

Feminism: A Human Right

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of feminism as a human right rather than merely a struggle of American women to achieve equal opportunity and salaries in the corporate world. Without denying the importance of such achievements, the facet of feminism that is explored for the most part is the ability for women around the world to be treated as human. Not only are women denied rights such as the opportunity to be educated or to earn money to feed their children, moreover they are considered property and subject to abuse. The central concept portrayed in this essay is that as women climb the ladder in the struggle to eliminate glass ceilings in the corporate world, we must not leave vast numbers at the bottom, still struggling to be considered human. The essay explores writings on women's issues from sources including the Bible, Virginia Woolf, and Bell Hooks enabling observations from diverse times and cultures to be explored. Often our society is oblivious to what is happening in other countries or even other neighborhoods, this essay is reminder.

Feminism: A Human Right

Feminism, as thought by many Americans, is not just a movement to create high-level jobs in the corporate world and equal salaries for women, although that component must not be disregarded. Women around the world are being treated as lower class citizens if citizens at all. Meena was a woman born in Kabul who was murdered in 1987 for her work with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, also known as RAWA. Meena and other members of RAWA fought for the right to earn money to feed their children, the right of literacy and knowledge, the right to leave their homes without permission from their husband, let alone the right to show their face in public (RAWA 1-2). In Nigeria, Amina Lawal was sentenced to death by stoning on March 22, 2002 because of admitting to sexual relations with a man other than her husband and giving birth to a child out of wedlock. Charges were dropped against the alleged father of the baby (Nigeria 1). In Pakistan an 18-year-old girl was sentenced to being raped as punishment for her 12-year-old brother's alleged illicit affair with a girl from a tribe thought of as higher than his. Four men carried out a gang rape while tribe members stood outside the hut and cheered. After the rape, the girl was driven naked through the streets of her village with hundreds of people watching (Pakistan 1). In Kenya, women are regularly subjected to violence and their perpetrators are allowed to operate with impunity. Margaret Njeri was allegedly tortured by police officers by being beaten with a knobbed stick, whipped, stripped naked in front of male officers and had chili peppers inserted in her genitals. She sustained serious injuries (Kenya 1-2). According to the article "Human Rights" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, human rights are defined as "rights that belong to an individual as a consequence of being human." Surely the consequences of being human do no warrant the abuses suffered by

these women. Feminism is a fight for human rights.

Feminism is not a fight only for the abused and suppressed to join and not just for women to battle, but a fight for all humans. A Baptist pastor's wife writes this essay. To be known as a Baptist pastor's wife and a feminist concurrently is exceedingly irregular. This is most certainly an appalling reality that must be remedied, for how can one be a Christian and not be a feminist is a more prudent question. Feminism is a movement for equal rights for women and even in the Bible it is written, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). According to the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman at a well. She comes to the well alone and in the heat of the day, suggesting that she is an outcast. Jesus affirms her dignity as a human being by speaking to her in public (John 4:7). In Romans chapter 16, Paul introduces Priscilla and Aquila, "who work with me." Not only is Priscilla named as a partner in the work; she is named first, possibly indicating importance. Colossians 3:18-19 is often used in the Christian world to denounce women as equal to men, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly." However, if read attentively, one sees that both sexes are given an equivalent command equally as imperative, as well as the fact that even telling a woman to be subject to her husband implies that she has a choice not to be. Would a person of lower class be given a choice? John Howard Yoder, in his book, *The Politics of Jesus*, contends, "the ability to call upon the subordinate party to accept that subordination freely is [. . .] a sign that this party has already been ascribed a worth that is fundamentally different from what any other society would have accorded" (181). A woman must be then considered of equal class, it is a human right. Even though it is still thought of today as odd, or even contradictory, to be a Christian and a feminist, it is a necessary stance.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf took a stance, that because of the culture of her time was much more difficult to take, when she authored her book *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf writes of feminism not as a movement against violence or even the disregard of women as human beings, but she mentions subtly the suppression of equal rights that occurred during the Renaissance and at the time she authored the book, some of which still occur in society today. In fact, any act that disregards a woman as equal to any other human is a violation of her rights. If Woolf could have had the audience, she most likely would have written about more obvious afflictions toward women, but she found it necessary to be subtle for the sake of having an audience at all. Lee Jacobus, in his introduction to Woolf's writing included in *A World of Ideas*, conjectures, "One reason for Woolf's controlled and cool tone is that she wrote with the knowledge that most men were very conservative on matters of feminism. In 1929, people would not read what she wrote if she became enraged on paper" (Jacobus 800). Even though subdued, Woolf's writing can still be engaging when the injustices inflicted upon women are discussed, no matter how trifling they seem to be compared to the violent acts noted previously. An injustice done to someone because she is a woman is a breach of human rights.

