

# Moving Beyond the Feminism Versus Nationalism Dichotomy

## An Anti-Colonial Feminist Perspective on Aboriginal Liberation Struggles

BY LINA SUNSERI

*L'auteur se penche sur les complexités du débat entre les féministes et les nationalistes, en particulier chez les femmes autochtones dans leurs luttes pour l'auto-détermination et elle rapporte des incidents qui ont marqué les conflits à l'intérieur des organismes menés par les hommes et ceux menés par des femmes autochtones.*

In writing this paper, I feel that I must clearly identify my position in our “Canadian” society: I am of mixed Aboriginal-Southern White European ancestry. This mixed cultural/ethno-racial identity provides me with distinct experiences which have brought me to a point in my life where I support the anti-colonial self-determination struggles of Aboriginal peoples on this Turtle Island known as Canada. Many times I am asked by friends, intellectuals, feminists, and non-feminists, how I could support any nationalist struggle, especially in light of what has taken place in many parts of the world in the name of ethno-nationalism. Indeed, I often wonder if an Aboriginal “nationalist” struggle can avoid the destructive results that have occurred elsewhere. I also wonder where I would be placed, and place myself, in this struggle given my mixed ancestry. My “hybrid” identity leaves me in what Homi Bhabha would call an “in-between” place, not quite the colonizer or the colonized. Located as I am in this ambivalent place, having the “privilege” of a mixture of cultures, it is not surprising then that I might feel both pulled and pushed towards an Aboriginal anti-colonial movement. This tension is further complicated by my feminist ideology and culture, an ideology that has expressed justifiable skepticism about “nationalisms,” especially in light of the latter’s relationship with women’s rights.

This paper, written in the midst of all these emotions and recent events of “nationalist” movements (such as the Serbian, Croatian, Kurdish and Tamil cases), is an attempt to come to terms with my support for an Aboriginal anti-colonial nationalist movement. Mine is obviously then a situated knowledge, informed by both feminist knowledge and Aboriginal experiences, either of my own or of other Aboriginal peoples. A situated knowledge stresses and validates the importance of lived experiences and it incorporates these experiences within theory (Collins). While recognizing the limitations of past nationalist movements to liberate women, I believe that it is possible to envision a progressive nationalist liberation movement, one which could eliminate oppressive and

unequal power relations. Given that Aboriginal women have lived for many centuries in an oppressive racist and sexist colonial society, which has brought them infinite political, economic, social, and cultural destruction, it is not surprising that these women would ally themselves with a movement that wants to restore and reaffirm their inherent right to govern themselves.

I will begin with an introduction to feminism, nationalism, and nation, and then briefly review the debates taking place between feminists and nationalists. I examine the contributions offered by feminist critiques of nationalism, highlighting the argument that there have been limitations to the liberatory aspects of nationalist movements. In most cases, once the post-colonial nation is formed, the position of women has not improved much and, in some cases, it has even regressed. I will argue that nationalism, in itself, is not necessarily evil, just as feminism is not but both have the potential to be exclusionary, and therefore, on their own, cannot resolve all of Aboriginal (and non) women’s problems. I will then offer an overview of Aboriginal self-determination struggles. In this section, I will examine some key characteristics and assumptions of these struggles, and then address the specific dilemmas that Aboriginal women face within these struggles both with the Canadian state and with some Aboriginal organizations (e.g. the Assembly of First Nations). In my conclusion, I will attempt to move beyond the feminism versus nationalism dichotomy by arguing that Aboriginal women’s participation in the self-determination of First Nations can be seen as both an anti-colonial movement and a feminist one.

### Defining feminism, nationalism and the nation

A core part of this paper consists of the debate between feminism and nationalism, and how the two seem incompatible. Some earlier second-wave feminists, believe that women’s oppression is unique and tied to a universal patriarchy (Firestone; Friedan; Millett). They sought to

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unite women through a sense of a shared oppression, and tended to believe that women's interests can be best achieved through a women's movement that places women's rights the first priority in its agenda.

