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# The Liberated Black Woman: A Question of Black Power and Nationalism

Gail E. Bingham

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The role of the Black woman in the liberation of womankind must first be clearly defined to establish the context in which the term "liberation" is used before discussion of the subject can have any significance. If by the term "liberated," it is meant the throwing off of some kind of yoke of oppression and dehumanization invoked by men which often reflects itself in unequal opportunities and pay scales, particularly in the professional world, then it is highly questionable that the Black woman needs this type of liberation as the ultimate object of her energies and concern.

If on the other hand, the term "liberated" means striving toward building a Black nation, which is separate from purely capitalist, monetary obsessions but which is steeped in nationalism, self-determination and Pan-Africanism being the concept with Africa as the focal point of a unified international Black identity and a consolidation on the political, social and economic bases then, indeed, we are speaking of the very life blood of the Black woman.

The adoption of the term "liberated" in the latter context may raise many objections with which the present women's movement does not intend to deal. This type of liberation and use of the term in relationship to building a nation is stretching matters a bit, if not being totally beside the point. But it is the point for the white woman is basically not trying to fight a system that flatly rejects her, but rather is seeking to modify that system to give her a bigger piece of the pie, so to speak. The Black woman must struggle to be included respectfully in the system of things, even in the manner, many white women see degrading. The problem for the white woman is to crush the pedestal she has for so long been placed on as the sheltered "little woman". She struggles against being a highly respected "art piece" on whom white men have placed certain restrictions and created various myths, involving the mixing of her worshipped fragility successfully into the sweat and crudeness of high level economic, business

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and professional transactions and involvements, without even mentioning manual labor jobs, such as street cleaning, trash collection, bus driving, etc.

The Black woman has not yet reached a meager point of acceptability by the system. Thus it appears ludicrous for her to crusade for the same goals as the "liberated" white women seeking "liberation". She doesn't even have the initial respect and consideration that gives her a place in the mainstream at all, much less an opportunity for a more significant role in the American society. The present women's movement essentially means becoming that much more enslaved to a structure of government and society which is based on material wealth and which thrives on the ruthless exploitation of all members of society and, particularly, of minority peoples. It is a system which reinforces atrocities in foreign policy, particularly in the Third World. These atrocities in foreign policy include colonialization, imperialism, depletion of natural and manpower resources, and the creation of dependency relations. Most of these same atrocities are also employed against minorities within the United States. Thus the Black woman is and will continue to be the victim of this type of system: not intentionally a part of it, not only unintentionally, but in ANY manner!!

There are many works printed by Black men that state the particular situation Black people, men and women, are in today in America. By making reference to some of these male works, the writer by no means, accepts the argument that Black women are discriminated against within the Black context also. The reason lies in the history of the Black woman. She has traditionally been the dominant, if not the only influence in the family, because Black men generally tended to leave their responsibilities. The motivating factor behind these desertions may lie in the fact that the Black woman was admitted into the working white society above her male counterpart. Although the work she did within the white society before and after emancipation may now be viewed as demeaning, it provided no less a stable job and a steady income. That was more than could be said in many cases for the Black male as provider in any context! The Black male has now finally decided to protect and beautify his woman. He has decided to accept and support the responsibilities of family more than before. And it is high time we, as Black women, had this kind of treatment since for years we have bleached our skins, straightened our hair and tried to duplicate in many other ways white woman's qualities, which many of our men also held in high esteem. So it is not an insult to the Black woman to have her men speaking in Blackness and structuring something that has meaning, commonality, unity and progress for all Black people. This is a new kind of pedestal, one that does not rest on superficialities, but on pride.

The question of Black survival as presented by Stokley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in their well-known book, *Black Power*, makes some points that are relevant in viewing the Black woman's role or relationship to the present women's movements. One of these is that it is a myth to assume that a politically and economically secure group can collaborate

with a politically and economically insecure group. Black people constitute a politically and economically insecure group in this country. The white woman is in control of the present liberation movement and although she is critical of the status quo, she does not basically disagree with the present societal structure. She only disagrees with how it manifests or reflects itself with a male-dominated bias. It is extremely doubtful that the white woman will feel inclined to be tolerant of other liberation movements, including Black liberation, within the ranks of her own movement or organization. As noted in *Black Power*:

“The white groups tend to view their interests in a particularly unified solidified way when confronted with blacks making demands which are seen as threatening to vested interests. The whites react in a unified group to protect interests they perceive to be their interests possessed to the exclusion of those who for varying reasons are outside the group.”<sup>1</sup>

