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"From local to global: Exploring the unique identity of Afro-Caribbean Women"

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Discourse in Gender relations amongst Afro-Caribbean women

Colonized by various European nations, the Caribbean is a melting pot of different peoples: Indigenous American, European, African, South and East Asian, Middle Eastern. Despite the obvious differences that existed among these groups, they were all collectively responsible for shaping the dynamics in the history of this region whether it be via genetic contributions, cultural practices, language, food, customs etc. The Caribbean by far is probably one of the most diverse regions represented in the face of history. Geographically, each island is dynamic in the continuous change and flow of possession by Europeans and influences of the countless peoples of various extractions. This diversity is evident in the realization that there is a queer inability for scholars, and people alike to truly define what is the Caribbean and what it means to be a part of this region. Referencing the Caribbean is almost always focused on a specific island community/locality in that region, giving the impression of the Caribbean as a region of difference, and that it has no collective identity. Though often played off, the region we know today is mainly comprised of people of majority African descent. These people are descended from the same Africans brought to the region of the Caribbean over 400 years ago via the Atlantic Slave Trade. Africans, in supplying the labor necessary to build the infrastructure of the region of the Caribbean, also laid down the cultural foundations for the area. Africans however, are not the only peoples that created this unique space. Other fairly marginalized groups such as immigrants from the Indian subcontinent were instrumental in the cultural and even political formations of areas in the Caribbean. Through a global feminist perspective lens there lies the indelible mark of how the rise of capitalism, colonial powers, and the social and

political dynamics of slavery, typified women of African descent as subjects of their environment. Afro-Caribbean women in particular were the very products of the unique space that was, and still is the region of the Caribbean (Showers Johnson 79).

In many ways, exploring the unique construction of the identity that is the Afro-Caribbean women, is inevitably tied to the familiar mark of Colonialism. Colonialism is the umbrella under which every other aspect of Caribbean society was able to manifest itself. The articulation of local-global, specifically in the context of Afro-Caribbean is speaking on how local events, identities, and culture fed into global forces. With the construction of the Afro-Caribbean, the local focuses on the events specific to the region of the Caribbean which are the rise of capitalism with the consequent legacy of enslaved African people and the effects of colonialism. Capitalism, a system that we presently associate with modern day industrialized regions of the world, laid the foundation for the existence of this area we know as the Caribbean. Capitalism, specifically the type that developed in the Western world was centered on the concept of free labor. Slavery came about as a consequence, or more a necessity of Capitalism. Capitalism essentially emerged in the context of British economy, but did not become a large part of this society until the first half of the nineteenth century(Moore 15). A disproportionate share in the lucrative market of the Atlantic, the Americas is said to be responsible for the rise in capitalism of Britain. Additionally, Britain as an industrialized nation, was growing in terms of production and trade overseas. The growth of production and trade therefore eventually became highly dependent on the concept of expansion for demand (Moore 22). Market Opportunity was the way towards subsequent power to purchase and exchange any type of goods, yet Atlantic societies, largely of European extraction, were limited in this area. The actual market for trade was based upon exchangeable surplus, but it lacked in the development of labor to consistently produce tangible goods (Moore 23). Slavery filled the void of labor that could potentially solve the problem of the large scale exchange of goods amongst European nations. Enslaved

Africans, through specialization, became an essential component of labor for production of both agricultural and non agricultural commodities (Moore 24). Slavery was an aspect that affected the social dynamics of gender, familial roles, and it plays out today in the social and gendered relations of the present African descendants. Slavery was the injustice served to the African people despite being relegated to the confines of the past. In the notion that African descendants give a considerable contribution to the cultural and social patterns that manifest themselves even today, it would be appropriate to explore a discourse in the identity of the women; the Afro-Caribbean women. Slavery was the lived reality of these women in a historical dimension, so of course it is essential to the present constructions of the unique identity that is the Afro-Caribbean women. Women, even today in West Indian culture, exist as the essential backbones of societies in their African descended communities. These are the women characterized by exhibiting domestic and economic independence. Afro-Caribbean women are unique in this experience despite holding varying histories, languages, and geographic locations. Exploring a discourse in Afro-Caribbean women is also an exploration of the historical roots of Feminism in the existence of Afro-Caribbean culture.

There is no discourse in the identity of the Afro-Caribbean women without mentioning the structure of family life as it pertains to the legacy of slavery. Dynamics of family life among captured Africans were drastically altered both in the forced detachment of familial ties and assigning enslaved Africans as indentured servants into conditions characteristic of plantation life. The beginnings of plantation life, prescribed specific roles to individual based on gender and ages (Blank 1). Men and women were almost always separated, so potential for what we think of as a typical family, was nearly or completely absent in those times. Unfortunately, as true as these observations by contemporaries must seem, there is far more to this dilemma of altered family structure as it relates to the Afro-Caribbean women. Slave masters were highly aware of the importance of slave families, particularly marriage which clearly did not conform to the idealized European marriage. The basic premise for such an observation by slave masters, was

that Africans, specific to their own cultural practices, had their own kinship ties and ideologies of morality (Bush 84). The conditions of slavery, imposed by masters is largely to blame for the inability to consistently put these cultural practices into play, and create what was considered a proper union in the African context. Going back to the notion that Afro-Caribbean women exhibit a close knit, unique identity, there is also a paradox that existed in the family structure. This is a paradox that resulted from the advent of slavery, but also a series of changes after emancipation (Blank 1). Marriage often portrayed as a seemingly essential aspect of social acceptance, became less prominent during the abolishment of slavery. Women were reluctant to turn to marriage for fear of losing the privilege of strong parental dominion over the children and household (Momsen 2).

