

Feminism and Women's Liberation: sex, gender, and the human spirit - a man's view.

For Gill and Louise

We Should All Be Feminists. Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie

The first step on the road to spirituality is to develop the conviction that I am not the male or the female. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

Like many men today I have become aware of a new momentum in the women's liberation movement - nothing short of a global revolution. My own mother, married, as she was to a disabled and controlling man, my father, died prematurely in her early sixties. Amidst my grief was a mystifying but clear sense of relief, which I rationalised at the time was my response to her "escape" from a life which had left her depressed for years and which I felt I was powerless to do anything about.

I welcome the current upsurge today in female activism, whether it is women speaking out now in all walks of life, female friends making me aware of the limitations of my masculine thinking, discovering recently the extent of long-standing female activity in sport, politics and other pursuits, my own increasing awareness of the sequestered nature of a woman's biological, social, and political life, (helped, perhaps, by daily listening to BBC radio 4 "Woman's Hour", with its recent new presenters) and, of course, women's new awareness and assertion that they will no longer accept the traditional way they are treated by men.

It strikes me this revolution is all the more crucial, given the "mess" we have made in our governance - or lack of stewardship - of the Earth - the obvious facts of the climate emergency, ecological crisis, mass extinction of species etc, we are responsible for. Women have a knowledge and experience of life from which men could benefit, and which is all the more important since women comprise fifty per cent of the human species, a fifty per cent who have been ignored more or less throughout recent human history.

Above all, the revolution in what Alice Walker entitled “womanism”, rather than just feminism, challenges the masculine assumption that the historical instincts of war and violence are essential and hard-wired elements of human nature. Yes, the physical universe is a violent and explosive place. The great American poet, Emily Dickinson, knew this. When writing of how, on our planet, “volcanoes....bear within - appalling Ordnance/ fire, and smoke, and gun/ taking Villages for breakfast/and appalling men” she also asserted “that Love is all there is/is all we know of Love”, knowing that “Love” is a far more powerful and unifying, if mysterious, force than all our volcanic instincts.

When Simone de Beauvoir wrote of women being *The Second Sex*¹ and Germaine Greer described their condition as one of actual castration,² they underlined the degree of oppression women have suffered throughout human history, through what is known as the “patriarchy”, the rule of the father and men. De Beauvoir pointed out that while “sex” is a biological distinction, “gender” is a psychological, social and political construction and, being such, is a continuum which stretches across both men and women. When Sigmund Freud asked that famous question he assumed all confused men were baffled by: “What do women want?”, the answer was quite simple, as de Beauvoir and Greer, like many of their leading “sisters” knew, women simply wanted to be “who they themselves are”, not like, or “equal”, to men.

Who women are is, of course, not so simple because, for centuries, they have internalised - or introjected - men’s own projections of them. And the answer depends, perhaps, in the first place on the question as to who men, themselves, are. Men had not asked themselves this - and what it is **they** want - as if male identity itself was taken for granted, as was the oppression of women. But, in asking themselves what they want, women are exploring the question and beginning to tell us more and more clearly.

Waves of feminism

Women’s liberation has come in waves - at first relatively quietly, then more dramatically, now reaching something of a crescendo - waves which have kept coming throughout European and global history, and crashing, as it were, on the shore of humankind. Mary

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1944

² Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 1970

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*³ reminded European men in the late eighteenth century they, themselves, were only half the human population and she stressed the importance of women's education in Europe, if *Homo sapiens* was to mean anything for the whole human race.

Then came, a century later, the fight, often violent, for female suffrage. The vote was achieved, but power, women learnt, was a different thing. Following the world wars - in which women experienced, ironically, active involvement in the world socially and politically, only to find themselves resubjugated to the domestic sphere thereafter - came the importance of awareness - "consciousness-raising" - in the 1960s and '70s if any progress were to be made. Central to a new feminine consciousness was de Beauvoir's insight that women were constructed by men and needed to free themselves of this construction. This led, eventually, to the understanding that if men were to be free of their own limited self-constructions, then women's freedom might have to come first.

The third and fourth waves were born of the inadequacies of Western feminism, as if it alone would lead to the liberation of all women. This involved a global perspective and the opening up of the women's movement to inter-cultural initiatives across the whole world. Central to this awareness initially was the notion of "intersectionality",⁴ introduced into the women's movement by Kimberlé Crawshaw,⁵ a professor of law at UCLA, activist and writer of a number of books on race. Intersectionality suggests the identity issues of race, class, and gender, for both women and men, are seen to be integral to, and interwoven in, any liberation movement. No one can be free if the issues of social justice, world-wide racism, and gender identity remain unexplored and unexposed. The cause of women's liberation, which now recognises their centrality, is about the future of us all.

³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792

⁴ See Hannah McCann, consultant editor, et al, *The Feminism Book*, Dorling Kindersley, 2019, "All Systems of Oppression are Interlocking: Intersectionality", pp 242-245. This book is a comprehensive and readable history and account of Feminism from its birth through "the struggle for equal rights, 1840-1944" and the consciousness-raising of the 1950s,60s and 70s - "The Personal is the Political, 1945-79" - to "The Politics of Difference, 1980s" and "A New Wave Emerges, 1990-2010" until the concluding section, "Fighting Sexism in the Modern Day, 2010 onwards". Like many DK publications, it is well presented with many illustrations, quotes, insets, and accounts of many women's lives, achievements and writings.

