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Branding Women as Pseudo- Feminists: Taking Away Women's Rights to be Angry Against Injustice

Fiona Cyril Creado

creadofiona@gmail.com

University of Mumbai, Mumbai, Maharashtra

ABSTRACT

As per Merriam-Webster (2021), Feminism can be defined as the advocacy of and belief in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes expressed on behalf of women's rights and interests. One of the popular terms that are being increasingly used to describe modern feminists is 'pseudo-feminist'. This paper reflects on the origin and meaning of the term pseudo-feminism to ascertain whether the use of such a term takes away women's right to be angry against injustice. Through careful consideration of the injustices encountered by women historically and different approaches to feminism, the paper establishes that the use of terms like pseudo-feminism undermines feminist causes and unfairly demands women to be not angry with the gender who have since time immemorial spewed injustice against them.

Keywords: *Feminism, pseudo-feminist, injustice, Australian women, women's rights*

History of Injustice and Violence against Women in Australia

The injustice experienced by Australian women has persisted for decades. Prior to the feminist movement that emerged during the 1800 to 1900s women in Australia were even deprived of basic human rights such as the right to vote, the right to participate in a parliamentary election and even the right to be protected from sexual exploitation (Dixson, 1986). After gaining suffrage rights, the focus of feminists in Australia shifted to the injustices of discrimination in workplaces and sexual harassment and violence against women. Historically, the sexual freedom of Australian women was significantly limited and female rights were deprived of adequate importance (Penny, 2010). This poor social status and conditions of women were brought into light during the 1970s. Women's liberation, sexual harassment, sexual violence, criminalization of marital rape and equal representation of men and women at all government levels, were some of the most prominent feminist issues during the 1970s (Malcom, 1997). Thus it cannot be denied that the suffering of women in Australia at the hand of the patriarch was endless.

There was an abundance of feminists in Australia during the 1970s who actively expressed their demands through their voices, placards and t-shirts. Most of the feminists since the 19th century were angered by the prevailing inequality, injustice and violence that they experienced and witnessed daily. As mentioned above, they even lacked voting rights; however, it was primarily the plight of the married white women in Australia that caught the attention of the suffragists. In the past, women in Australia were subjected to gross inequality and whatever little independence they had was taken away from them upon marriage to an extent that not only they were denied the right to own any property but also denied them the right to easily file for divorce and gain custody of their children. Economic control, physical violence, marital rape and even unwanted childbearing plagued the lives of women back then. It was then that the feminists took the matter into their own hands and with the help of activists like Rose Scott and Louisa Lawson delivered impassioned speeches, wrote to newspapers, held public rallies and signed petitions. Thus the feminists refused to be submissive or silent as was expected of them during that time (Woollacott & Staff 2021).

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women was ratified by Australia in 1983 which was accompanied by domestic legislation as well. Despite that, after 35 years of the convention, the rate of change in the country in terms of gender equality has been observed to be disappointingly slow due to which the country continues to lag behind other nations in terms of responding to issues of sexual harassment and violence (Smith, 2021). Gender violence which was once invisible in the past of Australia due to the silent culture slowly began to surface and historians began to discover a wide range of sources that reflected the Australian women's experiences of family violence, sexual violence and many other forms of violence. The Australian culture constantly told its men to be physically and mentally tough and its women to be the gentler sex. Women during the 19th and 20th

centuries were taught to be 'womanly' to manage the mood and temper of men around them. This made them susceptible to the men's anger and violence. The culture of hyper-masculinity was prized within Australian society which exacerbated violence against women (Piper and Stevenson, 2019).

Since the 1970s the widespread social and economic injustices against women have been checked to some extent and there has been growing awareness around inequality and gender violence. In 1972, the Women's Electoral Lobby was founded in Australia and the same year Australia established women's right to equal pay. Federal child care act, single mother's benefit and paid maternity leaves were also established for women. Marital rape was also eventually penalized and women were allowed to file for no-fault divorces around 1976. In 1986, Joan Child became the first woman speaker in the House of Representatives and Janine Haines became the first woman leader of Australian Democrats. Mary Genevieve Gaudron, Joan Kirner, Lowitja O'Donoghue, Dame Quentin Bryce and Julia Gillard were also some prominent feminists that uplifted the status of women in Australia through effective leadership (Victorian Women's Trust 2021). Despite that, the violence and injustices against women in Australia have not ceased. In 2015, the federal government of Australia proclaimed gender violence as a national crisis. In 2016, it was observed that almost one-fifth of adult women in Australia have reported being harassed in the past 12 months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

'Pseudo-Feminism' and why is it an Issue?

