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Shaded Stories: A Study of the Relevance of Feminist Principles in Today's World

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Abstract

In spite of the apparent equality of women in various sectors in the present world, the fact remains that women from various strata of society continue to be discriminated against in various ways. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to assert the relevance and necessity of feminist principles in the present world by debunking five common observations made about feminism. The first observation is that since women are enjoying equal opportunities in education and employment, there is no need for feminism. To counter this observation, this paper explores the persistence of sexual division of labor that leads to women's labor being unacknowledged and unpaid. The second observation is that feminism is redundant because women "create" their own problems. In this context, the paper asserts the importance of equal access and equality of risk that can counter the prevalent trend of blaming the victim in cases of sexual harassment of women. The third observation is that since women sell their own bodies, there is no need for feminism. In response to this observation, this paper asserts that instead of delivering moral judgment on sex/sexualized work, the more important need is that of prompt redress of any complaint pertaining to workplace exploitation of women as well as of creation of adequate employment opportunities for women from all strata. The fourth observation is that women are the worst enemies of women and hence feminism is redundant. Countering this argument, this paper asserts that the exploitative nature of virilocal, heterosexual, heteronormative families is the root cause of female oppression and "enmity". Finally, the last observation this paper critiques is about the "misuse" of women-centric laws. In this regards, this paper asserts how in many cases, "misuse" or its possibility is constructed, which in itself is a reflection of patriarchal ideology. On the basis of these five observations and their critique, this paper concludes with an emphasis on the relevance of feminist principles as the route to an equal and just society.

Key Words: Sexual Division of Labor, Equality of Risk, Workplace Exploitation, Heteronormativity, Women-Centric Laws.

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”

Cheris Kramarae

This paper arises from my bafflement at the general disapproving tendency towards feminism in the present world, particularly in my immediate socio-cultural context: the highly educated middle/upper class. In formal and informal discussions with peers from various spheres of life, I have by and large noticed that men and women alike express their distaste for feminism and feminists alike. But what affects me more than this distaste is one's absolute indifference to the pressing gender issues of our time. In 1949 in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explains the correlation between one's position of relative social privilege and a certain ease of habitual apathy. It has been established that one's sense of self corresponds to qualities that hold social and material value. Hence, one can look to the safety and resultant comforts as reasons for justifying and making ethical sense of not responding to the injustices that are affecting others. In 2016, I unfailingly observe the same apathy in the way many people respond to feminism. This paper is therefore an attempt to assert the persistence of various forms gender-based discrimination and the need for a more aware, sensitive and political response towards it. To achieve this end, the paper is structured in the form of deconstruction of five common observations made about the relevance/validity of feminism in the present world.

Observation #1: My wife goes to work, earns money and has the freedom to spend it as she wants. Why feminism?

Cultural hegemony, a concept developed by Italian scholar and activist Antonio Gramsci, refers to domination or rule achieved through ideological or cultural means. Explained further, the term refers to the ability of a group of people to hold power over social institutions, and thus, to strongly influence the everyday thoughts, expectations, and behavior of the rest of society by directing the normative ideas, values, and beliefs that become the dominant worldview of a society. Patriarchy forms a significant aspect of this dominant worldview. Bell hooks has famously described patriarchy as a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. I argue that it is this deeply engrained acknowledgement of the superiority of the male gender that makes one oblivious to the complex networks of cultural reproduction and patriarchal domination at work even in one's immediate environment, maintaining social order and at the same time producing what Nivedita Menon calls “the effect of untouched naturalness” (Loc 37).

Women, some of them appearing to be at par with men in terms of academic and employment opportunities, undergo acts of patriarchal discrimination and domination on the pretext of naturalness. One of the key features of the social order building mechanism of patriarchy is the sexual division of labor. Domestic work is considered to be women's primary responsibility even if they are also performing labor outside the home and earning

wages or a salary. Explaining the multi-layered oppression of women through the sexual division of labor, Menon argues that women are responsible for the reproduction of labor power because the sexual division of labor keeps the economy going. The labor that goes into making people capable of working day after day is provided by women directly or ensuring that a low-paid poorer woman does it. The economy would collapse if this unpaid labor had to be paid for by somebody, either by the husband or by the employer (15). A recent survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization has revealed that close to two out of every three women, or 60 percent of all rural adult women and 64% of all urban adult women are, in their prime working years, engaged in unpaid housework and this phenomenon is on the rise over the last decade. It can thus be argued that our inability to recognize this unpaid labor that sustains the economy and at the same time limits every woman's ambitions is an instance of the victory of patriarchal ideology masquerading as naturalness.

