



## **Agency To Equality: Co-extant Feminisms And Their Effects**

The discourse of feminism houses dynamic and versatile factions with varying objectives. The topography of this theoretical landscape contains vastly different climates that present unique benefits and disadvantages. However, as this diversity commands beauty, greatness, and expansion, the patriarchal structures it rails against feign versatility with power built over centuries dominance. Awareness to the power structure and basic composition of the patriarchy rarely reaches the American mainstream. That lack of awareness perpetuates gross dichotomies that prevent the unification or single-theory consignment of the feminisms. One feminism—be it cultural, liberal, black, and so on—does not equal a centralized, one-sided patriarchy. Additionally, that same patriarchy does not equal feminist discourse in its entirety. Without a clear view of patriarchal structures circulating the mainstream, feminists cannot unify or advance in-step effectively.

In lieu of unification, effective change stems from feminism's beautifully diverse discourse. With multiple forms of feminism in action in different spaces, completing piecemeal alterations, feminism as a whole can effect impactful change. The forms of feminism discussed in this paper come from *The Discourse of Feminisms* by Jill Dolan—which discusses cultural, liberal, and materialist feminism—and *The Combahee River Collective Statement* by the Combahee River Collective—which discusses black feminism. Each of these four feminisms deserve their place in the national discourse today because they remain effective in specific spaces that, when combined, cover

more theoretical ground than one feminism alone. To understand how these co-extant feminisms operate as a whole, we must define and apply them as individuals.

Cultural feminism enlightens the turbulent—and potentially violent— coming of age passage for women in Western society by calling for revolution, suspicion, and vigilance. “Cultural feminism is founded on the reification of sexual difference that valorizes female biology... It seeks to reverse the gender hierarchy by theorizing female values as superior to male values” (Dolan 6). Sexual difference, to the cultural feminist, connects to a primal base of maternity; there are those who can give birth and those who cannot. This polarizing view of the world is highly problematic when applied to the queer space—particularly to genderqueer individuals who can bear children. However, in the hands of a young woman developing self and social awareness, cultural feminism provides a theoretical framework for the rage awoken by awareness. That framework—a structure that provides a means of observation, analysis, and application—for cultural feminism posits a matriarchal figurehead, a gender binary, and an erasure of race and class. This view of feminist theory is the least complex, most polarizing of the four discussed in this paper, and in applying it you enter a superficial level of feminism. While that is problematic, the level lends itself to an entry point for a specific demographic of women. Without it, feminism runs the risk of not connecting with those individuals.

Delving into feminist theory, further than the entry, self-awareness of both the individual agent and the theory’s rhetoric begin to address problematic interpretations. We arrive at liberal feminism—later juxtaposed to black feminism as “white feminism”—which calls for universal change towards equality. Liberal feminism attempts to break

down barriers of race, class, and gender by instituting active blindness. “[Liberal feminism] relies on values claimed to be universally human, and in essence, demands that ‘everyone should receive equal consideration with no discrimination on the basis of sex,’” in the view of Alison Jaggar, a feminist scholar on politics and epistemology (Dolan 3). While this contains the indignant power behind feminist theory, it also dissolves important differences between women and where their anger originates. By eliding all women into one group you may see a united front, but it is an illusion of coalition. Just as each woman is an individual agent—a being with autonomy—in her community, she is a unique person with specific struggles and strengths. The glazing of individual plight is problematic in that it erases transgender and colored individuals as in cultural feminism, but this crack in liberal feminist framework may be a strength. Liberal feminism has proven to be effective in getting women into elected office by stressing equality and homogeneity in relation to a diverse group, which simplifies that group for the voter. Dolan celebrates,

“The increased number of women in the work force, a slightly higher percentage of women in corporate executive positions, and Geraldine Ferraro’s position on the 1984 presidential ticket, for instance, all stand as evidence of liberal feminism’s achievements in chipping away at male hegemony” (Dolan 4).

Presently, Hillary Clinton is running for presidential election and leading in the polls amongst democrats. Clinton’s campaign bills itself as a platform of the people—people being of very diverse racial and economic backgrounds. While the issues attacked by the Clinton campaign are that of a dynamic group, the power structure remains centralized and spearheaded by a groomed, amiable figure. This application of liberal feminism is effective for Clinton’s polling data and helps her get elected. Once

elected, her platform states certain changes will be made to benefit the masses. While we cannot posit the latter half of that plan, without liberal feminism in action today, the Hillary Clinton campaign would not survive. Cultural feminism calls for a deconstruction of the dominant, male class which does not appeal to voters, so it is not effective in this space for the advancement of feminism.

Upon further development, unrest within the feminist communities became palpable in-house. Feminists were angered with their own positions as women and activists. In the two previous forms of feminism the gender binary, generalization of race and class, and concrete theoretical structures were all immutable truths. Dolan surmises,

“Both liberal and cultural feminism speak to the ideologies of the social formations in the particular historical moment they address. The celebratory tone of cultural feminism is a corrective to female denigration under male domination. The fight for female visibility in a male world has helped liberal feminism open doors into mainstream activity... Materialist feminism, however, frames the debate over gender in more gender neutral terms... Materialist feminism deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions,” (Dolan 11).

This realization of women as beings oppressed, not only in visibility, but as economic agents becomes paramount. Attention to material oppression begins feminist theory’s movement toward intersectionality—the study of intersections between different systems of oppression. Materialist feminism—with its open-ended position—pays attention to socialized gray space, which allows a larger audience to connect to the rhetoric of acceptance and development. This makes an excellent partner to the queer space in feminist theory in allowing for subversive and shifting identities. However, this openness betrays the problematic application of materialist feminism in not providing a direct objective for all individuals under its purview. Also, in neutralizing gender in

discussions concerning the plight of a gendered people, we lose specificity. Lois McNay, in her book *Foucault and Feminism*, approaches the problematic views held by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In the essay “Power, Body, and Experience” McNay discusses Foucault’s blatant sexual indifference in saying,

“for many feminists, Foucault’s indifference to sexual difference, albeit unintended, reproduces a sexism endemic in supposedly gender-neutral social theory. As Schor puts it: ‘What is to say that the discourse of sexual indifference/pure difference is not the latest ruse of phallogentrism?’” (McNay 11)

This loose thread gives way to a large tear in materialist feminism despite its push for intersectionality. Without strong individual identities that are claimed unabashed, respect for a movement’s identity cannot be actualized. Positing that silence equals death, the black feminist community has railed against necrosis with strong, candid identity politics. Black feminism stands alone as the truest to-date intersectional system of oppression deconstruction yet together with all other forms of feminism in its ability to connect. In *The Combahee River Collective Statement* the group states:

“Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s” (Combahee 38)

This form of feminism spans the entire American civil rights movement, but only recently recognized as a valid form of feminism. Positing that racial consciousness has been ignored or politely left open-ended—in materialist feminism—black feminism deserves attention and care in present feminist discourse. However, the denied visible development within black feminism points to an issue within its structure:

“The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement,” (Combahee ).

Being wholly intersectional means you are reliant on multiple factions of activists and the oppressed. That dependence has hindered the black feminist movement because in order to operate under that title, one must construct a very strong sense of what it is to be black and what it is to be a feminist. In a system of oppression like that of the patriarchy and institutionalized racism, combining those two identities

In mandating a system-wide feminism, one steals agency from the individuals in that system. The individual's identity—and politics associated with that identity—educates their approach and application of feminist theory in general and specific intent. By providing equally viable choices within feminism, the individual is more likely to apply their chosen framework properly with care and passion.

## Work Cited

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