A Historical Analysis of Western Feminism

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Despite decades of feminist waves of movement, feminism continues to be read as a convoluted term, often used without a clear understanding of its meaning. Without solidifying a shared understanding of the term, creating an impactful movement is, and has been, challenging. However, defining feminism universally is an arbitrary goal, as women and other marginalized genders around the globe relate to it differently. In what follows, the objective at hand is instead to focus on Western feminism. With increased globalization and (im)migration that are sure to continue thanks to the climate crisis, strengthening the bonds of solidarity through a shared understanding of intersectional feminism is necessary. Intersectional feminism recognizes the unique ways female identities experience discrimination as a result of their overlapping identities. By re-evaluating the foundational three waves of feminism through the lens of Intersectional Feminism, we can foster a more inclusive and impactful movement that addresses the diverse struggles of women.

Historically, western feminism has been largely fixated on White women, failing to see the bigger picture of feminist issues related to race and gender inequality. The first wave of feminism started in the early 19th century, characterized by the women's suffrage movement. Motivated by the unjust legal system, White women worked to gain legal identity for themselves, which included but was not limited to: the right to vote, to own property, to sue, and to form legal contracts. Though prominent suffragettes started out as abolitionists, they largely ignored issues of racism and poverty. Spearheaded by the upper– and middle–class White women who shared similar sentiments on race and class as their male counterparts, they formed an exclusionary movement. After the passing of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which gave citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the U.S. –including formerly enslaved people– and granted African American men the right to vote, White women felt distraught that Black men were perceived as superior to them. This led to the creation of two organizations, the American Woman Suffrage Association, which aimed to gain voting rights for all women, and the National Woman Suffrage Association, which aimed to gain voting rights strictly for White women.

During this revolutionary era, Black women were marginalized by both Black men and White women, failing to reap the benefits from either the Abolitionist or Suffrage movements they were protesting alongside. They were erased from the narrative, gaining little recognition for the effort they put into protesting the systems of injustice. In 1896, Black women founded The National Association of Colored Women (NACW). They focused on suffrage as well as the general improvement of life for African Americans. Black figures such as Ida B. Wells, who founded the first Black suffrage organization focused solely on voting rights for Black women, created spaces of refuge for women of colour. When asked to march in a suffrage protest, Wells refused after discovering she could not walk alongside White women, who still practiced race-based segregation. Thus was the birth of White-feminism, built on the oppression and exploitation of other groups of women by weaponizing their class and race, and waving the banner of gendered oppression in their battle against the patriarchy.

The second wave of feminism is said to be inspired initially by Betty Friedan's book: *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. The book played a significant role in amplifying the

common convictions held by millions of White women in the United States and has subsequently earned recognition as one of the most influential works of feminist literature. In the book, Friedan characterizes the challenges collectively experienced by women as a "problem that has no name." Her message resonated with many women as the book explored feelings of discontentment and a sense of emptiness towards their duty of achieving the perceived pinnacle of femininity: to be wives, mothers, and homemakers. Though *The Feminine Mystique* was in some part relatable to all women across the U.S., Black women and women of colour are nowhere to be found in the text. In fact, as Black feminist second-wave scholar bell hooks discusses in her book, *From Margin to Center*, "the 'problem that has no name,' often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle- and upper-class, married White women– housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life…"(hooks 30). Furthermore, *The Feminine Mystique* largely failed to acknowledge Indigenous women and their narratives surrounding gender roles and identity which greatly differed from the mainstream European narratives being addressed. The "pinnacle of femininity" as Friedan conceptualizes it cannot be applied to the experience of Indigenous women whose languages and ideas about identity and the role of women in communities allow for greater fluidity and understanding of what it means to be a "woman." Dr. Chela Sandoval provides an explanation to this, referred to as "hegemonic feminism." Hegemonic feminism is characterized by overlooking issues of class and race, typically viewing equality with men as the primary objective of feminism. It adopts an individual rights-oriented perspective for driving social change rather than a justice-centered one. This form of feminism is predominantly led by White individuals, which diminishes the activism and perspectives of women of colour and generally regards sexism as the ultimate form of oppression.