Observation #2: Women are to be blamed for all their problems. Why feminism?

Noted feminists like Beauvoir and Judith Butler have demonstrated gender as a socio-cultural construct that is forcibly correlated with biological sex. People are produced as "proper" men and women through rules and regulations of different sorts which are either internalized or violently enforced. Each one of us, I argue, contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of social order by performing these rules by for example, commenting on someone's gender-inappropriate dressing, always adhering to the "proper" conduct, shaping young boys and girls into society sanctioned molds, forcibly implementing the dictates of society and so on, each act denoting a point on the spectrum of intolerance. The blaming of the victim in cases of sexual assault is an example of such an act of intolerance.

In today's world, rape is construed as evil not so much because it is a crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman but because it is a crime against the honor of the family. In the patriarchal perspective, rape becomes a fate worse than death as it is believed that there is no normal life for a raped woman. In this understanding, the raped woman is considered to be responsible for the crime against her because either she crossed what Menon calls the *lakshman rekha* of time by going out after dark or the *lakshman rekha* of respectability by dressing in unconventional ways or by leaving the four walls of her home at all (113). Mukesh Singh, one of the prime convicts in the 2012 New Delhi gang rape case, unapologetically comments in a documentary entitled *India's Daughter* that "a girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy...a decent girl won't roam around at 9 o'clock at night...housework and housekeeping is for girls, not roaming in discos and bars at night doing wrong things, wearing wrong clothes". In the same vein, Manohar Lal Khattar, a top elected official of the state of Haryana, is recorded to have made this comment: "If a girl is dressed decently, a boy will not look at her in the wrong way". Logically, it follows, the only way to avoid rape is to lock women up at home, within the family, under patriarchal controls. If rape is on one extreme of the spectrum of sexual crimes against women, eve teasing is at another. Women are advised and urged to stay indoors, not venture out at odd hours, be moderately dressed etc. to prevent the misfortune of being teased. In such an

emphasis on the confinement of women, there is a reflection of the patriarchal desire for restricting women's access to public spaces. In this context, Shilpa Phadke argues that a feminist's demand for equal access to public space must be based not on a demand for safety and protection but on the basis of "equality of risk". Menon explains that instead of emphasizing the protection and safety of women that reinforces the patriarchal imagination, the focus should be on the certainty that if women are attacked, they would receive prompt address (142). I assert that such a move would not only make public spaces equally accessible to both men and women but will also reduce instances of sexual attack on women.

Observation #3: Women sell their bodies of their own accord. Why feminism?

A common argument pitted against feminists who speak against the increasing commodification of women's bodies is that women voluntarily choose to sell their bodies as objects of male desire. Commodification, as Karl Marx describes it, suggests the pollution by market values of objects and relationships that should ideally remain outside of commerce. But in today's world where everyone makes a living by selling a faculty or an object, such a critique acquires a new dimension. In the present scenario, feminists therefore must question the ways in which dignity and social respect have come to be constructed in today's world and raise the question as to why commoditization of the body is considered to be immoral when all other forms of commodification are glorified. It should also be noted that many women who derive income from their bodies, be it in the form of sex work, bar dancing and the like, have worked in other sectors which they found to be exploitative and ill paying. A recent survey conducted on 3000 sex workers in the country reveals that 71% of the women have chosen sex work after having tried various other forms of work and facing debilitating factors like low pay, insufficient salary, no profit in business, not getting money even after work, etc. (Menon, 181). I, therefore argue that more than value judgments on the morality of sex/sexualized work, what is more pertinent is making available more profitable work options for women of all strata and regulating the working conditions in all kinds of employment so that a complaint against any form of workplace exploitation does not go unheeded.

