

## **Fragmented Feminisms**

**Susan Hawthorne**

I cringe when I see the word ‘feminisms’. My history as a radical feminist, poet, political theorist, aerialist, linguist and Australian, probably predisposes me to this reaction. But it is not just a gut reaction, it is also a carefully thought-out political stance.

My gut reaction against the term ‘feminisms’ is because it comes out of postmodern obscurantism. Postmodernism appeared on the feminist scene around 1980. Within ten years it had taken over the academic discourse, not only in literary theory and philosophy but also in Women’s Studies which was soon to become Gender Studies. Somer Brodribb names a number of features of postmodernism, among them:

- relegitimation of masculine dominance and indifference
- nihilism and the centrality of nothingness
- annihilation as the order of things
- the morbid phallic lack of Lacan
- the reification of immateriality

Add to these, the centrality of texts by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Nietzsche, Freud and other masculinists, my argument is that feminism is not central to this philosophy. Even if one adds Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, the experience of oppression by women is sidelined as a trifle. What is presented as postmodern ‘feminisms’ is a massive distortion of feminism and of the history of feminism.

Many postmodernists, including a generation or two of feminists who have come through universities at the time of postmodern dominance, know little of the history of feminism because it has become the domain of those 1970s dinosaurs.

What we hear is that the history of feminism is plain, boring, white and middle-class. In an article I wrote in 1994 about the history of Women’s Liberation in Melbourne Australia, I found that the very first meeting held in 1970 in Melbourne with this title was organized by five women. Three were women from European migrant backgrounds (the bulk of migrant groups in Australia at that time was from southern European countries); these three women all grew up in working-class inner urban areas and both they and their parents worked in factories or were labourers. The fourth woman was Anglo working-class and the fifth came from a middle class background. They were all over 40. Not only that, but a number of the earliest and most active members were urban Aboriginal women; one was a lesbian. The initiators of WLM were by-and-large not your standard image of white, young, middle-class women. Melbourne is not an exception, but I know the details of this community better than other places.

When I read *Sisterhood is Powerful* in 1973, what struck me was the incredible diversity of voices in that anthology. Some were young and angry and white, many were not. My point here is that feminism is charged with being singular and narrow when it was far from that. It is hard to pinpoint where this idea first came from, but I have vivid memories of arguments at conferences in Australia in 1980s where I heard such comments. I have been around long enough and involved in enough very different political and cultural activities over the last forty years to know that the argument is false. I have worked with feminists in Bangladesh and India; I’ve worked with Aboriginal women and heard their concerns; I have discussed lesbian politics with lesbian

feminists in Uganda; I know women in countries around the world who have been a part of feminist struggles around violence as well as art, politics as well as love to know that feminism never has been narrow, though parts of the media and some feminists, might wish to call it so. Feminism and feminists are not perfect. Black women around the world are frustrated and angry about not being heard; rightly so. Lesbians are tired of being shunted to the side over human rights abuses because the word lesbian does not help to raise money or support; rightly so.

Women with disabilities are exhausted by being made tokens, or lured to media appearances and exoticised; rightly so. Nor is every woman who calls herself a feminist, necessarily informed about the complexities of feminism. But from my own experience, it has been feminists who have raised issues of inequality, of oppression, of hatred, of environmental destruction and of war long before these became conversations in the mainstream. To ignore the ideas and writings of women of color, of Indigenous women, of working class women and women with disabilities, of lesbians is insulting. To ignore our voices is to distort our history. Further, feminism, taking in half the world's population, has always been pluralist; there have always been disagreements between us, but that does not mean that we can't work together. Disagreement, argument is what makes you think harder. It means that more than one mind is at work; it opens the possibility for multiple minds to chew at the same problem. These days, instead of argument we get name-calling and silencing. Sometimes this comes by someone in the audience standing up and saying, what you just said makes me feel 'unsafe'. Walking down the street sometimes makes me feel unsafe, but I still do it. Such games are conversation-stoppers, guilt-provokers and plain nasty. Very frequently the speaker is a man.

Postmodernists engaged in name-calling, including charging feminists with being 'essentialist'. Somehow it was said to be a bad thing that we organize around our oppression as women. Those of us who have grown up as girls and women share similar experiences of oppression around the world because we have been raped, we have been starved, we have been brutalized, we have been paid lower wages or no wages at all for our work. We have also been humiliated and dehumanized. Sometimes our children have been stolen from us, frequently we have been left to live in poverty trying to raise families on almost nothing. In spite of this, revenge violence against men is rare. These things have happened to us because we are women. The extent of the brutality will be heightened if we are a member of a despised group: colonized, black, lesbian, prostituted, disabled, old, poor, or a member of a class or caste that puts us in the lowest category of the society. What is not noticed is that the phallus, phallic thought and masculine texts are themselves acts of essentialism.