When asked to speak on women and fiction, Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own* her primary argument, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). Woolf focuses on the problems a woman encounters as a writer, although the impression is given that she is creating a parallel between writing and any endeavor outside the customary for women. Money and a room for herself were not feasible for a woman in 1929, for it was not

acceptable for a woman to earn money or to have a place of her own in which to work. Herbert Marder, in his book *Feminism and Art*, interprets Woolf's comment that, "she must have the same opportunities as men to pursue her interests, to be free of material cares" (25). Today access to learning at any level is assumed for either gender in prominent nations, but not so in some countries. As previously mentioned, even recently in Afghanistan, girls were prohibited from attending school in fact, they were not permitted to read at all. Woolf writes about an experience in 1929 at a library on a men's college campus in Britain,

Here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction. (7-8)

She then mentions that the library has "all of its treasures safe locked within its breast" (8). Treasures are not only the books themselves, but all of the jewels of knowledge waiting inside of them, locked away from the grasp of a woman. Like the saying goes, knowledge is power, and to keep a woman from knowledge is to keep her powerless. The word power can bring to mind the picture of a great ruler or position in society, but the power to overcome abuse, and the power not to be considered property, and the power to be literate are the only dreams of some women. It is a disgrace that is a reality today, for a woman should not need to dream of such rights, but she should have the ability to dream of being a great ruler and even see it become reality.

Woolf writes of an imaginary sister of Shakespeare named Judith who did dream; she wanted to be an actress. Judith was as gifted as her brother yet was not even sent to school. If she started reading a book, she was told to put it down and mend the socks and if she wrote anything she had to hide it or burn it. In her teenage years, Judith was told she would marry a local wool-stapler, but she refused while her father begged her not to shame him. Judith had no choice it seemed but to follow her dream, for her talents compelled her to pursue them; "the force of her own gift alone drove her to it" (49). She headed for the theater where after stating that she wanted to act, was turned away at the door while the men laughed. However, the actor-manager took pity on her, and soon she became pregnant. Upon the realization, she then killed herself (48-59). If Shakespeare had been a woman, we most certainly would not be aware he had ever existed and indisputably would not have the advantage of his momentous works. It is curious to suppose what other enlightenments our world are missing that might have come into being had a gifted woman not been suppressed, no doubt a vast sum.

Virginia Woolf creates a substantial argument about feminism as a human right; however her writing is focused on the rights of the middle class. "Feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually- women who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority", Bell Hooks writes in her opening paragraph of *Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory* (863). She makes the point that these women do not organize a rebellion, let alone openly question their particular existence, which is a sign of their "victimization" (863). Hooks later writes about the claim of modern feminists that "all women are oppressed," then she defines 'oppressed' as "the absence of choices" (866). She makes the

point that all women in the United States may be discriminated against as a sex, but not all women are oppressed, for some women do have choices even if they are insufficient. She indicates that to clump all women together is to deny “factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc.” (866). Hooks makes a valid point that many of us have overlooked, for to be a feminist in the educated, middle class society is many times equated with the corporate ladder. Feminism must not be thought of only in this way, for some women have climbed the ladder, some are still climbing, but a vast number are left at the bottom or are still trying to find the ladder. Moreover, the ladder is not a corporate one for millions of women, just a ladder to equality – to human rights. How can any woman who has reached the top of the ladder or is even in the midst of the climb, consider herself to be successful in her endeavor? Surely she has paved the way for others behind her, but that cannot be enough. Women on the ladder most certainly cannot leave others on the bottom or searching, for surely success will not be achieved until all women have been empowered to begin the climb.

Meena, the martyred leader of RAWA, wrote a poem entitled *I'll Never Return*, part of which is translated,

I'm the woman who has awoken
I've arisen and become a tempest through the ashes of my burnt children
I've arisen from the rivulets of my brother's blood
My nation's wrath has empowered me
My ruined and burnt villages fill me with hatred against the enemy
Oh compatriot, no longer regard me weak and incapable,
My voice has mingle with the thousands of arisen women
My fists are clenched with fists of thousands compatriots
To break all these sufferings all these fetters of slavery
I'm the woman who has awoken,
I've found my path and will never return.

Meena has inspired many women to find the ladder and begin climbing. Those who have found it, whether by searching or by being born with access to it, have the responsibility to help those who do not have the ability to get to the ladder. How can women fight for opportunities such as higher pay and equal jobs when so many are fighting for basic human rights? Human rights such as the right to earn even enough money for bread to feed her children, the right to be educated, or the right to be treated as a human being rather than property. The fight must continue for luxuries such as equality in the workforce, only not at the expense of leaving vast numbers behind.

Victory is not in the achievements of an individual or even a few, but victory will take place when all the runners have crossed the finish line. In the charter establishing the United Nations, all members were pledged to promote and encourage “respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” Feminism is a human right, and we have a duty to promote and encourage it.

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Biographical Sketch

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