

Full Length Research Paper

The Movement from Secret Acts of Defiance to Manifestation of Women's Empowerment

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Before the advent of L'écriture féminine and the feminist revolution, Chinese women formed a kinship through the secret language of Nu Shu. Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray concentrated on redefining themselves as asexual-neither male nor female. Chinese women in the nineteenth century used Nu Shu as a form of affinity and passive aggressive defiance of the androcentric society in which they lived. They embraced their femininity in the curves and strokes of the Nu Shu language. Condé and Schwarz-Bart searched to explore the themes of alienation as Martinicans living in a European French society and the search for an identity that typifies the quintessential Caribbean patriarchal culture. The evolution in consciousness of the female and how she sees herself as part of the diasporic dilemma confronting Caribbean society is marked by the almost limited early works by women authors. As women found their voices and led the way for other women, a natural empowerment ensued with new loyalties as generations transcended the effects of colonialism, indentureship, and slavery. Afro-Caribbean women became vocal and paved the way for East Indian writers to emerge and find their voices. Contemporary literature exemplifies these women's struggles toward empowerment and identification with the land of their birth. From confusion spawns a new position for women as they move toward self-expression and self-actualization with the appointment of the first Indo-Trinidadian female Prime Minister.

Keywords: Nu Shu, L'écriture féminine, Afro-Caribbean writers, Indo-Caribbean writers

Introduction

*Men dare to leave home and brave life in the outside world,
But we women are not less courageous.
We can create language they can't understand.* (Quinn, 1991, p.101)

This courage typified Chinese women in the era where the ancient Chinese art of foot binding was the norm. Girls were forced to endure excruciating pain in isolation for the cost of smaller feet. In the Qin dynasty, small feet were the aspiration of every Chinese girl. During the years spent barely able to walk and function as a result of foot binding, Chinese women and girls developed the Nu Shu language to form a kinship and bond that defied the patriarchal society in which they lived. Chinese women in remote areas such as Jiangyong County in Hunan province were not permitted to learn the standard Chinese writing. Consequently, they formed Nu Shu to pass stories, songs, and folklore from one generation to another. Women living in a patrilineal society were expected to be subservient to the men and as such, Chinese women in

Jiangyong County developed Nu Shu to form a bond during the Qin dynasty. Oppressed, illiterate, uneducated, unable to walk, confined to their homes, lacking any political or financial power, Nu Shu gave Chinese women a sense of power and understanding of each other and their positions (Lee, 2002). Their world is transformed into a place of secret power where they speak a separate language from the men and their years of confinement become more enriching. Nu Shu was discovered in 1958 and has been the source of numerous analyses.

Perennial subordinates to their husbands and only respected if they bore their husbands a son, Chinese women sort respite and unleashed their creativity in the formation and perpetuation of Nu Shu. In the Nu Shu language, practicing their needlework on paper fans, they documented stories, songs, and folk tales celebrating their womanhood. Lee (2002) indicated that two formalized kinship developed: (a) "tongnian, or same year, or laotong or old same involving two girls of the same age; and (b) jiebai zimei or sworn or ritual sisters found between two or more girls of different ages" (p. 104). These relationships offered Chinese women the sisterhood, bond, respect, and

acceptance they did not receive from their husbands and the androcentric community.

In creating Nu Shu and passing down the tradition from generation to generation, Chinese women illustrated their defiance of the abject poverty and oppression in which they lived where their voices would never have otherwise been heard. Lee (2002) stated that Nu Shu allowed rural women to “alleviate the pain, to validate each individual’s identity, to create a distinct atypical communication mode, and to invite participatory performance through the creation of literacy” (p. 107).

Celebrating every aspect of their femininity, Chinese women capitalized on their femaleness and used the strokes and brushes of Nu Shu to empower themselves and celebrate womanhood. The size of the characters in Nu Shu are smaller and thinner reflecting Chinese women’s attempt at embracing their difference in gender and their feelings of inadequacies in an alpha male society. The curves and titled lines laud femininity as opposed to the straight and ticker lines of the Chinese language. Mc Laren (1996) underscored the importance of Nu Shu, “The value of Nu Shu writings lies not so much on the conventional plots and performances genre, but precisely in the stereotypical formulae and motifs that encode a distinctly feminine interpretation of Confucian norms” (p. 384). Women found self-expression, felt more in control and less powerless and victimized when they practiced Nu Shu. Chinese women felt validated and in some way they were resisting the stereotypical dictates of society and men as to what was expected of them. In this manner, these iconoclasts set the tone for future generations and women internationally as can be evidenced in France with the *écriture féminine*.

