

# **RACISM AND ITS IMPACT ON BLACK WOMEN**

## **A South African Perspective**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It is not an easy task to speak of the impact of racism on Black women because of three related reasons. First, it is because of our shared humanity with Black men, that Black women do not view their struggle for liberation from racism as an isolated, exclusive reality. Part of the point of departure for Black women is that all Blacks as a community are oppressed. However, it has to be stressed that racism has and continues to have a particular impact on women. The second reason for this difficulty is the assumption that amongst Black women themselves the impact of racism has been the same, whether one is a rural woman or an urban woman; live in an informal settlement or not; is a working class or middle class woman. In other words such a broad topic may conceal class differences within the Black community. This shows that the situation in which we find ourselves in South Africa is very complex and as such cannot be treated by one paper. We cannot afford to speak of women without qualification. The fact that there are many women out there who would have loved to be here to share how they have experienced racism without the inhibition of having to use a foreign language is proof of the complexity of the situation. Language and academia automatically exclude a great number of women. The end result of this is that middle class women have to speak on their behalf. This statement does not in any way undermine the necessity of Black women intellectuals to develop a theology that takes a Black woman's experience seriously. The third reason for my difficulty is that it is almost impossible to speak of racism

without speaking of sexism because of their inter-relatedness; as both of them are relational concepts, like any form of oppression.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the effects of racism on Black South African women. What I am writing about is a story; one of many stories of women throughout the world. My hope is that Black theologians in the process of this investigation will be able to see how Black theology itself has continued to perpetrate the aims and objectives of White and racist oppressive rule whilst they claim to be speaking from a Black experience of struggle. An attempt will be made to first, define my understanding of racism as a sociological concept. In the discussion on how racism developed, we will refer to both sociology and science. When discussing the impact of racism on women, we will look at psychological economic, political, and religious oppression. A brief look at the part played by Black Theology in oppressing women will be done. The last section of this paper will be exploiting why Black women reject the racism- sexism- classing syndrome. Racism is located within a specific context in South Africa, and this is the subject of our next discussion.

I am writing from an experience of pain, humiliation of struggling with what my faith means in the context in which I find myself; pain because of what Black women have been subjected to because of the colour of their skin (both by White women and White men); humiliation as a result of an undermining of Black women's integrity and dignity by Black men, as if oppression by Whites was not hard enough. The struggle with faith experience in the context of suffering results from the Christian faith which is said to be democratic in essence but void of the least democracy in practice when it comes to women. The paper is therefore written from a context of the cry of weariness from all women on the one hand, and on the other hand from a deep experience of faith in God who brings hope. It is a time when God is giving birth to something new. The delay of the birth is probably delayed amongst other things by (to use medical terms) a mal presentation of the unborn baby. A normal presentation is the vertex (head), now, once the baby presents by the shoulder or breech (buttocks), labour is prolonged as both these parts of the body find it difficult to negotiate the pelvis. In cases like these a cut has to be made or a Caesarian section performed to extract the new life without damage to both the mother and the child. It is in the reali-

sation of this that Black women say they will cut if necessary, but their freedom will be realised. A definition of racism seems appropriate at this stage.

## **RACISM AND THE RACE PARADIGM**

Boonzaaier and Gordon define racism as, “condition of control over the means for both the life chances and lifestyles of the subordinated other through the use of stigma, pejorative treatment and discrimination resulting in differential opportunities and highly differentiated sharing in rewards of society” (1988; and 1987:16). From this definition we gather that racism has to do with manipulation of societal power/forces and a refusal to accept a two-way communication/relationship. Racism so defined explains all that women are to suffer because if the relationship is between the powerful and the powerless prescriptions of how they are to conduct their lives will come from the powerful.

The man who is sometimes known as the father of modern racism is Count Joseph Arthur because he proposed ideas which became influential in many circles including science. Although racism has existed as early as 300 AD the notion of “Race” as refer to a cluster of inherited characteristics comes from the 18th and 19th century thinkers (Giddens, 1990:256). Count Joseph proposed that three races existed; Black, White and Yellow. Black was marked by an animal nature, lack of morality and emotional instability. This is partly why superiority of the White race is a key element of White racism today., It is the same type of thinking that later influence Adolf Hitler and part of Nazi party ideology.

In South Africa racism is associated with colonialism. The race paradigm was entrenched since 1950 resulting in the apartheid ideology (separate development). It feeds on the assumption that the South African population consists of a number of discreet unassimilable groups. One of the reasons why White South Africans found the race paradigm handy, according to South African historian Theal, was that it provided them with the means to justify the discrepancies between the ruling and servicing classes.

