FEMINISM AND ITS TEXTS: DEFINITION AND ITS URGENCY

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Abstract

The definition of what a feminist text is and what quality does a feminist text need to have, have continually been debated. Moreover, the urgency of having feminist texts is regarded as unnecessary, if not out of date in the modern era by many. This paper discusses a number of possibilities of what could qualify as a feminist text, as well as verifying the need for feminist texts in this global era.

Key words: feminism, feminist texts, definition, quality, urgency

1. Introduction

A student challenged me, recently, with a question on the use of feminism and discussing feminist texts when gender equality has been achieved in Indonesia and worldwide. Indonesia, this student argued, even has Kartini, a heroine who fought for the emancipation of Indonesian women as early as the beginning of the 19th century.

In response to the student's challenge, we should perhaps consider these situations: Quite recently, Ahmad Dani, the leader of Dewa band, publicly filed a divorce against his wife Maia, the leader of Ratu band. He even set a deadline that Maia has to leave her bright career by the beginning of 2007. "Maia has to choose between her career and her children," declared Ahmad Dani at the end of November 2006 when he held a press conference. "How far can a woman's career go? She will grow old soon and loose her career," reasoned Ahmad Dani.
In the 1980s, more than 100 years after Kartini, my late mother who was about to start her Doctoral study, was approached by her fellow lecturer with a fatherly manner, saying:

"Don’t climb too high, you are a woman. The higher you climb, the more you will hurt yourself when you fall”

I, too, was made conscious of gender differences as the professors who interviewed me addressed this to me:

"The problem of employing a single lady is that she will not stay for good. She will soon get married, often to a man from a different city and she would have to move to her husband’s city”

I was an excited fresh graduate in 1991, ready to start a teaching career. Despite my being a cum laude graduate, the professors who interviewed me still thought that because I was a woman, my career still very much depended on who would be my husband, who I would depend on. I could not exist alone.

Never before had I realized that patriarchy still held such a strong influence in modern society. I was brought up in an environment where none of the ladies were uneducated. I could also witness women engineers, women scientists, women doctors, even women astronauts. Equality has been achieved, it has been said. Women are no longer denied entry to any career, and educational opportunities are equally available to both sexes. If so, what is the need of feminism with its feminist texts? The situations above, however, show us that equality has not really been achieved - and definitely not since Kartini’s era, and it is incorrect that feminism is not needed anymore.

II. Defining Feminism

What is feminism and why do we have to talk about it so much, and why do people have to be allergic to it? Because feminism is not a monolithic entity, trying to define it is an interesting endeavor. The Wikipedia encyclopedia states that feminism is a collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies largely motivated by or concerned with the equality of all people. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also mentions that there are many different kinds of feminism, but generally feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, and political phenomena. Feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms.
Early feminists and primary feminist movements are often called the first-wave feminists, which primarily focused on equality and gaining the right of women's suffrage such as the rights to vote. This 'wave' of feminism dates from the enlightenment (eighteenth-century) and stresses equality, rights, liberation and emancipation.

The second-wave feminist movement, beginning in approximately the 1960s, was most concerned with the difference of women, and disputes the pivotal position of masculine principles - either principles associated with masculinity (rationale, indifference, authority) or principles inherently masculine (sovereignty, hostility). Men are theoretically less other-directed due to their distinction from their biological and maternal origin. This second wave of feminism asserts a more radical refurbishment of culture than the first wave feminism, moving from merely equality to a transformation of what it means to be 'human.' The second wave feminism also stresses the distinction between sex and gender, arguing that sex is a biological and natural being, while gender is the social and cultural interpretation of that being. Therefore, there is a need to emphasize women’s sex and confront strict models of gender.

More recently, some younger feminists have identified themselves as third-wave feminists while the second-wave feminists are still active. The third-wave feminism is a feminist movement that began in the early 1990s. Unlike the second-wave feminism, which largely focused on the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated areas, third-wave feminism seeks to challenge and develop conventional definition of gender and sexuality. Third wave feminism focuses on how the difference between men and women is created and carried out. It is possible to deconstruct sexual difference. The supposed 'opposition' between masculine and feminine relies on some prior assumed and repressed system of values, which can be questioned. Third wave feminism rejects the dual model; there are not two sexes but a series of sexual identifications and performances. There is no natural 'sex' underlying our gender. We only think we have a natural and pre-cultural sexuality because of gender. Instead of the sex/gender difference or the claim of a common humanity, third wave feminism stresses heterogenous and unjustified difference: not a difference between men and women, but a constant and unbalanced difference.

Feminism is, therefore, not a single and monolithic movement. Feminism may mean different thing for different people. Simply put, feminism does not merely aim for equality between men and women, nor claim more space in the sun for women within the existing social structures. But the need for it is never-ending because gender roles tend to continually shift, in relation to all kinds of factors such as war, economics, or notions of morality. And thus, constant and unbalanced difference will continually be formed.
III. Defining Feminist Texts

Resembling the notion of feminism, feminist writing covers all aspects of writing for women, by women, and about women and the issues that concern them. The subject can be a little difficult to define because there are about as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists.

"Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing." writes Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Her point is valid because by writing, women’s experience, which has been excluded or misinterpreted in mainstream tradition, is made visible. In other words, if we want to read something about our lives, then we have to write it ourselves. This provides women with a means of self-recognition, a shared voice and identity. The question is whether all those writings can be regarded as feminist texts? On what basis would we classify certain texts as feminist? What qualities are necessary for it?