L’Ecriture Féminine: Panegyric or Panacea?

L’écriture féminine movement started in 1970 with noted writers Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray underscoring the need for women to embrace their feminine bodies and differences through language and text. Cixous felt that women were sexually repressed and their sexual pleasure denied expression. In *the Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), Cixous asserted, “Woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (p. 15).

Cixous, felt lost in a literary world dominated by phallogentric bias. In response, she wrote books urging women to see themselves as individuals. She pleaded with them to embrace their bodies and experiences. Through empowerment, Cixous believed that women would transcend their female bodies and view life not in terms of binary oppositions of male/female albeit as androgynous beings. Writing, Cixous exhorted, served as a form of celebration of all aspects of femininity. Cixous advocated that it is through writing that social change would occur as women empowered themselves and refused to view themselves as oppressed and incapacitated.

“Is the pen a metaphorical penis?” questioned Gilbert and Gubar (1979, p. 6). Cixous contends that it is. She believes there is a lack of exchange linguistically, socially, and culturally which allow women to express themselves freely. She believes that the pen is an invaluable tool in empowering women to search for their own identity at the exclusion of the limits placed on them through male mental modes. It is only through self-expression can women achieve emancipation, celebrating life and “libidinal economy” as opposed to Freud’s emphasis on absence and death. By embracing and claiming their femininity through writing about themselves in its entirety, women accomplish liberty from a male-dominated conceptualized world. In a similar vein, Cixous opposed binary opposites and viewed them as oppressive forces that kept women in the male/female mold. She espoused an androgynous individual who embraced both male and female as one.

Cixous opposes binary opposites. She believes that the idea of male/female places each individual, from birth, into the trap of emulating the behaviors of his/her gender. This offsets the necessity for individuals to see each other bereft of gender differences and to transcend gender stereotypes. According to Sarup (1993), “Cixous is committed to the production of a form of writing that would embody bisexuality, and operates in the interests of women” (p. 111). Dualistic opposites suggest a hierarchy, which oppresses women. Cixous indicates that women should reject these opposites and create a new reality with increased self-awareness and empowerment through writing.

Cixous and others finally answered a call for philosophy not to be seen only through a phallogentric perspective. Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous allowed women to embrace their womanhood by urging them to write about their experiences, their bodies, and their feelings. In so doing, these postmodernists’ feminists showed the empowerment and respect owed to them. Cixous instituted changes in thinking using writing from a female perspective. Her play on words, phonemes, her use of rhythmic language to capture the varying emotions women experience gave vent to a new genre of writing- *l’écriture féminine*.

Metaphysically, this challenged women to see themselves as individuals and through their eyes transcending the male/female dichotomy. This gave women voices. They no longer needed to stay repressed and oppressed. Philosophically, this opened a new path of writing and thinking which defied Lacan’s (1953) belief that language and the subconscious are similarly structured. Cixous illustrated and defied Foucault’s (1966) view that language can be used to oppress. Cixous carried her idea a step further and suggested that women could create their own language. She formed her own words because she continuously felt trapped in a language that is predominantly male directed. Cixous created words within the confines of language and meaning so that the reader would understand the words.

Transcendentally, Cixous urged women to reach beyond themselves, their sexuality, and their capabilities.

Condé and Schwartz-Bart: Xenophilia or Xenophobia?

In their 1967 novel *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* Schwartz-Bart and her husband explored the feelings of alienation and a woman's search to embrace her Caribbean identity. The perennial conflict between European French and French Caribbean identity illustrate the inner turmoil as French Caribbean women searched for a sense of identity and patriotism. This antipodal dimension moves from xenophilia to xenophobia as each character in the novel searched to reconcile her identity as a French Caribbean woman or heuristically reconstructed a new French Caribbean identity embracing both European and Caribbean milieu into a harmonious Gestalt.

