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POOR WHITE WOMEN

By Roxanne Dunbar

A caste-class society depends for its perpetuation on the desire of the lower caste masses to get on top, and to identify with those of the privileged caste or class rather than their own people. An enlightened power group will encourage 'climbing' knowing full well that the few who 'make it' will be thoroughly corrupted or destroyed in the process.

For the agrarian poor white female, class and caste oppression is multiple (surely infinitely multiple for those who are black). In the farming community where I grew up, the distinction between male and female was absolute. But the women had none of the 'privileges' given the female sex among the wealthy. Men had many of the privileges reserved for men only, though. For instance, women were expected to work in the fields doing heavy labor when needed, but men were never expected to do domestic work or care for the children.

The care of the children definitely was in the hands of women only. Women cared for one another in maternity, and helped each other with the children. Children were raised somewhat 'communally' (by 'blood' aunts or honorary aunts), but only with women sharing the labor.

In some country families, the women did dominate -- probably more often than did the men (usually there was a division of labor based on sex, and totally separate spheres of power, and since these poor white men had no power outside the patriarchal family, and there was no town government, there was no exteriorization of the patriarchal role). In one such family, the man hardly ever spoke and was shy. The woman was strong and independent. She was just, egalitarian, and no-nonsense. She ran the farm, and her husband was a sort of foreman for her. Her children were extremely good at everything, and were considered to have the highest characters of any young folk in the community. To have such independence, though, the woman had to have a man. That is, widows and divorced women were powerless and tragic.

In general, women talked as loudly and as much as the men in mixed company. Any joke about women was met with a more biting joke about men, or the reverse. The women were not passive, nor were they expected to be 'soft' and 'maternal'. They whipped their children, yelled at them, demanded that they entertain themselves. But the men were not abstract figures; they were constantly present, in and out, working with the women, and living in crowded quarters with the family.

The women basically seemed to consider the men as weaklings who must be kept in line to keep them working, and to keep them from drinking. I suppose that generations of men moving off to the West leaving women in charge of farms and children made for very sturdy, independent women, but also for meandering men. I know my mother feared that my cowboy father would one day walk out, or take to drinking. The women seemed determined that equality meant equal bondage. If they were to be tied to farm and work, the men should be also. The men wanted the freedom to rove, and have land and family of their own as well. The women did not go for that bargain.

By the time I was born (1938), many of these patterns were beginning to change, so that by the time I had left home (1955), the tenuous cultural patterns had been shattered. I hear much in my childhood about the leaner years of the depression, when there were no shoes for my brother and sister, barely any food, and how lucky I was. But still we were very poor. It was a poor community, and getting poorer. The city people were buying up the land for wheat crops. It got harder and harder for a family that did not own land (like mine) to find a farm to rent or sharecrop. We moved a half dozen times between the time I was born and when I started to school. There was always talk of going to California, mostly by my mother.

My mother wanted a better life. She had always lived in incredible poverty, with no mother (her Indian mother died when she was two) and a drunken Irish father. She blamed my father for our poverty, and he blamed his misfortune, though he railed against the Roosevelts, the Northerners, and the rich. Mostly, though, they fought with each other.

In the late '40s and early '50s, many of the 'dirt farmers' went to work in the city at the defense plants, and moved away. My mother wanted that, so she could have a refrigerator, stove, running water, a bathroom, closets, like all city people seemed to have even when they were very poor. My father refused to move to the city, but he did finally stop trying to farm. He got a job out of a larger town nearby, driving a gasoline truck, delivering to the rich farmers. He made \$150 a month when he started (1947), and ten years later he was making \$200. We moved into the tiny town (150 people), but we continued to raise our own food and meat. My grandfather and grandmother were among the founders of that little town, so that we had a certain status, though poor. We were never considered 'white trash' but there were such families there. The desolation of their lives was far, far greater than my own.

Then it was in the early fifties that movies and television invaded the culture, introducing new (urban) patterns. The

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country folk were mystified by the city people portrayed, and they were humiliated in their ignorance and roughness. The women were embarrassed by the white, soft ladies in low cut gowns with their jewels and high heeled shoes up against those country women with their leathered brown skin and muscles, and drab work clothes and heavy shoes. The men felt 'more manly' toward the soft-voiced, tender ladies on the screen than toward their own unsightly women.

The image of the male which Hollywood created was not so very different from the country man. The female image was totally different. The farmers' taste and desire were supposed to change, and his self-image thereby. But the country women were to change completely -- psychically and physically. And it didn't work. The sight of country women in rhinestones and platform heels and brief dresses over their muscular bodies was a pitiful one indeed. The men left them (in fantasy) for Hollywood (the new West).