The ideology of 'feminism' can be traced long back in time and is associated with the strive to rise against injustice; however, the notion of 'pseudo-feminism' is relatively new. According to their contemporaries, feminists are those who advocate for women's rights and demand equality of all sexes and on the other hand, pseudo-feminists are those who only claim to be feminists and blatantly ignore the primary point of feminism which is equality. However, there is no actual definition of pseudo-feminism beyond the description that it does not resemble feminism (Murti, 2019). However, it is often accompanied by hatred towards the male gender. This ambiguous meaning of the term makes it even more controversial. In this respect, one can contend that the issue of branding women as pseudo-feminists is a contemporary issue and therefore has no relevance in the historical context. The paper is of the opposing view and contends that the emergence of this contemporary issue lies in the events of the past and is strongly linked to the history of violence and injustice against women in Australia; as Machiavelli (2017) had once stated, "whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult with the past".

The association of Australia with feminist movements have had a long-standing since the past, and after New Zealand, it is one of the first nations in the world that provided women with the right to be elected in the national parliament and South Australia was indeed one of the first to provide women with full suffrage right (Commonwealth Australia, 2010). Australia has also been home to several notable feminists including Julia Gillard, Germaine Greer, Edith Cowan and Vida Goldstein. Over the years, feminist movements in Australia have brought several changes in the country and have also paved the way for anti-discrimination and equality laws (Commonwealth Australia, 2011). Whatever success the feminist movements have gained, is the result of hard struggles by the feminists of the country. In pen and paper, women in Australia are considered to be equals to men and allegedly enjoy the same rights and liberty as men in the modern world. Does this indicate that the buzzwords associated with feminism such as equality are no longer an issue since equal status has already been established? If one were to conduct a reality check, one can observe that equality in Australia is still a distant dream. In 2006, Australia Ranked 15th in terms of gender equality in the world, women are still being paid approximately 23.1% less than men, more than three fourth of board directors in Australia are still men, Australian women retire with 53.8% less super as compared to men and Australian women account for only one-third of graduates in technology, science, engineering and mathematics. This indicates a need for keeping up the fight against patriarchy (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2017). Yet when a modern woman tries to voice her opinion and rage, she is often bombarded with tags of pseudo-feminism.

According to certain modern feminists, all it takes is a little mistake to be tagged as a pseudo-feminist. The patriarchal society continues to unleash sexist, unfair and gender-biased comments and actions upon women but just when modern women take a step forward to outrage against the prevailing unfairness they are countered with terms such as pseudo-feminist that undermines their feminist causes. Yes, indeed, the demands and contentions of the modern feminists are not the same as previous generations of feminists and one can inevitably argue that past feminist causes such as suffrage rights hold more weight than contemporary causes such as the right to equal pay or even something as trivial as having a choice over their own body. However, it is essential to note that all societies are dynamic and therefore the needs of societies and individuals within the society change with time. Therefore no feminist cause can be stated as too small and the women outraging are not doing so without any cause. Misogyny and sexism continue to pollute the Australian culture and even Julia Gillard, the first female prime minister of Australia was stereotyped as "lying bitch", 'heartless harridan' and a 'scheming shrew' (Gordon, 2014). Every other woman in Australia has experienced some form of discrimination, gender-based violence and unequal treatment. Therefore it should not come as a shock that they are angry about the same.

Given the injustice that the women in Australia continue to experience, it should not be surprising that women hold grudge against not only patriarchy but also the male gender as a whole. While this hatred against the male gender itself does not fit into the notions of equality and liberation of women in society, thereby making it unnecessary in feminist movements, this grudge is important to spark the rage that fuels feminist movements. However, terms like 'pseudo-feminists' support used against modern women supports the already existing social and political undertones against feminism and undermine their effort to speak up against injustice. The use of the term 'pseudo-feminism' acts as a strong opposition to attack the modern feminists as conservatives initiating such resistance claim that feminism and women's movement destroys families and cause harm to men in society (Sponberg, 2008). Furthermore, this distinction drawn between feminists and pseudo-feminists gives rise to intergenerational dispute that puts a dent to the unity of the feminists thereby weakening their stand in society. The generational gap between the earlier generation of feminists who are supposed to be considered as 'real feminists' and the modern feminists already puts the collective identity and

sisterhood into crisis; this combined with the attack of derogatory terms like 'pseudo-feminists' further destroys the feminists' collective identification. This difference created within the feminist community by differentiating between real feminism and pseudo-feminism, serves as a distraction as it pitches feminists against each other in the generational fight thereby ignoring the common enemy, i.e., patriarchy and injustices hauled by patriarchy (Long, 2001; Trioli 1999). This then raises the question of whether the approach was taken by the so-called 'pseudo-feminists' in the contemporary world indeed so different from the approach taken by the previous generation's 'real' feminists that their causes deserve to be undermined?

