



Caribbean Quarterly

A Journal of Caribbean Culture

ISSN: 0008-6495 (Print) 2470-6302 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcbq20

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Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2024. xvii + 533 pp.

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To cite this article: Amílcar Peter Sanatan (2026) Patricia Mohammed, *Janet Jagan: Freedom Fighter of Guyana*, Caribbean Quarterly, 72:1-2, 211-215, DOI: [10.1080/00086495.2026.2707259](https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2026.2707259)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2026.2707259>



Published online: 07 Sep 2026.



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Book Reviews

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REVIEWED BY AMÍLCAR PETER SANATAN

IN MY FAMILY'S BOOK COLLECTION, THERE WERE texts on Caribbean, Latin American, and Third World revolutionaries. A recurring name in pamphlets and publications was Cheddi Jagan. Dr. Cheddi Jagan, the dentist who went on to become one the Caribbean's most astute leaders of twentieth century decolonisation through "the forging of a labo[u]r-political nexus" in Guyana and the region as a whole.¹ Images in the study room ranged from a younger, sleek, handsome man of Indian descent from Guyana in suits to an older man with thinning silver hair and garlands around his neck. His work, like Maurice Bishop's and Michael Manley's, went on to shape my understanding of the postcolonial context of national development and the spectrum of the Caribbean Left. My earliest memory of the name Janet Jagan, political collaborator and wife of Cheddi Jagan, was as author of the books *When Grandpa Cheddi was a Boy* and *Anastasia the Anteater and other stories* published by Peepal Tree Press in the United Kingdom.² Our family library was a partial archive. While my parents proudly recalled figures like Merle Hodge, the Trinidad and Tobago-born writer who contributed to the Grenada Revolution, and Celia Sánchez in the Cuban Revolution, there were significantly less books, pamphlets and texts on women in the Caribbean Left, authored by women. For a long time, a dominant androcentric tradition in political and social sciences limited assessments of women leaders and revolutionaries in Caribbean Studies. Through the writings of Caribbean feminist scholar-activists, like Carol Boyce-Davies Laurie Lambert, Rhoda Reddock and Alissa Trotz, we have more comprehensive works on women figures and their roles, contributions, thought, and experiences on the Left today.

Janet Jagan (20 October 1920–28 March 2009), née Janet Rosenberg was born in Chicago, United States of America. She crossed paths with the Cheddi Jagan in the US; they eventually married in a “simple ceremony” in Chicago City Hall in 1943. On the surface, her marriage to Cheddi Jagan and subsequent migration to the British colony in South America was reminiscent of “the familiar stereotype of the coloured male migrant returning home to his town or village with a [w]hite trophy wife”. But, Janet Jagan’s immersion in the political struggles of the colony grounded her in the culture, landscape and aspirations of the oppressed majority. Though she dedicated decades long service to marginalised groups, social movements and the People’s Progressive Party (PPP), “[t]o many she remained the American-born [w]hite Jewish woman who was a corrupting influence on her husband” and “the dogmatic Marxist leading him along a thorny socialist route”. But, within her political party and among peers, she was fondly referred to as “J.J” or “Comrade Janet” by friends and party members. Throughout Janet Jagan’s life, she consistently achieved milestones as a “first”: the first woman elected to the Georgetown City Council, the first editor of *Thunder*,³ and the first woman to become deputy speaker of the Legislature. Later, she went on to occupy the roles of the nation’s first woman prime minister, vice-president, and president. In retrospect, Janet Jagan was part of the nationalist movement of women leaders between the 1950s to 1970s, in the transition from self-government to independence, that ushered greater participation of women in mass-based party structures and civic life.⁴

Patricia Mohammed’s latest book, *Janet Jagan: Freedom Fighter of Guyana*, restores Janet Jagan’s place as a key figure on the Caribbean Left, framing her as both a creative political and artistic force in Guyana. The book is organised into fifteen chapters with a postscript featuring excerpts of elegies upon her death. In the headpiece of each chapter, a picture of the Harpy Eagle, a large bird of prey soaring South American skies, is featured with the heading. This serves as a tribute to one of Janet Jagan’s favourite birds, as well as firmly situating the text in the landscape of Guyana. Some chapters open with intriguing ethnographic prose, offering field insights into Guyana’s palimpsest landscape of colonial governance, Indigenous peoples’ presence, and the dwellings of descendants of Africans and Indians. This prose is complemented by references to scholarship, interviews, archival

sources, and literary works by Louise Bennett, Martin Carter, Mahadai Das, Derek Walcott, and others.

