation, The Protection of Employment Act Chapter 89:02 and The Labour Contracts Act Chapter 89:04 and the provision of necessary mechanisms to ensure compliance.

Policy No 19 advocates for discussions with labour personnel with a view to the unionization of the category of workers comprising home assistants and agricultural workers.

And relatedly, the Dominica gender policy is committed to enhancing the conditions under which men might be willing to accept such responsibilities and play equal or complementary roles to women in the nurturing and parenting of children. Recognising that some unions (namely WAWU) in Dominica have negotiated paternity leave provisions in their Collective Agreements, Policy No 24 advocates the need for unions to educate the public and lobby government to include this provision in law as a basic entitlement, noting that such education and discussion should also extend to the penalties for abuse of this leave. We might in discussions consider the very real economic, social and legislative implications of unionizing domestic work, accounting for it in GDP calculations and granting paternity leave to men. The fullness of these is both beyond my immediate competence and also will require input from different sectors and professions.

In raising the issue as a key and strategic entry and exit point in this lecture, I have also asked myself why did I focus on these two issues, that is, the recognition of domestic workers through unionization or other practices that ensure their access to fair and equitable working conditions and the consideration of paternity leave for men. It derives from a very simple observation. I have pondered the fall out or backlash, if you like, of the struggle for women to gain ascendancy in society. We need to admit that the battle to consider women as workers who earn a living and need a wage equivalent to men's has been won by the 21st century. We need only look around at the workplace, the media industry, the professions, the proliferation of women in education and in the health sectors to recognise that while we need to remain consistently vigilant of conditions, we can move on. In winning this right of equal recognition, feminism has also imposed another set of burdens on the household — the double burden of competencies and excellence as caregiver, homemaker and professional that are required of those who combine service to the workplace and the domestic environment. To do this, many women, like myself, have required helpers: Cynthia's, and Mavis's, and Girlsins, cleaners and cooks and baby carers who must take our places, while having to take care of their own houses and families. Women we trust with our houses, our possessions, the food that

¹ *The National Gender Policy on Equity and Equality for the Commonwealth of Dominica*, prepared by Patricia Mohammed, Consultant to the Government of Dominica, Deborah Mc Fee and Committee of Representatives from Ministries and NGOs in Dominica, 2006

they put on our plates. How does a society begin to deal with the changing landscape of work and family so that the burdens are not visited on another generation. We see its results in the growing delinquency of masculinity and the challenges that are presented to young women to understand their sexuality at a very early age. Parental care now requires not just feeding and clothing and monitoring homework, but surveillance over Internet sites, cable television and action to safeguard against drugs. Since both sexes are providers and protectors, it requires that we imagine the concept of masculinity and femininity differently from that which we inherited as far as parenting is concerned, as far as household and domestic life is concerned, as far as the smallest cell of society which is the household and family, and where the young learn to become productive and disciplined adults.

This lecture thus ends on a rhetorical note. Gender must return us constantly to the common denominator of what it is to be human and to learn what fairness and equity really means. Those lessons are learnt from very early. A mother and father do not feed and clothe one child and ignore the other, even though they may be differentiated by concepts of beauty or capacities. It is often said of people with disabled children that they learn love through such children far more as the disabled require and reciprocate more of this quality. Societies must also learn to do the same. Caribbean feminism must be constantly the conscientious watchdog on our domestic practices in the face of growing global threats that, being dots in the ocean, we are incapable of reversing. And all of us need to become part of this conscience, not just women. Gender must no longer be “dis woman thing”.

ⁱ Rhoda Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994).

ⁱⁱ Rhoda Reddock. “Feminism, Nationalism and the Early Women’s Movement in the English-Speaking Caribbean (with special reference to Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago)” in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Selwyn Cudjoe, (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ From an obituary tribute to Clotil Walcott presented by Rhoda Reddock at services held in her honour.