
The Significance Of Feminism

In April 2018 Michelle Wolf hosted the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner, an event championing the right to freedom of speech. Jokes were made at expense of the sitting administration, in particular, about the lack of facts often presented by Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. The internet erupted into controversy, with many calling out Wolf on her blatant attack on a woman in power and calling her remarks "unfeminist". Wolf responded in an interview with "-because I'm a woman, I can say things about women because I know what it's like to be a woman, if that makes any sense."

The public outcry against Wolf was eerily similar to a controversy from the summer of 2013, blogger Mikki Kendall grew increasingly frustrated watching her friends-who, like her, were - being viciously attacked online. They were, to use the modern term, being trolled and harassed on a global platform by a by a white man who identified as a "male feminist". He later admitted that he had intentionally "trashed" women of color, posting on Twitter: "I was awful to you because you were in the way" (Kendall, 2013).

However, the most noticeable thing about the public showdown, was the absence of the prominent and mostly white digital feminists which prompted Kendall to start the hashtag. The failure to acknowledge the racist, sexist behavior of one their own frequent contributors prompted her to create #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen. This was Kendall's form of activism in the age of the internet and the hashtag quickly began trending on Twitter and ignited a wide range of discussions about social media, feminism and call-→out culture. Kendall was belittled and even raged at by multiple journalists such as Michelle Goldberg, who ranted and raved at Kendall specifically, and women of color more generally, for starting a "toxic Twitter war" that is destructive for feminism (Goldberg, 2014).

What remained unquestioned by these journalists and scholarship in general was why this step was necessary in the first place. The running theme of the unquestioned dominance of white women as both the creators and defenders of a feminism – not just in the days of the suffragette, but today, in the modern era, perhaps because they have by attained, due to racial and social bias, more opportunity, greater resources' and a wider outreach , they are afforded the opportunity of setting the national narrative. Which begs the question: why does this resurgence of feminism seem increasingly hostile to women of color? Although a number of scholars have critiqued the first or second waves of feminist movements as rooted in whiteness (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982; Truth, 2009;), there is little existing literature that appears willing to equate whiteness with privilege when it comes to feminist activism. To address this gap in our understanding of white feminism, I will discuss some major arcs in modern feminism.

Literature review

As a child of the 90s, I never knew a world without some version of the Internet, but it is said that during the early days of the Net, some scholars theorized that this emergence of virtual environments and a culture of fantasy would mean an escape the boundaries of race and the experience of racism. A few imagined that people would go online to escape their embodied racial and gender identities (Nakamura, 2002;) and some saw this as a perfectly balanced

platform where there is “no race, no gender” much like aboard a Star Trek spaceship. The reality unsurprisingly, is quite different. Race and racism were ingrained biases that transferred almost seamlessly, when ideas were shifted online. The reality of the Internet we have today has important implications for understanding whiteness and the privilege it affords when talking about feminism.

The examination of whiteness in the scholarly literature is, by now, well established (Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Whiteness, like other racial categories, is socially constructed and actively maintained through social boundaries. A key strategy in maintaining these boundaries is through efforts to define who is, and is not, white, with ample historical evidence showing how the boundaries of whiteness are malleable across time, place and social context (Roediger, 2007). Being white is seen as the default and does not take away from any identity unlike others which are radicalized. At the same time, some scholars have noted that whiteness can result in paradoxical ‘hypervisibility’ (Reddy, 1998). Historically, whiteness has shaped most aspects of modern society be it housing, education, politics or law (Painter, 2010). Yet, whiteness is not often the focus of critical attention when it comes to discussions of the Internet and race (with the exception of MacPherson, 2003), and to date, any research that discusses the lack of diversity in this space is met with fierce opposition.

