Nimah Muwakil Zakuri

Gendered National Voice: Women in Trinidad and Tobago Art, 1956-1971

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Feminist theory has proposed that women in all societies and belonging to diverse cultures across the globe are in one way or the other subordinated to their male counterparts (Rosaldo et al 17, 67). This generalized pronouncement has been the basis of numerous amounts of studies aimed not so much at determining its validity but at analyzing the specific trans-cultural frameworks that create and perpetuate such scenarios (189). Analysis of the public/private binary is one method of examining the ways in which the status of women is viewed by a particular society. This binary deduces that the public sphere that relates to such things politics and economics are related to men and furthermore, given a higher status than the private sphere, associated with the "activities performed within the realm of the localized family unit" (190), and linked to the woman. Nature versus culture is another binary that has been used to explain why women have traditionally been viewed as the lesser or weaker sex. Sherry B. Ortner in her famous essay Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?, suggests that physical and social factors, as well as ascribed mental attributes contribute to women being seen as closer to nature as opposed to all encompassing "higher" plane of culture. She points out however that "…these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems." (Rosaldo et al 70).

Using the tools of various disciplines including anthropology, sociology and psychology, feminists have developed theories that have exposed several deep rooted assumptions held by various societies about the role and status of women; attempting thereafter to inform policy in order to arrive at social change through equity. This universalistic approach however, has been refuted in many instances as being too ethnocentric (Williams et al 199), classist and even racist, as it sees through the lens of the white middle class female operating within the nuclear family. The basis upon which feminist theory was developed, it is argued, does not take into consideration the myriad of variables that contradict this notion of female subordination, as we move from one societal context to the other. Still as Peggy A. Sanday argues in her essay Female Status in the Public Domain, "In (some) societies women may have economic power but not authority" (Rosaldo et al 194).

Arguably, within the Caribbean context there is practical evidence of the challenge of a wholehearted acceptance of the theory of female subordination; as well however, there may be much evidence in support of it. Through the socio-historic as well as the aesthetic examination of selected works from the National Fine Art Collection of Trinidad and Tobago, this paper will analyze the way in which women were portrayed by artists during the years leading up to and during the early post independent years in Trinidad and Tobago. Operating on the premise that all art is a reflection of the society within which it operates and that artists consciously or not espouse many prevalent assumptions and ideals through their creations, I will attempt to determine firstly, how well broad feminist theories can translate or are able to be inserted into a Trinidad and Tobago context and secondly, if used as the benchmark, what can be said of the status of women during the above mentioned era. Adelaida De Juan, renowned Cuban art critic suggests:

> *… a retrospective of the woman seen as the object of attention for diverse artists, offers up the changing map of social relations between man and woman, the role that they carried out in the society or time in which they lived and further still, the space assigned to the woman in her social ambit (9).*

Art history, like many of the disciplines mentioned before, has also been used as a tool by many feminist critics in the unmasking ideals implicit in visual culture. It is important to note here that a complete study of the history of art of Trinidad and Tobago has never been done. Furthermore one of the only attempts at a study of the region's artistic development was done about a decade ago by Veerle Poupeye in her book entitled Caribbean Art, which gives a good overview of the richness and vastness of the region's art history. Notably, her study does not include a critique from the perspective of gender or women's issues of the works that she encounters. Poupeye does include in her study however women artists such as Jamaica's Edna Manley and Mexico's Frida Khalo noting their significant contributions. Feminist criticism as it pertains to art history in the New World would surely provide us with many answers and surely expose many hidden biases 1) on the part of artists depicting us as "the other" 2) and how we present ourselves to the world. Many issues many also be encountered as well when we begin to come across the unique cultural constructs and cultural heritage of the region, enabling us then to develop new theories tailored to approximate the understanding of our diversity.

The late 50s and early 60s was a time of great societal change in Trinidad and Tobago. Politically, the country was ushering in a new era in its existence with the onset of Independence. However despite this step towards the future, there existed a significant amount of social stagnation, lingering traits of the colonial experiment, manifesting itself through issues such as high unemployment, illiteracy and economic dependency. Artists operating during this time would have undoubtedly been surrounded by a wealth of opportunity "…to present important economic and social truths" (Barnet 178), in an effort at "…..improving us spiritually or morally, or giving us insight into the political system so that we can work for a more just system." (178). C.L.R. James in his book Beyond the Boundary 1963, in his philosophizing on the nature of art and the true artist says that:

> *…the blind imitation of nature was not art, not even if*

that object was what would commonly be agreed upon as beautiful, for example a beautiful woman. There was another category of painter superior to the first. Such a one would not actually reproduce the object as it was. Being a man of vision and imagination, the object would stimulate in him impulses, thoughts, memories visually creative (During 420).