The second wave, through the adoption of hegemonic feminism, lacked intersectionality. Though Black and other women of colour were involved with the mainstream ways of participating in the second wave such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and consciousness-raising groups, much of their work was oversimplified and undervalued. As such, the notion that women of colour joined the feminist movement later than White women was popularized. In reality, women of colour were consistently engaged in three areas at this time: collaborating with feminist groups dominated by White individuals, establishing women's advocacy groups within pre-existing mixed-gender organizations, and founding feminist organizations for Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian women. Additionally, it is ironic how the social equity which first and second-wave feminists yearned for had already existed for hundreds of years prior, in traditional Indigenous societies. In certain Indigenous communities, the women were the leaders, they were recognized for their roles as mothers, knowledge keepers, and skilled warriors, and yet, while White women fought for their rights, Indigenous women were simultaneously being stripped of theirs through the centuries-long practice of forced assimilation in both Canada and the United States. One of the earliest examples of feminist organizations founded by women of colour in the second wave was a Chicana group called the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc. The founders Anna Neito-Gómez and Adelaida Castillo created the organization in response to the harassment Chicana women were facing in the Chicano movement, which centred on matters of social justice, equality, educational reforms, and political and economic self-determination for Chicano communities in the United States. Ironically, the second wave of feminism has often been described as the period of "women's liberation," a time when women worked towards the establishment of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). However, intersectional feminist, Benita Roth, described second-wave activism as the emergence of "feminisms"; a movement in which various groups of women,

predominantly created based on race, formed distinct groups. The Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) emerged as a pioneering socialist organization dedicated to women of colour in the United States, active from 1968 to 1980. It pursued the goals of dismantling capitalism and eradicating racism, imperialism, and sexism. TWWA was a frontrunner in championing an intersectional approach to confront the multifaceted oppression faced by women, marking a significant milestone in the history of feminist activism. By excluding activism from women of colour in public discourse, both their work and identity have been removed from the movement. If feminism is deeply rooted in the marginalization of women of colour, the very image of feminism is distorted. The second wave of feminism was constructed upon earlier concepts of racial bias that had been present since the first wave of feminism. This exposes the underlying reality that what had initially appeared as a gender-based movement was, in fact, intertwined with issues of white supremacy.

The third wave has its beginnings in the Anita Hill case and the Riot Grrrl movement. In 1991, Anita Hill testified that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her when she worked as an advisor for him. The all-white and all-male jury sparked outrage among feminists.

Writer and activist Rebecca Walker (2007), in response to the hearings, wrote an article in Ms. magazine touching on what many feminists were thinking:

> To me, the hearings were not about determining whether or not Clarence Thomas did in fact harass Anita Hill. They were about checking and redefining the extent of women's credibility and power. Can a woman's experience undermine a man's career? Can a woman's voice, a woman's sense of self-worth and injustice challenge a structure predicated upon the subjugation of our gender? (Walker 2007)

In her article, Walker made a plea to all women: "The fight is far from over… Turn that outrage into political power… I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave." As a result of the Anita Hill case and Rebecca Walker's article, the term "Third Wave" was born. Sparking an era unlike the previous waves. Additionally, in the early nineties, underground feminist punk rock bands emerged, forming the collective "Riot Grrl" groups. These groups developed as a response to the combination of sexist punk culture, politics, feminism, and style. The movement became popular through the use of zines, which became an important way to produce feminist-led publications that could discuss issues that were considered too taboo in mainstream culture.

