

Feminism

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Locally and globally, feminism argues that patriarchy operates as a logic, a phallogocentric system of thought, as well as a gender order that is 'naturalised' in everyday life, reinforcing and reproducing divisions between men and women. The aim of feminist politics is to trouble, challenge and change these binaries already constructed by gender (Butler 1990; Ziarek 2016), to delink and disrupt how patriarchal thought (within both the Enlightenment and Colonialism) reproduces a persistent asymmetrical gendered order between men and women across master/slave, oppressor/oppressed, predator/survivor, presence/absence. Against patriarchy, feminisms engage in a multiplicity of complex strategies and tactics to envisage life differently for women (Jaggar 1983; Gunew and Yeatman 1993; Evans 2000; van der Tuin 2009). 'Feminism', a singular, is the plural umbrella term through which women connect to overcome the social, cultural and economic disconnections which they experience as women (hooks 2000; Lugones 2003; Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019). Significant inequalities between women within and across different configurations of class, race and ethnicity both divide as well as unite women politically. Feminism's vision of political action today (for the 99%) is primarily trans-national, challenging the gendered economic configurations and political divisions found across contemporary trading partners and alliances like the European Union, GATT, NAFTA, BRIC or Asia-Pacific Trade Agreements (Spivak 2003; Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019).

Creating solidarity, fostering coalitions and alliances as a political practice is no longer expressed in terms of a universal sisterhood (Morgan 1970) or the notion that 'one woman' represents all women. The strategic necessity of organising as women has not changed because systematic discrimination against women still exists. Anti-essentialist feminist critique since the 1980s has made clear the absolute distinction between women (real beings) and Woman (idealised metaphors) prevalent in culture (Collins 1990; Benhabib and Cornell 1991; Schor and Weed 1994; Witt 1995). Connecting people, and not women-alone, remains the only mechanism to overcome divisions secured through fear, hate and xenophobia, to break down barriers established by race, nation, religions and/or ethnicities, and cross the borders and boundaries established by custom, traditions, knowledge constructions, beliefs and hierarchies or generational groupings (Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty 2003; Sudbury and Rey 2009). Feminist alliances aim to create solidarity between our partial and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988; Shohat 1998), but also new situations where acknowledging cultural and political differences between people results in co-operation and not life-threatening conflict or war or insurmountable

communication problems, including the silencing or shaming of ‘Others’. Feminist visions of change challenge dominant (male) power structures which maintain the *status quo*. Feminisms’ critique asks who benefits from shifts in the current global order, when the movement of tectonic plates between pre-dominantly masculinist systems of power, authoritarianism and control continues to bring only negative changes to the daily lives of millions of women around the world. This is why, given the inequality, discrimination and conflict in the world, feminism remains a resource for overcoming states of disconnection, manifesting hope in connection.

Feminism is a global travelling concept (Bal 2002; Cerwonka 2008): first, under the banner that women’s rights are human rights (the UN position, see Adami 2022), and second, in the movement of women since the 1970s away from second-class citizenship towards greater civil rights and social recognition in nation-states (the ‘post-Westphalian’ contract, Fraser 2013). These tendencies can no longer be divided between a First World and a Rest of the World; or a Global North versus a Global South; or democratic vs. authoritarian regimes, because women’s impoverishment and lack of access to resources exist globally, albeit differentially. The civil, political, social or cultural rights of women remain dependent on where they live or are from, and women have divergent ideas about where concepts of class, race, caste and ethnicity operate in a gendered politics, including in indigenous communities. Inequality does not change because someone becomes stateless, undocumented or is regarded as a persecuted minority; the visibility of people in these situations highlights instead the fragility of civil equality for the majority of citizens.

UN agendas for ‘women and development’ have emphasised ‘women’s’ role in family, health and social cohesion and education, but offer far less in its sustainability goals about women’s role in culture, environment, or peace-keeping and conflict resolution, other than monitoring the situation. Bringing more women into the waged labour market is not an answer when care, health and education systems are inadequate. Gaps and contradictions remain for women in decision-making on the global issues and resolutions made by the United Nations itself. This is why women trans-nationally continue to protest restrictions (e.g. ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ in Iran); organise rallies against judicial indifference regarding violence against women (e.g. in India and Argentina); hold International Women’s Day Strikes and Marches; and come together over protests against changes to abortion laws (e.g. in Poland and USA). The battleground for feminism (in the Enlightenment tradition) was fought over women’s right to be recognised as human (not animal) – as in artist Barbara Kruger’s ‘I won’t play nature to your culture’ – to be a legally-recognised person with self-determination and independence of thought; to own both property and their own person; to have citizenship and a vote (Wollstonecraft 1792; de Beauvoir 1949). Framed differently, these battles continue over women’s position in universal human rights (as freedom of expression and freedom from insecurity

and fear) and for recognition of their voice in society and culture (especially access to social justice).

