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Empowerment. It is A Struggle Within and A Struggle Without.

Feminine empowerment and equality of the sexes is always the ultimate ideal, yet there is always something standing in the way. Be it societal pressures, the ever-present patriarchy, and in some instances, ourselves. Yes, we, women, can stand in our own way. Feminism is seen as universal, but there are factions and contrary hierarchies even within this movement for complete unity. All women should consider themselves within the Sisterhood, to be there to help one another and raise them up, but that notion became warped by society-induced competition between us. Having been raised that to have personal self-worth and validity is based off of a man's perspective, which is always a comparative view for all women, the negative aspects of female-female interaction come to the fore.

We as a sex are conditioned to submit to male authority while simultaneously trying to have more perceived power over other women. We subjugate ourselves without even realizing it, unaware that our relationships with conceived lower-class women just perpetuate the notion that we need to be dominated. Unfortunately this has always been an issue within the feminist movement- dating even farther back from 'radical' Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first to ever address it, and continuing up to present day. Her argument was based on pure submission; women then never fought for their rights as an

individual, barely even their thoughts. Others, like bell hooks and Audre Lorde, have commented on the privileged white woman rallying the call while still undermining her lower-class and/or colored peers. There is always resurgence in this strain of feminism, for albeit it is an unpopular genre it has relevance when women who benefitted from the patriarchy urge others to follow in their footsteps. Sheryl Sandberg is one such who revitalized the argument with her tell-all book *Lean In*, and with her added prestige as being a COO of Facebook she has practically started a coo on what it means to be a 'liberated' woman. It has always been the thought that the only thing women need to fight for equality is 'The Oppressive Man' but it is much more complicated than that, especially when the oppressed do not realize they are also repressing themselves.

Depending how one views it, we are in a constant struggle of repressing our sexuality yet still portraying sexuality. "Sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in way that make them act in complicity with the status quo" (hooks p.127) then do we not continue to generate our own form of sexism? We proliferate the teachings that to be a successful woman you must first be approved by the men; this need to maintain pits woman against woman in a contest that neither wins because it is just a demonstration of the patriarchy's influence. "We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with another" (hooks p.127) but we really are not natural enemies. Hooks is making a statement by thoroughly establishing all the different ways women should not be together. In her next sentence, the culprit of this schema is revealed, "Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught

that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience” (hooks p.127) These are lies though, as hooks emphatically states later; we all know we can get along yet still be diverse. If we know this, why are we still taught it? Why do we still reiterate it amongst ourselves? For some reason, there is division within feminism.

It is Feminist Movements, not singular, because though we fight ultimately for a common goal we still continue to fight against each other. There is a sort of oligarchy within feminism, those at the top are mostly affluent white women who set agendas or establish direction. They consider themselves the only true leaders of feminism, “that they somehow ‘own’ the movement” and can say “[they] want black women and other non-white women to join the movement.” (hooks p.133) The biggest contention for bell hooks is that feminism divides itself among race and class distinction. In comparing her to Wollstonecraft, their arguments are not that different across the span of years.

Wollstonecraft is focused on class distinction, not so much Big Broad Feminism but the more specific thought that education creates differences between women’s views of themselves. “A profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of misery...and that women in particular are rendered weak and wretched...their minds not in a healthy state,” is the biggest hindrance to feminine enlightenment. (Wollstonecraft p.215) She feels the injustice that women are not supposed to be educated, knows it is considered too much for their ‘delicate sensibilities’ but really it is because an educated woman is a strong woman. The patriarchal ideology of her time expresses feminine submission; it keeps them ignorant so they will not know what they do not have. Progress cannot be made when many women are all too willing to keep their heads down and listen to what their husbands tell them. Though this coquettish servitude was mass-produced over 200 years ago, it seems

back in production in this day and age. Wollstonecraft wrote “do passive indolent women make the best wives?...by obtaining a few superficial accomplishments, have strengthened the prevailing prejudice, merely contribute to the happiness of their husbands?...all their thoughts turn on things calculated to emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions [weak] and wavering” (230-233). She described women who used the worst aspects of cunning and sensibility to continually give pleasure to their men, not women who ever achieved contentment as a fellow human being. It seems women still have not gotten out from under the ‘truth’ of male dominance, further perpetuating the notion of the ancestral sexism that they are lesser. We need to start believing it. For too long women have spoken out against the unevenness of the power struggle in male-female relationships and too quickly are they shunned or silenced into oblivion.

Even Wollstonecraft, who speaks from a place of education, cannot escape the fetters of her male-dominated society. It is evident that it was a struggle, and she can only write about the first level of women empowerment, education. She cannot reach deeper into feminism, because she would not have been accepted by her male-only peers. Her critics slandered her so harshly that her writings, beyond her time period, were still only whispered about so late as the 1900s. She was part of the first wave of feminism that did not even know it was a wave. Audre Lorde sums up the constant plight faced by Wollstonecraft, and all her contemporaries, in “The Master’s Tools.” Wollstonecraft could not fully say what she was feeling and thinking about women because the only conventions and tools at her disposal were the ‘master’s’, the men’s. *“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may temporarily allow us to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about*

genuine change;” Lorde is just speaking the unacknowledged truth behind most feminist action (Lorde p.112). At times, women still only see so far as the parameters set for them. Sometimes the box is expanded, but it is still a box, and in this invisible enclosure the only thing comprehensible are the limitations set between. This may be why women resort to competing solely with each other, there is that set of mores underneath that says they can only rise above other women, never a man. This pathological desire to still be subservient, even when they know better, must be removed before women can truly reach what they are striving for.

It has always been a fight to be allowed *to deserve*, education, freedom, personal identity, respect; “to allow the *I to be*”. “Interdependency between women is the way to freedom” and women need to remember this. (Lorde p.111) This appeal may have spanned the generations, from Wollstonecraft to hooks and Lorde, but it has been continuously shunned by the self-imposed purgatory of non self-actualization. Womanhood is more than what *they* say it is, Sisterhood more than what has been achieved so far. It is a beautiful struggle, but a struggle none the less. Let us take from the words of these women, whose sentiments have given empowerment to us, who still struggle to believe there can be an Us.

Works Cited

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