Pacifism or Aggression: A Historical Comparison to Feminist Approaches

While drawing comparisons between real feminists and pseudo feminists, one of the most common themes that constantly appears are their approach to feminism and women's rights. Opponents of the 'pseudo-feminists' argue that these pseudo-feminists take help of the social media accounts to spread hatred and nonsense in the community like parasites and worms. The modern-day feminist influencers are often shoved into this category who are criticized for posting immodest pictures on social media in the name of equality and freedom, thereby promoting pseudo-feminism (Khatri, 2021). Some Australian 'pseudo-feminist' influencers who can be alleged to be fall under this category may include Suzie Stevens who advocates for self-love and women's right through images of body positivity or Avalon Hope who destroys archaic stereotypes through her sex appeal and unapologetic allure (Dawson, 2021). These so-called pseudo-feminists are criticized for defaming the word 'feminism' itself by destroying the true meaning of the word which is equality and instead focuses on ruling over the other gender through passive approaches. This is often accompanied by allegations of male-bashing. They have also been labelled as the cause behind society losing their trust in women (Sinha, 2020). Does that mean that pseudo-feminists do exist and it is dangerous for the notion of equality which is the basis for feminism? In order to answer this question, it is important to compare the 'pseudo-feminist' aggressive approaches of modern feminists with the earlier generation feminists whom society portrays as real feminists. If it were to be true that an aggressive approach in feminism and rage against another gender defeats the purpose of feminism by destroying equality then the only approach women could take to establish their rights is pacifism. However, historically, feminism and pacifism have been observed to be antithetical ideas (Goodman, 1978). Despite the beliefs of many, the divide between approaches in feminism is not new. Feminism is not a battle between the two sexes, but attempting to uplift the status of women in society is associated with a fight against the patriarchal norms of the society which upholds male superiority which automatically leads to opposition against the male gender. Even during 1970, ideas regarding what constitutes real feminism was divided. Within the parameters of radical feminism during the 1970s, women who read mainstream women magazines such as 'Cleo' were considered as non-real feminists. According to the popular belief during that time women's magazines perpetuated that women could only find fulfillment in male domination, sexual passivity and nurturing maternal love, and therefore did not conform to the ideology of feminism. At the same time, there existed another group of feminists, who believed that women's magazines share the same feminist intend and are a good platform to find solutions for injustices and lived experiences (Le Masurier, 2007). Therefore, it can be observed that even during the 1970s, one group of feminists took an aggressive approach by showing strong opposition to male domination while the other group took a more pacifist approach. However, in this respect, it is essential to note that even though one approach may be favored over the other, the ultimate agenda of both the approaches are the same, which is to end the miseries and injustices faced by women.

There are indeed innumerable benefits to taking the pacifist approach to feminism. Scholars have argued that a pacifist approach helps enrich the feminist philosophies and attain the aspirations of non-violence. Taking the pacifist route to feminism is also said to allow the discovery of new and liberating ways of working that defies the traditional male structure (Goodman, 1978). Moreover, it is also true that feminism does not need to be restricted to one particular gender and even men who strongly believe in the equality of all genders are feminists. This is in lieu of the ideology that all humans deserve equal treatment irrespective of their gender. However, this rule has been broken innumerable times in feminist movements for decades. It is essential to note, in this respect that, the male-bashing that accompanies the aggressive approaches of the so-called pseudo-feminist does not correspond to the notion of equal rights; however the purpose of this male-bashing is not battle against the sexes, rather it is battle against abuse and injustice (Gogoi, 2015).

Society, since time immemorial, has been dominated by the influence of males and therefore it is only natural that feminist movements are more inclined towards taking a defensive role only for women as that is the gender that has gone undefended historically (Gogoi, 2015). This injustice against women have been spewed by the male gender, and therefore, it is not fair to expect women to raise their voices against the injustice without raising voices against the ones who are the root of the injustice. Pseudo-feminists are constantly bashed for hating the male gender as a whole and not trusting men by being misandrists which do not correspond to the philosophies of feminism but no one talks about the fact that expecting women to put their trust in the gender that has been the root of their miseries is impractical in many ways. "Feminism is all about respecting women's experiences, identities, knowledge, ideas, and the strengths and endeavoring every single woman to realize their rights". Injustices experienced by women by the hands of males in society forms a part of their identity and experience and thus it is natural for women to be angered by the male gender (Sinha, 2020).

Conclusion

Historically women have been victims of gendered injustice and abuse at the hands of patriarchy. Thus equality of genders automatically involves a higher focus on fighting for the interest of women to uplift their status by fighting against those who spew the injustice. Labels such as pseudo-feminism, is nothing but the dominance of the age-old superiority complex of patriarchy in an attempt to continue to oppress the women in Australia which have prevailed for decades, as is evident from the history of injustice and violence against women in Australia. Therefore terms like pseudo-feminist is merely a way to insult and demean feminists by the misogynists who find feminists too strong to handle. The use of such terms makes the feminist causes trivial and dismisses feminist demands. This re-establishes the thesis that terms like pseudo-feminism undermines feminist causes and unfairly demands women to be not angry with the gender who have since time immemorial spewed injustice against them.

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