Feminist writing on many subjects has revealed a man-made world, acts of everyday sexism, misogyny as normalised, absences as the result of phallogocentric systems of belief and many models of knowledge which prioritise male interests and points of view and minoritise alternative perspectives. Patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, harassment, discrimination, or even feminicide, have been used to try to describe how ideas about the sexes reinforce men's greater ownership of power or resources and extend control over women's sexuality, freedom of movement and finances. Gendered distinctions about family, nation and community are used by both Right and Left, democratic and authoritarian regimes in propaganda and cultural representations. Advanced capitalism, Imperialism/colonialism, feudal and subsistence economies all reproduce and maintain diverse but consistently gender-segregated systems for work and leisure (Mies 1986; Federici 2004). Analyses of the gender order within labour markets, capital accumulation, trade routes and the commodification of every aspect of daily life tend to reveal globalisation as solely about markets and trade routes, while lists of progressive policy interventions, activist campaigns and local initiatives identify how globalisation is a political struggle for change from below. Women's presence in Arjun Appadurai's five 'scapes' is consistently under-rated (Appadurai 1990). The gendered operation of the system of economies, of geo-politics, of war, of culture is a problem for everyone – especially the primary illusion in war that only men fight while women suffer. Feminism questions the reinforcement or maintenance of norms that reproduce gender segregation in labour markets and war as an answer to conflict over resources.

Feminist visions for change have been characterised as rooted in the everyday, in pleasure, joy, repair and reparation, in care for others, for habitus and for the environment, even as they acknowledge the pain, distress, violence, unhappiness, brutality, dispossession and loss that are all around us. It is not women's 'fate' or 'destiny' to be confined to the 'private' sphere of home and family, to do most of the domestic work, reproduction, nursing and caring roles, and it is often not a 'choice'. In the competitive individualism of capitalism, neo-liberal feminism claims the path to success is escaping this 'fate' by becoming better paid and greater consumers of goods and services. However, feminism's slogan, the 'personal is political', cannot be reduced to individual will or market power, because all political action requires collective struggle. Neo-conservatives argue feminism is the enemy because it does not reinforce traditional family models or old-fashioned moralities of modesty and silence imposed on women. Someone – not necessarily female – must still clean where we live, wash the socks, collect and cook the food, and offer care for a larger group of people (than one). Socialist feminists argue that society should re-evaluate 'housework' and how we offer care to others, moving it away from individualised domestic

labour as ‘women’s work’, and linked to a re-evaluation of underpaid carers, cleaners and keyworkers who do this as waged work (Verges 2021). Social democratic feminisms insist that a more equal distribution (‘equality’ at all levels of representation) must address larger goals of world peace, an end to poverty, greater social justice for all, and the end to persecution of all minorities. Yet, the exchange of women between men has not ended: women’s position remains defined through their relational place in a family – mother, wife, grandmother, daughter – and women are still valued by their sexual availability or unavailability. For many women ‘home’ is not a safe place and this is not just when ‘home’ is as fragile as a tent in a refugee camp.

Feminist visions challenging ‘home’ as a place in nationalism range from the idea that ‘women have no country’,¹ to pointing out the essentialised role that the figure of Woman offers to different kinds of nationalisms (Yuval-Davis 1997). Feminism(s) is not a power grab for women to rule the world (even as irony!), feminism instead asks everyone to think differently about life and what is meaningful within it. The reproduction of the degraded idea of existence in a brutal bare life (neither poetic or political nor considered in relation to gender) (Agamben 1998) – the existence of today’s modern slaves – is not part of feminisms’ vision for the future. Women are still judged according to their use value to others, including their ability to generate money by/with the sale of their bodies, not just their labour. Power and desire still crystallise around concepts of the ‘male gaze’ on female (or hyper-feminine) bodies as objects to be looked at, and women are still valued more as consumers than innovative producers, even in popular culture. Feminist artworks have ‘riffed’ on the dispossession, alienation and loss of women in the social, economic, political and cultural gender order on many topics including the history of colonialism/capitalism and post-Socialism/Communism. Women are not just the trophies of beauty for wealthy elites or defined by their purchasing power, they are major producers in global economies, in world agriculture, subsistence farming and in the world’s crafts. The rising figures for infant and maternal mortality indicate the lack of value society really gives to women’s role as mothers of future generations. The education and rearing of children are a communal enterprise that fosters connections between people, resources, methods and practices – building and maintaining culture has many similarities. Giving birth to a child (or even a great work of art!) is not a single act, it involves learning and years of care and work, as does the creation, fostering and maintaining of any culture. And still, from the art market to global trade in artefacts and craft production, we are confronted

¹ Virginia Woolf said this in *Three Guineas* (1938). By contrast, the important statue of Edith Cavell (1865–1915, a nurse in the First World War) in St Martin’s Place, London (1920) by George Frampton carries her words ‘Patriotism is not Enough, I must have no Bitterness or Hatred for Anyone’ which were added in 1924.

with the idea that women are a minority of artists and cultural producers and the ridiculous presumption that when women are both mothers and artists, this is somehow a contradiction or confusion of roles.