What does a postmodernist mean when they say such things? If I organize around my experience of epilepsy, that is a bodily event, am I being essentialist, or am I using that experience as a way of talking about discrimination based on perceptions other people have of the epileptic body? How is this different from discrimination based on perceptions other people have of the female body?

Another reason why 'feminisms' jars is because it makes it so clear that we are begging to be accepted. Feminism is a radical idea. It suggests that roughly 6,000 years of patriarchy should be dismantled. It challenges not only the structures of patriarchy but also of capitalism and colonization. These are our current institutions of power propped up by international banking, free-trade agreements alongside the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Washington Consensus. Outside of these formal institutions are similarly powerful groups such as the sex industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the global food industry, the commodities industries (oil, coal, precious and rare metals) and the international trades in arms, drugs and women's bodies.

What you don't hear in the discussions about power by the powerful is any notion of capitalisms. No, they are united and clear about how they will profit from and exploit ordinary people.

If one takes a look at struggles by different groups of people, one finds that politically things begin to fall apart as the movement fragments. Marx and Engels in The Communist Manifesto end by saying 'WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE' (by limiting their call for unity to men they got it wrong and it is part of the reason that Communism has failed women). In spite of my misgivings, this remains an important political statement; a call for unity. Political struggle is about uniting around common cause. Once the communists began to fragment, it was all but over. When postmodern feminists talk about 'feminisms', it is all but over.

Why am I so down on postmodernism? Because it killed the political will of the Women's Liberation Movement. Some examples:

- Just at the moment when women's writing and feminist writing was on the rise, when feminist bookstores and publishers were thriving, we were told, 'the author is dead'. The author was therefore relegated to second-rate position and unable to speak about her work. As an author, I do and I can speak about my own work. Others will bring to bear their own ideas and interpretations, but as a writer who is aware of my literary strategies, I am certainly not dead (not yet).
- At a time when women were discovering that patriarchy was neither inevitable nor universal, the postmodernist accused such research of being 'essentialist'. This has had huge effects on archaeological research. Whenever large numbers of female figurines are unearthed, to speak of commonalities across time and culture is to be labeled pejoratively as 'essentialist'. I saw an example of this recently in Malta, where the archaeologists compared what they called 'the corpulent figures' to male Sumo wrestlers. If you look at the bodies, the shapes are all wrong. Women's and men's bodies deposit fat in different parts of the body and they do not look alike. Despite these observable differences, to point it out is to invite being called 'essentialist'. These disputes between archaeologists do not really advance the discipline, indeed some of it is intellectually destructive, a kind of dumbing down.
- When feminists were meeting internationally at conferences, comparing the different experiences across cultures, learning from one another, speaking across borders and cultures, we were told, 'you can't speak for another if it is not your position'. This took the fire out of the bellies of those engaged in political activism because they might accidentally make a general statement about women's experiences and then be howled down by the small number of academically articulate voices who took the contradictory position that there can be no position. Politically, this is like shooting oneself in the foot. The notion of collectivity, which was so important in the Women's Liberation Movement, went out the window and was replaced by libertarian individualism and what Renate Klein calls the 'choice trap'. A choice is the ability to decide between two reasonably equal things, eg a chocolate cake or a cheesecake. The so-called 'choice' between, say, living in poverty and 'choosing' prostitution is not a choice; it is a difficult decision that one wishes no woman ever had to make.
- Feminists had critiqued the institution of rape, had criticized the pornography and prostitution industries and we soon saw an alliance between the sex industry, significant sectors of the gay liberation movement and those who wanted to define prostitution as a job and a choice. Oddly, when the CIA sent in undercover people to see what the various liberation and civil rights movements were doing, we called them 'the enemy within'. But when the sex industry sent people into gay lib, queer, LGBT and feminist groups to undermine our struggles, it was called 'agency', 'choice', even 'liberation'.