Like such writers as Aimé Césaire and others, Condé, and Schwarz-Bart celebrate the Caribbean landscape coming to terms with their Caribbeaness or Antillanité through the beauty that surrounds, the vitality of the language, the rhythm of the African drums and the essence of their soul. Their characters surpass their feelings of alienation and return to communing with the pulsating splendor represented in nature. Telumée in *Pluie et vent sur Telumée miracle* (1972), finds her niche and embraces her indomitable strength by affirming that she is not a victim but a strong vibrant woman who identifies with her culture and the plenitude that surrounds her. Cudjoe (1990) indicated, "Telumée draws her energy from the language and culture of the island which mediates her entrance into the world of identity, presence and continuity" (p. 355). The book celebrates the discovery of Caribbeaness and the need to embrace everything that makes the individual Antillanité.

Telumée feels happy and contented exactly where she is emphasizing French Caribbean woman's need to accept their Caribbeaness and connecting more with Caribbean than a foreign European culture that leads to alienation and lack of self-concordance. The use of the Creole language in both French and West Indian novels celebrates the uniqueness of the Caribbean experience and suggests that this experience is one-dimensional despite language differences. The French island is rediscovered with the use of language, imagery, and poetic expressions offering a cadence of rhythmic Caribbean heritage as a celebration of its identity and Antillanité.

Mckay (1997) stated of Condé's plays, "whether the exile is chosen or imposed, living away from one's native country can prove to be a profoundly difficult experience" (p. 106). Living in exile in a foreign culture, Condé's characters in her plays are changed forever as they struggle to assimilate a culture that is in conflict with their innate nature and their upbringing. Mckay (1997) continued, "Because of the distance imposed by their exiles, like the author, the exiled characters all see themselves in a different way than those who stayed in their homeland" (p. 98). Those in the homeland lead antipodal lives to those who

chose to migrate for a specific number of years. Neither fully identifying with the new culture, assimilating aspects of the new culture to integrate within the society, but never harmonizing themselves to the new culture, the feeling of being uprooted a constant inner conflict. They yearn for the life they had in their homeland thinking it is the same only to realize on their return that it is not the same and the longing they had for their native land is no more as they feel a disconnect between the past and the present.

The female protagonists in West-Indian French and English books covet the perceived comfort of the adopted land, unsure as to which they could call home. As more assimilation of the new culture occurs, there is inner turmoil and conflict with those of the native land. The dichotomy between the two cultures is never totally assimilated and on returning to the motherland, they find themselves feeling alienated from the culture of birth. Such disparity and cognitive dissonance resonate into a fractured personality as evidenced in the protagonists of French and English Caribbean novels and plays. The essence of such characteristics is captured in the works of Condé, Schwarz-Bart, Phillip, and to a lesser extent Hodge. The dilemma is whether to choose the culture of the new country or be loyal to the culture of birth. Xenophobia or xenophilia?

Afro-Caribbean Women: Pundits or Plaudits?

The first voices to be heard in the Afro and Indo-Caribbean Diaspora were the Afro-Caribbean women. The Afro-Caribbean women set the tone and pace for the Indo-Caribbean women. Mehta (2004) reiterated the connection between Afro and Indo-Caribbean women, "African and Indian women in the Caribbean share a common history of geographical and cultural displacement, forced labor, economic enterprise, resistance and familial dispersal" (p. 25). The commonality of history, geography, and culture has found the Indo and Afro-Caribbean writers forming a connection and understanding as fellow sufferers of similar fates. Mehta further suggested, "By embracing a transformative dougla poetics of accommodation and renewal in their writings, Afro-Caribbean writers such as Merle Hodge, Marina Maxwell and Indo-Caribbean writers such as Narmala Shewcharan and Ramabai Espinet have created new discursive paradigms for reading Caribbeaness as a site for interracial collaborations, gender negotiations and the affirmation of negated identities" (p. 25).

Chancy (1997) saw Afro-Caribbean writers coming to terms with their migration and in need of safe spaces. The theme is similar to that of their Martinican counterparts on alienation in the adopted land, self-definition, recuperation, and return. Space and transnational identities are the themes of various Afro-Caribbean authors. The need to leave the native land or return to the native land recurs throughout the literature (James, 2007) and echoes the cyclical ebb and flow of the waves from poverty to betterment. According to James, this "tidalectics" recurs throughout Caribbean literature and is part of the

dilemma constantly confronting Telumée in Schwarz-Bart's novel (p. 33).

