

Freedom Fighter of Guyana – Janet Jagan

A biography by Patricia Mohammed

The Good Steward

In the Caribbean spring, a green time for the region's political development, there were few names that shaped the basin's consciousness that did not come from a colonial history. Names like Eric Williams, Cheddi Jagan, Grantley Adams, Norman Manley, Alexander Bustamante, VC Byrd and T A Marrison. But among that group there was one name that didn't. The name was Janet Jagan - - an American born Jewish woman, widely considered at the time to be a Communist, who had influenced Cheddi Jagan, her British-Guyanese husband whom she met while both were studying in the United States.

As a child growing up, I had heard of the Jagans but had a different impression of Janet. My grandfather, Norman Manley, and my grandmother Edna revered the Jagans as fellow warriors for Caribbean independence and freedom, as the islands worked to lift the heavy yoke of their colonial past. My grandmother was a friend of Janet. They had met in 1949, both foreign born white wives (though my grandmother considered herself a mulatto) who saw culture as an imperative part of national consciousness in their husbands' political drive towards self-determination. I have often wondered if arriving as outsiders of different nationality, race and culture, Edna in 1924, and Janet in 1943, they were able to see the notable absence of features that would identify the Caribbean in their local arts which in colonial days reflected far more of England than the rich Caribbean landscape or its developing island characteristics. After all, not only countries get colonized; minds do too.

Patricia Mohammed's meticulously researched work describes how Janet, happiest working behind the scenes, started out as an arduous party organizer and fighter for women's rights, reluctantly entering the public arena as co-founder of the People's Progressive Party, Georgetown City Councilor, and Member of the House of Assembly. After the Jagans' five month confinement to prison, in 1957 Janet became Minister of Health Labour and Housing, and finally democratically elected Prime Minister and later that year President, after her husband's death in 1997.

So, who was this American woman who the US government banished after she became a Guyanese citizen and then, many decades later, was described by American journalist Robin Wright, in *The New Yorker* as a formidable example of women like Hillary Clinton in their own drive to grasp political power. In fact Janet Jagan was first to break the glass ceiling as an American when she was elected Guyana's President in 1997.

What were the influences that drove this steadfast socialist and champion of the poor and disenfranchised in her husband's country. These are the questions Mohammed has gone to great pains to answer, in a story that reveals the ways in which the struggle for self-realization in those days was as much against American neo colonialism as it was against the crumbling British colonial system.

Could an author write a biography of Janet Jagan without the presence of Cheddi overwhelming Janet's story? Well Mohammed has managed to separate Janet from the couple's common cause. The story is structured to aim and keep a laser sharp focus on Janet. An initial look at its list of contents, mostly chronological, reveals chapters that not once mention Cheddi Jagan. The author paints a compelling portrait of Janet as a woman who is an ardent party organizer and activist; whose personal strength and conviction speak from a light within, a light probably inspired by the Fabian socialist influences of her youth. Janet was conscious of deep social inequalities in the country of her birth which cried out for social justice. Mohammed shows how Janet's experience growing up in Chicago as a Jew gave her an empathetic understanding of what it is like to feel discriminated against and excluded; to be society's underdog.

Without ever diminishing the powerful, altruistic role of Cheddi Jagan, the author has managed to almost seamlessly extract the essence, often by difference, of Janet from the complementary kinship of the marriage, revealing a character less gregarious, less stellar perhaps in the sense of shying away from the limelight, but more meticulous. An editor and journalist, she was perhaps initially more comfortable with the cultural and cerebral, but she became equally passionate about then British Guiana and its people and future, about achieving peace and democracy. In a land deeply divided by history into two racial groups, Janet and Cheddi were fighting the good fight through democratic partisan politics, on behalf of all their country's races. It is a great irony that from her background as a minority, in her new land she would one day be facing and fighting officially-sanctioned proportional representation partly initiated by the US in her adopted country.

Janet's early ardor was far from being just a phase of youthful protest. Revealed here is an extraordinary woman who moves from the richest country on earth to one of the poorest, embracing her husband's family and culture with humility and grace, and imbibing both the beauty and misery of his land with sensitivity and intelligence. Janet immersed herself in the culture and politics of Guiana, recognizing the great problems faced by a majority of its people, always responding by seeking practical solutions.