- Feminists analysed structures of language, but soon we were to hear the non-words that would be applied to feminism in order to take the radical wind out of our sails. We started to hear the word ‘gender’. Feminists don’t fight for gender; gender is what we are fighting to be rid of. There are only two genders, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ and they represent the worst aspects of social stereotyping applied to men and women. Soon the word ‘rape’ was outlawed and replaced with gbsv (gender-based sexual violence). You can’t walk down a street and make sense yelling out a slogan with this 4-word non-word in it. They said that men who were raped were left out if we talked about rape. Not so, men too can be raped, they just did not want the word applied to them (it is a woman’s word). Gender made Women’s Studies more comfortable for men. But men know that gender does not apply to them. Ask almost any male what the meaning of gender is, and they’ll mostly say it has something to do with women. Gender meant that men could gate-crash women’s organizations; gender is a way of confusing the political arguments because after all there are many feminisms so you can’t keep me out! Who are you, you dinosaur feminist, to say what I can or can’t do? It is once again an individualized libertarian response.
- The use of the word ‘queer’ had the same effect on the lesbian movement. It erased lesbians. Lesbians, the backbone of the Women’s Liberation Movement, were no longer welcome, unless of course we were prepared to be subsumed in the LGB – soon LGBT, soon LGBTI, soon LGBTIQ, GLBT etc – where will it stop? Such alphabet soups are not helpful to advancing the cause of feminism. In some parts of the LGBTIQ movement to be heterosexual is posed as radical! And now everyone wants to get married! I did not join the Women’s Liberation Movement to fight for marriage – and many heterosexual women didn’t either – rather we were fighting to eliminate the institution of marriage, just as we were trying to live in a gender-free world.
- Many other ludicrous ideas have been put forward in the name of feminisms. Margot Weiss, for example, writes about what she calls ‘consensual BDSM classes’ and refers to it as ‘play’. She writes:

My copy of the monthly newsletter of a San Francisco SM organization included a scene report, a written description of a consensual BDSM play scene. The scene took place at a San Francisco dungeon in March 2004. It was an interrogation scene, involving a Colonel, a Captain, a General, and a spy. The spy was hooded, duct-taped to a chair, and slapped in the face. As she resisted, the spy was threatened with physical and sexual violence, stripped naked, cut with glass shards, vaginally penetrated with a condom-sheathed hammer, force-fed water, shocked with a cattle prod, and anally penetrated with a flashlight. The scene ended when the spy screamed out her safeword, the word that ends the scene: “Fucking Rumsfeld!”.

Weiss goes on to say that “The photographic representation in Abu Ghraib ... effectively transforms a political real – torture – into a safe sexual fantasy” (Weiss 2009, p. 181). She takes no pause to ask whose fantasy and whose pain? The real torture of Abu Ghraib is real to the prisoners, and just like the women abused in pornography it remains the fantasy of someone who watches from the outside. And to the lesbians and heterosexual women who have been raped and tortured, what does this say to them?

The thing about torture is that you do not know whether you will be alive at the end of the day. You do not know when it will end. It is more than just ‘powerlessness’; it is subjugation, degradation, abandonment, and dehumanisation.

The ‘consensual BDSM classes’ are defended on the grounds that they are performative. Performativity comes squarely out of postmodern theory. Such academic acceptance of torture as

a game is appropriative of people living under totalitarian regimes who do not have the ‘luxury’ of saying ‘No’, or of saying ‘Rumsfeld’ as a parody. It misses the entire history of the intersection of the colonisation of women and the colonisation of the ‘other’.

The idea of multiple feminisms has been used to destroy feminism and in particular to destroy radical feminism. To summarise:

- A feminist recognizes that women as a class are oppressed and secondly does something to change this.
- An anti-racist activist likewise recognises that women and men of color are oppressed and secondly s/he does something to change this.

While we are all subjected to a multiplicity of social, political and economic forces, in order to counter that we need unity. Oppression is a singular force – it might come from several directions simultaneously – but the battle against it has to be a united idea, one that allows women (in the case of feminism) to come together and battle against the forces that oppress them (us).

Feminism is not narrow. Representing 52% of the world's people can hardly be called narrow. Because feminism does represent all women even if not all women want to be represented.

What do I want? I want an end to an empty vessel called ‘feminisms’. I want a feminism that is multifaceted and yet united. I want poetry and song and art as well as politics and collective action. I want us to try and live differently, to live in such a way that we don’t support the global structures of power that are set up to divide us. I want the chance to sit down and talk, not be yelled at or accused of being phobic of one thing or another. Such practice takes us nowhere.

Let's have real live feminist passion, imagination, insight – even disagreement. But let's recognise we are all on the same side not spread out in fragmented differences that mean we can no longer speak to and for one another.

### **Bio note**

Susan Hawthorne has been actively engaged in the Women’s Liberation Movement since 1973. She has written works of poetry and fiction as well as political theory. Susan has been active in a wide range of political activism around issues such as rape, working with Indigenous women in educational and publishing settings, disability and lesbian visibility. She has written extensively about war, torture, free trade, globalization and environmental issues. Her books include *Cow* (2011) Finalist in the 2012 Audre Lorde Lesbian Poetry Prize, *Wild Politics: Feminism, Globalisation and Bio/diversity* (2002) and *The Falling Woman* (1992, novel). In 2014, she will publish a new book, *Lupa and Lamb* which explores the myths, prehistory and history of Rome and its neighbours through the stories of wolves and sheep. She is the publisher and co-founder with Renate Klein of Spinifex Press and Adjunct Professor in the Writing Program at James Cook University, Queensland. She has been an aerialist in several circuses and loves ancient languages which has taken her to study Latin, Greek and Sanskrit.