

**New  
Caribbean  
Thought**

*A Reader*

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## Conceptualizing 'Difference' in Caribbean Feminist Theory

R H O D A R E D D O C K

The concept of 'difference' has emerged as a significant one in contemporary social theory. Whereas for the most part this has been the result of the increasing influence of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought, in feminist scholarship this was predated by the black feminist critique of what they saw as white feminism. It is also interesting that this concept assumed importance at a time when conflicts based on differences of various kinds, in particular ethnicity and religion, have become the main loci of war and intergroup violence in many parts of the world.

The emergence of the concept of 'difference' and related terms, such as diversity, have presented a major epistemological challenge to larger world views and projects based on attempts to create collectivized subjects or imagined communities (Anderson 1991) such as nation states, social groups and unified classes. As such, therefore, overarching projects, such as the socialist project, which sought to organize based on the collective subject of the worker, and feminist projects, which sought to organize based on the collective subject of the woman, have come in for serious challenge.

### The Black Feminist Critique

As noted before, one of earliest challenges to mainstream feminist theory as it emerged in the North in the 1960s and 1970s was the black feminist critique. This emerged from a strong feeling among black feminists in the United States and the United Kingdom in particular of being excluded from a generalized discourse about women as well as from the discourse about blacks. In their classic 1977 statement, "A Black Feminist Statement", a group of black US feminists known as the Combahee River Collective (1983) stated, among other things, that:

A black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973 Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). (14)

The main focus of the black feminist critique was the invisibility/absence/erasure of black women from the feminist discourse. For example, the popular early analogy between 'blacks' and 'women' denied the existence of black women with experiences that differed from those of black men and white women. One of the earliest writings on this was Audre Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly" (1983), where she expressed the pain she felt at not seeing her experience expressed in Daly's then most recent book (*Gyn/Ecology*).

Black women also accused white women of refusing to examine the effects which racism had on the experiences of black women. In highlighting sexism and ignoring racism, white feminists were denying an important factor in configuring the experience of black women as well as not exploring their own complicity along with white men in this process. From very early, therefore, the situation of the black woman in the United States was described as being one of double jeopardy, where their life chances were determined both by race and sex. In later years this was expanded to include class as it was realized that the structuring of race in the United States was such that class had been 'racial' and 'gendered' so that an understanding of black women's situation had to consider the difficult economic situation in which most of them found themselves. The black feminist critique also raised the issue of class to mainly middle class feminists, contrasting the economic circumstances and work-life experiences of both groups.

The focus on difference at this time was couched in terms of discriminations and isoparities as each factor was the cause of a different set of disadvantages. Whereas these three multiple isoparities, later joined by sexual orientation, were initially seen as additive, Patricia Hill-Collins (1988), in her conceptualization of *multiple isoparities*, saw these discriminations as not simply additive but as multiplicative, in that each discrimination multiplies the impact of the other. For example, racism is multiplied by sexism which in turn is multiplied by classism and so on. She explains: "The importance of any one factor in explaining black women's circumstances thus varies depending on the particular aspect of our lives under consideration and the reference groups to whom we are compared" (48). Furthermore, this she rejects as "monism"; "any political claim that one particular domination precipitates all really important oppressions" (51).

### Postmodernism

In recent times this black feminist concern with difference has received a filip from the popularization of poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses, particularly in their challenge of hegemonic universals and their understanding of power as a dispersed phenomenon. For example, the work of Jean-Jacques Lyotard, who challenged the role of hegemonic metanarratives that serve to silence and deny competing discourses through the creation of overarching and totalizing universals, and that of Michel Foucault, who questioned the false power of hegemonic knowledges and the institutionalized structures that sought to control the creation and dissemination of knowledge, have influenced the black feminist discourse. Foucault also stresses the need to critique existing understandings of power as overriding and dominant and calls on us to see power in various forms and in social relations where we would not have seen it before. Finally, Jacques Derrida questions the Western tradition of constructing knowledge in binary opposites where the first term is the signifier of the Other and where the second term is defined in opposition or in contrast to the first; for example, white/black, unity/diversity, man/woman. He calls for a deconstruction of these controlling systems of meaning and for the opening up of new ways of understanding difference, and the specificities of its historical, social and cultural construction in ways that do not lead us into new essentialisms.

