




FEMINISM

女权主义简史

Margaret Walters 著 朱 刚 麻晓蓉 译



通识教育
双语文库

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION



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Introduction

‘I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is’, the writer Rebecca West remarked, sardonically, in 1913. ‘I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.’ The word was a comparatively new one when she wrote; it had only appeared in English – from the French – in the 1890s. Interestingly, the earliest examples of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary carried negative meanings. In 1895 the *Athenaeum* sneeringly referred to a piece about a woman whose ‘coquetting with the doctrines of feminism’ are traced with real humour. ‘In Germany feminism is openly socialistic’, the *Daily Chronicle* shuddered in 1908, and went on to dismiss out of hand ‘suffragists, suffragettes and all the other phases in the crescendo of feminism’.

1

In those years, some writers used an alternative term – ‘womanism’ – with the same hostility. One long-forgotten writer was roused to angry sneers in his memoirs when he recalled meeting an intellectual woman living in Paris (she comes across, despite his prejudices, as lively and interesting) whose writings reflected ‘the strong-minded womanism of the nineteenth century’.

Curiously, one of the sharpest attacks on the word ‘feminism’ came from Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One’s Own* is such an effective and engaging plea for women. In *Three Guineas*, written in

1938 in the shadow of fascism and of approaching war, and probably nervous about any '-ism', she rejects the word out of hand. No one word can capture the force 'which in the nineteenth century opposed itself to the force of the fathers', she insists, continuing:

Those nineteenth century women were in fact the advance guard of your own movement. They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state.

They were called, to their resentment, feminists, she claims (she is historically inaccurate – the word was unknown in the previous century), and she goes on to insist that we must

destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day. The word 'feminist' is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women.' Since the only right, the right to earn a living has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word.

But though Virginia Woolf's 'right to earn a living' was, and remains, central to feminism, getting on for a century after she wrote it is clear that its attainment by no means solved all women's problems. Women's work – despite the much-publicized earnings of some high-fliers in the business world – remains lower paid; or, in the case of housework, not paid at all. When Woolf was writing in the 1920s, feminists had hardly begun to articulate, let alone address, women's special problems: issues to do with childbirth and child-rearing, or the strain on women who had to combine housework and/or childcare with work outside the home.

Over the centuries, and in many different countries, women have spoken out for their sex, and articulated, in different ways, their complaints, their needs, and their hopes. As this is a Very Short Introduction, I have concentrated on feminism in one country,

England, and have tried to explore its development through time. While women in other countries have had different experiences and definitions, in England, right up until the 1960s at least, the word 'feminist' was usually pejorative. Very few women, however deeply engaged in fighting for women's rights, would have described themselves as 'feminists'. When women began to organize again in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement called itself Women's Liberation (borrowing the term from black, Third World, and student movements). This was often shortened, sometimes affectionately, sometimes in a derogatory way, to 'women's lib'. But those years also saw the word 'feminism' being brought back into general use, and its meaning was extended. Though there was still a justified concern that civil and legal equality had not been fully achieved, the new movement tended to concentrate on problems specific to women in their reproductive and social roles. In those years, too, feminists in Britain made an attempt, at least, to reach out across national boundaries and discover what they had – or did not have – in common with feminists abroad.

But how often, still, do we hear women anxiously asserting 'I'm not a feminist but . . .' as they go on to make claims that depend upon, and would be impossible without, a feminist groundwork? The American feminist Estelle Freedman argues that right from its origins, the word has carried negative connotations; that surprisingly few politically engaged women have styled themselves feminists. In the 1990s some feminists in England and the United States identified and warned against a 'backlash' against feminism and its undoubted achievements. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, for example, called their third collection of essays *Who's Afraid of Feminism?*, with a cartoon of a big bad wolf on the original jacket cover. They argued that 'attacks on feminism frequently merge into a wider misogyny'; 'the feminist' is now the name given to the disliked or despised woman, much as 'man-hater' or 'castrating bitch', 'harridan' or 'witch', were used before the 1960s. They added that women also have to expose and eradicate the misogyny inherent in feminism itself.