Enslaved African women were initially subject to the patriarchal dominance of European and African men, yet as men became less involved and critical in the lives of Afro-Caribbean women, there came an undeniable potential for new opportunity among women (Momsen 1). Afro-Caribbean men, just like their female African counterparts, also became subjects of their environment. Afro-Caribbean men were subject to frequent patterns of migration from their original settings. Emigration, also called out migration, to other areas of the Caribbean was an event spurred out of potential economic opportunity for men (Momsen 150). In West Indian societies like the small island of Nevis, there was particularly high levels of this out migration. In the case of Nevis, with a similar case in other West Indian societies, the abolition of slavery only left men with the prospect of being laborers on plantations, yet the wages could not supplement even a menial living (Momsen 151). Men migrated in the thousands to find work in a number of trades. Work ranged from agricultural trades of working on the sugar plantations of Cuba/Dominican Republic, oil refineries in the Dutch West Indies to industrial and domestic labor on the East Coast of the U.S (Momsen 151).

The absence of men in the event of their emigration, both temporarily and permanently to other areas, has led to the present structure and constituents of the family unit. With regards to family, it's interesting to note that Afro-Caribbean men and women generally hold different spheres of responsibility. Women are more or less confined to the domestic unit of responsibility associated with reproduction and rearing of the offspring. European values idealized this concept of women being solely concerned and kept within the home, and the man being the breadwinner as well as the representative for the family. Men participated in the public arena of responsibility. Women managed the affairs of the household, yet in the varying absence of the male figure were assisted through various networks. Relatives, sisters, brothers, and elder figures such as grandmothers, and neighbors functioned as support groups to facilitate management (Momsen 150). Men also play a role in establishing networks outside the home, providing some economic assistance, going through the public attempting to play roles as 'providers'. Their issue exists in that they can also be obligated to provide for multiple households. The construction of the Afro-Caribbean as a unique figure in the familial setting is evident in the event of her own migration. Women seeking to find employment outside the boundaries of the domestic, have trouble re-establishing the same networks abroad that helped her run the household. Even in the already established links of relatives and neighbors at home, she is the driver. Afro-Caribbean women are therefore unique in their construction as they provide strong roles in both the social and economic aspects of family, and overall community (Momsen 151).

The concept of gender has played a big role in establishing a consistent identity of the Afro-Caribbean woman. Under the conditions of plantation life and European slave masters, there was a departure from commonly held perceptions of gender differentiation. A departure from gender differentiation in the sector of field work worked from both a colonial imperative for

economic gain, but also propagated racist colonial ideologies of black, African women. Along with propagation of negative associations with the black women, women were regarded as below, even on the level of their male African counterparts. This is clearly a mode of patriarchy speaking on behalf of the European. In the eyes of European slave masters, the concept of “slave” as it applied to African males and females, was not at all consistent with gender division. There was also an absence of gender division when dealing with the concept of manual labour in the fields (Bailey 68). Women in fact, provided an essential if not necessary hand in the continuation of plantation economy. Ironic is the fact that enslaved African women are portrayed as being confined to less menial positions such as housewives, concubines, or domestic house slaves (Bailey 68). One such example of the preponderance of women in the field of labour, are the sugar plantations on the island-nation of Jamaica. Sugar was among the most lucrative trades that at one point made the island the largest exporter of the crop. Sugar was a major driving force in the economy, production of labor, and capital (Moore 184). Enslaved black women were allocated to a much narrower paradigm of occupations, with the second most common mode of occupation being domestic work. Men were able to participate in much larger array of opportunities. On plantation estates such as the Rose Hall, River, and Green Park estates of the parishes of St. James and Trelawny, there was an examination that women provided an unmatched contribution in numbers to field work in the cultivation of sugarcane (Byfield 84).

The Afro-Caribbean women is unique in her construction by a number of means. In the localities that exist within the Caribbean as a microcosm, a space of specificity, history has manifested her image into the more global scale of comprehension. The Afro-Caribbean women is tied to the powerful constructs of colonialism, which through her existence in the Caribbean is linked to the rise of capitalism in the Americas and the historical legacies of slavery. The Afro Caribbean women is unique in her ability to display independence both on the domestic and economic level usually without the prevalence of a male figure. Afro Caribbean women were

able to work through a completely new environment, and the creation of their identity is relevant to the same diversity that is the Caribbean. The Caribbean is an area with incredible diversity, unique localities that exist within the numerous island nations. Every locality as it pertains to the Afro-Caribbean women has a somewhat different tie to colonialism and the legacy of slavery. Despite what is seemingly different, there always exists a commonality which is manifested through the Afro-Caribbean women who represents this question of the “how” and “what” in the Caribbean.

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