According to Jane Parpart (1993), while postmodernism has been received with mixed responses from various tendencies within feminism, it has served to strengthen the arguments long put forward by black feminists in the North. She notes:

Black and Native women in North America and Europe have become increasingly vocal about their unique problems, and the need to incorporate race and culture as well as class and gender into feminist analysis. While minority feminists have been arguing for a long time for a racially and ethnically specific feminism. (443)

For many black feminists, mainstream (that is, white) feminism had created an essentialized woman, one based on the experience of mainly white middle class women of the North. This model ignored the fact that black women had had a different experience. This approach is expanded on by bell hooks (1992), who in opening up a discourse on black postmodernism sees its utility not only in the de-essentializing of woman per se but, further, in a de-essentializing of blackness through a recognition that there may be different ways of being authentically black. In addition, this approach heightens the recognition, often ignored by early black feminists, that the black experience has not been singular. Increasingly today, differences in class within the black community have meant that the experiences of black women could be vastly different.

### Deconstructing Blackness

The term 'black' has always been a problematic one, the main problem being its emergence within the modernist era as an oppositional term for white and the differential meanings that it has had in different contexts. For example, whereas in the United States the word 'black' referred specifically to the descendants of African slaves or any other person who had the slightest trace of African ancestry, in Europe in general and Britain in particular the word 'black' was used as a political oppositional term to encompass a wide range of racialized groups. In the words of Avtar Brah (1996):

The concept 'black' now emerges as a specifically political term embracing African-Caribbean and South Asian peoples. It constitutes a political subject inscribing politics of resistance against colour-centred racism. The term was adopted by the emerging coalitions amongst African-Caribbean and South Asian organisations and activists in the late 1960s and 1970s. They were influenced by the way that the Black Power movement in the USA, which had turned the concept 'black' on its head, divested it of its pejorative connotations

in racialised discourses and transformed it into a confident expression of an assertive group identity. The Black Power movement urged black Americans to construe the 'black community' not as a matter of geography but rather in terms of the global African diaspora. Eschewing 'chromatism' – the basis of differentiation amongst blacks according to lighter or darker tone of skin – 'black' became a political colour to be claimed with pride against colour-based racism. The African-Caribbean and South Asian activists in Britain borrowed the term from the Black Power movement to foster a rejection of chromatism amongst those defined as 'coloured people' in Britain. (Brah 1996: 97)

While for almost two decades the term 'black' served as a useful unifying mechanism through which South Asian and African Caribbean activists were able to make successful demands upon the British state, this term has come under increasing attack. According to Brah, ethnicist scholars have argued that the term 'black' in Black Power ideology referred specifically to the historical experience of people of sub-Saharan African descent and was designed primarily for them. When applied to South Asians, the term black did not have the same cultural meanings, such as those associated with black music, and so was relevant to South Asians in a political sense only (Brah 1996).

The argument about the term 'black' has been echoed in the Caribbean as well. Well into the 1980s the nascent Hindu Women's Organization questioned the use of the term 'black' to refer to Caribbean people of Indian ancestry. They too argued that 'black' had a meaning and relevance to people of African descent that it did not have for Indians and so was a hegemonic concept that denied the specificity of the Indian Caribbean experience (Reddock 1993). While the British critics suggested the replacement of the term 'black' by Indian or Asian, the Caribbean activists initially called for the term 'brown' then later for Indian Caribbean, a term that stressed the cultural and historical specificities of that group.

White Brah argues that the term does not necessarily have to be defined in essentialist terms, and can have different political and cultural meanings in different contexts, we have a situation where African diaspora feminists, after decades of arguing against a erasure of their specific experience, are being cast in a similar position in relation to South Asian identities. What is clear is that the existing and now hegemonic discourse of race, class and gender that developed in the North is inadequate to deal with the differing complexities of the Third World. But then again, it is possible that the overarching dominance of the white audience in the North has overshadowed the very real differences that exist among women of colour there.

In the last two decades, since the end of the cold war and the disappointment in the promise of modernization and socialism, there has been an upsurge of small- and large-scale conflicts based on ethnic and religious differences. While the politics of difference quite correctly directs us to the social, cultural and political marginalization of groups by dominant and hegemonic practices and discourses, the violence that accompanies much of this conflict has particular consequences for women.

Women are subject to some of the worst physical and emotional violence in open conflict situations, including rape and forced pregnancy. Women are often called upon to wear the 'ethnic markers' of their community resulting in calls for 'returns' to the veil, to 'family' or other symbols of female subordination. This has become particularly important under circumstances of economic liberalization experienced in the South, as structural adjustment policies that limit the availability of already scarce resources are introduced.

It is imperative, therefore, that women's movements tackle head-on the issue of difference, exploring its complexities of empowerment and oppression in ways that open it up for debate. In this way, women can themselves assess the situation and chart a way forward.