Many Aboriginal women, along with other women of colour and "third world" women, have felt alienated by what they view as "Western" feminist movement that has either marginalized them or not accurately represented their experiences and interests. As Charles and Hintjens point out:

In the context of the Third World, this rejection of feminism often arises from its association with western, middle-class women and with the negative consequences of modernisation.... However, feminism has also developed a critique of modernism.... Thus western feminism recognizes that women neither automatically share a gender identity nor do they necessarily have political interests in common. Their material circumstances and experiences differ significantly and a unity of interests between women from different cultures (and within the same society) cannot be deduced from their shared gender. (20)

The marginalization of non-White European women within mainstream Western feminism is a reality, and women of colour have challenged the members of the movement to analyse its own racism and its essentialist portrayal of the "Universal" woman. As Charles and Hintjens indicate above, Western feminism has more recently provided its own critique of modernity and taken into account the diversity of women's experience. Although Western feminism has responded to the challenges presented by women of colour and Third World women, and re-evaluated its earlier assumptions, I still believe that more work needs to be done, especially vis-à-vis the further incorporation of issues of colonialism and racism into the theory and praxis of the movement. Until the women's movement completely faces the reality that many of its members are part of the colonial power, and therefore share some of the advantages that their male counterparts enjoy, most Aboriginals and other colonized groups will continue to view it with some skepticism. If we could all come to understand feminism as a theory and movement that wants to fight *all* forms of oppression, including racism and colonialism, then we could see it as a struggle for *unity* among all oppressed women and men. It is this meaning of feminism that I accept, and therefore I can call myself a feminist without reservations.

For the purpose of this paper, nationalism and nation are associated with movements for independence, liberation, and revolution. A classic definition of nation is that of Benedict Anderson, who constructs it as "an imagined community," a collectivity of individuals who feel that they belong to a shared linguistic community. Anthony Smith presents a primordial definition of nation. For him,

nation refers to an ethnic collectivity with a shared past. In my analysis, nation means not only a community that may share a common culture and historical experiences, but it is also a collectivity that is "oriented towards the future" (Yuval-Davis 19). Nationalism is that ideology or discourse which promotes and shapes the formation of such communities. There are different kinds of nationalism; some rely on an exclusionary and homogenous vision, but others can be empowering and culturally diverse. Partha Chatterjee argues, in the context of an anti-colonial project,

the national question here is, of course, historically fused with a colonial question. The assertion of national identity was, therefore, a form of the struggle against colonial exploitation. (18)

It is precisely this anti-colonial, liberation struggle to which I refer when I speak of nationalism in this paper. Within this framework, and within an Aboriginal context, nationalism means a process to revitalize the different institutions and practices of our various Nations (Alfred). An Aboriginal perspective on nation and nationalism differs from a Western one because its basis for nationhood is not rooted in notions of territoriality, boundaries, and nation-state (Alfred). Moreover, other concepts (such as "pure" Indian, status-Indian, national and regional boundaries) are all constructs of a colonial state and are foreign, if not antithetical, to most Aboriginal cultures and ways of governance (Monture-Angus 1995).

### **Feminist critique of nationalism**

Feminist studies on nationalist and other liberation movements have revealed that, after national liberation, women generally have been pushed to domestic roles (Abdo). During nationalist struggles, women are often seen as the producers and reproducers of the national culture, and can acquire prestige and status as the bearers of "pure" culture. However, they can also become increasingly controlled, as their reproductive roles and their portrayal as bearers of culture can also be used to control their sexuality and confine them to domestic roles (Enloe).

Embedded implicitly and explicitly in this discourse of women as the bearers of culture and "tradition," is another discourse not exclusively tied to women: that of ethno/racial identity as immutable and connected to blood. Yet, when identity is viewed as uni-dimensional and biological, it marginalizes those who do not fit the strict categories of belonging to one specific ethnic/racial group, and in the process excludes all those individuals who have "mixed" descent, because their blood cannot be easily and exclusively connected with one group. When ethno-racial nationalist movements connect their concept of belonging to the nation to this notion of purity, we can also see that they need to regulate the sexual relationships of the members of their community. In practice, this regulation

is more strictly applied, and with more negative sanctions, against women, because their reproductive roles become extremely important in the discourses of common origin and purity of blood (Yuval-Davis).

