

Feminism and slavery



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Feminism

Women were socially differentiated within the gender orders of slave based societies. The diversity of women's experiences in West Indian slave societies, undermines the formal claims to order in the knowledges conceived by the politically challenged term ' woman', as well as feminism as an advanced, radical conceptual device (Mohammed, p. 35).

Either way, histories of slavery experience are viewed with considerable ambivalence and scepticism (Mohammed,).

It has not helped matters that dominant textual constructs of the slavery regime, the longer part of the colonial period, represents it as the social experience on which rests on contemporary ideologies of race, class and gender relations.

Slavery is conceived also as the master mould from which are cast the persistent conflicts among women over definitions and ideological ownership of womanhood and femininity.

The contested politics of womanhood furthermore, has been accounted for in terms of women formally differentiated exposure to slave owning colonial masculinities and institutionalised hegemonic patriarchy.

These politics have also been explained in relation to the changing gender orders promoted by slavery and expressed culturally through civic institutions and productive arrangements,

An important consequence of this internal political feature in feminine identity was hardened ethnic and class positions between women that made problematic all projects of post-slavery rapprochement.

Slavery is conceived also as the master mould from which are cast the persistent conflicts among women over definitions and ideological ownership of womanhood and femininity. The attack upon non-white female identity promoted a gender culture of exclusion that was rationalised and maintained as new gender representations surfaced in distinct ideological and material situations.

Texts written by white women with a social familiarity of slavery yield ready evidence of these developments.

Carmichael, for example, described black women in her published travelogue as 'masculine', 'brutish', and lacking feminine sensitivities (p. 36).

Carmichael's reference was consistent with white men's view about the labouring capacity of female slaves.

For her, black women were outside the pale of feminine identity - hence her conclusion that 'to overwork a negro slave is impossible.'

Such texts served to consolidate and propagate the general opinions formulated by white male overseers and managers about black women.

Plantation records prepared by white men, for example, speak of black women's apparent ease at 'dropping children', capacity for arduous physical labour, and general 'amazonian cast of character.'

Collectively, these accounts, written by white women and white men, indicate the varying ways and intensity with which the ideological project of defeminising the black woman was carried out (cited in).

White female slave holders did not adopt publicly an anti-slavery stance.

Rather, despite their own marginalised social position within dominant patriarchy, with its repressive socio-sexual culture, they were known for their private and public support for the pro-slavery enterprise.

White women, then, offered the faint heart-beat of a feminist opposition to supportive 'texts' during the long slavery period, though it may be suggested by way of mitigation that their private miscegenation with black men, and their occasional private grumbles about the 'horrid nature of slavery, should be taken account as part of a discreet, subjective oppositional politics.

Nugent's decision to dance with a black man during a ball at Governor's residence sent an enormous shock through the sensitivities of upper-class female Jamaican society.

It was understood, and stated, that only a governor's wife could possibly have survived the disdain and derision that followed.

The aggression shown by the same female elite society towards Elizabeth Manning who, as a prominent member, was accused by her husband of extensive sexual relations with enslaved black men on the estate, helps to discredit the claim that there was perhaps a silent, submerged anti-slavery

conscience among sections of white female upper-class society (cited in). p. 42

Enslaved black women presented slave society with its principal feminist opposition.

Oppressed by the gender orders of black and white communities, and with little room to manoeuvre to acquire the respectability necessary to secure a platform for public advocacy, slave women were undoubtedly the most exploited group.

The inescapable tyranny of white and black masculinity created levels on which gender oppression was experienced and resisted. P. 45

It wasn't just the men that sexually abused the enslaved women.

[http://www3.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/hist106web/Slave
%20Communities/atlantic_world/gender.htm](http://www3.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/hist106web/Slave%20Communities/atlantic_world/gender.htm)

According to Shepherd, some white working class women who owned enslaved Africans females rented them out as prostitutes.

Understanding the role, the women played in the slave trade and community is important to offer a new dynamic to the study of slave culture in general.

Not only were slave women subordinate because of race but they also shared the trials of the oppression of the female gender.

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Women slaves played a key role in the development of slave communities through the development of African Sexuality, Family Structure and Economic Productivity.

It is therefore infinitely important that we must understand the slave trade from a female perspective to understand the development of these slave communities.