## Difference in Caribbean Discourses

Issues of race and class and later ethnicity have been central to Caribbean postcolonial discourse. Yet for the most part, the black feminist critique of the United States and Britain did not find an echo in the Caribbean. This dissonance was most strongly reflected in the critique of black feminism by Trinidadian Gemma Tang Nain (1991), who characterized it as follows:

We in the Caribbean are no strangers to racism, having experienced some of its most extreme manifestations during slavery and for some time after its abolition. However, given the numerical advantage of persons of African descent in the region, it has been possible since the end of colonial rule, and particularly since the 1970s, to weaken the hold of racism. White men (both local and foreign) may still control the economics of the region but black men have achieved political power and do exercise considerable control over the public sector. To the extent then that power changed hands, it went from white men to black men; women did not feature in that equation. Caribbean women therefore have not found it necessary to differentiate feminism into 'black' and 'white'. (1)

In conclusion, Tang Nain argued for a change from the label black feminism to antiracist or socialist feminism as a more acceptable alternative. The former term she saw as divisive and based on a narrow understanding of feminism. This article was important as it is one of the only documents that provides a clear critique of black feminism from the perspective of a woman of colour. At the same time, however, her paper failed to draw reference to the issues of race and difference within the Caribbean itself.

### Contextualizing the Caribbean

The Caribbean is a diverse area comprising the islands of the Caribbean archipelago, the Guianas in South America (Guyana, Suriname), and Belize in Central America. This region is ethnically diverse due to its tumultuous history of conquest, genocide, slavery, indentured or contract labour, and various migrations, forced and voluntary, over its history.

In all of this, the African-descended population comprises the largest single grouping, although this too differs from country to country. For example, in Guyana descendants of Indian indentured labourers are the largest group, and in Cuba and Puerto Rico a significant population of European descendants still exists. There are also descendants of the indigenous peoples, Chinese, Lebanese and a range of Europeans. Additionally, ethnic intermixtures of various permutations abound, some forming new groupings of their own. The Caribbean, therefore, in common with many postcolonial societies, is an extremely heterogeneous region.

For decades, in spite of the numerical dominance of the African-descended population, anti-African discrimination and racism was rampant throughout the region. This was accompanied by a well-established self-denial among many of these peoples and a rejection of Africa and 'Africaness' in many instances. However, interestingly, this denial of Africa was often combined with a strong sense of resistance against discrimination and racism. Although strong African-consciousness movements developed at various points throughout the history of the region, it was not until the Black Power movements of the 1970s that a true reclamation of an African identity could be said to have been experienced in the region. In the words of Rawwida Baksh-Sooden (1993):

The post-colonial discourse which emerged since the independence movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the humanities and social sciences, the literary, fine and theatre arts and the

field of journalism have all been attempts to grapple with the experience of colonialism from an anti-imperialist framework which included the perspectives of race and class. . . . In the Caribbean then, the discourse has been one of reclaiming identity. The reclaimed identity, however, has been predominantly African. (25)

This is not surprising as the Caribbean, possibly excluding parts of the Hispanic Caribbean, is a primarily creole space, and one where major struggles took place (and still take place) for the valorization of African-derived languages, lifestyles and cultural forms. The term 'creole' here is derived from the work of Edward Kamau Brathwaite in his essay "Contradictory Omens". In this essay he defines the process of 'creolization', the creation of creole society as taking place through the forced acculturation of Africans to European norms and behaviours, the inadvertent assimilation of Europeans to African norms and the unconscious and reciprocal interculturation of one to the other (Brathwaite 1977: 11). This process he saw as resulting in a new cultural creation – a creole society, comprising a continuum of cultural and linguistic forms ranging from the prestigious and more accepted Euro-Creole forms to the more despised and often hidden Afro-Creole or folk forms.

In Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname, Indians comprise a much larger proportion of the population than in other parts of the region. As latecomers, however, they were never totally integrated into the dominant creole cultural paradigm. In recent times, however, due to a strong Indian identity movement and the increasing economic and political power of the Indian community, this is changing. This identity movement has included cultural nationalist tendencies as well as religious fundamentalist movements of Hindus and Moslems. All this has served to place the issue of difference squarely on the table.

### Toward a Caribbean Theory of Difference

As this chapter is an exploratory one, I shall seek to analyse how some of the feminist scholars of the region have sought to deal with the difficult issue of difference.

