

book review of Germaine Greer's
The Whole Woman

By Reihana Mohideen



The generation that challenged women (and men) to “think clitoris”—the “second wave” of feminists of the 1970s—are today’s older generation of feminists. Germaine Greer, one of the better known Western personalities of this generation, made a big splash with the publication of her book *The Female Eunuch* almost thirty years ago. Exemplifying Greer’s libertarian views on sexuality, the book had a big impact on young feminists at the time. Its call—for an aggressive, adventurous, exploring, unconventional and uncompromising female sexual practice—mirrored the sexual revolution that was intimately linked to the youth radicalisation of the 1960s and the emerging women’s liberation movement in the West. However, Greer was also criticised for her book’s somewhat elitist, sneering attitude towards those women who still hadn’t “made it” and continued to live in conventional relationships.

Her latest book, *The Whole Woman*, is the sequel to *The Female Eunuch*, and the book that Greer claimed she would never write.

It captures some of the best aspects of her early political views—an uncompromising and angry feminism. A clear rejection of the post-feminist myth that women have “made it” (unfortunately a fashionable view current amongst many Western feminists), the book is a passionate and eloquent critique of the status of women today. As the introduction says: “When *The Female Eunuch* was written our daughters were not cutting or starving themselves. On every side speechless women endure endless hardship, grief and pain, in a world system that creates billions of losers for every handful of winners. It’s time to get angry again.”

Greer’s writings usually reflect the experience of educated, White, middle-class women and this book is no exception. However, one does get the impression that, thirty years on, she is conscious of the narrowness of this experience and attempts to draw more broadly from the experiences of women of colour.

Reading the book as a migrant woman living in White society, I admired her principled feminist politics and passions and identified strongly with the main themes in the book. While being aware of the particular race and class perspectives of the author, I was glad that she hadn’t patronisingly attempted to speak on behalf of “all” women.

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The 'Beauty Myth' or the Barbie-doll Syndrome

The book makes a scathing attack on the stereotyping of women's beauty—the beauty myth—and the industry that thrives on it. Today new “disorders” are discovered to “explain problems” that women face. One such “condition” is called Body Dysmorphic Disorder (or BDD)—described as an abnormal preoccupation with one's perceived physical defects—said to be prevalent amongst women. According to a British study this leads to severe depression and some 25 percent of the cases attempt suicide. The popular singer Michael Jackson is said to be a suitable case study for this condition—he has had over 30 cosmetic surgery operations, and according to his ex-wife Lisa Presley, he doesn't take off his make-up even in bed.

Women spend hundreds of womanhours trying to achieve the perfect hairless body form. They are expected to struggle daily, waxing their legs, plucking their eyebrows and containing their pubic hair to achieve pubic baldness—all of which would be considered to be pathological behaviour in men.

Fat, as the women's liberation movement in the 1970s claimed, is still a feminist issue. That good ol' dimply fat, which in previous phases of

human history and in older cultures was considered to be a mere physical attribute of women and men, has now been rendered disgusting by modern-day marketing schemes. Liposuction has been invented—an extremely painful process that can leave women genuinely disfigured—in many cases to suck this naturally existing cellulite out of women's bodies.

The “beauty contest,” which has become somewhat discredited in the West, is now being increasingly promoted in the Third World. When the 1996 Miss World contest was staged in Bangalore, India, the cheapest seats sold at a price of 2,000 rupees, and 10,000 state troops were sent out to quell the protestors outside, who were holding an alternative pageant featuring Miss Poverty and Miss Illiteracy.

The beauty myth is, of course, an Anglo-capitalist stereotype. Perhaps the pinnacle of this stereotype is the Barbie doll. Whatever modifications may have taken place in recent years, Barbie is essentially Aryan—a Teutonic blonde model. Migrant women of colour living in White society constantly suffer the humiliations of this type of stereotyping. You can dye your hair blonde and pretend that you have a glorious “tan,” but you never quite “make it” as a “natural” blonde, with “sensitive” skin and transparent eyes. Ah, but then you can be “exotic”—like Naomi Campbell, an African queen, or some other ethnic variation of it. After all, didn't a Filipina-American win the Miss US beauty contest and isn't Miss India such a favourite on the world beauty pageant circuit? Exotica then has become commodified and the generally acceptable alternative for migrant women. Accepted by what standards? The standards of White society, of course.

The bottom line of all this is—there's a buck to be made. The cosmetics industry with

its creams (skin whitening creams being very popular in Asia), toners, exercise equipment, dietary supplements, etc., make millions of dollars out of “women’s carefully cultivated disgust with their own bodies.”

Pantomime Dames—or are They ‘Real’ Women?

