The Challenge of Integration of Black Women in the United Kingdom from Slavery to Contemporary Britain: Resilience of a Fight

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Abstract: In the United Kingdom, the black community, in general faces several difficulties to be integrated in the Anglo-Saxon white mainstream. Specifically, because of double identity in connection race and sex, black British women experience frustrations that cause even more complication for their integration. The present essay resorts to the concept of "Black feminism" which highlights the inextricably linked oppressions of sexism and racism that black women face in multi-racial societies. In addition to the challenge that any minority group has to meet, the paper exposes the black women's capacities of resilience in Britain.

Keywords: Integrated, race, Black British women, sexism, racism, minority group

Résumé : Au Royaume-Uni, la communauté noire, en général, éprouve plusieurs difficultés à s'intégrer dans la société blanche Anglo-saxonne. Et de façon plus spécifique, en raison de la double identité liée à la race et au sexe, les femmes noires britanniques vivent des frustrations qui compliquent encore plus leur intégration. Le présent article fait recours au concept de « féminisme noir » qui met en évidence les oppressions inextricablement liées du sexisme et du racisme auxquelles les femmes noires sont confrontées dans les sociétés multiraciales. En plus des défis que tout groupe minoritaire rencontre, l'article révèle les capacités de résilience des femmes noires en Grande-Bretagne.

Mots clés : Intégré, race, femme noire britannique, sexisme, racisme, groupe minoritaire

Introduction

A passage from Bell Hooks's book "Ain't I a Woman" reads,

> When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about, racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women. (Hooks 2015:21)

Thus, for the Black American female activist, the black woman receives consideration neither from black men behavior neither in the same racial group, nor from the white woman with whom she shares the same gender identity. She is quite always ignored. In a context similar to

this testimony of the Black American writer, many black women in multiracial societies are confronted with poor social conditions. The black community in the United Kingdom cope with difficulties for its integration. That situation becomes worse for black women who are victims of the oppressions linked to their race and gender. They are therefore victims of racism, because they are black, and gender discrimination, because they are women. They experience double oppression, which turns into obstacles to their political and socio-economic rise.

Through an analysis of the British society behavior characterized by sexism and racism, this paper investigates Black British women's capacities of resilience that results, not so much in a posture of defiance of a system created by the white and the man, as in the phrasing of a type of feminism in connection with their experience of double discrimination. The concept of Black feminism a variation of feminism adapted to the political, socio-economic and cultural condition of Black women in multiracial societies, proposed by Bell Hooks, takes into account the two main difficult aspects that women face. In the first phase, the paper sheds light on the sexist attitudes as the first challenge that black British women meet. In the second phase, the paper explores racism viewed as social construct erected against black British women. The last section of the discussion presents the various forms of fight led by Black British women who display their capacities of resilience.

I. Black British Women in a Sexist Society

Davis Bullwinkle's essay about "Women and Their Role in African Societies" poses that the African societies from which black British women come have always praised manly values and attributes. In Africa, the lack of resilience of women to conform to a sexist and macho African society is the result of the education and traditions black women in African societies receive. In African tradition and psychology women are housewives and have their place beside men, of course, but after them. Authority is therefore held by the man, and his wife depends on him and is totally submissive to him. Moreover, she does not contest her husband's title and place as the head of the family. In this respect, Bullwinkle asserts that "African women traditionally have viewed themselves as subservient to their husbands. They have the right to go to the marketplace and trade but in many cases must receive permission from their husbands to participate in any other economic activities" (Bullwinkle 1983: 264). Besides the African black woman who lives in Africa, the West Indian black lady is a woman with African attitudes and traditions too; her continent of origin is Africa. Her behavior with her man, considered to be the natural head of the family is similar to that of the African woman. The following situation

described by an Afro-Caribbean woman is an accurate illustration of the woman's condition: "I got married in 1949, and had my first child in 1950. Before we got married, we built a house. My husband used to work hard in the fields but I had two jobs. I used to work in the home, as all women did, but I also used to work in the market, because the things he planted, I used to go and sell. I was a higgler. We raised a lot of cattle, and we had chickens too." (Bryan et al 2018: 20)

That picture of the woman in the family unit in the Caribbean is a reproduction of women's situation in Africa, inasmuch as the major feature of any traditional system is to seek its own perpetuation no matter the place. Thus, even though African men and women were deported to the West Indies due to slavery, the former tended to replicate their domination over the latter. The domination took the form of sexism with which black women were confronted in the West Indies. In the Caribbean and in Africa as well, the woman apparently accepts with some sense of passivity her condition, because of the African traditional values they have inherited.

