

Name

Instructor

Subject

Date

New Perspectives on Feminism in Bell Hooks' "Feminism and Class Power"

When people hear or talk about feminism, they usually conceive images of selfless female activists fighting for gender equality and recognition of the rights of women in the society. Personally, I imagine groups of successful career women and female academicians fighting to create more space in the private and public spheres for their fellow underprivileged womenfolk. I imagine a group of assertive women who, having fought their way up the social ladder in a male dominated society, are committed to help their womenfolk overcome the challenges of male chauvinism, sexism, classism, and gender discrimination that keeps them under the oppression of patriarchal domination. However, Bell Hooks' essay "Feminism and Class Power" paints a significantly different picture. Hooks' essay argues that feminism was inspired and supported by privileged high society women who were dissatisfied with the passive domestic roles they played in their married lives. Their ultimate goal was not opposing gender discrimination, but using it as a means to achieving their self-interests, which were centered on gaining access to the same economic power as the men in their privileged social class. This essay argues that although feminism has helped expand the opportunities available for women by pushing for social reforms aimed at ending gender discrimination in all spheres of life, it (feminism) is still an elitist movement that achieves little for the working class women. Like in its earlier days when it was "a white woman thing" (Hooks 107), feminism is not a collective

class struggle, but an upper-class affair that is dominated by career women interested in gaining more economic and political power.

The most outstanding argument that the author makes on her topic is that “It was not gender discrimination nor sexist oppression” that had kept the privileged women at home, but the fact that given their lack of special skills, they could have only performed unskilled labor roles and earned low wages like the rest of the working class masses (Hooks 102). This perspective clashes with contemporary views of women and feminism by denying the role that patriarchy and unequal gender relations played in limiting the advancement of women in society. It also changed my opinion regarding the fundamental reasons that inspired feminism. The author suggests that the feminist movement was not originally inspired by genuine reasons of gender inequalities, but a ploy by dissatisfied upper class women to turn their limited access to economic power (which was expected given their low education levels), into a gender issue (Evans 38). It is surprising, as one would expect under the circumstances, that they did not advocate for better access to education to improve their chances in the job market. The willingness of high-class women to do low-level jobs appears to be submission to male domination rather than a protest against patriarchy and gender discrimination. However, the strategy of politicizing their situation worked by making gender inequality a political issue that attracted media attention, and consequently brought gender issues into public conversations.

One unusual perspective by the author is the idea that patriarchy unwittingly fueled the feminist movement by resisting attempts by the few women who were willing to do jobs that were far below their educational level just to escape from their “imprisonment” at home. The attempts by upper-class husbands to deny their wives the opportunity to do work meant for the low-class masses turned the simple matter of a desire to work outside the home “into an issue of

gender discrimination” (Hooks 102). It is at this point that the author adds an interesting twist to the conversation on feminism. The assertion suggests that the desire by high-society husbands to “domesticate” their wives was the excuse that rebellious privileged women needed to transform gender discrimination from a class struggle affair into a political issue. The twist here is the author’s interpretation of the real issues that inspired feminism. Hooks seems to be of the opinion that feminism came into being not because it aimed to liberate women in general, but because high-class women were not content to just sit at home and wait for their husbands to feed and clothe them. They loved their life, but they wanted more- independence and the opportunity to indulge in the social world of men. Why would an uneducated woman who had everything that comes with class desire to do a poor man’s job if not the need to assert her independence? Hooks supports this idea when she states that lesbians, who did not depend on men for financial support like their heterosexual counterparts, “needed and wanted equal pay for equal work” (Hooks 103).

On this point, I agree with Hooks that feminism was not solely about achieving equality for women in general, but mainly advancing the interests of an elite class of women who were not satisfied with their situation. They wanted more for themselves, which most unfortunately, required them to compete with men. They simply used the condition of working class women to justify their grievances and make the competition easier. It is here that Hooks addresses an issue that I consider important to the word, regarding the way individuals in positions of power use the underprivileged as a means to self-enrichment. It is even seen in politics, where politicians use the suffering of the masses as a platform to gain popularity and gain political power (Simons 23). This point is also a lesson to contemporary feminists who may be tempted by the allures of material success to betray their cause like their predecessors (Hooks 105). A casual observation of the way society functions today reveals that, even many years after all the noise made by so-

called women rights activists to purportedly create more space for their fellow womenfolk in a male dominated world, the majority of women are still content to perform their gender-defined roles, “as long as the roles are freely chosen, felt to be fair and acceptable by each partner, and increase relationship satisfaction” (Cox 101). This means that feminists are disgruntled voices that are not comfortable with the traditional values and structures that govern society. Many women, including my own mother, my aunts, my friends’ mothers, and most of the women I know, are content to be mothers and housewives, obediently performing their domestic roles without complaint. In many communities, the position of men in the family, and by extension in society, has never been questioned.

There are also women who are very successful in their careers and earn more than their husbands. Yet, they have never dreamt of putting on their husbands’ trousers and starting to call the shots in the house. As much as these women are ambitious in their careers- and they have a right to, their success does not make them to forget who they are; mothers and wives with socially defined roles in the family. Hooks’ observation that there were conflicts even within the feminist movement (between privileged white women and black women) over appropriate behavior, and the desire by white women to be the voice of authority in the movement (Hooks 104), shows that the self-appointed advocates of women’s rights had self-interests that were different from those of the working class women. Hooks supports this point further by quoting Mary Barfoot in *The Coming of Black Genocide* that “there was no liberation” but the profiting of the feminists who wanted to share the spoils of Euro-imperialism with the men of their social class (Hooks 105). Indeed, Hooks says, feminist conversations of class became less common as the privileged women gained more power and economic success like their male counterparts (p.

105). This suggests that feminists were not really against male domination, but after getting a share of what the men of their social class had amassed by exploiting the working class.

Nevertheless, I disagree with Hooks argument that feminism will be successful only when it is transformed and radicalized through “education for critical consciousness” (Hooks 107). This approach calls for the involvement of men, women, and children in feminist politics, and changing the way they think, behave, and interact with the rest of society. I think that such a move will not be successful because it will trigger a counter-reaction from the men who will feel threatened by a feminist resurgence. The reformist approach is more appropriate as it advocates for social transformation that will gradually expand women’s access to economic, educational, and political activities. This approach has already achieved results in many countries through constitutional reforms aimed at increasing women’s participation in politics, business, and academics.

Works Cited

Cox, Frank. *Human Intimacy: Marriage, the Family, and Its Meaning, Research Update*. New York: Cengage Learning, 2008. Print.

Evans, Richard. *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia 1840-1920*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.

Hooks, Bell. "Feminism and Class Power." *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Simons, Greg. *Mass Media and Modern Warfare: Reporting on the Russian War on Terrorism*. New York: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013. Print.