

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Department of English

Beyond Gender: From Proto-Feminism to Queer Decolonial Feminist Practice and Theory

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You Might As Well Call Me A “Hypoclit“

Portfolio

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1. Introduction

In my earlier school years, approximately when I was 14 or 15, male teachers began calling me “Emanze“ (kind of the earlier German word for “feminist“, predominantly negatively connoted); because I was a vociferous female teenager, because I had an opinion. When I had my first conscious contact with feminism, and with conscious I mean that I willingly raised my voice knowing feminism was a movement, I did not know how long the movement already existed. Only at university did I learn more about feminist movements, how long they existed and what the goals were/still are. From every session of such lectures I left shaking my head because I was so frustrated that these movements are still necessary today; how can it be so anchored in the minds of not just one but several societies that women are worth less, that the man is superior to the woman - for hundreds of years? I have had several discussions with people who claim they would not consider themselves a feminist, however, hold the opinion that men and women should have the same rights. Every time I was confronted with such a statement I immediately replied that this attitude makes you a feminist and that is why you should call yourself a feminist. The more I think about it the more I realise that I have wasted a lot of energy trying to convince people to call themselves that, if they share the values of feminism.

This portfolio actually cost me a lot of time. Not because I did not want to deal with it, but because I just figured out a lot about feminism and what I learned in the last years (yes, only in my twenties). There are several rough versions of this portfolio that contain different aspects of my feminist existence. The following sections contain a lot of personal material and that is because I have learned a lot about feminism and my personal relation to the subject in the several seminars at university. One could see this portfolio as my journey of becoming a feminist including the hurdles that appeared along the way.

2. Raising a Feminist

I never really thought about where feminism came from and what societal issues caused the need of a movement for women. I did not grow up as someone who struggled from gender inequalities, I was never disadvantaged, I was never suppressed and my mother always told me to raise my voice and share my opinion (which was also not the best advice, I would argue). The unequal treatment of men and women was a myth for me; my mother was a single parent and she taught me how to fight for what I believe in. She taught me how important it is to be independent of men and to build my own life; so, in a way, I was confronted with the surface of such issues, but I have never experienced them within my family. However, I learned that my mother had a hard time growing up with six brothers and only two sisters; her mother favoured the boys in the family and neglected her daughters. In retrospective, I understand why my mother put so much emphasis on telling me over and over again that no man should ever have power over me.

My mother raised me to be vociferous, and I was. There was nobody who could ever mute me and deny me of my right to speak up. Was I aggressive? Yes. Did I have a reason? No, not really. Not during my time in school. I was a feminist but I did not know why and I have to admit that I was not very conscious about it; men and women should be treated equally was what I supported. Nevertheless, I never really understood the motivation behind this concept as I neither experienced unequal treatment myself nor did I witness it elsewhere - at least I did not recognise it as what I would now call gender inequality. As mentioned before, I only learned about the history of feminism in university; including not only women's role in feminism but also men's (and *). Taking seminars on the topics of feminism motivated me to look up further information not so much on the history of feminism but on current topics; it motivated me to educate myself and to improve as a woman and as a feminist. Nevertheless, there have been huge question marks along the way.

3. The Very First Session

In our very first session we learned about Mary Wollstonecraft and her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and the first thing that ultimately crossed my mind (due to the year of publication) was the French Revolution, more precisely, how I was educated on that topic in school. Ask a German ninth-grader how often he or she* learned about the French Revolution and all you will receive is an eye-rolling mimic. German history teachers are obsessed with the French Revolution, however, this would not even be a problem if we learned about all facets.