Perhaps the most powerful chapter of the book and the most moving for me personally, is "Sentenced to Jail" in which, after the 1953 suspension of the British Guiana's constitution, many were jailed over time including Janet and Cheddi. Janet's time in prison is described without drama by the author and equally dispassionately in the notes left by Janet which are lovingly transcribed by her daughter Nadira. In the biography of a woman bound up in politics, the focus is on her public life. But here in prison where a quiet and simple routine provides Janet with welcome time to read and think, one feels poignantly her devotion to her son whom she misses. During this time her son Joey celebrates his fifth birthday without his mother, but Janet writes him stories that will be the beginning of a series of children's morality tales reflecting the flora and fauna of Guyana that she will continue writing for her children and grandchildren and the children of Guyana for the rest of her life. Those stories are a metaphor for Janet – the visionary who would watch a nation grow as one would children, learning the stories and values that, rather than borrowed from other cultures, reflect the truths of home. She might be midwife to Guyana's Independence, but birth mother to her children and the stories she writes for them.

When Janet arrived in Guyana in 1943, the Caribbean was undergoing initial upheavals in protest against the British. Mohammed describes the conditions of rural Guiana that so spoke to Janet's sensitivities – the brutal poverty, lack of the most basic infrastructure and the stifling disadvantage of women in a patriarchal society. Janet's interest in the USSR political system and later visits to Russia were all in pursuit of working examples of equality for women. That system, despite its infringement on political or democratic freedoms, had granted equal status to women in the workplace and in this regard must have seemed an attractive model to Janet.

It is impossible to understand the story of Janet without the historical context of the Cold War and America's almost paranoid fear of anything Socialist which it interpreted and propagandized as communism. Within the reach of the American Eagle's neo colonial claws, Janet and her husband Cheddi would be characterized and victimized and eventually imprisoned for using a socialist model to provide equal opportunities for men and women, education and medical care for all, and welfare for the needs of the vulnerable and neglected. This paranoia affected many of the Caribbean islands whose early activists were often labeled Communist and even imprisoned despite the fact their emerging political parties were largely shaped by democratic theories.

I came away from this book with much more than knowing the historical details of Guyana which in different ways mirror its ex-colonial neighbors in their fight against poverty, violence and injustice as they too struggled for their political self-determination. This biography fills in many gaps in understanding a region whose histories have not always been fully recorded. But I had just one disappointment; a question that has always puzzled me remains unanswered. A cursory look at the Index revealed no mention of the Caribbean federation, January 1958 to May 1962, and why Guyana chose not to join the union. It is reminiscent of Belize where George Price saw his country's destiny tied to the mainland of which it was a part. I have always wondered if the Jagans had a similar vision of their nation's destiny.

As a journalist and diary keeper, most dear to Janet Jagan was a record of her adopted country's history and its cultural sovereignty. She was an obsessive informal archivist who studiously saved and filed every possible record of Guyana's living history and whose attention to her husband's legacy would preserve his memory after his death in 1997. She would have been relieved and proud to know that decades later an equally meticulous historian and gifted writer, Mohammed would in her research find and use this extensive material in weaving her story and the story of modern Guyana.

Martin Carter, the Guyanese poet, contemporary and friend of Janet, in one of his protest poems describes the Caribbean imperative: "My course is set. I give my sail the wind/ to navigate the islands of the stars/ till I collect my scattered skeleton/ till I collect..." ...from a destructively fragmented colonial past defined by slavery and then by indentured labor. Mohammad's work here is an important step in that process. What will resonate long after its reading and our understanding of this renaissance woman who is its hero, is a sense of that intangible goodness that seeks to unite the divided, to lift the powerless, house the homeless, educate the illiterate and care for the elderly, the young and the vulnerable. This goodness, as typical of Fabian Socialist ideology as it is of Christianity or any of the humanitarian movements through history, is represented by Janet Jagan. Mohammed's life of Janet

reminds us that social generosity has no nationality or gender, no specific theology or political persuasion. It is just a human instinct of good people to help their neighbors, and by extension the larger society that's being built. And Mohammed has honored this superbly.

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