Just as troubling is the caution that the term ‘feminism’ seems to arouse in many younger women, a surprising number of whom seem to shy away from the concept. One English tabloid recently published a double-page spread entitled ‘Is Feminism Dead?’, which managed, neatly enough, to sit on the fence; equal space was devoted to arguments yes and no, to those who felt the term was still urgently relevant, and to those who were sure it was dated, even embarrassing, and should be retired. The piece was illustrated with a photograph of ‘militant women’s libbers’ picketing a Miss World demonstration. (In fact, everyone in the photo was laughing.) Faintly embarrassed, I recognized my much younger self, with long hair and long skirts, clutching a distinctly uninspired placard announcing that ‘women are people too’. I had almost forgotten that the Miss World contests still existed (in those bad old days it was on prime-time television), until in 2002 the event received unexpected publicity, first when Nigerian militants demonstrated violently against its ‘parade of nudity’, which they thought would encourage promiscuity and Aids, then when several contestants refused to participate because a young Nigerian woman, sentenced to death under Islamic sharia law for having become pregnant outside marriage, was reprieved – but only until she had weaned her baby. The beauty queens’ gesture was both courageous and effective, though interestingly, one insisted, with a hint of anxiety, that she took up her stand, certainly not because she was a feminist, or even because she was a woman, but because she was a human being.

When I recently asked some women in their early 20s – some of whom were university-educated, others working, and all, clearly, beneficiaries of earlier battles for women’s rights – whether they considered themselves feminists, or indeed had any interest in feminism, most of them replied, flatly, no. The very term itself, one woman claimed, sounds stuffy and out of date. Feminism, she felt, has become, on the one hand, a playground for extremists – she termed them ‘fundamentalists’ – who had nothing useful to say to women like herself. On the other hand, she argued, feminism has become ‘institutionalized’, and she compared it to communism: it

demands commitment, not simply to ideas, but to a generalized ideology. Moreover, she added, it is nowadays just another academic subject. You can get a degree in 'gender studies' and that, she felt, is the real kiss of death: proof, if any were needed, that feminism is no longer urgently relevant. Perhaps these younger women will feel differently in ten years or so, when they find themselves juggling family, housework, and a job; perhaps they will find that they need to re-invent feminism to suit their own experience. But in a way, I hope they will not need to.

Chapter 1

The religious roots of feminism

6

Some of the first European women to speak out for themselves, and for their sex, did so within a religious framework, and in religious terms. It is perhaps not always easy, in our secular society, to bring them back to life: to recognize fully their courage, or to understand the implications, or the extent, of their challenge to the status quo.

For centuries, and all over Europe, there were families who disposed of ‘unnecessary’ or unmarried daughters by shutting them away in convents. For some, this must have felt like life imprisonment; but for others, conventual quiet seems to have facilitated genuine fulfilment: it allowed some women to develop a talent for organization, and some were able to read and think, and discover their own distinctive voices. Hildegard of Bingen, who was born at the end of the 11th century and became a nun, and later the abbess, of a small Rhineland convent, has long been known as a remarkable and impressive writer; recently, her great musical talent has been rediscovered and celebrated. But she was sometimes plagued with doubts about her ‘unfeminine’ activities, and wrote to one of the leading churchmen of the time, Bernard of Clairvaux, asking if she – an uneducated woman – should continue with her writing and with composing. He encouraged her, and within a few years she was known and honoured all over Europe. When she was 60 years old, she embarked upon preaching tours all through the

German empire, even though at that time only priests were allowed to preach.

Like other medieval women, when seeking to imagine the almost unimaginable, and to communicate her understanding of God's love, she turned to womanly, and specifically maternal, experience, and wrote of the 'motherhood' of God. 'God showed me his grace again', she writes, 'as . . . when a mother offers her weeping child milk.' Some religious women imagine, with maternal tenderness, the infant Jesus. A Flemish Beguine meditates on what the mother of God must have felt:

for three or more days [she] held Him close to her so that He nestled between her breasts like a baby . . . sometimes she kissed him as though he were a little child and sometimes she held Him on her lap as if He were a gentle lamb.

'Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God . . . ?' asked the Englishwoman Julian of Norwich in the early 15th century. She marvelled that 'he who was her Maker chose to be born of the creature that is made'. Moreover, she argued:

our Saviour is our true mother in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed . . . We are redeemed by the motherhood of mercy and grace . . . to the nature of motherhood belong tender love, wisdom and knowledge, and it is good, for although the birth of our body is only low, humble and modest compared with the birth of our soul, yet it is he who does it in the beings by women it was done.

Whereas other women had made the analogy briefly, Julian of Norwich goes on to spell out the comparison very directly. Christ is like

the kind, loving mother who knows and recognizes the need of her