Discussion

The internet was supposed to be a free and open space, to encourage thought and conversation that would be impossible in daily life. However, feminism is a charged topic and when it is equated with race the conversation often turns hostile. For women of color, the initial challenge is simply being heard, as they are frequently ignored. Once their voices have registered, they risk being bullied and verbally abused (or worse). Most likely they will be called “angry”, or in some cases, accused of starting a “war” (Goldberg, 2014). The delicate nature of the conversation, often leads to it being avoided all together, and for women of color this means lost opportunities as they are skipped over, because their inclusion requires a much broader debate which most are unwilling to have. For white women speaking out about white feminism is akin to challenging the status quo, which means they might lose their own standing in the social order, which will lead to lost opportunities and a sharp decline in their ability to relate to their own.

When Mikki Kendall’s hashtag #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen was trending, many white feminists reporting feeling hurt, attacked, wounded, or simply left out of the conversation (Van Deven, 2013). In many ways, the reaction to challenges to white feminism causes “unhappiness” which, as Sara Ahmed explains, can be a good thing: “To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order is to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause. To be willing to cause unhappiness might be about how we live an individual life (not to choose “the right path” is readable as giving up the happiness that is presumed to follow that path). ...To be willing to cause unhappiness can also be how we immerse ourselves in collective struggle, as we work with and through others who share our points of alienation. Those who are unseated by the tables of happiness can find each other.” (Ahmed, 2010)

Ahmed’s is a hopeful analysis for those who seek to find their niche in this new brand of feminism, and it is obviously effective, when it comes to making change. Stacey Abrams won

the Democratic primary. As Vox's Matthew Yglesias explained, black voters are what rushed Abrams towards making history. He said : "While black women are a crucial voting bloc capable of deciding close contests, they are sorely underrepresented in seats of political power." (Yglesias, 2018). A 2016 study by the Voter Participation Center, noted the increase in women voting when comparing 2012 and 2016. However, they predicted that the participation by groups of color, women in particular, will go down in the 2018 Midterms. They were wrong. Spurred on by the current political climate and encouraged by major political parties women of color, many of them under the age of thirty, have ran and won Midterm primaries and they are supported by their own. First time candidates such as Stacey Abrams , Peggy Flanagan, Deb Haaland and Rashida Tlaib are running in both red and blue states and many polls see them winning seats in the House and Congress this fall. Millenials are beginning to see the need to support and elect diverse voices and change the narrative.

On the flip side, when focus is shifted onto the the presence of women of color in the various industries of America, progress seems much slower. A study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research in 2013 found that on average black women earned fifteen percent less than white women. The wage gap was almost double for Hispanic women. White women make up almost sixty five percent of the work force, five times more than any other ethnicity. However, that same report found the gender wage gap to be approximately twenty five percent, meaning on average, women earned eighty cents for every dollar made by a man. This shows that the need for feminism is alive and well and that while the movement sorts out the discrepancies in its message, it must also remain focused on its key objectives, one of which is to break the glass ceiling.

It appears that the problem highlighted has already been noticed and initiatives to rectify the situation are in motion. Emerging media platforms such as BuzzFeed have begun to release statistics on their workforce in an effort to be more mindful of hiring biases, and to bring attention to the fact that policies that increase diversity on social media platforms are both popular and lucrative for businesses. These are, however, small steps down a much longer road.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that feminism and that the women that champion it are far from perfect. This is a global movement, with rules that shift and grow in response to criticism. However, to assume that feminism operates in a vacuum, distanced from historical oppression and cultural narrative would be a mistake. Biases are delicate and ingrained upon the human psyche. It is often hard to spot discrimination in action, unless one takes a step back shifts perspectives.

The path forward is to challenge white feminism and rise in favor of an intersectional version that centers the experiences of black, Latina, Asian, Indigenous, queer, disabled, and trans women. It is never easy to speak against a social order. To challenge white feminism is also to risk causing unhappiness, but this is a risk we must take so that we can find each other in our resistance to it. The current social landscape is being shaped by the millenials and will eventually be run by them. Therefore, the unenviable task of pushing against the status quo falls to them.