In United Kingdom, Black British women who are descendants of African women and Caribbean women are victims of a type of sexism harder than the one in Africa and West Indies. Sexism in Britain is supported by British laws that deny women any rights, forcing them to accept their place inferior to that of men. The sexism black women encounter in the UK is juxtaposed to degrading stereotypes and harsh treatment. The terms used by Annecka Marshall, a Black British woman, eloquent describe the Black woman's victimized posture. Marshall authored an essay entitled "Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writing on Black Women" which states: "Portraying Black women as sexually denigrated has been central to the ideological justification for systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism and class oppression. The historical development of representations of Black women as animalistic, diseased and licentious has contributed to our subordination in contemporary Britain." (Jarrett-Macauley 1996:5)

The presence of sexism in the labour field adds to the discrimination black British women face. They are denied some jobs, just because of their sex.

Nevertheless, the women's presence in the West Indies as slaves, and later immigrants in United Kingdom testified to their courage and their qualities displayed at work. Such qualities did not make differentiation from men. As slaves, no distinction was made between Black men and Black women. Their work on plantations were similar in difficulties and pains, as Bryan et. al. portray in *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*:

> We were expected to work just as hard and as long as the men when we were slaves, and this has never changed. Our role as slaves was to work as

> fieldhands on the plantations or as domestics, washerwomen, cooks, seamstresses and nannies in the slavemaster's house. In the eyes of the 'backra' (or overseer) we were equal to the men just as long as our strength matched theirs. But in our eyes, we were more than equal to the men, for having completed our work on the estate. (Bryan et al 2018: 17).

The situation black women underwent has stayed unchanged, even when they moved to United Kingdom. Their oppression as black women workers still prevails in waged labour, although they do the same job as men's.

The majority of black women who migrated to Britain came from West Indies and Africa after the Second World War. They were as numerous as men, and like men their initial objective was not to stay in UK, but to make money for the family left in their homeland. They intended to return home as soon as they make enough money. But in Britain, the jobs given to them were works white British indigenous refuse to do. Most of these jobs were in the servicing, semi-skilled and unskilled sectors. They were daytime cleaners, canteen workers, laundry workers and maids. Thus, it became quite impossible to save money and send it back home, or go back home as they initially decided before their arrival in Britain.

Black women were also victims of what was called 'homework' that consisted in staying at home and working for a firm. These jobs included sewing and light assembly work. Black women could take advantage of this kind of job, because it offered them the opportunity to take care of their children. These kids were previously left at home when their mothers went for their work. At first sight, the 'homework' resolved the difficulties of childcare for black women. But in reality, they came out as the losers in the deal, while employers were the greatest winners. According to Bryan's analysis,

> It enabled them [employers] to pay the lowest wages, and to offload overhead costs, such as heating, lighting, electricity, machinery and rent, onto the workers themselves. Homeworkers were classified as 'self-employed', which freed the firm from paying National Insurance contributions and fringe benefits such as sick pay or holiday pay. Being self-employed increased our [black women] vulnerability, and employers took full advantage of the opportunity to make direct cost savings. Taken on as additional labour during production peaks, homeworkers would be laid off during 'troughs', with the firm free of any liability to pay redundancy money, and immune to accusations of unfair dismissal. (Bryan et al 2018:30-31)

This kind of work was especially done by Black British women workers, because they needed to take care of their family and have a wage job to feed that family. The 'homework' was unfortunately an imperfect alternative for these Black British women. "[And] it is no coincidence that it has remained almost synonymous with cheap, Black, female labour." (Bryan et al 2018: 31).