While recognizing some of the negative results of some nationalist discourses for women, we cannot ignore that some anti-colonial movements have provided the opportunity to mobilize women in their common struggle against the oppressive colonial or quasi-colonial power<sup>1</sup> as in the case of Algeria, South Africa, Palestine and some Latin American countries. The women involved have increased their political consciousness and, in some cases, made the male nationalists more aware of exploitative and oppressive gender relations. Often enough though, the male nationalists argue that colonialism and/or capitalism has been the cause of women's problems and they have completely ignored or dismissed the patriarchal nature of women's oppression. Moreover, neither a nationalist nor a socialist revolution has yet integrated a feminist discourse (McClintock). Constructing a radical alternative discourse that can smash both the sexist emperor and the sexist "colonized" is not an easy task. This project becomes even more difficult when other forces, both internal and external, such as global capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and reactionary "traditionalism" are at work, limiting the possibility of a full transformation of social relations in the post-colonial world.

### Aboriginal self-determination struggles

Aboriginal peoples of North America have in recent decades successfully articulated a discourse of "self-determination," advocating a commitment on the part of non-Aboriginals to recognize Aboriginal inherent rights to govern ourselves. This discourse of self-determination is similar to that of self-government; however, I see it as having a much broader meaning and intent. Some may use the two terms interchangeably and argue that self-government means an inherent right of Aboriginal peoples to "be governed by rules of social, moral, political and cultural behaviour upon which they agree" (McIvor 167). However, I tend to agree more with Monture-Angus and with other Aboriginals who claim that self-government implies a perpetuation of a colonial superior government that still makes the ultimate decisions about the meaning of aboriginal rights and how these are to be implemented (1999). Self-government, then, is viewed by us as a "limited form of governance" (Monture-Angus 1999: 29) that maintains unacceptable and unjust colonial relations. Self-determination, on the other hand, holds a better promise for Aboriginal peoples, because it is premised on the notion that our rights to be independent and to determine our own futures were never extinguished. (Monture-Angus 1999). What we demand is not merely equal opportunity within the mainstream Canadian system, but rather an inherent right of First Nations people

to live by our own unique set of values (Schouls). Some of these different sets of values comprise a distinct definition of government, of land, and of land rights. For native peoples, "government" constitutes a decision-making system based on consensus and on individuals maintaining significant responsibilities for their behaviour and decisions (Barnaby). Similarly, Aboriginals have a unique relationship to the land; in fact, this distinctive relationship to creation is reflected in our languages, hence our insistence that our rights to lands be recognized. Ours is a world view that moves far beyond the material utility of natural resources because we view our relationship with animals, plants, water, and all other living things as a very spiritual one. Land rights are, then, very different than proprietary rights. While the latter translates into individual ownership of land and is usually based on a market economy, the former "needs to be understood in a context of culture and territoriality.... Similarly, tribal sovereignty must be understood in its cultural context, one that reflects self-determination and self-sufficiency traditionally predicated on reciprocity" (Jaimes-Guerrero 102).

Many Canadians feel threatened by the demands of Aboriginal peoples; some fear they might have to relinquish any privilege they have enjoyed at the expense of Aboriginals' oppression, others feel that Aboriginal self-government may weaken an already shaky Canadian national identity. It is important to note that recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty does not automatically become national independence. As Glenn Morris argues,

Given the difficult practical political and economic difficulties facing smaller states in the world today, most indigenous peoples may very well not opt for complete independent state status. Many would probably choose some type of autonomy or federation with existing states, preserving rights to internal self-governance and control as members of larger states. (78-79)

What is crucial here is that it is be the choice of Aboriginal peoples to determine which course to take rather than having one imposed on them, as has been the case with the Canadian state.

As in some other anti-colonial liberation struggles, Aboriginal women have had an important role in the "national" struggle and their roles have not been free of contradictions and obstacles. Colonization of the Americas ultimately transformed all structures, including Aboriginal gender relations. Prior to this, women in most Aboriginal societies enjoyed a large amount of status and power. The *Haudenosaunee* (Iroquois, or a more appropriate translation, People of the Longhouse) women, for example, occupied prominent positions in all aspects of indigenous life. Within the laws of the *Haudenosaunee* people, the *Kaianerekowa*, known as the Great Law of Peace, it is clearly stated that women choose the *Oyaneh*

(Clan Mothers), who had a large amount of power in each clan, including the power to remove chiefs, to decide on matters of inter-tribal disputes, and determine distribution of resources (Goodleaf).