One of the first Caribbean scholars to introduce the concept of difference was V. Eudine Barricau-Foster in her article "The Construct of a Postmodernist Feminist Theory for Caribbean Social Science Research" (1992). In this article she sees liberal and socialist-feminist analyses as of limited relevance to

the experiences of Caribbean women because of their grounding in assumptions of the Enlightenment. For example, she argues that socialist analyses constructed women essentially as victims and so ignored ways in which they daily resist and participate in actions aimed at changing their lives. In proposing a new Caribbean theory, Barricau-Foster posits the contours of such a theory as a space "filled by operationalising gender, class, race, sexual identity and political action within the Caribbean context" (17). She continues, "The theory views all past generalizations of Caribbean woman as 'subject to scrutiny and change', available for revision unless they can meet the requirements of this new construct" (17). In applying this new theoretical approach, however, the author did not really go beyond earlier understandings of the experiences of Caribbean women. While noting that "Black women's experiences of race in the Caribbean differs from that of black women in North America" (25), this paper, probably because of the parts of the region on which it was based, lost an opportunity to more fully explore the complexities of difference in the Caribbean feminist context.

A clearer beginning to the discourse on difference in the Caribbean is provided by feminist scholar and activist Rawwida Baksh-Sooden. This is probably understandable as her location as an Indo-Caribbean woman of Muslim background contributes to her sensitivity to the subject. In a 1992 paper, she notes in passing the difficulties for Indian feminists in circumstances of communal and ethnic tension to openly admit to and denounce the patriarchal practices within their community. Later, in "Is There an International Feminism?" (1993), she develops her ideas further, noting that in the emerging discourse on Caribbean feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, the discussions on race almost exclusively concentrated on the African Caribbean experience within the postcolonial context.

Baksh-Sooden (1993) noted, for example, that in Caribbean feminist historiography (with one major exception), studies of family and slavery had concentrated on issues of matrilocality, female-headed households and so-called male marginality, all issues that contrasted greatly with the Indian Caribbean experience. This discourse she characterized as "Afrocentric".

[W]hat this means is that feminist analyses of Caribbean society have tended to focus on the black and coloured population and creole culture. Hence the lower-class family is always discussed in terms of the female-headed household despite the fact that among Indians (in societies with significant Indian populations) the lower-class family shows forms ranging from the Indian joint family, the three generation extended family and the female-headed household. (26)

In the main, this is a correct analysis although not yet understood by feminist scholars in all parts of the region. But the weaknesses in this analysis could also be explained by the absence of Indian women themselves as writers of those analyses. As soon as this changed, the discourse also changed. My main criticism of this argument, however, would be her choice of the word *Afrocentric*, for this gives an incorrect understanding of the mainstream discourse. Indeed, *Afrocentricism* is also a minority discourse within the region; the majority of African descendants have more of a creole consciousness than an *Afrocentric* one.

This view of a creole consciousness is supported by Rishvee Thakur in his review essay "Orientalism Revisited" (1993), where he comments that

[c]omplaints of the essential Afrocentric character of the Caribbean functions along the same lines. As with the 'Indo-Caribbean' it is not certain what Afrocentric means other than the fact that the Governments and major institutions of the Caribbean are dominated by Afro-Caribbeans. But there is really nothing Afrocentric in that, if Afrocentric means traditions and practices that have their roots in Africa and were reconstituted in a post-slavery Caribbean. What is at issue is who gets to manage the post-colonial settlement, codified and organised around the creolised ideals of an Anglo-Christian tradition, Westminster and all. (13)

Baksh-Sooden continues, however, to note that the issue of racial difference within the Caribbean feminist movement is quite distinct from that of the United States and Europe. In the postcolonial situation the African population has had some degree of political if not economic control. As a result, she notes, the bitterness characteristic of interethnic relations among feminists in North America and the United Kingdom is not as characteristic of the Caribbean region. She posits that in spite of the real cultural differences among feminists of different ethnic and religious groupings, the larger tradition of anticolonial struggle, based on the commonalities within the different experiences of the plantation, slavery and indentureship, provides a common point from which to collaborate. This tradition also facilitates links to wider social movements, such as trade unions, left political parties and other social movements, creating a greater possibility for a multicultural feminist platform.

A third contribution to this discussion is put forward by another Trinidadian woman of Muslim background, Patricia Mohammed. In her doctoral dissertation "A Social History of Post-Migrant Indians in Trinidad from 1917-1947: A Gender Perspective" (1994), Mohammed is able to use her concrete analysis of gender relations in Trinidad society. Mohammed's thesis

traces the processes through which former indentured immigrants adapted to freedom and settlement in Trinidad in the three decades after immigration. She paints a picture of this period of Indians as a despised and despising minority seeking to establish themselves in an alien and hostile environment. A hostility, she argues, based not like today on sexual rivalry or scarcity of jobs but on antagonism to perceived racial and cultural differences on both sides.