When learning about the era of the French Revolution, all that was talked about were the ‘Jakobins’, Robespierre, le terreur and the pursuit of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. At first glance, one might say “So what?” But as I developed a close relationship to the importance of language and how one utters something in order to give it importance, I realise that the French word “*fraternité*” addresses only men. The parole of the French Revolution deliberately excluded women. We learn this from Olympe de Gouges’ “*Declaration of the Rights of Women*” (1791) or Mary Wollstonecraft’s “*Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”. Olympe de Gouges’ “*Declaration of the Rights of Woman*” (1791) was the answer to the “*Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*” (1789) including fundamental human rights addressed towards men. Gouge extended the existing declaration to women. Her contemporaries regarded her work as arrogance, and four years after she published the declaration she was to become a victim of the guillotine and, accordingly, of the Patriarchate of France. *La feuille du salut public* stated her fate as follows:

Olympe de Gouges, born with an exalted imagination, mistook her delirium for an inspiration of nature. She wanted to be a man of state. She took up the projects of the perfidious people who want to divide France. It seems the law has punished this conspirator for having forgotten the virtues that belong to her sex (Burgett 1998: 104).

Her notion that women should have the exact same rights as men was dismissed as “exalted imagination”, her efforts to protest against the oppression of women were commented on with her “want[ing] to be a man of state” and forgetting her role as a woman in society.

Mary Wollstonecraft criticized the proper role of women in society as well, aiming at the denial of education towards women and their physical inferiority to men which she claimed to shall not be of concern since the men of her time were rarely confronted with situations in which their physical strength and superiority would have been required. Her “Vindication of the Rights of Woman“ does not say, however, that men and women are created equal; this shall only defined by God:

Let not reached the point where I want to reverse the order of things, I have already conceded that, by the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a higher degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex, but I do not see the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ, given their nature. Indeed, how could they, if virtue is only present in one eternal standard? So I have to, if I reason therefore, argue that they have the same orientation and simple, and that with the same vigor that I support a God exists (Wollstonecraft 1792).

Personally, I would argue that this is a very important stance Wollstonecraft is taking. As an atheist, I do not agree with God as the deciding instance of whether men and women are equal or not, however, it is obvious that there are differences between men and women; mentally as well as physically. It seems as if the term equal is a little confusing here and it needs further clarification. Because in reality, when having discussions with different people explaining what feminism stands for, in most cases I receive the answer “But men and women are biologically different“ - yes, nobody is denying that fact but we should not be treated differently based on our biological differences, should we? And I always think:

“Dear men, no one is intending to devalue you as a human, as a man, trying to deny you of your manhood - no, we are trying to raise women’s value to your level to be valued equally and embrace manhood as well as womanhood. And what does it say that some of you are afraid of a society not embracing differences of men and women, even if we - and I am repeating myself - do not intend to do that? Internalised misogyny is real“.

But I always say: “Ok“.

4. But Wait - Am I Really a Feminist?

One of the question marks I mentioned in section 2, probably pointed at myself and whether I can be a feminist or not. Through the years I came across many facts, or what I thought of it: conditions. I compared myself to other feminists, especially to those you would see in the media. The biggest criticism I confronted myself with, was probably of political nature; the fact I did not know about the structure of political issues criticising structural sexism and misogyny. Well, Donald J. Trump unwillingly informed me about these issues pretty quickly. Not a day goes by that I look into specific media platforms and I am not confronted with pure sexism, absurd misogyny, toxic masculinity; a society in tremendous need of change.

Beside the political aspect of feminism, I considered my personal appearance and behaviour of not being really feminist; well, I would rather say I considered my personal appearance and behaviour of not being perceived as really feminist. First of all, sometimes I do a full face make-up including contouring, highlighting, a very strong eye make-up and if I feel like it, even fancy lipstick colours as red or pink. And yes, I use make-up to impress men sometimes. There are cases I intend to appear “more attractive“. As a feminist, of course, I would always say that women do not wear make-up to appeal to men, however, as I do that on some occasions, doesn't that contradict with what I stand for?