The contact with European societies and the eventual colonization of Aboriginal peoples altered the conditions of Aboriginal women of Canada. As Cora Voyageur argues:

one of the primary reasons for the situation of Indian women today is that Indians, in general, were subjugated by the immigrant European society....The British North American Act of 1867 gave the power of legislative control over Indians and their lands to the federal government. The Indian Act of 1876 consolidated legislation already in place. The measure depriving an Indian woman of her status when she married a non-Indian was first legislated in the 1869 Indian Act. This Act was also the first legislation that officially discriminated against Indian women by assigning them fewer fundamental rights than Indian men. (100)

Most Aboriginal women point out that, for them, the Canadian law is at the centre of our problems and the patriarchal nature of the Canadian state has different meanings and consequences for Aboriginal women (Monture-Angus 1995). In order to fully understand how patriarchy works in Canada, we *must* look at the oppressive role that the Canadian state has had, and continues to have, in the everyday lives of Aboriginal women. Decolonization, therefore, is a necessary step for the full liberation of Aboriginal women, and it is the one point where Aboriginal men and women can come together as united. By "decolonization" I mean the process by which the longstanding colonial relations between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals are abolished and new relations formed. These relations will be based on principles of mutual respect, sharing, and recognition of the inherent rights of Aboriginal peoples to follow their traditional ways of governance.

Resorting exclusively to an agenda of decolonization while simultaneously not integrating women's issues into it, as I have warned earlier, can be "dangerous" for women. We cannot be certain that the national liberation will automatically translate into a women's liberation. More often than not, failing to combine a gender analysis with an anti-colonial one can only increase the chances that colonized women's lives will not be improved, as the new male leaders will be reluctant to give up any power they have recently gained. As Aboriginal women, we have an awareness of inequalities and injustices we suffer as women as well as Aboriginal peoples. These inequalities may have been created as a result of the colonization of our peoples, but some may have existed in some communities externally to it, and we need to look closer at this possibility. As

Emma Laroque states, it is important to remember that:

Culture is not immutable, and tradition cannot be expected to be always of value or relevant in our times. As Native women, we are faced with the very difficult and painful choices, but nonetheless, we are challenged to change, create, and embrace "traditions" consistent with contemporary and international human rights standards. (14)

Canadian Indigenous women have, at times, found themselves in opposition to the male-dominated and federally funded Aboriginal associations. The two important historical moments where we witnessed this dissension between male leaders and female leaders occurred during the amendment of the Indian Act which reinstated Indian status to Aboriginal women who had married non-Indian men, and then later during the Charlestown Accord talks, when the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) argued that the collective rights of Aboriginal women related to gender equality were not protected and integrated in the Accord. Throughout these moments, the Assembly of First Nations, the main Aboriginal organization recognized and funded by the Canadian state, did not fully support the positions of Aboriginal women as advanced by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), often arguing that the women's arguments were based upon an individual rights discourse that undermined the struggle of First Nations for self-determination.

This particular way of looking at the dissension between the male-dominated political associations and the Native Women's Association of Canada ignores a critical issue: "the discursive formation of ethno political identity that emerges as male and female political leaders contest each other's expressed collective aspirations and envisioned future nationhood" (Fiske 71). Many Aboriginal women's groups (which do receive support from many traditional men) use a political discourse that looks at the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender and they want to bring back symbols and images that have been part of most Aboriginal traditional cultures. Some of the symbols include that of "Woman as the heart of the Nation," "the centre of everything" (Fiske). What Aboriginal women envision, then, is a feminized nation, where both men and women equally give birth to it, and following a traditional Aboriginal cultural world view, kin ties are "evoked as symbols of a community and nation: blood and culture, not law, define ethnic identity and citizenship within a nation that nurture and sustains her people" (Fiske 76-77). As I expect the word "blood" to raise many eyebrows, I feel it is important to remark that as my elders and other Aboriginal peoples have told me, many Aboriginal traditional societies were very open to "adopting" members of other "tribes" who acquired their culture. At least, that was the case for the *Hauenosaunee* people. Therefore, it can be

clarified that the notion of blood is not as rigid and exclusionary as the one more commonly used by other ethno-nationalist movements. It stands to represent one's affiliation to a clan, and one's membership to it can be obtained either by birth or adoption by the female members of the clan.