Employment is most the cases linked to education. Sexism in British society has determined for a long time the kind of job Black women could do proportionally to their level of education. "For Black schoolgirls, sexism has […] played an insidious role in [their] lives. It has influenced […] already limited career choices and has scarred [their] already tarnished self-image." (Bryan et al 2018:58) One of the public employments in which Black British women are still numerous, even today, is the health service. Upon the arrival of immigrants in Britain, after the Second World War, in the fifties, almost all the public services needed to be supplied with workers. But the public service that needed the most to be filled with manpower was the National Health Service (NHS). Unfortunately, Black women who immigrated were just needed for petty jobs in the service. They were used as nurses, cleaners, and cooks and not really expected in the upper structure of hospitals and other healthcare centers. "From the very beginning, the NHS had one purpose – to replenish this country [Britain]'s labour supply with fit, white, male workers" (Bryan et al 2018: 89). In other words, Black women were initially excluded from this type of job, and, subsequently, they were not the welcome in this service. It appears that the NHS was a sexist service, because the health profession in Britain was predominantly based on a patriarchal pattern. Besides, even when black women were patients in the healthcare service, they faced sexist practices and attitudes.

The service was not geared to receive black women as patient, but white men who were considered to be the main labour force of the country. Then, from the early years of immigration till today, Black women realise that they are far from being the priority of British authorities. This assertion is upheld by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, in their essay *The Heart of Race,* when they affirm: "Black women's health is therefore at the very bottom of an ever-diminishing list of national health priorities (Bryan et al 2018: 91). Sexism is not the only brunt of the obstacles women face in United Kingdom. They are also confronted with racism.

II. Black Women and Racism in the United Kingdom

The presence of Blacks in the United Kingdom can be traced back from the Anglo-Saxon period. They have always been subject of questioning by white people. Therefore, many false assumptions were developed about their lives that led to their debasement. The British people's feeling of hatred for the black race grew out of a definition of Black people as slaves who arrived in Britain after 1570. The white's resentment revolved around four main points:

> First, the African's skin colour was seen in a negative way. In England the concept of Blackness was equated with sin and flirtatiousness. Indeed, Blackness was the antithesis of 'whiteness'. 'Whiteness' symbolized purity,

> virginity, virtue, beauty, beneficence and God. In contrast, Blackness connoted filthiness, sin, baseness, ugliness, evil and the devil. Second, the African was considered to be a heathen and uncivilized. […] Third, the African was viewed as a savage beast. In particular the English associated Africans with apes […] Lastly, the African was perceived as being sexually potent. (Jarrett-Macauley 2005: 6)

Such negative opinion about Blacks became worse with racist scientific theories that were constructed in order to strengthen and legitimize white supremacy in the mid-19th century. Many theories have been developed by pseudo-scientists including the Frenchman Arthur de Gobineau. Amina Mama, in her book *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* summarises the Frenchman opinion:

> Africans were completely devoid of intelligence […] black people [are] unable to think in any reflective manner and endowed […] with an 'imagination' that [is] rooted in their blood. Art, in this scheme of things, was the antithesis of intellect, a thoughtless activity requiring only the reflection of sensuality. […], Africans lacked the sophisticated linguistic skills, the scientific and political faculties of the Europeans, and were sentimental, affectionate and best suited to dancing, dressing up and singing. (Mama 2002: 19).

For Mama, such prevailing constructs of the black race resulted in an even more degrading picture of Black women viewed as the inferior category of the inferior race. Racism against Black women in Britain has mainly relied on these dehumanizing theses. The scheme could be phrased in terms of syllogism: Whiteness is superior to Blackness, and men are superior to women; so black men are superior to Black women who are equally inferior to white women. In other words, as white men placed Blacks at the bottom of the humankind, black women could be viewed as the inferior of the inferior race. Their irreverence for black women was materialized by the conditions in which Black African women were treated at the time of slavery: the African enslaved women were kept in cages like wild animals, just because their physical shape was an object of curiosity for white Britons. That was the case of the South African "Baartman" who became a sexual fetish to the point that her image was put on social cards of lewdness. Actually, "Saartje Baartman, a South African woman, was brought to England in the 1800s and displayed in fairgrounds across Europe, billed as 'the Hottentot Venus' until her premature death […]. Much of the attention she attracted, caged and shown in a seminude state, was centred on her physique" (Mama 2002: 91). In addition to that popular curiosity and the image of sexual attraction to which the black woman associated, the European scientific world of the time used her body in 1816 for experiments to corroborate pre-existing racist doctrines.