The third wave quickly became an era of inclusivity where scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first coined the term "intersectionality," became known for their works and could exist in spaces with White feminists. However, Dr. Rebecca Clark Mane examines how, though third-wavers pushed for diversity, the critiques of women of colour and/or anti-racist feminists highlight the reality that the mainstream feminist agenda did not advance enough to ensure that the "inclusion of racial difference" was actually transformative. Mane, through an analysis of the grammar of whiteness in the third wave, raises the idea that diversity served a functional purpose. Furthermore, Chela Sandoval argues that though diverse feminist scholarship was included in the third wave, it has been "misrecognized and underanalyzed." Various scholars continue this discussion by arguing that the third-wave institutional feminist narrative had extended to tokenize the inclusion of women of colour scholarship without even reconceptualizing the "whole White,

middle class, gendered knowledge base." Third-wave feminism betrayed women of colour by positioning it as an inclusive, radical feminist movement. They waved the banner of feminism without dismantling the racist, classist implications of it. They weaponized the term feminist, claiming to be welcoming and all-inclusive. bell hooks critiqued this in her book, *Feminism is for Everybody*, stating, "The dismantling of consciousness-raising groups all but erased the notion that one had to learn about feminism and make an informed choice about embracing feminist politics to become a feminist advocate." Feminists must be informed about intersectionality. This does not suggest education plays a role in understanding feminism as this institutionalized view of feminism was built on classist ideologies. In the book Against White Feminism, author Rafia Zakaria writes, "[there is a] division between the women who write and speak feminism and the women who live it, the women who voice versus the women who have experienced, the ones who make the theories and policies, and the ones who bear scars and sutures from the fight" (Zakaria, 2021). If feminism is to stand in solidarity with those who face gender-based discrimination, and systemic patriarchy, and establish freedom and rights for all people, one who harbours racist ideologies cannot be a feminist. Feminism has been built and practiced on a foundation of White supremacy, and therefore a forward trajectory is not entitled, but a critical analysis and re-evaluation of the entire movement is president.

Current fourth-wave feminism has returned to spaces of public discourse taken up by previous waves. Social media has facilitated this change, allowing voices to travel far and wide. A key example of the underlying hegemonic feminism in the fourth wave was the #MeToo movement where women across North America shared their stories of sexual harassment and assault. Though the movement gained massive attention after actress and producer Alyssa Milano's involvement, the origin of this movement is a woman of colour, Tarana Burke. Within the mainstream #MeToo movement, women of colour have been left out of the conversation. Instead, affluent White women are the ones who have their voices heard. In a Washington Post article, Tarana Burke discusses how "What history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices—those of people of colour, queer people, disabled people, and poor people—aren't centred in our movements, then they tend to become no more than a footnote." The continued marginalization of women of colour is dangerous, especially when considering the fact that women of colour are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and are less likely to be believed when they report harassment, assault, and rape. Indigenous women continue to face disproportionate risks of experiencing domestic abuse in their communities fueled by the intergenerational trauma of forced assimilation policies. Still, the larger society is no safer as rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women remain alarming. In the book *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color* by Ruby Hamad, the author wrote "It is only when white women are violated or even imagined to be violated by nonwhite men that white society suddenly seems to find its moral compass". In this line, Hamad is proposing that the issues related to gendered violence and oppression are exacerbated by white supremacy, disproportionately harming racialized individuals. Feminist movements such as this are grounded in single-issue frameworks, overshadowing the complexity of the problem that impacts the lives of so many women.

As feminism in the West has evolved, it is clear that the experiences of White women have often dominated the narrative, sidelining the intersectional struggles faced by women of color and marginalized groups. Despite the emergence of intersectional feminism, which aims for a more inclusive approach, there is still a pressing need to center the voices and experiences of those who have been historically marginalized. To truly achieve gender justice, we must challenge existing

power structures and prioritize solidarity across all intersections of identity. It is far less palatable to admit that men are not the primary cause of injustice and systemic oppression, but that women have also contributed to the mistreatment and discrimination of other women. Accepting this reality is a crucial step towards fostering a more impactful movement centered around women's rights.

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