

## Black British Feminism

By Heidi Safia Mirza

Black British Feminism as a theoretical and activist movement has its genesis in the 1940s and 50s in the activism and struggles of black women migrants, who came to Britain from the newly independent colonies of the Caribbean, African, and Indian sub-continent during the post war recruitment drive for cheap labour. As a political project in the purpose of Black British Feminism has been to highlight the absences and reveal the pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the 'black other' as they are produced in a gendered, sexualized, and racialised discourse.

Though there are many different voices among Black feminists they never-the-less speak of Black Feminism, not Black Feminism(s) as the political project has a single purpose. The contested use of the term 'black' which they embrace demonstrates that you can have 'difference' (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of 'sameness' (i.e. Black Feminism). The concept 'black' as a multiracial signifier emerged in Britain in 1960s as a strategic political term embracing African, Caribbean and South Asian peoples in post colonial Britain. Though divided by language, religion, nationality, and culture, a new politics of solidarity became possible under these new relations of equivalence.

The concept of 'black' has not been without its tensions as the call to Afro-Asian unity by OWAAD (The Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent) demonstrates. In *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985) Bryan, Scafe and Dadzie show how in 1978 grassroots black women's movement became a landmark in terms of an emerging Black British Feminist consciousness. Their struggles reveal the political agency of black women of different languages, religions, cultures and classes who consciously constructed a political based identity in response to exclusion of women experiences of racism from the antiracist racist movement. As Rahila Gupta and Ranu Samantrai have shown Black women's coalitions such as Southhall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism who have campaigned for African and Asian women's rights since 1970s still thrive. These organisations demonstrate the value of the tensions brought about by heterogeneity and conflict which open debate and expand democratic practices within the Black Feminist Movement.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Black British feminism as a critical theoretical project sought to engender critical racial reflexivity among white feminists. Hazel Carby's article, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood'(1982), embodies the classic Black British Feminist response to exclusion and white feminist authority. Centering her argument around the key areas of feminist discourse- the family, patriarchy and reproduction- she interrogates the contradiction of the white feminist theoretical claim to universal womanhood on the one hand, but the practice of exclusion of women who are different on the other. Similarly Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar in 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' (1984) focus on white feminism's subversion of the discourse around the family, sexuality and the peace movement in its unconscious attempt to valorise and represent nothing more than white women's own cultural experience as global.

More recently the black feminist theorists have turned to locating black female identity at the centre of their analysis. In the space opened up by the discourse on postmodern difference, black women have been looking more closely at new forms of cultural racism such as those legitimated through dominant regimes of representation. Key collections such as *Black British Feminism: a Reader* is oriented around issues of identity and difference, and explores cultural hybridity and the diasporic experience.

Black British Feminism is a dynamic body of thought that has shifted and changed over the years. It has always been contingent in nature confronting and deconstructing the intersectionality of class, gender and racial exclusion, where it appears, not only in eurocentric academic feminist discourse, but also as it produced in Black women's everyday lives in regions, nations, and places associated with Great Britain.

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