Hodge captured the essence and heartbreak of migration when her protagonist's mother left the shores to seek education and improvement away from Trinidad. The iterative theme of migration, separation, and alienation typifies Caribbean literature. Phillip (1988) captured the plight of the powerless Afro-Caribbean woman who is morally, emotionally, and psychologically strong and determined to succeed despite the odds. She is willing to sacrifice the known for the unknown in hopes of providing a better life for herself and her child.

Finding the balance between two disparate cultures resonate in Phillip's novel *Harriet's daughter* where Zulma is forced to search for equilibrium between her West Indian roots and her adopted home, Canada. This conflict typifies the quintessential Caribbean dilemma when migration is as much a necessity as a reality. Lacy in *For the life of Laetitia* and Zulma in *Harriet's Daughter* both have limited relations with their mothers who live elsewhere. Zulma returns to the Caribbean but Lacy aspires to leave the Caribbean. James (2007) underscored the paradoxical nature of West Indian literature, stating, "For all its grounding in regional reality, however, one of the enduring paradoxes is that reality is written out of an ethos, largely Afro-diasporic, by writers who have migrated" (p. 45).

Afro-Caribbean female writers, both French and English, paved the way for Indo-Caribbean writers to emerge and rise to the challenges of their enculturation and innate nature. Indo-Caribbean writers inspired by their fellow Afro-Caribbean female perspectives, with shared nationality, history, and geography found their voices. Their writings expressed disgust at the treatment meted out to them from an androcentric society, culture, and religion where they were treated as slaves by their husbands and his family. In contemporary society, Indo and Afro-Caribbean women are making their mark in society as they set a new mode of thought on their contributions to societal development.

Indo-Caribbean Women: We Will Rise

Archetypal notions of the Indo-Caribbean woman as a victim of circumstance at the hands of a vituperative husband are changing. Indo-Caribbean women are finding their voices and transcending previous notions of them as simply subservient beings passively and dutifully catering to their husband and children's whims and fancies. A paradigm shift has occurred in the way in which Indo-Caribbean women see themselves and their situation. They no longer see themselves as helpless and defenseless victims of their karma or destiny. They embrace their freewill through their indomitable spirit to succeed through hard work and diligence. Indo-Caribbean women are embracing their dharma (purpose) with grace and passion spawning a new genre of writers, educators, researchers and voices to be heard and lauded.

Bragard (2008) reiterated this point, "coolie women's writings are refuting stereotypical representations organized around the paradigms of exoticism and victimization by portraying female characters transgressing social, ethnic, sexual, cultural and gender boundaries" (p. 133). In traditional literature, Indo-Caribbean women are characterized as the brunt of their husband's beatings after a bout of drinking rum and eating curried duck at a river lime (get together). Indo-Caribbean women according to Bragard, especially Hindu women, have perpetuated the tradition of exploitation despite herself by allowing the man in the past to continue his domination of her. This has changed and continues to change as evidenced by the rise in power of the first Indo Trinidadian prime minister in Trinidad. No longer, are Indo-Caribbean women oiling the cricket bat with which her husband beats her (as portrayed by Naipaul, 1959 in *Miguel Street*) but she is now raising her head embracing her sense of self, learning to create her destiny and challenge the archaic laws, rituals, and dogmas espoused hundreds of years ago by pundits and the scriptures.

Shashtra (1993) by Laskhmi Persad exemplifies such a transformation. The Indo-Caribbean woman has catalyst from her caterpillar form into a butterfly where she enhances, challenges, and evolves. The protagonist, Shashtra, defies the odds and becomes a success. She struggles to find herself and understand her place in the world. She fights against the traditional role of the Indo-Caribbean woman to that of her own role and who she aspires to become. She finds her wings like the caterpillar and embraces her voice as she starts her neophyte journey as a university student, marriage, motherhood, widowhood, and being a single parent. In this novel, Persad illustrates the transformation of the new Indo-Caribbean woman who empowers herself through free will and choosing her destiny instead of surrendering to tradition and progresses toward a modern concept of the Indo-Caribbean woman symbolic of the crossing of the Kala Pani.