The Author

Are all texts written by women feminist texts? On the one hand, we can say that they are since the patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women. Rendering them is clearly an important anti-patriarchal strategy. "Write yourself, your body must be heard," invites Cixous in *The Laugh of Medusa*. Evidently, women are rarely heard, and if they are, it would be from the point of view of men. The patriarchy has imposed certain social standards of femininity on all biological women and has tried to make us believe that the chosen standards for ‘feminine’ characteristics are natural. The patriarchy has developed a series of ‘feminine’ characteristics to be imposed on women. In Indonesia’s point of view, for example, a woman is considered as feminine if she has long hair, wears a dress/skirt, is modest, does not laugh loudly, does not talk too much and quiet - which can also mean that she should not ‘speak’ through her writing either. Writing is said to be man’s territory; and therefore, women should not write. It is then clear that women who write have refused to conform to this patriarchally created feminine identity. Though they are undoubtedly female, they are not necessarily feminine in the patriarchal point of view. This refusal of patriarchal concepts is, in a certain sense, a feminist act, and those texts by women can act as a record of women’s consciousness, a documentation of women’s experiences in a male-dominated society.

On the other hand, however, it is impossible to assume that all text written by women will be essentially ‘feminine’ in perspectives and values. Even less can we assume that anything and everything written by women will be a feminist text. Being a feminist
is often defined as political commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism, and not all books written by women exemplify anti-patriarchal commitment.

If not all texts written by women can be assumed to be feminist texts, an intriguing question arises. Can men become feminists? Can they write feminist texts? In principle, the answer to this question is surely yes, having fulfilled certain criteria I will discuss further, men can be feminists and they too can write feminist texts. Anyhow, there is an assumption that women writers almost always experience anti-patriarchal incidents in their lives and that this experience will create a typically feminist pattern of writing. This feminine pattern and feminine experience, common to female writers, however, is not available to male writers. Under patriarchy, men speak from a different position than women. A man can recognize and deplore the structure in gender inequality, but he cannot experience them as a woman would. Because men can never be women and therefore cannot have the experience of women, feminist texts written by men would be positioned quite differently from feminist texts written by women.

The Ideal Reader

As having been written by a woman alone is not sufficient enough a quality to make a certain text feminist, how important is the position of the reader for a feminist text?

For a feminist reader, there is no innocent or neutral approach to literature. Reading a text as a feminist is a political activity and all interpretation made is political. It is also the reader’s role to conclude whether a certain text can be classified as feminist, and different approaches produce different readings. Given a potential text, the feminist message will not develop if the reader is not a feminist.

How then would we define a feminist reader? Should it be a woman? Again, the assumption that all feminists are women or that all women are feminists is much more misleading than it is helpful. Being a female does not necessarily make somebody a feminist. However, being a female means being able to experience what it is like to be a woman in a male-dominated society. Being a woman in a male-dominated society can mean that women apprehended a certain text differently from men. In reading Thomas Hardy's *The Major of Casterbridge*, which begins with the famous scene of the drunken Michael Henchard selling his wife and infant daughter, Irving Howe has praised it as "insidiously attractive to male fantasy". Elaine Showalter, however, is convinced that unless a woman has been indoctrinated into being very deeply identified with male culture, will have a different experience of the scene. Thus, women are inclined to have a great potential to be a feminist.
The Text

With so many possibilities arising in trying to find the qualities needed for feminist texts, do we now simply have to have all of the qualities above in order to judge that a certain text is feminist? If so, can we then categorize The Mills and Boon romantic novels as feminist novels as they are apparently written by, read by, marketed for and are all about women?

However, it is just not possible to say that women-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism. It is so often assumed that the act of describing experiences typical of women is a feminist act without carefully considering whether women’s experiences expressed there are made in alienating, deluded or degrading ways. Therefore, the Mills and Boon account of female love and female sexuality is not emancipatory reading for women.

In the Mills and Boon novels and in other masculine literature, most female characters still exist only in relation to other men. If they are in relationship with other women, their relationships are unfriendly, even antagonistic. Women characters in literature are often pictured as competing with other women in trying to win over men. Women are pictured as delicate, timid, inert, if not bitchy, seductive and dangerous. Louise Bernikow in Among Women is very correct when she made the comparison that getting women’s hair right is the female equivalent of slaying the dragon. Whether a female is “pretty” or not is crucial to the story, determining her success or failure at winning the Prince and determining what other women will think and feel about her. In fairy tales and then in more “sophisticated” fiction, being pretty is an aspect of character and activity.

We need a text which pictures women from the point of view of women as there seems to be a difference on what actually happens in women’s lives, and the diminished reflection of that in literature. Men’s good women are far more passive than the female protagonists created by women themselves. The real world of women is yet to be discovered in literature.

Virginia Woolf mentions this needed discovery in her book A Room of One’s Own:

“Chloe liked Olivia”, I read, and then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely Anthony and Cleopatra would have been altered had she done so. .... All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly, are too simple. So much had been left out, unattempted.... (93)
Positive relationships among women: mother-in-law and daughters, sisters, friends, cousins, have been too silent, have not been told enough.

It is thus not easy to define a feminist text as there tend to be no certain fixed definition of it. A number of certain criteria have to be fulfilled in order for a feminist text to develop. Just as when trying to grow a good tree, one needs a combination of good seeds, good soil, and good weather in order to have a good harvest. Good seed will not grow in barren soil nor in bad weather. However, a good soil for growing a cactus, will not be good for growing ferns, and a good climate for planting a coconut palm is certainly not a good one in which to plant pines.

However, despite the complicated definition of a feminist text, one thing is sure: the real world of women is yet to be discovered in literature.
Bibliography