"She also attracted the scrutiny of scientists such as Baron Cuvier, who probed and examined her while she was alive and later dissected her corpse and preserved her genitals. A plaster cast was made of her body and, until recently, displayed in the Musée de I'Homme in Paris, where it continued to attract unsavoury attention." (Mama 2002: 91)

During the same period, some black women were also victims of racism despite their outstanding achievements for the well-being of British populations. They faced a type of racism that was nourished by jealousy and hatred from white women. This was the experience of Mary Seacole, a mulatto, well known for her activities as a healer, especially in the Caribbean, Jamaica and Central America. The Black British writer, Mama Amina notes the mulatto's desire to help in these terms: "Seacole was determined to continue to carry out her healing vocation […] already practiced during cholera and yellow fever epidemics in Central America and the Caribbean […]" (Mama 2002: 91). However, when she arrived in Great Britain in 1854, the community of white British nurses gave her a cold reception. She did the same job as they did, but she was a woman and black. That was the problem. Therefore, because she was not the welcome in the country, the practice of her activities was strictly prohibited.

Besides, the arrival of Black women in UK from the former British colonies after World War II to help rebuild the crumbling country did not put an end to racism. On the contrary, racist acts became more intense against these Black women almost everywhere in Britain, despite their good will. Workplaces became space for racial discrimination, as shown by a young black Caribbean girl immigrant:

> At the new firm, they [employers] had to employ Black workers or they would get taken to court, so they employed two of us. The other workers [White] gave us a hard time. They called us all sorts of names and even went on strike and brought in the union. The union told them there was nothing they could do, when the firm paid the bonus we would get as much as them. In the canteen, when we sat at a table together, we knew full well that no one would sit at the table with us. Some would even prefer to stand up to eat their meal. (Bryan 2018: 26)

Black women in UK today are mostly from African or Caribbean descent; many of them are of mixed origin, and many others were born and raised in Britain. Wherever they come from, all of them have already experienced the hard reality of racism. The first immigrant black women and their offspring are still living today that difficult experience of racial discrimination. White racist behaviours hinder the integration of black women in the country. In fact, representations of black women as animals, mentally disturbed persons, or creatures without decency contributed to their subordination in British society. The difficulties that black women experience as health workers are not only related to sexism that we described above but to

racism too. Racial discrimination seems to be the most important difficulty that black women face for their integration in the employment area. When the UK health service and transport sector in particular needed staffing to revitalize the economy of the country, newly arrived black women from the former British colonies responded positively to the authorities' appeal despite the low wages offered in these sectors. The white women, on the contrary, refuse to work there. However, despite their noble desire to help restore the dynamism of British economy, black women suffered from racism. These racist discriminations are reported:

> Over the past thirty years the NHS has got – and is getting still – a huge captive, low-waged Black women's labour force. Stories abound of Black SENs who were unable to go on and train as SRNs because of the poor references they were given by their seniors. Those Black women who succeeded in overcoming the obstacles and gaining SRN training often found that they were simply extending their period of cheap labour by a further two years. The highly regulated power structures within the NH Sserved to isolate overseas nurses and to intensify our experiences of racism, at both at a personal and institutional level. (Bryan 2018:40)

Black women in UK also experience racism in education. Young Black girls were offended by their classmates and their teachers. The first immigrants to arrive after the Second World War relate their experience in these terms:

> Children were presented with a world view in which blackness represented everything that was ugly, uncivilised and underdeveloped, and our teachers made little effort to present us or our white classmates with an alternative view. Having been raised on the same basic diet of colonial bigotry themselves, they simply helped to make such negative stereotypes and misconceptions about us more credible. According to them, we 'could not speak English' and needed 'special' classes where our 'broken' version of the language could be drilled out of us. We were quiet and volatile. Best of all, we were good at sports – physical, non-thinking activities – an ability which was to be encouraged so that our increasing 'aggression' could be chanelled into more productive areas. (Bryan 2018: 66)

Blacks in general and black girls in particular in UK are victims of stereotypes in education. They are criticized for refusing to accept the disciplinary exactingness required by schools. These clichés force many of them to leave the general circuit of British school education to technical education circuits. This is what Cooper's research reveals: "Black students are frequently portrayed as conflicting with the behavioral requirements of mainstream schools. Historically they are more likely to be moved into separate schools and units for those deemed to have special emotional, learning, and behavioral problems […]. (Gillborn 1997: 380). The racist behaviour of teachers is largely responsible for the difficulties young black girls in British schools encounter. They are very regularly excluded from the education system

because of the existing tensions between the teaching staff and young black students. Gillborn and Gipps published:

> Although older boys (ages 14 to 15) are most likely to be excluded, in comparison with peers of the same age and gender, African Caribbean girls are also excluded in disproportionate numbers. Ethnographies of multiethnic schools suggest that statistics like these may be the tip of an iceberg; even where they share the same classroom as other students, teachers' beliefs and actions can be such that African Caribbean young people do not enjoy equal opportunities to succeed. (Gillborn 1997: 380)

Racism against Black women in the United Kingdom is thus perceived through several levels of British social life. Since their arrival in the kingdom, black women have suffered great humiliations. The existential difficulties that they continue to face do not prevent them from their desire to be integrated in the British society. They fight as women to exist in a sexist society and as Blacks to be accepted into a white dominant society.

III. Fight for the Reconstruction of the Image and the Dignity of Black Women in the United Kingdom

The struggle of Black British women to restore their image, their dignity and to be integrated into the British society has many different forms. For these women, the fight consists first to redress the inaccuracies that vilify them and second, to stand up against all the injustices they encounter in UK. This restoration work is the concern of many Black British women such as women writers and women activists. They are opposed with their writings and with detailed and argued documentation that the wrong image of the black woman assimilated to apes in the 19th century was developed by racist and sexist European pseudo-scientists. The only objective of all the speculations related to the sexuality of black women was to dehumanize them and to lower them in order to justify the sexual abuse of the master. This is revealed by Annecka Marshall, a sociologist.

> The female slave was considered to be governed almost entirely by her libido. Her sexual attributes were often sensationally exaggerated as offering the delights of illicit sex. Enslaved Black women were sexually objectified as loose, lewd and wanton. The argument that Black women were lascivious and immoral was used to rationalize their sexual abuse by ‘white’ masters and overseers. (Jarret-Macauley 2005: 8)

In the British context, the racist and sexist assertions developed against black women also aim to justify Anglo-Saxon social domination by a sexist male ideology on the one hand and by racist theses on the other. It is about rationalizing the inferiority of the Black British woman in order to justify her oppression. This sexual disparagement, for sure, has unwholesome effects in the British society today. British sociologist Annecka Marshall insists

when she says: "The historical development of representations of Black women as animalistic, diseased and licentious has contributed to our subordination in contemporary Britain." (Jarret-Macauley 2005: 5). Therefore, erasing centuries of lies and stereotyped beliefs is not easy at all. Very likely, the work of reconstruction the dignity of the Black British woman becomes a work of revisionism too. Some Black British women aware of the issue are also devoting themselves to it. The British black writer Delia Jarett Macauley asserts:

> In my complementary roles of writer/editor, teacher, I had two distinct, but related, aims. The first was to research Black women's lives in contemporary and historical fields and to increase the body of knowledge of that lived experience. The second was to look at the construction of images of the Black woman, whose status as 'Other' in literature, film and art has supported a system of domination and subordination in Euro American thought and life. (Jarrett-Macauley 2005:15)