Mehta (2004) posited that the "legacy of the cane" has resulted in "female epistemology of cane" a direct result of indentureship leading to a tenacious, resilient, self-affirming Indo-Caribbean woman who succeeds through her own grit. Mehta further stated, "The female cane cutter represents the literary muse for Indo-Caribbean women writers who position her as a valuable role model that inaugurates and sustains a vital female heritage in the Caribbean" (p. 23). The strength and hardship endured by the female cane cutter during indentureship and after, suggests physical, spiritual, and moral fortitude. This strength no longer needed to deal with abusive husbands and many children is now channeled into finding their voices, developing a kinship and sisterhood, defining themselves in a phallogocentric society, and engendering a legacy of hope and aspiration for young Indo-Caribbean women.

Shinebourne (1988) in her book *The English Plantation* epitomizes the traditional relationship between the Indo-Caribbean male and female in the following:

They just eat and drink rum in their spare time and beat their wives and fight at the rum shop, and weddings. Their wives cook from 3 o' clock in the morning to late at night. You want to be a coolie woman? I don't care! Coolie women have to carry all the burdens for the men, the burden of the sick, the old, the children, burying the dead, and no thanks, is only licks" (p. 128). In this rhetorical question, Shinebourne appositely captures the essence of the archaic or traditional Indo-Caribbean woman and even some who live in remote areas.

In epitomizing the classic Indo-Caribbean woman in the kitchen taking care of her husband and children and always cooking, Shinebourne (1988) dealt with the issue of physical and psychological entrapment which perpetuated based on the dictates of religion and the cane culture. The perennial issue that confronts June, Shinebourne's protagonist, is that of the archetypal role of a Hindu woman who is expected to abide by tradition and destiny and not exert her free will.

There is a definite disparity between her wants and desires and her cultural heritage and identity. Claiming one's heritage entails a certain level of subservience and passivity which neither Shatra nor June want to surrender. The issue of the traditional coolie woman seems to be in conflict with the modern views perpetuated by both June and Shatra as they search to redefine their Indianness, their Caribbeanness, and their definition of self, as modern coolie women.

Implications and Applications

You want to be a Chinese woman? You want to be a French woman? You want to be a Martinican woman? You want to be an Afro-Caribbean woman? You want to be a coolie woman? You are woman. Chinese women were physically and psychologically trapped. French women felt their world as women were interpreted through a male perspective. They also expressed the feeling that they were sexually oppressed. Martician women felt trapped when living in a foreign culture and felt the disconnection with their native land after spending time away from their birth place. Afro and Indo-Caribbean women were trapped in the antiquated stereotypical roles laid down by an androcentric society demoralized by the effects of colonialism, slavery, and indentureship. The indelible thread connecting all these women is oppression at the hands of a male-dominated society and their use of language as a tool to express their inner turmoil, foibles, strengths, fears, and happiness. They embraced their uniqueness and communed with their surroundings to find a voice and synergy.

Current trends in women's movement and literature suggest a level of feminine consciousness developing. This woman is an activist, is finding her voice and honing what she wishes to express, she is competent and the maker of her destiny not leaving her life to chance or at the dictates of a religious pundit. She is best described as Alexander (2010) described the Indo-Caribbean Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, "her girlish flowered dress, pink mini-sweater and white wedge heeled

sandals gave no impression on Tuesday that she had come to cut big men down to size" (p. 4). Kamal Persad Bissessar went to the Caricom heads of Government in July 2010, to end the era of Trinidad as the Godfather of the Caribbean. She used her cane culture of resilience, service to others, and strength to implement change befitting her people.

Kamla Persad Bissessar has set her own standards for excellence, defined and reengineered herself as a coolie woman individually and collectively, is a bedrock of the home and society and is no longer passive aggressive, is vocal and operates from a position of love, nurturing, appreciation and supportive motherly skills to govern a country. She is one of the many strong female Indo-Caribbean voices that are being heard throughout the region. So, in response to the question, You want to be a coolie woman? Yes, I want to be a coolie woman and foremost I celebrate being a woman in this new voice that women are finding and embodying. No longer can the hackneyed cliché of women as barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen serve contemporary society where women are as strong as or stronger than men in all areas of life. They are empowered, self-actualized, with self-concordance, self-awareness, they possess empathetic listening skills, social and emotional intelligence, and are leaders in their own right choosing empowerment in lieu of subservience and oppression. The headline in the *Trinidad Guardian* (15 March, 2011) best sums up the efforts of women in general to empower themselves, "From barefoot to Prime Minister" (p. 6).

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