Observation #4: Women are the worst enemies of women. Why feminism?

I have often come across a comment made arrogantly and lightly that it is not men but women who are women's worst enemies, most clearly evident from the many examples, real as well as fictional, of the conniving mother-in-law. It is argued by patriarchal forces that women are at the forefront when it comes to imposing draconian rules on themselves. Menon offers a thought-provoking political explanation about why the mother-in-law often turns out to be the cruelest to the daughter-in-law. According to Menon, there are no battles between the father-in-law and the son-in-law not because they are "rational" men but because their spheres are entirely different. That is to say, the power game between them is not such that increased power for one means reduced power for the other. However, women in virilocal households derive their power solely from men: their husbands, and then their

sons who eventually become some other woman's husband. Power struggles between women are in built in this kind of structure, and are therefore inevitable (43-44). The family as we know it – patriarchal, heterosexual, bound by blood – has long been criticized as the locus of reproducing a rigid and oppressive social order that discriminates against women. The heteronormativity of the family as a prerequisite for the creation and maintenance of patrilineal property and inheritance rights cannot be overestimated. In this context, Menon's proposition on the tug of war for power between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law explains how it is not a reflection of women's "essential" irrationality but of the divisive structure of a patriarchal society and ideology.

Similarly, although it is a common argument that dowry is a bygone, traditional affair, in reality, patriarchal, patrilineal norms of society have made dowry a practice stronger and more vicious. Dowry, a North Indian Hindu upper caste practice has gradually spread to almost all classes, castes, regions and religions in India since the 1980s due to increasing consumerism and marketization and the rise of cash incomes associated with the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s. Many feminist writers like C.S. Lakshmi, Srimati Basu and Menon have pointed at how dowry is linked to the compulsory nature of patriarchal, patrilineal and virilocal marriage and the way it alienates women from their natal families. The control over a woman's dowry lies not with her but with her husband and his family leading dowry to acquire a non-voluntary, oppressive and violent character. The Dowry Prohibition Act, feminists have pointed out, is ineffective because it cannot address the social mechanisms through which dowry flourishes. Additionally, this act can come into play only if a complaint is filed. Hence, I argue, instances of "liberated" men not taking dowry cannot be an indication of the progressive nature of Indian society. The solution lies in a more liberated property rights act that limits men's rights to be exclusive custodians of inherited property.

Observation #5: Most of the female-centric laws and acts are often misused. Why feminism?

As a patriarchal institution, the engrained violence of marriage is difficult to be addressed because women have no language to address this. As a consequence of marriage, women are sent away to the husbands' homes to adjust and manage, giving women limited rights to property as a wife and daughter. Because there are not many laws that protect all aspects of the rights, security, autonomy and integrity of a woman in her marital home, Menon notes, women use dowry allegations to address various related forms of exploitation and oppression which have come to be called misuse of the provisions of the Prohibition of Dowry Act. Because dowry involves the property of the natal family, the woman can expect or at least hope to get support more easily than by lodging other kinds of complaints about oppression (44). Additionally, remarks Menon, the "misuse" argument is ironically correct because all those who represent patriarchal forces in society are genuinely baffled and shaken by the questioning of how patriarchy is supposed to work through marriage/family (44). It is to be noted that acts and laws such as these are prone to being misused for addressing personal or political grievances, and in such cases, a feminist ought

to fight for ensuring justice to the bereaved party. But the potential for misuse is an inherent feature of every act and law, which does not necessitate the repeal of such laws: people can be falsely accused of murder, robbery, embezzlement. Hence, an argument that demeans laws to protect the rights of women on the pretext of the possibility of misuse is another instance of the overwhelming power of patriarchal ideology that singles out women-centric legislation for defamation.

In the light of the above discussion, I would like to assert that in a world controlled by covert and overt networks of patriarchy, the role of the academicians, who regularly deal with young people in their formative years, is crucial. Only by broadening ours as well as our students' horizons of comprehending complex socio-political realities can we begin to think about an equal and just society in the true sense of the term. In achieving this goal, feminist principles have a determining function.

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