For the most part, Aboriginal male-led organizations use a different discourse, one which is masculinist and derived from the same European hegemonic power that they oppose. In this discourse, men are the natural citizens and women instead have to be accepted by the men and the Canadian state (Fiske). This masculinist discourse came into evidence during the proposed amendments to the Indian Act to reinstate women who had lost Indian status into their communities. In a subsequent period, in name of protecting the constitutional "collective" rights of self-government, Aboriginal male leaders were ignoring the gender relations of power that presently exist in Aboriginal communities. Throughout both these debates, Aboriginal women asked for either re-instatement or insurance that gender equality for Aboriginal women be protected in the Constitution, Aboriginal women have always argued that, if we truly want to reaffirm our traditional way of life, women's rights are to be considered collective by nature and to be at the core of Aboriginal notions of "nation." Moreover, to argue that women's rights (as Aboriginal women) are only individual rights is a colonized way of thinking, because for Aboriginal peoples the individuals are always part of the collective, not outside of or contrary to it. We must also remember that many of the dividing lines (either of status, reserve residency, blood, or membership to bands) now existing in our communities were not originally drawn by Aboriginals themselves, rather by the Canadian state (Monture-Angus 1999: 144-45). During our decolonization process, we Aboriginal women must ask the men and the leaders of Aboriginal communities to respect the powerful roles Aboriginal women held and which are part of many traditional laws (e.g. the *Kaianerekowa*). In doing so, we can then equally walk together towards the same path and have a similar vision, one in which we are, in the words of Sharon McIvor, "united with our own people, on our own lands, determining our forms of government, deciding rules for membership in our Nations, and deciding who will live on our lands" (180).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to illustrate the complexities of the ongoing debate between feminists and nationalists. Throughout I argue that there is not a single version of either feminism or nationalism and demonstrate that they can be either progressive or reactionary. For the most part, "Western" feminism has been guilty of excluding, or at least marginalizing, women of colour and Third world women and has only recently begun to

integrate issues of race and colonialism in its theories. In the context of Aboriginal women's issues, feminist theories need to look more closely at the issues of land rights, sovereignty, and colonization and the impact this has had on the lives of Aboriginal women. In their critique of nationalism, feminists need to look much deeper at issues of land rights, at the colonial state's erasure of the cultural practices of indigenous peoples, and should not be quick to define Aboriginal women's participation in nationalist struggles as non-feminist and inherently dangerous for women. (Jaimes-Guerrero). However, we Aboriginal women should be also very careful not to prematurely dismiss all of feminist theories. Undoubtedly they have enriched our analyses of power relations, especially of those most directly related to gender. It is also true that many "mainstream" feminists have attempted to reevaluate their earlier assumptions and are beginning to question their own colonization of "others." More importantly, most of the feminist skepticism about nationalisms should be taken seriously. Historically, women's participation on anti-colonial liberation movements has been vital; but has not translated into enduring gains for women in the new nation. There are many nationalisms, and only one that offers women an emancipatory place in *all* phases of the liberation movement would be the one that I could join. Most importantly, identities which are defined by an ideology of purity of "race" have the potential to be very oppressive and dangerous, especially for women, since they are seen as bearers of the imagined pure nation. We must also acknowledge that "tradition" is not static, but is always transformed by people; therefore, post-colonial Aboriginal nations must accommodate differences of experience and let traditional practices meet the continuously changing needs of their members.

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<sup>1</sup>I would refer readers to the works of Jayawardena; Charles and Hintjens; Moghadam; and Alexander and Mohanty for an overview of the mobilization of women in anti-colonial movements.

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## SHANNON BAILEY

### Playing with Water

After supper, our mothers gossip  
together on the front porch, cigarette smoke  
swirling. Vicki and I pinch  
snapdragon blossoms for their secrets.

Our mothers have secrets of their own; passions  
wound tightly into pincurls under shower caps  
and secured with bobby pins.

Tonight they are fed up,  
fed up and bored with making ends  
meet. Their Black-Cat tobacco  
tins filled with quarters  
will not do. Vicki and I asking  
for licorice money  
"mommy please, mommy, mom please"  
will not do.

Yes! we are restless and jump about  
like brittle-legged grasshoppers  
in the heat. When the curfew siren  
wails as if there were a war  
in every house, we plot  
the bombardment of this town  
under the hot kiss of our mothers,  
sawdust sparks careening like tracer bullets  
from the top of the Beehive burner in Slaterville.

Shannon Bailey is busy working on a novella and a series of  
short stories through the Humber School of Correspondence.