Greer has always been controversial and has even sought controversy. This book is consistent with that. Under the provocative chapter title “Pantomime Dames,” Greer forcefully argues against sex-change operations submitted to by transsexuals as a form of treatment for gender-role distress. Sex-change operations, which concentrate on breast and genital transplants, is “profoundly conservative in that it reinforces sharply contrasting gender roles by shaping individuals to fit them.” What about uterus and ovary transplants? Greer poses the question to highlight her argument. This genital mutilation is unnecessary, she states. She points to other cultures, such as in the Indian city of Varanasi where, she claims, transgender or transsexual people do not attempt to “pass” as men or women.

Here Greer is intervening in a major political debate, taking place within sections of Western feminism today, on the role of transsexual or transgender people in the women’s movement. Are they “real” women and should they be allowed to be a part of the women’s movement? Those who oppose their participation in the women’s movement are generally those who subscribe to the perspective put forward by “identity politics”—that women should organise according to their identity as Indigenous, migrant, Black, White, lesbian, heterosexual, transsexual and transgender etc, rather than across commonalities that link them—such as feminism. The emphasis of identity politics is on individual “identities.” Linked to this de-

bate is also the controversial notion that there are more than two genders—feminine and masculine.

Identity politics, in the realm of race and gender, becomes a highly explosive mix. How many times have migrant women of colour heard the public refrains of Whites at women’s conferences as they metaphorically whip themselves over their perceived racist “guilt”? How many times have we been patronised because our views were acceded to, not on the strength of our convictions, but because of our skin colour? No, we have to insist, don’t off-load your guilt on us. We are not here to ease your guilt. We refuse to be your therapists. However, if you want to struggle as one with us for our collective liberation—sister, you are welcome.

A Generation Gap Within Feminism?

Greer looks at some of the currents (or fads) amongst younger women embodied under the notion of “girl power”—geek girl, guerilla girl etc. While the term “girl” was initially used as an attempt to subvert the original sense of the term (a belittling of women) and to reaffirm woman power (such as the subversion of the term “Black” to mean “Black power”), the project didn’t quite succeed. The notion of “girl power” has been co-opted by the establishment and marketed back to the younger generation of women. Greer points to the rock band the Spice Girls—Posh Spice, Ginger Spice, Sporty Spice, Baby Spice and Scary Spice—as a prime example of girl power commodified. This is an extremely sophisticated propaganda exercise aimed at younger women by the establishment. However, it can be argued that young women today are not so easily fooled and continue to be motivated to struggle towards the goals of genuine liberation for women.

Mothers

The problems of older women are not directly addressed in the book. However, Greer has already written controversially on this subject. In her other recent writings she has argued for radical celibacy as a preferred sexual practice—a far cry from the ideas in *The Female Eunuch*. In *The Whole Woman* she does address the problems facing mothers in a razor-sharp appraisal of the current status of motherhood in Western societies.

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Motherhood, she states, is being systematically degraded. Women are not only increasingly bearing the brunt of societies' problems, but mothers are being increasingly blamed for societies' woes. Working mothers are accused of not caring for their children and of being cold-hearted career seekers. And not only do they neglect their young, they even deprive their sons and husbands of scarce jobs.

As the neo-liberal ideology of individualism breaks down the social and community ties that people have relied on for support, mothers get blamed for the social problems that are created. It is their fault that extended family ties and even nuclear family ties have disintegrated. Emotional problems that affect people in later life are traced to their mothers. A major purpose of psychoanalysis today is to put the person "in touch with her hostility to her mother." Eating disorders are sometimes blamed on mothers. In its recent International List of Recognised Diseases, even the World Health Organisation included an ailment called "attachment disorder." As described in

an article in the *Guardian*, those affected "have never had a mother's selfless commitment modelled for them when they were children, nor experienced their birthright of an unbroken one-to-one attachment." But if children do receive this "unbroken one-to-one attachment" then mothers are blamed for dominating them.

Single mothers have become the lowest of the low—the preconceived notions being that they have slept around or can't "hold on to a man." Hence single-mother benefits, a concession of the welfare state, is now under savage attack in Australia with the government demanding that they "work for the dole."

Without treading the slippery path of glorifying motherhood and the nuclear family (the watchword of right-wing forces in the West), Greer's call to make "dignified motherhood a feminist priority" strikes a chord in many women.

Liberation Subverted

Criticising the notion of equality as put forward by liberal feminism, Greer argues that this notion was always limited and has now been subverted to justify women "making it" in a man's world on terms acceptable to these male hierarchies. These are the "sisters in suits" who make up the "padded-shoulders brigade." Equality for women has become a "motherhood statement" that is widely accepted but becoming subverted. The original notion of women's liberation should be resurrected as the alternative. "Unpopular feminists 'fight' for liberation; popular feminists work for equality. ... These are the feminists everyone can like," she notes acidly and goes on to warn: "If women can see no future apart from joining the masculine elite on its own terms, our civilisation will become more destructive than ever. There has to be a better way." ☺