Mohammed (1994) argues quite convincingly for a system of competing patriarchies operating simultaneously. The dominant white patriarchy, which at that time controlled state power as it existed then; a 'creole' patriarchy, emerging from among the African and mixed groups; and an Indian patriarchy at the lowest end of the ladder, which sought to consolidate and reconstruct the patriarchal traditions of India (30–32). In her own words:

Thus the patriarchal context as it existed in Trinidad in 1917 was that of a competition among males of different racial groups, each jostling for power of one sort or the other – economic, political, social status and so on. In the face of a hegemonic control by the white group and another kind of dominance by the 'creole' population, the contestation was both a definition of masculinity between men of different races, and for Indian men to retrieve a ruptured patriarchy from the ravages of indentureship and thus be better placed to compete in this patriarchal race. This required a consolidation of the patriarchal system brought from India. (32)

As with many groups, symbols of women's subordination became markers of ethnic differentiation. Mohammed argues that in the hostile environment of the Caribbean, Indian women colluded with their men in the reconstruction of a Caribbean Indian patriarchal system. At the same time, where possible, they negotiated privately for spaces within which to manoeuvre.

Mohammed's analysis is useful as it helps us to conceptualize the difficulties of difference for feminist scholars and activists in postcolonial and ethnically differentiated societies, where loyalty to a competing patriarchy often influences the ways in which we are able to articulate the wider struggle. Mohammed posits a situation where women, in the name of community, collude consciously or unconsciously in their own subordination, even as they negotiate with it, in situations where symbols of women's subordination become markers of group identity. This was true of the Black Power and black consciousness movements of the 1970s and still contributes to some ambivalence among some Afro-Caribbean women activists in the region today.

Thus men's competing and conflicting relations with other men affect their relations with women, which in turn affect their relations with other women.

It brings to mind the ways in which struggles for identity and nation are always couched in masculinist language often referring to restoring a 'manhood' of some sort.

At another level altogether, Honor Ford-Smith's oral testimony, "Grandma's Estate", in *SISTREN* and Ford-Smith's *Lionheart Gail* (1986), provides yet another example of the conceptualization of difference in Caribbean feminist thinking. In that collection, her use of Standard English at once distinguishes that piece from the others (written, at Ford-Smith's insistence to the publishers, in the language of the authors, Jamaican 'creole'). In the very first line she identifies herself as the offspring of a brown woman and a white man, differentiating herself by class and colour from the other contributors in the text. In this article she also chronicles her African grandmother's quest to get rid of their blackness through her children and her children's children, with the end result being that Ford-Smith herself is, for all intents and purposes, a white Jamaican. But like other women in that text, Ford-Smith fights the battles of race, class and gender that are part and parcel of life in the postcolonial Caribbean, in her specific case exploring the contradictory locations of persons such as herself in the evolving realities of the region (*SISTREN* and Ford-Smith 1986: 177–97). Ford-Smith's work raises the issue of white Caribbean feminists, their conflictual situation within the postcolonial struggle for identity and their positioning within the Caribbean women's movement.

For my own part as an Afro-Caribbean feminist activist/scholar, I was acutely aware of the differences between myself and Indo-Caribbean women. This difference was, to me, both a real difference and a constructed difference. It served to maintain cultural spaces through which men could maintain control over 'their' women and also alternate their behaviours towards women of different groups according to the ethnic stereotypes. It was my experience, for example, that African and Indian women were constantly being defined in opposition to each other, Indian women were or are what African women were or are not. This, within the ethnic contestations and configurations of our society, served to narrow the options and spaces available to the women concerned.

It was for this reason, therefore, that in my own historical research begun some years ago, my efforts at understanding the experiences of Indian women was as important to me as was my understanding of African women. Not simply because it was politically correct to do so but because our differences had in some way contributed to what we had now been constructed to be. In other words, it was impossible to know myself if I did not know my Other/s.

In conceptualizing a theory of difference for the Caribbean, therefore, it is not enough simply to celebrate diversity. We need to isolate the ways in which the constructed differences have contributed to how we have conceptualized ourselves. Difference in the Caribbean therefore can be a mechanism for showing interconnectiveness. The long-term project of a feminist understanding of difference would not be simply to come to terms with the other but rather to understand the other within ourselves as we have in many ways been defined in opposition and in relation to each other.

In this sense, I find the work of Patricia Mohammed particularly enlightening as it suggests that feminist conceptualizations of difference need to be quite different from masculinist ones. They should also be conceptualizations that highlight our interconnectiveness as well as our separateness and that, most importantly, provide the basis for collective social action, a reality that I believe we have gone some way in achieving in the Caribbean.

## Note

1. That was until recently. Both Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago now have Indian prime ministers and predominantly Indian Cabinets.

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