Mohammed rejects scholarship that invisibilised Janet Jagan and popular representations of her iconography as “villainess” (106). Janet Jagan was a complex political figure who was instrumental in modern political history of Guyana and party politics. Mohammed examines Janet Jagan’s political career on its own merits, positioning her role “not as a subordinate but as a major actor in the focused anti-colonial struggle for independence and self-government of a people” (5). Since the 1940s, both Cheddi and Janet were deeply involved in social organising within the labour movement and worker solidarity, eventually co-founding key political vehicles like the Political Affairs Committee in 1946 and later the PPP. Significantly, Janet Jagan co-founded the Women’s Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) as early as 1946, establishing her as an early pioneer of women-led socialist movements in the Anglo-Caribbean, though tensions and tough questions on “racial politics” within the organisation fractured the organisation.⁵

Curiously, the book advances a gendered analysis of Janet Jagan’s politics in fragments. Readers would benefit from learning more about the gendered dimensions of Janet Jagan’s orientation of her theoretical concepts such as socialism, the party structure (influenced by the Norman Manley-led People’s National Party of Jamaica), mobilisation strategies in periods of ethnic conflict and social division, sexual and gender politics in community, national and international fora, and the gendered realities of everyday politics in mass-based political institutions. Like several high-profile women leaders in political party structures in the Caribbean Left, Mohammed argues that it is unlikely that Janet Jagan self-identified as feminist (187). In the book, insights into the gendered dimensions of Guyana’s decolonial struggle are highlighted in relation to Janet Jagan’s early support for women’s reproductive health, excerpts of her prison diary between 1954 and 1955, analysis of the petit bourgeois entanglements and precepts in the WPEO’s beginning and the early 20th century women’s movement, and the impact of politically organising women in the Women’s Progressive Organisation.

In the Introduction, which includes the methodology applied by Mohammed, there is a brief discussion on the objectives of this text and its focus on biography. The book was commissioned by the Jagan family

and the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre. The mandate of the book is clear. Yet, it is important to acknowledge this book was authored by one of the leading feminist scholars in the Caribbean whose background in Caribbean feminism was born from interest and participation in twentieth century regional and international liberation and social justice movements. Questions arise: What were Janet Jagan's contributions to Caribbean socialist women's theory and action and Caribbean feminism? What relations of sisterhood and/or partnership did Janet Jagan establish in advancing her aims in the Guyanese women's rights movement, as Mazake Thame explored between Beverley Manley and Linnette Vassell in Jamaica?⁶ What further insights can we glean from intimacies across borders as Janet Jagan had between herself and Eslanda Robeson, wife of Paul Robeson? Or, differences gestured to in Vanda Radzik's recall of Janet Jagan (242)? What was Janet Jagan's political engagement with Viola Burnham, wife of Forbes Burnham, and the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement? How was Janet Jagan's politics complicated by her partnership with Cheddi Jagan, a male icon of Guyana's and the Caribbean's Left? To what extent did masculinist structures and standards of machismo in the PPP impact Janet Jagan's political agency? There are "inescapable entanglements"⁷ of gender and feminism in Guyana's history.

Mohammed's critical gender analyses are more explicit in sections where she provides historical context such as the discussion on racial and gendered hierarchies in the Caribbean and the relegation of "the status of East Indian male in the hierarchical scale of masculinities in the region" (114). It also comes forward in narrative detail on Janet' Jagan's mother (Katherine Kronberg), Janet Jagan's progressive student outlook while enrolled in US-based universities, tensions surrounding the interracial union in families separated by continents, and interfaces with ethnic and colour barriers in education at Bishop's High School when she accompanied her sister-in-law at a school enrollment interview with the Headmistress. These insights on interpersonal relationships and the politics that undergird them are inherent in Mohammed's Caribbean feminist lens. But, it clearly does not form the imperative of this book. The book will walk readers through an uneasy and traumatic decolonisation process. Mohammed's interdisciplinary approach elucidates the affective dimensions of oppressed people in colonial situations struggling to determine their futures in a world of imperial might. Janet

Jagan was on the frontline of these events. Similar to the achievements of Janet Jagan's career, Patricia Mohammed has accomplished a "first" – developing a full-length text on the life of Janet Jagan. This is a useful starting point for new writers to critically appraise Janet Jagan's legacies, extend our archives on women leaders in the Caribbean, and maybe even reimagine the name of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre itself in tribute to the ways both Janet Jagan alongside Cheddi Jagan, jointly co-created and modelled their political work in life. **CQ**

NOTES

1. Perry Mars and Alma H. Young, "Introduction", in *Caribbean Labor and Politics: Legacies of Cheddi Jagan and Michael Manley*, ed. Perry Mars and Alma H. Young (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), x.
2. Janet Jagan, *When Grandpa Cheddi Was a Boy* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1993); Janet Jagan, *Anastasia the Anteater and other Stories* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1997).
3. *Thunder* was the official news and communications publication of the PPP. It was established in 1950, replacing the PAC's Bulletin.
4. Rhoda Reddock, *Reflections on Gender and Democracy in the Anglophone Caribbean: Historical and Contemporary Considerations* (The Netherlands and Senegal: SEPHIS-CODESRIA), 23.
5. Kimberly D. Nettles, "Becoming Red Thread: Alternative Visions of Gendered Politics in Post-independence Guyana", *Social Movement Studies* 6, no. 1 (2007): 61.
6. Maziki Thames, "The Significance of 'Communists Wearing Panties' in the Jamaican Left Movement (1974-1980)", in *Black Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: Critical Research and Perspectives*, ed. Melanie A. Medeiros and Keisha-Khan Y. Perry (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 56–74.
7. Alissa Trotz, "Inescapable Entanglements: Notes on Caribbean Feminist Engagement", *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 9 (2015): 191.