⁵ Kimberley Crawshaw, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex", 1989.

The Earth, the human spirit, and human liberation

Linked to the importance of intersectionality is also the ecological movement as an alliance concerned with the future of the Earth and its life forms, and including men as well as women. The climate emergency, and all that term implies, also raises universal but fundamental questions about who we all essentially are and what the world is, in terms of absolute and spiritual values. This is a question that goes to the heart of what it is to be a human being, male or female, at any time. The metaphysical implications were raised in the last century by that modern Indian sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi, who taught his students a simple, if sometimes difficult method of consciousness transformation, which involved asking the question “Who am I?” but also holding the question constantly in mind throughout a person’s conscious life. (Carl Jung wrote an account of Ramana, whom he described as “the purest of India”, adding that his teaching was “the breath of world-liberated and liberating humanity, it is a chant of millenniums”⁶.) This applies, of course, to men as well as women, but women have much potentially to offer in their natural understanding of our spiritual nature.

Take the experience of birth and child raising, for instance. Birth and death are the two great initiations of life. Men who now watch their wives and partners giving birth declare it to be a life-changing experience. But, for women, giving birth is more than this. The notion of penis envy is now thought to be laughable, (the Greenham Common Peace Camp had always drawn attention to the penile quality of American Cruise Missiles!) but not womb - or uterus - envy. Women accept the miracle - and pain - of birth as natural but, of course, childbirth holds the mystery of life itself. Birth may be a very uncertain but life-originating reality. To hold an “other” life inside you - to be both yourself and “other” at the same time - and consequently procreate it, is to be involved in an activity that is tantamount to a godlike or divine process. It is an experience of ultimate empathy. Women also go on to raise children both as their own and “other” throughout life. Hopefully, more men are also beginning to realise and do this.

One of the grievances of the woman’s movement is that men see them as other, showing little empathic understanding. Being “othered”, women feel disregarded and alien as a result, something many of them, as I say, have learnt to internalise over the centuries and which accounts for their feeling of self-alienation. (It is akin to the point the Algerian

⁶ C. G. Jung, *Psychology and the East*, Routledge, 1986

psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, made about the psychological trap “black” people find themselves in when they are forced to accept their false colour identity by a culture who think of themselves as “white”.⁷)

Who are women?

I draw attention to this because for the majority of men their projections on to women may be an unconscious defence, intimidated, as men may be, by the capacity women have to procreate physically, which also has implications for women’s creative capacities in all spheres of life. Germaine Greer suggested that women were unaware how much men seemed to hate them but was equally exasperated by women, who, while eulogising Greer’s own influence and example in the women’s movement, play down their own natural talents, as if they had too little to offer by contrast. The fact is, women can be both strongly assertive, as well as empathic, in any walk of life, compared to the extremes of men’s violence and sexist behaviour towards them.

In seeking to be themselves - exploring “who they are” - women can also come to know that sex - the division of all humankind into two physical forms - belies the truth about us, that men and women are people before they are male or female, and, as people, there is something in both men and women they share that is beyond their sex, however enjoyable and alluring sexual difference is. Everyone, male and female, is different, of course, though difference doesn’t have to result in conflict. Audre Lorde, the American feminist and social activist who - who described herself as “Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, and poet” - wrote an essay about this in her landmark feminist book, *Sister Outsider*.⁸ Difference is what can connect people. Yes, the female sex have different bodies and different procreative functions, but, otherwise, they have much in common with men. Within all people is an experience of spirit that is both individual and interdependent. Men and women share this.

Shared hormones

Ken Wilber pointed out in the Introduction to *The Brief History of Everything* that, while the biological difference of sex between men and women has implications for our way of living, it doesn’t have to mean an absolute divide. For instance, Testosterone, the

⁷ See “Introduction”, pp vii-xiv, in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Penguin, 2021, 1952

⁸ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 1984.

hormone stimulating agency and autonomy, exists in both men and women, as does Oxytocin - “the love drug” - which facilitates both childbirth and empathy. Relationship and parenting can stimulate and release Oxytocin in men, and act to balance and regulate the extremes of testosterone, while testosterone, itself, can equally be stirred up in women by their experience of agency, as in political activity for instance. ⁹

Sexual difference does not have to divide women and men into polarised opposites. Women have learned to take care of their physical bodies, as evidenced by the continued publication and re-editing of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* ¹⁰ since its origin in the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective in the early 1970s. Women’s bodies are designed for the magic of child birth, and they can also take pride in their skill of home building and child raising, which doesn’t mean they are not also clearly capable of creative work outside the home. At the same time men can take equal pride in parenting and contributing to the family home.

The reign of patriarchy is sometimes thought of as a reaction to, or compensation for, the place of matriarchy in human history. Actually, “patriarchy” may not be just a case of male exercise of power over women, as some of the more radical, as opposed to liberal, feminists believe. It may have resulted in historical conditions other than simple, self-aggrandising power issues. It may, anyway, be about a power that men might now be relieved to share with - and learn from - women. Certainly, if we perceive history in terms of oscillations between the extremes of matriarchy and patriarchy, the priority today surely points to both men and women working together to prevent one extreme dominating the other. Clearly, the future of life on Earth - including that of the human race - in this 21st century is crying out for it.

December 2023

⁹ Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, Shambhala, 1996 (2016, with a discussion between KW and Lana Wachowski, one of the directors of the film, *The Matrix*, 1999).

¹⁰ Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A New Edition for a New Era*, 2021, (1970).