Another assumed controversy I have to face on a daily basis is the fact that I had breast surgery when I was 21 years old. First things first, I am not making a secret out of it as I think it is nothing to be ashamed of or in need to be kept a secret. In, I think, the second session of the “Pornification of Culture“ class another student made a statement about having surgery assuming that the porn industry and the patriarchy are the reasons why women have surgery, especially, breast surgery. Was I offended? Definitely. Why? Because, and I make that statement every single time I am talking about my surgery, I did not have it because of men. I did not feel the pressure to have a specific breast size to be “more attractive“. Am I influenced by society and a certain image of womanhood? Yes. But on no occasion did I ever think about how a breast surgery would make me more appealing to men. In fact, since I had surgery, I have never worn clothes that would reveal my décolleté too much - because if there is one thing I hate about having had surgery, it is men staring at my breast. However, of

course, such statements made in class and comments of men saying they prefer a smaller breast size (which I am not interested in, seriously, I do not want to know and I could not care less) make me think about how I might not be the best version of a true feminist.

Referring to the title of this portfolio, I have been called a “hypoclit“ and yes, in a way, I appreciate the word pun. It should be noted that I was called a “hypoclit“ by a man. Why? Because I had box braids, which is an African-American hairstyle for which black women are discriminated against. I know that now and I regret that I was unconscious about that issue. In no way had I ever thought about the different treatment of white women and women of color and in retrospective, I regret that hairstyle. I am guilty of cultural appropriation but I have learned my lesson - every time I see pictures of myself wearing that hairstyle, I cringe.

I was also called a “hypoclit“ because I tended to tell men that they do not get to have a say in some matters. As for example, when it comes to abortion, a lá “no uterus - no opinion“. On some occasions these thoughts still cross my mind but deep down inside I feel that there is an importance to include men in the debate but it should always be clear that for a range of topics, men and women do not share the same experiences and, therefore, women’s voices should be heard, not men’s.

Apparently I am also a “hypoclit“ because, when I still worked as a waitress I was groped by a customer. I reported it to my boss and the customer was thrown out and after two days he contacted me and apologised for his behaviour. I did not file a complaint with the police which was a mistake I was confronted with; I was accused of being responsible if this man sexually assaulted another woman. Yes, I was seriously told several times that it would be my fault if that happened again.

The term stuck with me and I have thought of myself as a “hypoclit“. During the last two semesters I have heard several men and women use the adjective “female“ as a noun. On every occasion I would call people out asking them to not use that word as noun. As I had another glance at my bachelor’s thesis with the topic “Gay Prosody? An Intonational Analysis of Male Homosexual’s Intonation“ I realised that I have used the adjective “male“ to refer to men several times. And here I am. Still calling people out who would use “female“ as a noun.

5. Conclusion

The notion of feminism has always been a part of my life, even though I was not always aware of it and for a certain time of my personal life, it was not “necessary“, I would argue. Nonetheless, throughout the years and especially with having classes about the history, the role and necessity of feminism, I came to realise how a system of sexism, misogyny and patriarchy affects me and every woman and every men around me on a daily basis. I try to escape patriarchal suppression and I would argue that I succeed in it very often, nonetheless, many women and men do not. And as long as that is the case, I will never refuse to call myself a feminist and to fight for equality for men and women.

I will never not fight for emancipation of men and women. I will never not try to stop the indoctrination of gender roles. With reference to my experience this also means that I will have to remind myself to not blame men in general for patriarchy - I have to admit that I did this. But I learned to reflect and question not only systems of oppression but also my behaviour and stances. Furthermore, perhaps I need to be more patient with myself as well. I am still learning about feminism and its many facets. Sometimes I will contradict with my views but I am able to reflect on that. That is indeed something I learned in the many feminism classes at university. I am grateful for that offer as it helps me to improve. With reference to the question if I am really a feminist, **now** I would say yes. I raise my voice and I create a platform for those who cannot speak on their own; I also let others speak of issues I have no experience with. I include everyone, I count every woman in - women of color, trans women, women of the world. Day by day I try my best to be a better feminist and to be inclusive and there are certain aspects I am not yet educated well enough on but I have come to terms with it. Maybe in the future, I will mentally cross the line and I will be at a point where I do not get too emotional about feminist issues but, honestly, being emotional about something does not make me incapable of also being rational about it. I consider myself so lucky to be a descendant of so many great women who have risked their lives and set the fundament for a better life for women. It is insane that there ever was a necessity for these women; I cannot change history but I can have an impact on the future.

Works Cited

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