It is necessary to point out that White South Africans have realised the negative connotations of race. They have substituted race with terms like “culture”, ethnic group, nation, Volk or community. The shift is necessary

for them (whites) to conceal their true interests - that of domination. When one looks at ethnicity itself one may observe that what it is said to be differences are mainly learned processes which in all honesty cannot be reasons for staying together. "Ethnicity refers to cultural practices and outlooks that distinguish a given community of people". Members of ethnic groups see themselves as culturally distinct from other groupings in a society. Some of the characteristics which may serve to distinguish ethnic groups are language, history or ancestry (real or imagined). This results in other ethnic groups to think that they were born to govern, alternatively to see other groups as "unintelligent, lazy and so forth" (Giddens, 1990:244). Having defined racism, one can now see how over-emphasis of "ethnicity" or "minority groups" has a potential to perpetuate the underlying notions associated with the race paradigm. I believe that this is what is happening in South Africa.

Like Race, they have an ability to create moods in the minds of human beings to justify or maintain group formation at the expense of a comprehensive human liberation. The core of racism therefore is injustice, irrespective of the name which it takes. What impact has racism on Black women?

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA**

In many ways, from early childhood Black women have been led to believe that they were intellectually inferior to Black men, White women and White men. As Bennet rightly observes, "at school females were encouraged to pursue domestic subjects whereas the males are the ones who have the head for science and maths..." (171).

Even in adult life, denigration of Black womanhood continues, especially for working class women. For example, when a Black woman is employed by a White family she is given an overall, a pinafore and headgear so that she does not dress up like the "Madam/Missus". A picture which she will continually have of herself is that of being a servant. This is done in such a way that she does not see herself as a human being who is created in the image of God. In fact, her dignity is denied. When she dresses herself up nicely on a Sunday afternoon to go to Church one street down she is confronted with a White man in his car who hoots at her and whispers, "Hey baby" (irrespective of the age of the woman concerned). This White man assumes

that if a Black woman is out of her overalls she is presenting herself as a sex object. This may result in a sense of guilt; that there is something wrong which the woman has done to call "this" man's attention.

One would expect to have better treatment in the church which professes not to be of this world; a church of Jesus Christ which claims to be non-racist and non-sexist. One can look at any or most of the "mainline churches" to see how power functions. Whilst on the one hand Black men are struggling for power to be Bishops and so on, White men are forcing their way through to Administrative positions where the money is, to make sure that no Black man ever controls money. Black women, being the oppressed of the oppressed are the ones who suffer the most. Being in the majority, when the male Bishops are visiting circuit/parishes they are expected to organise a present for "our father". In other words, whilst they (women) do not participate in placing those Black Bishops there, they are the ones to feed them, or keep them in "power". Women internalise this oppression, and resign themselves to running soup kitchens for unemployed men in the streets, church bazaars and running Sunday School classes. Black men have also become a part of the "system" so that it becomes very difficult to distinguish their actions from White racists. The surprising thing is that those who are very active in the "people's liberation" are usually the ones who give women a tough time when it comes to gender issues. On reading their "very profound Theology" one can be fooled into thinking that you are talking about the same thing when you speak of liberation, yet, on closer observation, one has no option but to agree with James Cone when he says that, "The difficulty that Black male ministers have in supporting the equality of women in the church and society stems from the lack of a clear liberation-criterion rooted in the gospel and in the present struggles of oppressed peoples...It is amazing that many Black male ministers, young and old, can hear the message of liberation in the gospel when related to racism but remain deaf to a similar message in the context of sexism" (Maimela, 1990:60; cf James Cone). For me this shows how racism has not only turned Black women but Black men as well into Schizoid personalities. The second issue which comes out of this analysis is that it is possible that when Black male theologians speak of liberation, that liberation either excluded Black women or, the lesser (women) is included in the larger (men).

Furthermore, statements like, “Who told you that you are oppressed? Are you also a feminist? This liberation ‘thing’ has no room in Africa; You are only involved in the liberation movement because you are frustrated by the fact that you are not married , you need a man and all will be well”, are very common. Because of this continued bombardment of the woman’s psyche with these derogatory comments some may come to believe that struggling for full humanity is an anomaly for women. This shows how dangerous it is to take the identity of one’s oppressor. Whites make the same comments about Blacks, for Blacks are so dumb that they cannot know when they are oppressed unless they are told. In fact making these comments is a critique on God who created women and said “it was good”.

It is equal to saying that God made a mistake by creating women. By implication it means that God created an incomplete human being. This type of mentality further calls into question the mission of Christ; that of having come to liberate all human beings from all forms of oppression that undermine human dignity. All of this cause psychological trauma to women which may manifest itself in many ways, one of which would be adoration of male leadership (by females). Men will then claim that women never vote other women into positions of leadership and make noise about the strangeness of this phenomenon. What oppressors fail to appreciate is that they are themselves contributors to the dependency syndrome in women.