If the present woman’s movement can be thought of as a kind of white liberalism, and this writer feels that it can, then Black women must acknowledge that white liberalism has and continues to be impotent. Addison Gayle, a professor of English and editor of several books, in an article, “Existential Politics”,<sup>2</sup> traces this impotency from the Civil War through the politics of the welfare state. Gayle explains the welfare state as being a pact that offered something for whites by enabling them to pose as the benefactors of humanity and at the same time make Black people dependent upon them. Speaking of liberalism Gayle says:

“. . . The breakdown of the old white liberal-negro coalition has placed Black people in the most existential position of their lives. For the first time, Blacks are demanding real change, not the semblance of change, real power, not the illusion of power, and are attempting to construct real, viable alternatives to the programs of the past. . . . The weight of survival has been placed upon the shoulders of Blacks and only Blacks can determine their future. . . . The dedication must be to race. There must be an unashamed, unabashed commitment to race that admits the differences between Blacks and whites and explores these differences. This means that it is more important to write a Black novel than an American novel, more important to support a Black institution than a white one, more important to address Black problems than American problems.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore with respect to Black women’s involvement with the present political system, James Boggs in his book, *Racism and the Class Struggle*, points out that no matter what type of bill is drawn up by politicians, it will be apparent that, before the ink is dry, the document will not be sufficient and another bill is needed and must be introduced. It becomes clear, then, that no bill or act of Congress, or court decision will offer a solution to Black problems. Politicians cannot offer a solution to Black dilemmas

because to do so would be to put the power of vested interests in this country on the line. Even to speak of democracy is a fallacy, for democracy does not exist in America: elites run the country. Democracy is based on a class system where the only way to get anywhere is by working against rather than with neighbors and fellow men. With regard to the effect of such a class system, Boggs notes:

“This is what the American classless society is—issuing orders and particularly those of other races to advance yourself materially and socially without regard to right and wrong and without regard to social responsibility. What has been boasted about as the ‘opportunity’ to rise above your class in America has been in reality opportunism. What has been boasted about as the ‘freedom of the individual’ has been, in reality, the freedom to purchase material goods regardless of human values. What has been boasted about as ‘government of the people’ has been, in reality, the evasion by the people of the social responsibilities of self-government.”<sup>4</sup>

The Black liberation struggle should encompass certain criteria for survival. These criteria should include self-determination, devotion to a single goal, acquisition of land, unification among Black people and a change of system—economic, social and political. Self-determination means overcoming exploitation, oppression and manipulation. It is a development of a people’s identity and control over their destiny. Devotion to a single goal implies a need for unification and mobilization toward a mutually desired goal, which is necessary for the effective operation of the group and its survival. Acquisition of land is most important because it is not realistic to assume that one can achieve a total politics of liberation within this country; Black people have tried that route since emancipation. The type of nationalism that Black people must strive for must not simply be a transplant of present capitalistic orientations, but a different system altogether that will address itself better to the fundamental needs of Black people.

What then must the Black woman do? The Black woman must resent and denounce concepts of birth control, population explosion, and financial and professional restrictions that hamper her ability and desire to reproduce. She must raise her birth rate more than double its present level, for strength of a people lies in their numbers. In this respect, the Black woman has much to learn from her traditional African counterpart. The Black woman must not be a housewife if she honestly cannot stand the restriction. However, in securing other activities, she must not be obsessed with her own self-fulfillment and aggrandizement, but she should use her employment activities and involvements to spur the emergence of her people in their struggle for nationalism. She must use “any means necessary” to extend her knowledge of that which must eventually be destroyed if she and her people are to survive and one day be dominant.

The Black woman may then be and do whatever she chooses and use

anything to achieve the aims of her people. Whatever she chooses to do, she must maintain a devotion to and striving for Black freedom and dignity. It is an extremely difficult task, for the danger of being coopted is ever present and alluring. It is extremely risky to assume that any aspect of Black liberation can be advanced or enhanced through a movement such as the women's liberation organization, because shouldering a white cause can be translated to mean struggling to maintain a status quo which will only change faces. From past experience, most Black people are quite familiar with such integration attempts and "successes" and are well aware that a change of face is only the beginning of an expensive, time-consuming treadmill that basically changes nothing!

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 7.
2. Addison Gayle, "Existential Politics" in *Liberator*, (January, 1969), p. 5.
3. Ibid.
4. James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle*, (New York: Modern Reader, 1970), p. 126.