

Do we still need Feminism?

“Feminism is a critique of male supremacy” – Linda Gordon (Dolan 1988:3). It is statements like this one, which have led many to question the relevancy of feminism. While male supremacy still exists, is the whole female narrative based on how females are treated by males or can there be a narrative in which the female has their own story. Feminism is not just one thing but has different forms. Dolan (1988:3) describes this as a large organization, which does not have a specific mantra. Feminism is rooted in different ideologies such as sociology, psychoanalysis and even post cultural ideologies and for this reason it cannot be described simply or defined in any basic form (Dolan 1988:3). Feminism was accepted because it challenged the existing intellectual, ideological and methodological norms. Its resurgence in the 1960s was at a time when visual culture was booming with television taking the center stage of the visual.

Feminism was born into visual culture; it is all about representation. Most performance at its inception was made in such a way that it reinforced cultural conditioning (Dolan 1988: 2). The male subjects were always heroes in the narrative and women were the invisible subjects (Dolan 1988:2), and this posed a problem for the female spectator, as she could not see her representation in the narrative. The representation of women was relegated to supporting roles, which enabled the male narrative to continue; these supporting roles can be that of a seducer or an ornamented pleasure. Of this Dolan (1988:2) says that while the female spectator follows the narrative, she can see the objectification of her own gender. It cannot be denied that feminism manifested in visual culture. Having been spectators and passive subjects in the male narrative, there needed to be an intervention that would change this kind of culture.

It is important to identify the differences among feminisms. Dolan (1988: 3) speaks of liberal, cultural and materialist feminism. While each provides a different understanding of the discourse, the main thesis is the exclusion from the male discourse and its representation. While Dolan has categorized

feminism in this way, she does not fail to note that these categories are just part of the many categories of feminism.

Liberal feminism strives to work within the system and relies on universal humanism (Dolan 1988:6). Its successes have been the increase of women in the workplace. The success of liberal feminism can also be seen in the tackling of the representation of women who can now be seen in more diverse performance roles. Some critics of liberal feminism believe that the representation of women on the visual platform is based on the male role model and so, while women now play an active role in the narrative, it is at the expense of femininity.

Cultural feminism is also known as radical feminism (Dolan 1988:7). This feminism aimed to define men and women in categories other than gender. While liberal feminism works within the system of the male representation, cultural feminism suggests that female representation take the place of male representation altogether (Dolan 1988: 7). In cultural feminism terms the reproductive capabilities of women make them superior to men.



Figure 1. Beyoncé. Formation World Tour, Toronto

The visual culture of cultural feminism seems to be that women should have their own narrative performed. Cultural feminism is criticized as narrowing women down to one thing. While the sexual difference from men is established, the only representation becomes biological. The image in figure 1 is of Beyoncé performing at her world tour in Atlanta. Beyoncé has taken the world by a storm with her unapologetic and fierce femininity. The spectator looks at her and identifies femaleness as a movement of strength and one with its own narrative. In this image, she is shown dressed in a costume that flatters her femininity.

Materialist feminism does not focus on the gender itself but seeks to understand the policies, cultural and social structures that have caused the oppression of gender categories. Materialist feminism pries into psychoanalytic theories of gender in order to establish what is progressive and what is not.



Figure 2. Prince. 8 minutes on SNL

Prince shown in figure 2 is an icon for materialist feminism. He lived an androgynous lifestyle in which he did not follow the gender codes for dressing,

hairstyle or even singing. Prince's song "I would die 4 u" has the lyrics "I'm not a woman. I'm not a man. I am something that you will never understand". With this, he liberates himself from any gender association. Where liberal feminism encroaches on the defeminisation of women in order to allow them a narrative, cultural feminism aims to separate the narratives of females and males, materialist feminism ignores the genders altogether and focuses on the practices of society and existing theories such as those of Freud and Lacan in order to bring equality to both genders (Dolan 1988:11)

Hillary Clinton's career can be described as liberal feminism. She works within a system that has long been categorically ascribed to the male gender. She ran for the 2008 presidency and while she may not have won, the idea of running at all changed the narrative of the female representation. In the 2016 election race, she is described as the front-runner. While this is a stride in the narrative, critics have ascribed an honorary phallus to Hillary because the narrative of her political career only came alive after she had completed her mothering role as well as her supporting role as a president's wife. Butler (1988:483) speaks of how women's social existence can be derived from some facts of their physiology. In Hillary's case, her existence as a presidential candidate has only been possible because she has already fulfilled her physiological duties.



Figure 3 Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton debate in Flint, Michigan.

Butler agrees that culture has made man a universal in which the narrative of women has to be fought for but that has risked the rendering of a representation that is not feminine (1988:486). While the female spectator may see herself being represented by Hillary, it is a representation by sex only and not necessarily by gender. Political analysts view it as a wise notion that Hillary does not entirely represent herself as the female candidate but takes on a liberal stance, which makes her a competitive equal. In the image in figure 3, Hillary take on Bernie Sanders on a debate in which they angrily clash over auto industry bailouts, guns, political battles from the 1990s and ties to Wall Street (Collinson: 2016). The stage puts them at equal footing and they both give their opinion without right and wrong or superiority and inferiority.

The question of whether feminism is still necessary is answered in that feminism has different categories for everyone who ascribes to it. The categories described by Dolan (1998:3) show that feminism is no longer a fight against the oppression of one gender by another. Even within the female gender itself, the representation of female has become broader. Patton speaks of how contemporary advertising employs sex appeal for almost anything (2000: 79). The appeal is not in the complete body but can even be violently cropped to just fit the necessary sexy part. Feminism has enabled women to frame themselves in every other way of their choosing

Reference:

Butler, J. 1999. *Performative Acts and Gender constitution in The Feminism and Visual Culture reader*. New York: Routledge.

Collinson, S. 2007. Clinton, Sanders talk over each other in debate clash. CNN (Accessed 2 May 2016)

Dolan, J. 1988. *The feminist spectator as Critic in Theatre and Dramatic Studies* (52)

Patton, P. 2000. *The Dirty Bits: Tortured Torsos and Headless women in Sex Appeal: the art of allure in graphic design and advertising*. S, Heller(ed). New York: Allworth Press.

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Figure 1 Beyoncé. Formation World Tour (2016)
(Photograph: beyonce.com/Atlanta)

Figure 2 Prince. 8 minutes on SNL. (2007)
(Photograph: Rolling Stones)

Figure 3 Hillary Clinton debates Bernie Sanders in Flint (2016)
(Photograph: CNN)