

# In a Feminist Mirror, Darkly:

## Reflections On Cultural Misconceptions of Feminism

Feminism is a fairly simple concept, but as with most simple concepts, it is easy to distort and misconstrue. Both those who embrace the concept as an ideology and those who denounce it have found ways to use the tactics of fear, divisiveness, and confusion in service of their particular beef—whether with certain feminists or feminism as a whole. Those who perceive feminism as a threat argue that our society is at a point where sexism and gender inequality are practically non-existent; therefore, “egalitarianism” makes more sense. Much as white folks unwilling to deal with their racism want us to believe that the election of President Obama heralds a “post-racial” era, people who support the replacement of “feminism” with “egalitarianism” want us to pay attention to superficial gains while the substantial inequity between men and women persists. And if you’re unwilling to reject feminism based on some fabricated evidence that sexism is no longer a thing, they’ll scare you away by painting feminists with such a broad, negative brush that

you’ll be moved to make some lukewarm declaration like “I’m not a feminist, but I do believe in the strength of women”—as Katy Perry did while accepting the 2012 Billboard Woman of the Year award, of all things. On the flip side, our view of what a feminist looks like is so narrowly focused that when Beyoncé announced that she was a feminist, people lost their shit. Why? Overwhelmingly, the answer seemed to boil down to this—she’s too sexy.

The emancipation of Bey has been deconstructed and re-constructed to death, so I’m not going to do that here. I will say that our reaction—and when I say “our,” I’m including those who identify as feminists—to her and other feminists who don’t necessarily live up to our vision of what a feminist is, validates the idea that ‘what a feminist is’ has been distorted. The same caricatures that existed in the 1960s and 1970s persist today, adjusted for inflation. Feminists are still purported to be bitter, humorless and misandrist. This caricature can be molded to fit whichever subgroup of feminist you’re

attempting to disparage; just season to taste—for example, one hilarious myth regarding Black feminism involves the CIA tricking Black women into becoming feminists/womanists in order to destroy the Black Nationalist movement, which, incidentally, was fronted by Black men. Granted, that’s a



particularly convoluted version of the “man-hating” stereotype, but it’s rooted in the patriarchy’s same old fear of losing control. To maintain that control requires the reinforcement of gender norms and the consequences that result from violating them. Those consequences are reflected in the go-to (heterosexist) insult “You just can’t get a man, so you’re bitter.” The narrative of the feminist life cycle goes like this: You’re an unfeminine woman, which is undesirable to men, which leads to rejection by men, which leads to misandry and the adoption of feminist beliefs. A counter-narrative might go something like this: the impulse to dispute the legitimacy of a woman’s feminist chops springs from an inability to accept her expression of her sexuality, which reflects the same internalized anti-feminist beliefs that spawned the feminist awakening in the first place.

Similarly, legitimate objections within the feminist movement by women of color, queer, and trans women to exclusionary practices and a lack of intersectionality have been highlighted by agents of the patriarchy to advance their own anti-feminist agenda, which has, in turn, aided those feminists who would rather not examine their own

complicity in supporting racism, homophobia and transmisogyny. With these external forces pointing to the marginalization of certain types of women as evidence that feminism isn’t a viable philosophy, it’s important that we address these issues instead of trying to silence the women bringing them to the fore. The question of who benefits from feminism shouldn’t be something that requires clarification, and centering on straight white cisgendered women as the primary voice of the movement begs the question. If empathy and understanding doesn’t compel those with privilege to acknowledge the need for an intersectional feminism, maybe they’ll be moved by the specter of anti-feminist exploitation of internal strife?

It comes to this: social, economic, and political equality for all genders is a cause that should be easy to say you’re down for, but the dilution of the word “feminism” has ensured that making that declaration with any type of clarity is no longer as simple as the concept of feminism itself. Being an advocate for feminism now means navigating a minefield of misconceptions, each of which requires its own refutation. But here’s the thing: this is an obstacle course designed and installed

by those who view themselves as having something to lose in the institution of feminism as a social and political doctrine. There’s no easy or clear exit route, either. It seems like the truths of feminism would be self-evident—but when those truths are obscured by falsehoods meant to turn women against each other, it’s actually not that surprising that so many choose to eschew the label. I can’t get mad at them, either. Hating on the women that fall prey to patriarchal distraction techniques only confirms their allegations that feminism isn’t universal. Those of us in the struggle have to act as shepherds for the members of the flock that have run astray. Only with patience and deliberation can we counter the cultural misconceptions that have poisoned the feminist well.

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