

**book review**

*Feminism is for Everybody*

Written by bell hooks

Reviewed by Katherine Marie M. Belen

For third wave generation feminists, who are unfortunately deprived of a walking and talking feminism, bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody* could not have come at a better time.

Many of today's feminists come face to face with feminism only in the classrooms. While the movement has been infused with new blood, it helps that there are seasoned guards like hooks, whose theory of feminism is rooted in common sense and imbued with the wisdom of experience.

Hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody* is the book that she always wanted to have in her hand whenever she was asked "What is feminism?" More than 10 years ago, she offered this definition in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression." Early on, she wanted to stress that the movement does not regard men as the enemy. The enemy was sexism. It is a point she reiterates in this book.

"Clarity," hooks states in her introduction, "helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have been socialised from birth on to accept sexist thought and action." She suggests everyone's accountability; knowingly or not, we all have played a part in upholding a system, which promotes injustice and oppression.



*Feminism is for Everybody* is like a guidepost about how we can all work on behalf of feminism, right where we are. Throughout the book hooks counters society's bias against feminism, rooted, among others, in the misconception that feminists are man-hating lesbians who simply want whatever men have.

**Breathing Life Into Feminism**

Hook's book is concise and readable; it does away with jargon that can discourage even the most avid feminist.

Call it an engaging tour on feminism—hooks provides a rundown of how the move-

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ment began and what its concerns were in the beginning. A sampler: Gender equity was summarised in the catch phrase "equal work for equal pay." This found resonance among "reformist thinkers" within the feminist movement, who chose to emphasise gender equality. But revolutionary thinkers, to which hooks belongs, wanted more. They did not want to simply alter the status quo so that women would have more rights; they wanted to transform the system into one with no room for patriarchy and sexism.

The book acknowledges that disagreements over the direction that feminism ought to take led to various splits within the movement. It was a development that left the public confused about what feminism was all about.

Still, hooks argues that while at some point, feminism lost its momentum, it is still very much around. The challenge, she says, is to adapt it to the times. Rather than being limited to academic discourse, feminism must

be kept alive by using today's cultural and art forms such as T-shirts, bumper stickers, postcards, hip hop music, television and radio commercials, and billboards.

Another section of the book asks one to appreciate the victory that women achieved in the 1970s—of reclaiming the glory of the female body.

It also reminds women of other simple yet significant things in life: i.e., that they are able to enjoy the comfort of wearing pants, largely because of the feminist movement. It was feminism, after all, that challenged the sexist-defined fashion industry.

Feminism, hooks reminds us in the book, also examined the pathological, life-threatening aspects of self-obsession. The movement also made the medical establishment pay attention to compulsive eating and compulsive starvation disorders.

### **'A Radical Act'**

*Feminism is for Everybody* draws the big picture that, sadly, still escapes many. Feminist politics, hooks says, "still is the only movement for social justice that offers a vision of mutual well-being as a consequence of its theory and practice." It is for this reason, she says, that the issue of class and race falls within the ambit of feminism.

*Ms. Magazine*, which reviewed hooks' book states, "She passionately argues that our ability to deal with the interrelation of gender, race, and class must be addressed in order to move toward true feminism." In doing so, it added, "hooks succeeds in taking feminist theory from the academe and giving it back to the communities from which it



sprang—redefining it in lucid, accessible, everyday terms.” It is, Ms. couldn’t help pointing out, “a radical act, indeed.”

At the onset, mass media paid attention to the issues put forward by early feminist women who came from the privileged class, hooks maintains. The issues most relevant to working women, who put in long hours for measly wages and came home to do all the household chores, were never really addressed. Instead what stood out were the cries of a small group of well-educated women who wanted freedom from the misery of being housewives. What reformist white women with class privileges essentially wanted were the same freedoms they perceived men of their class to be enjoying. She argues that the fact only the privileged women gained power while the rest of the masses of women do not as much as gain wage equity with men demonstrates the fact that class interests had superseded feminist efforts. hooks emphasised the importance of critiquing women with class power who opportunistically use a feminist platform while undermining feminist politics. They only keep in place a patriarchal system that will ultimately re-subordinate them. They do not just betray feminism; they betray themselves, she says.

No group of white women understood the differences in their status and that of black women more than the group of politically conscious white females who were active in civil rights movement. Yet many of these individuals moved from civil rights into women’s liberation and spearheaded a feminist movement where they suppressed and denied the awareness of difference they had seen and heard articulated in the civil rights struggle, hooks says. hooks puts forward the harshest critique: These women apparently did not divest them-

selves of their white supremacist notions of being superior to black females and thus, by virtue of their being “more informed” and “better-educated,” they declared themselves more suited to lead the movement.

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Consequently, hooks argues, they entered the movement erasing and denying difference, not playing race alongside gender, but instead eliminating it from the picture. She recalls that in those days, white women who were unwilling to face the reality of racism and racial difference, accused revolutionary thinkers like her of being traitors.

Black women like hooks, however, demanded to look into the status of women realistically to lay the foundation for feminist politics, which was necessary to build solidarity. Only then, they stressed, was genuine sisterhood possible.

In an interview she had with Pema Chodron, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, hooks addressed this distressing concern: “Much of the work I do revolves around racism and sexism. On the one hand, I want to start right

where I am, in the now. But on the other hand, I also have to have this vision of a future where these things are not in our lives. Do you think that's too utopian?"

She emphasises that only by returning to a discussion of class and race can feminist women and men restore the conditions for solidarity.

### Ending Patriarchal Violence

There are many other misconceptions that hooks challenges in her book. One involves the view held even by some feminists, primarily reformist thinkers, that work automatically liberates women from male domination. Working for low wages did not liberate the poor and working class women, she points out. She laments the lack of a feminist agenda that offers women a way to rethink work. Women can be freed from male domination when they have achieved economic self-sufficiency, she states. Work must be one that enhances self-esteem and self-respect, and must pay decently. She identifies areas where one can start: women and men who prefer to stay home and raise their children must be paid wages subsidised by the state; home-schooling programmes that can grant high school or graduate diplomas can be established.

The book also discusses the link between patriarchy and violence in the home. hooks defines patriarchal violence as one that is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control another through various forms of coercive force. Thus, it can include male violence against women, same-sex violence, and adult violence against children. She uses the term patriarchal violence over domestic violence to remind the

listener that violence in the home is connected to sexism.

She makes a point about feminist parenting and feminist liberation of marriage and partnership that is founded on principles of equality, respect, and belief in mutual satisfaction and growth. Only by ending the patriarchal domination of children, by men or women, can the family be a place where children can be safe and free, and where they can know love.

Other points discussed at length in hook's masterpiece are feminist masculinity, feminist love, spirituality and vision. For instance, she talks about the need to create a positive feminist discourse on love, about the need for feminist leaders to bring a spirit of love to feminist activism. Love grants the power to oppose domination, she states.

Indeed, throughout the book, hooks illustrates the various stages that feminism has undergone to be able to address the individual needs of women and men across class, race, sexual preference and spiritual affirmations.

She acknowledges that much work needs to be done, among them taking the feminist theory out of the elitist settings of the university and bringing it to the people. hooks has done her part by writing children's books that popularises feminism, and by writing *Feminism is For Everybody*.

*Katherine Marie M. Belen or Cookee very recently encountered a major crossroad and has decided to leave commerce in search of work, and hopefully a life, directed towards livelihood development, improving education, and integrating values formation in both.*