### **RACISM HAS REDUCED WOMEN TO A SERVICING CLASS**

This is a very complex issue. It touches on economic exploitation of women. Bonita Bennet writes, “The capitalist system needs a right-less group of people who can be controlled and exploited in the labour market. In South Africa, this group is the predominantly Black working class. The women of this class of people suffer the most: they are triply oppressed. They are exploited because they are women, because they are Black, and because they are workers”. (170). How did these women come to be in that position? The establishment of cities, towns and villages is a contributory factor. Cities sucked healthy men from the countryside for the purposes of labour in industrial areas. They were considered single, so they were accommodated in single men’s hostels. Their wives were not allowed to come with them because they

were not needed as such, Pass Laws and influx control kept this in check. This on its own established the fabric of indigenous societies. Women were forced by poverty to the cities and were employed as domestic service workers. They were deprived of a good education. As their husbands and brothers were boosting the South African economy, some rural women and their children had to look after the block so that children did not starve. Illiteracy rates became higher and higher. So whilst Black women saw to it that White women went to work by looking after White children, Black children were left without parents to see to their schooling. These brave women, however, tried their best with their little income to pay for their children's education. Racism, with regards to women, is a clear strategy of making Black women feel ashamed of the Blackness and womanhood. I want to also suggest, therefore, that the effects of racism are, amongst other things, determined by one's social class. For example, in rural areas there is no, or very poorly developed, infrastructures. As a result there is no pure water supply and no electricity. This means that women have to walk long distances to fetch water or to collect firewood. For the latter they are accused of depleting natural resources and not caring for the environment, which is "God's creation", yet no provision for alternatives is made. (I am in no way advocating for deforestation.)

Whilst women form the majority of the labour force they are the least paid. Society has conditioned people in such a way that low pay is something that is taken for granted, and most of the time never questioned.

In the political sphere, the few women who hold positions are subjected to a lot of stress. They are expected to "prove they are capable", but that is not expected from men.

In the religious sphere women are not treated any better. In some churches because their ordination was negotiated for by men there are constant threats of not being stationed if they speak "against men". The point here is missed altogether because the fight is not against men but against all forms of justice: racism, classism, sexism etc.

## **BLACK THEOLOGY AND WOMEN**

I am echoing many women throughout the world who raise the question of the invisibility of Black women in Black Theology. When Black male theologians were at Seminaries, Black women were kept out of theological institutions. This means that Black women have been deprived of a chance to acquire tools which are necessary for developing hermeneutics and a systematic theology, and later to be accused of being not intellectual enough to theologise. Even those women who go to theological seminaries have it tough there, because their Black brothers cannot accept that God can and does call women to the ordained ministry. It is accepted because of pressure. I know of at least one theological Seminary where Black male students refuse to listen to anything that has to do with women and their oppression.

Jacquelyn Grant asks a genuine question when saying, "how adequate is the conception of Black Theology for the liberation of the total Black community?" She further suggests that "Black women have been invisible in theology because theological scholarship has not been a part of the woman's sphere" (*Black Theology and the Black Woman*). I want to believe that Black Theology has in this sense delayed development of a holistic theology of liberation. A time has come for women to reflect on their experience because it is within this context that God's revelation is experienced and received by women. Are Black Theologians wanting to maintain that it is the prerogative of men to handle theological issues?

### **WHY WOMEN REJECT SEXISM AND CLASSISM**

1. It is contrary to our theological inclusiveness that God made us all in one image be we male or female, we are called to provide equal opportunities, acknowledge our uniqueness and celebrate rather than exploit that uniqueness.
2. We had no part in the selection of our parents, genes or preponderance of our pigmentation or area of birth. God works through women, men, youth and children. So does God also care about or ecology.
3. These ideas of Racism, Sexism and Classism divide and deprive humanity of gifts, graces and resources to enhance the rule of God here on



earth. I choose to say the rule of God one each/earth than to say God's Kingdom or God's Queendom.

4. While there was always sexism and classism in our African heritage, it was discouraged and efforts made to compensate those who were deprived or victimised by it. For example, single women would be allowed to build their own home, have their own cattle and cows and be a family with other people's children since we were (and still are) all members of the extended family.
5. These evil ideas negate Jesus Christ's teaching and ministry. Jesus spoke to people of all classes, people of all sexes, Samaritan women, Marty and Martha, women disciples, read Luke 8: 1-3 etc.
6. If we truly want to see a God-guided and people centred world, we need to desist, i.e. stop perpetuating or condoning racism, sexism and classism in one's thoughts and vocabulary, practices be they personal or institution-alised. Repentance is the essential step towards redemption. Let's change ourselves first just as much as we demand similar change in other people or our "secular society".
7. We deprive ourselves and all of God's people of the needed sustenance, guidance and inspiration that is presently thwarted by racism, sexism and classism.
8. Our faith should permeate and underpin what we say, do and stand for and not just say and love what we say.