This work of reconstruction of Black British women led by Afro-British intellectuals certainly aims to restore their confidence, but also and above all to awaken their conscience in a society which marginalises them. Jarrett-Macauley states: "Since the early 1980s there have been a number of published works by and about Black women in Britain […] A handful of non-fiction works published during the last decade have raised awareness of the position of Black women in this society". Thus, several Black British women become aware of the importance of restoring their image, which had been flouted several centuries before. The fight is also about overcoming stereotypes that have destroyed the identity of black women in the UK. And yet the African-British woman is courageous. Her role isn't just to run a house, care for children only, or be a sex object. Yvonne Stewart, revolted to be reduced to these functions, expresses clearly:

> I am a Black woman but look at me. I am Black yes but I can do a hundred per cent better than you. My skin is Black but it's not holding me back…. A Black woman is a Black woman. She can do anything she wants. She's a woman and that's what she should know. Number one she's a woman. She can do it because we women are mainstay. We keep the world going. (Jarret-Macauley 2005:47)

The fight for the respect and integration of the Black British woman, free from prejudices and stereotypes goes beyond the theories developed by Black British women themselves to rewrite their own history and thwart the racist and sexist theories that exist. This battle for the positioning of gender and race is also taking shape with the struggle of activists on the ground. Black women in the United Kingdom meet in various feminist associations including OWAAD (the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent) to discuss and find solutions to the difficulties encountered by women of the black ethnic and Asian minority.

This movement brings together ethnic black minority women and Asian minority women. On the ground, OWAAD activists speak out against racism, gender discrimination, police brutality, social injustices in education and health, and many other issues discriminating black British women. The British site Black Cultural Archives underlines:

> At the height of the Women's Movement during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Black women became involved in struggles for social reform, most notably in the area of education, health, and police brutality. This meant engaging in sit-ins, strikes, demonstrations, awareness raising and the establishment of Black Studies and Supplementary Schools to counter the mis-education of Black children. (S. Dadzie, Black Cultural Archives online)

In 1978 when the movement was created, it encouraged other local associations of black women to defend their interests locally. Several local groups were then organising their structure around OWAAD across the country with the same goals. Some local associations such 'Brixton Black Women's Group' and Southall Black Sisters 'became the leading figures of this organisation. The OWAAD organisation disappeared because of internal misunderstandings in the early 1980s leaving a great legacy to the entire black community in the UK and mainly Black British women. The activist struggle led by this organisation and its leaders including Stella Dadzie and Olive Morris rolled back the racist immigration laws, put an end to the sus law practiced by the British police, and restored the confidence of many black women in the United Kingdom. In fact, in an interview with a journalist, Stella Dadzie, the revolutionary of the Black British feminist movement conclude:

> Throughout history, Black women have made an equal and significant contribution to the development of our people, the richness of our various cultures, to our resistance against colonial oppression, and to our struggles for national liberation. Black women have been and we continue to be strong, resilient and courageous, despite the fact that we are the most oppressed group in any society we live in. Our race, our sex, and our low economic status have placed us at the bottom of the heap in Britain and throughout the world. It was in order to fight against this triple oppression as we experience it in Britain that OWAAD was formed. (S. Dadzie, Black Cultural Archives online)

Conclusion

This analysis about the difficulties of Black women integration in the UK was divided into three parts. On the one hand, this paper allowed to highlight the hassles related to women integration in the British sexist society because of their gender. Black British women experience gender discrimination by men of both races. On the other hand, this paper has shed light on the racist practices against black women at various levels of British society. She is even also rejected by the Anglo-Saxon white woman who does not consider black woman as her equal

due to numerous stereotypes concerning her race. Finally, the present essay has shown the different struggles led by Black British women to be respected as woman and as Black in Britain. At the end of this analysis, the struggle of women against sexism and racism contributed to their integration in key social sectors such as health service and education. It also permitted to stop racist immigration laws voted during fifties and sixties. Thanks to their fight as activists, they are more integrated than they were when they arrived in Britain.

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