Worst of all (for me), the women tried to create the glamour in their daughters, which they themselves could not attain. 'Pretty as a movie star' was a common way of describing a girl who fit the image. The image was curly blonde hair, blue eyes, rosy complexion, and a soft round body. I was tall, dark, thin, with very straight hair and big feet ('big feet' was a terrible 'problem' for most country women). But my mother tried; she made me get permanents (the electrical contraption), and she actually bought shoes that were too small for me, which crippled my feet. Shirley Temple was the daughter all mothers wanted, and I clearly could never become Shirley Temple. How much pain, how much wasted energy on trying to create little Shirleys?

But I worshipped movie stars and stared at their pictures for hours. I had another idol, though, which loomed large in my childhood, and which was more complex and damaging -- Scarlett O'Hara. Everyone had seen *Gone With The Wind*. It was an epic dramatization of our people's plight, we thought. And a woman was the central figure. *Gone With The Wind* is a perfect example of the kind of brilliant propaganda which was created by sell-out 'pop' artists and intellectuals during the '20s and '30s for Fascist regimes in the West (Europe and America).

All the stereotypes of the Bourbon imagination (economy) were recreated in dazzling, compelling form. Scarlett was not just a woman; Scarlett was the South (Bourbon, of course) -- proud, beautiful, strong-headed, and in war, brave and unflinching, never really defeated. After the war she made alliances with the carpetbaggers, but always was wily, crafty, never disloyal to her real self. In fact, she was too demanding, too crass. The North (Rhett Butler) was not that evil. In the end Rhett shuts the door in spoiled Scarlett's face, and we all know she deserved it. Somehow we were left with the illusion that Scarlett was triumphant, which indeed the Bourbons have been.

At another level the stereotypes of caste were reinforced, again in the mode of the Bourbons. Scarlett was a lady, though strong and capable of anything a man could do. Scarlett was the new woman of the new South. Rhett was the new man -- strong, masculine and in charge. Melanie and Ashley were relics from the past -- the innocent antebellum Bourbon South with all its serene beauty. And, of course, Black people are portrayed as happy darkies, loyal and childlike. Poor Whites did not appear as major characters, but the big tent of imagination encompassed us. The poor were there, but we were allowed to identify with the White South (the Bourbons), and to share their war, frustration, glamour. This perfect meshing of all Southern interests with the interests of one class, the class in power (Bourbon) is analogous to such trickery on a national level now, and is, in fact, as old British device for keeping the poor folk 'loyal'. The glamour and power and 'nationalism' (Southern) of the Bourbons have always been sufficient to keep the poor Whites down in the South.

But *Gone With The Wind* had an even further effect upon poor White females. We 'played like' we were Scarlett O'Hara. It fit rather well with our worship for movie queens since Scarlett O'Hara was really Vivien Leigh. Scarlett's tragedy made her an even more attractive figure. In terms of behavior, Scarlett taught us that a woman should be strong, but hide the fact; should be sexy, but virtuous, though sex could be used to save a man or one's country. Scarlett before the war, or after the war, would not have made the impression it did, had not Scarlett in wartime been offered as an image of a lady digging potatoes and living in poverty. That it was a temporary situation only gave us hope that ours, too, was temporary. For *Gone With The Wind* truly allowed us - poor White girls - to believe that we, too, were Southern princesses.

Poverty is a reflection of bad character, of evil in America, where everyone supposedly has the right to climb. A clever poor White girl lies about her humble background, when she goes to the city, that is, if she wants to catch a man who will raise her status. She will say that her family used to be wealthy and own slaves; that the Civil War destroyed the family's wealth. That is, she will have aristocratic pretensions and separate herself from her people. In other cases, her family raises her believing they do in fact have a noble Bourbon past. Just as in Mexico, where every non-tribal Indian claims noble Spanish blood, every white family in the South claims origins with the elite.

So the poor white woman grows up either in ignorance destined to marry a poor White man and live in relative poverty or move into the post-wartime economy of urban employment, or she will make it out into a higher class through marriage. In any case, her identity will remain highly confused. Ashamed of her class status, she probably will not in her lifetime discover her caste status as a woman, though she is fully aware that she is subservient to the men of her class, who are just as poor.

It took me many years to fully liberate myself from class climbing, and then only to find that I would never be accepted at the top, not even had I been born upper class, because I was female, not male.