The history of the Caribbean, as a rule, is complex and dynamic in itself. Beyond generalized analyses, attempts at further and compartmentalized studies of specific phenomenon tend towards the overturning of many theories that may hold true for similar happenings extra-regionally.

It was deemed that the comparative examination of seven (7) paintings by various artists created from 1956 to 1971 was a logical and localized approach to this broad topic. The dynamic character of the time period being analyzed lends to the development of a rich argument as it relates to societal reality - popular reaction - visual representation. Artists and artworks were selected primarily because of their depictions of women participating in various activities, such as religious, economic and domestic. Popular as well as not widely known artists are all featured in the comparisons, with particular attention not so much on their artistic abilities, but the implicit ideological statements in their iconography.

In 1958 Thora Mahabir paints, Preparing the Meal (Plate 1), two (2) years later, in 1960, Hugh Stollmeyer presents us with a painting reminiscent of Gauguin's native girls, entitled Washer Women (Plate 2). Both of these paintings depict women engaged in a domestic task. Ironically, in form and content they both display remarkable similarities although painted by a female and male artist respectively. For example, in both paintings the women are disengaged and distant from the viewer, thoroughly engrossed in their tasks. An invisible line from the subject in the background to the protagonist in the fore divides the painting diagonally from left to right, and serves to guide the viewers gaze in a downward direction. These paintings show women occupied in duties surrounding the "reproductive sphere" (Rosaldo et al 195) and at first glance reinforces the woman as subordinated through confinement within the domestic arena.

Thora Mahabir's is a relatively small painting depicts an intimate scene of two women and an infant. The women are solemnly engaged in the preparation of a traditional Indo-Trinidadian meal while the child looks on in anticipation. The mood of the woman in the background is dutiful, while the woman who sits in the foreground seems almost engaged in prayer due to the approximated symmetry employed by the artist in the structure of her body. The artist's naïve use of colour and volume portrays the women as objects rather than living beings, they are stark and sculptural, austere even. This mechanized view of the women, further exaggerated by the repetition of the balls of dough being prepared by the protagonist brings to mind Ortner's argument of women being seen as "mere" vessels of reproduction only ensuring the repetition of the species, whereas because the male is:

…lacking natural creative functions, (he) must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially", through the medium of technology and symbols. In doing so he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman only creates perishables… (75).

The general use of a monochrome colour and the flatness of paint application add to the sense of serenity afforded by the scene that has a definite correlation with sterotypes of the Indo-Trinidadian woman as docile homemakers, religious and dutiful.

In contrast, Stollmeyer's painting depicting two women also engaged in domestic chores exudes a more sexually charged air. Stollmeyer's women are bare-breasted. They are, though somewhat shielded by the surrounding foliage, placed in a less private setting than the Mahabir's women, here reinforcing two points; first is the one raised by Foucault (54) concerning the hierarchy of sexual prestige where the man in many circumstances is praised for his sexual prowess and the woman for her virtue and sexual purity. This is not to say that Stollmeyer's women are not "virtuous", but the fact that he chose to depict them in the nude in a public setting, rather than clothed as Mahabir did may point to another local and generalizing perception about the "looseness" and availability of Afro-Trinidadian women. The theme of the washer woman is very prevalent and popular one among local artists. Knowing to him or not Stollmeyer, buys in to the age old perception of and perpetuation of the black woman as a sexual object through his idyllic depiction of the laborious activity. Depictions such as these have their antecedent as far back as in the 1773 painting by Angostino Brunias, West Indaina Washerwoman which Patricia Mohammend make reference to in her essay, Morality and the Imagination – mythopoetics of gender and culture in the Caribbean: the trilogy (72). The question we must ask ourselves here is why an artist would choose to depict a theme that neither edifies nor advances a particular group of people in any direction but rather undermines much of the work done in trying to dispel such perceptions. A fine example of the work being done at this time towards the advancement of women was the formation of the Caribbean Women's Association (CWA), whose aim as outlined in Rhoda Reddock's essay on feminist research in the Caribbean, "…was to provide women of the Caribbean with a representative organization dedicated to the principle that women must play a vital role in the development and life of the Caribbean community." (Bose et al 217)

To conclude this first section that incontestably illustrates the evidence of a subscription by local artist to universally held assumptions about gender difference I cite Linda Nochlin as she expounds on power relations between men and women.

It is important to keep in mind that one of the most important functions of ideology is to veil the overt power relations obtaining in society at a particular moment in history by making them appear to be part of the natural, eternal order of things. It is also important to remember that symbolic power is invisible and can be exercised only with the complicity of those who fail to recognize