There are plenty of artworks by women that point to how gender operates, often with feminist playfulness in role reversal or employing other forms of humour, irony and critique. Identification and recognition are critical terms in art criticism, but their purpose is not to bolster identity-based politics or to create a universal 'feminine'. Feminism in curating, criticism and art history has revised existing categories in genealogy, genre and subject and invented its own, questioning the dominance of the 'male gaze', redefining social spaces, challenging the obsession with certain media or innovation as constituting history. Feminist art is not produced in a single medium, style or genre (not even in textiles!) nor is it only to be found in collaborative models or activist self-organisation in networks (e.g. Lippard 1984; Deepwell 2020).² Women artists have been part of most contemporary art tendencies: conceptual art, fluxus, minimalism, abstraction and many posts (including the postcolonial and postmodern) – as well as forming their own feminist trans-national avant-garde (Schor 2016). Feminism's re-evaluation of women artists has moved them away from modernism's negative positioning of them as automatically minor/marginal artists into major figures whose works now determine the key themes and concepts that define contemporary art.

Feminism, as a politics and poetics, introduced new subjects into art³, offering different accounts of women's subjectivity, sexuality and modes of being/becoming on many issues. The category of 'the body' is not a feminist invention, because feminists ask 'whose body' is represented and what view of the personal as political does a work represent. Renewed celebrations of drag, gender-bending or camp expressions (in style, personality or dress) do not change this situation, except where they highlight discrimination (e.g. the works of South-African artist Zanele Muholi). To overcome disconnection, feminist poetics and politics find value in everyone's lives, in their fullness, diversity and plenitude and life as full of a sensory rich, multi-layered, and diverse set of experiences in the cycles of birth, growth, change and death. Arguing that these gendered norms have been dismantled by gender-neutral language defies the overwhelming evidence that they continue to be used and redeployed daily.

Feminisms continue to point to difficult questions about the persistent uneven distribution of recognition in institutions and ongoing contradictions between

² See KT press' Feminist-Art-Observatory which lists over 500 books, anthologies and exhibition catalogues on feminist art and women artists from around the world since 1970.

³ See Katy Deepwell's Feminist-Art-Topics project of 30 topics and 1000 works at <https://www.kt-press.co.uk/feminist-art-works-topic-intro.asp>.

the hypervisibility/under-representation, excess/invisibility in representations of women's bodies and women's lives. Would renewed attention to the percentage of women working in different aspects of the waged-labour economy, to women's migration patterns globally, or the rise of women as capable multi-taskers in middle management in highly administered cultures or global technology firms tell us more about women's positioning in a dis:connected model of globalisation? Is it only a question of identifying for feminism emergent trends in women's art production and mapping their antagonism towards certain cultural dominants in geo-political agendas (as Jameson (1992) proposes about world cinema)?

Feminisms' fascination with crossing borders and disciplines, with overcoming sex-role defined limits, with transnational connections mirrors the reality of so many people's lives in today's diasporic and globalised conditions: a polyglot existence, with work in one country, family members in another, with alienation from one form of cultural life (tradition) to newly established bonds to another (emergent cultures). To connect means remembering other histories in spite of globalisation's production of amnesia, as the memories of events, people, ways of life, communities, landscapes, industries and ways of working dissolve and 'all that is solid melts into air' (Berman 1998). This washing out/evacuation of all memories and histories is capitalism's primary tool of disconnection and allied to how propaganda in politics remakes every new epoch, designed to make its own power the dominant ideology. Do we really want to join the new 'group think', to participate in falsifications of history and the recycling of old myths instead of searching for new ways to discuss issues from climate change to the threat of permanent war? Reconnection through history is not about bringing back the obscure, the curious or folkloric, it is about remembering the past in relation to present struggles and this is how feminism(s) re-vision a future which is less extractionist and exploitative capitalist in its possibilities for all. There exist many alternative feminist perspectives from cosmopolitanism or critical regionalism, even reifying a planetary perspective (Gilroy 2000; Spivak 2003; Meskimmon 2020 and 2023) or finding kinship with the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016) that might lead us to when, where and how women fit into the dis:connections within globalisation.

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