

## **Feminism, Interrupted**

'A well-argued, no-nonsense account, and essential reading for anyone interested in the state of feminism today.'

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'Lola offers a crucial vision that imagines beyond racist, capitalist solutions to oppression ... the necessity of this book cannot be overstated for those who call themselves feminists and those who eschew feminism as it presents itself.'

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, author of *Postcolonial Banter*

# **Feminism, Interrupted**

**Disrupting Power**

Lola Olufemi

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# Introduction: Feminist work is justice work

‘And what does the gift of feminism consist of if not a certain bundle of ways of thinking historically, ways of seeing, ways of hoping?’ – Vikki Bell

Feminism is a political project about what *could be*. It’s always looking forward, invested in futures we can’t quite grasp yet. It’s a way of wishing, hoping, aiming at everything that has been deemed impossible. It’s a task that has to be approached seriously. This book is for anyone who is beginning to think critically. Feminist histories are unwieldy; they cannot and should not be neatly presented. I hope this book makes you think about the limits of this world and the possibilities contained in the ones we could craft together. I hope it makes you want to read more and become more familiar with radical feminist thought and practice. If this book makes you pick up another book, or watch a documentary, search the archive, reach for a poetry book – if it sparks or reignites your interest in feminism, then it has served its purpose.

Everybody has a story about how they arrived and keep arriving at radical politics. Some of us are politicised by the trauma of our own experiences, by wars waged in our names, by our parents and lovers, by the internet. It’s useful to share the ways we become politicised if only because it helps politicise others. Growing up as a young black woman, I felt the oppressive way the world was organised with my body and through

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interpersonal relations long before I could articulate what those feelings meant. Revelling in the discovery of the word 'feminism' and its history as a political practice in my early teenage years at school, I found a personal freedom. I read ferociously. Black feminism, Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Anarcha-feminism, Eco-feminism. Feminism opened up my world. I saw in it, conflicting theorists and activists, all giving their ideas about the way the world should be. Perhaps most memorably, it released me from the desire to comply with the world as it is. This meant many things for me as an individual; feminism allowed me to be wayward, the wrong kind of woman, deviant. It took me longer to realise that true liberation meant extending this newfound freedom beyond myself. Just because I felt freer in some respects, did not mean I was free.

The material conditions of my life were still determined by the same systems; poverty and racism still trapped the women around me. Disparities in healthcare, education, public services and access to resources limited the possibility for any kind of expansive existence. I saw how black women were locked out of womanhood as defined by a white supremacy and how anyone outside of those accepted boundaries simply did not exist in the eyes of mainstream feminism. I began to understand how my own rebellion, the defiance instilled in me by the feminists I admired, was raced and classed. I read about how freedom requires upheaval and must be fought for, not romanticised. It was during this period that I realised that feminism was not simple. There were no pre-given solutions. The 'answer', if there was one, required us to place different feminisms in conversation and necessitated a radical flexibility in our organising. Feminism was complicated and messy in ways that made me reconsider my foundational political beliefs: equality versus liberation, reform versus abolition. Feminism meant *hard work*, the

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kind done without reward or recognition, the kind that requires an unshakeable belief in its importance, the kind that is long and tiresome, but that creates a sense of purpose. It proposed a new way of being that transformed the way I looked at the world.

The feminists I admired argued that the abolition of all prevailing systems of violence was crucial to any feminist future. They called for a revolution in the way we think about ourselves and others. Their critiques of the state, capitalism, the family, white supremacy, sex and education encouraged in me a rejection of what was expected. They provided a place to say the unsayable. bell hooks writes about how she came to theory ‘desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me’.<sup>1</sup> The same can be said for many young women who come to theory to be given a blueprint for a better world; who come to theory looking for a way to be changed.

I knew I had to choose what kind of feminism would form the basis of my understanding. My experiences had taught me that nothing should be taken for granted; there was no coherence or consensus on accepted principles in the feminist movement. If anything, it was defined by conflict. The decision to practice a radical feminism was crucial because I became aware of how it separated those wanting to create a new vision for the world from those merely wanting to climb the rungs of power.

### Who’s the boss?

There is a divide playing out in the mainstream. The emergence of neo-liberal feminism or ‘boss girl feminism’, driving many contemporary discussions, clashes with a radical and critical vision of feminism. Broadly speaking, neo-liberalism refers to the im-

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, ‘Theory as Liberatory Practice,’ in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59–75.

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sition of cultural and economic policies and practices by NGOs and governments in the last three to four decades that have resulted in the extraction and redistribution of public resources from the working class upwards, decimated infrastructures of social care through austerity measures, privatised the welfare state and individualised the ways we relate to one another. The neo-liberal model of feminism argues that 'inequality' is a state that can be overcome in corporate environments without overhauling the system, centralises the individual and their personal choices, misguidedly imagines that the state can grant liberation, seeks above all to protect the free market and fails to question the connection between capitalism, race and gendered oppression. This model of feminist thought is most appealing to those who have a limited knowledge of radical history and the gains fought and won by activists who dared to demand what was once deemed impossible. The consumerist promise of success that neo-liberal feminism offers is hollow, because it is a superficial promise made only to those who can access it.

White feminist neo-liberal politics focuses on the self as vehicle for self-improvement and personal gain at the expense of others. We are instructed by corporate talking heads to 'lean in' into a capitalist society where power equals financial gain. This model works best for wealthy white women, who are able to replace men in a capital structure. Liberal feminism's obsession with getting women 'to the top' masks a desire to ensure that the current system and its violent consequences remain intact. It invisibilises the women of colour, low paid workers and migrant women who must suffer so that others may 'succeed.' It makes their exploitation a natural part of other women's achievements. In this approach there is no challenge to hegemony, only acquiescence. The boardroom has become a figurative battleground upon which many stake their feminist aspirations. If

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we are to challenge this, we must ask ‘what about the fate of the low paid women who clean the boardrooms?’ and ‘what makes their labour so easily expendable?’ A feminism that seeks power instead of questioning it does not care about justice. The decision to reject this way of thinking is also a decision to reject easy solutions. We all have to ask ourselves at some point, who will I be and what will I do? What can my politics help me articulate? What violence will it expose?

All of these questions are crucial to every young feminist because by choosing a feminist politics that is critical, you are making a commitment to a world that has not yet been built. A world other people will tell you that you are foolish to believe in. The decision to shun a simplistic, consumerist and neo-liberal feminism will shake your understandings of the principles that underpin feminist thinking. Refusing neo-liberalism will open you up to a world where ‘feminist’ means much more than ‘woman’ or ‘equality.’ Making these connections is crucial to any revolutionary work because it means that nobody is left behind, nobody’s exploitation goes unseen. It asks us to practice radical compassion, to refuse to ignore the pain of others. It demands that we see how tackling seemingly unrelated phenomena like prison expansion, the rise of fascism, neocolonialism and climate crisis must also become our priorities.

### **The task**

‘Feminist work is justice work.’ When I heard this phrase at a university event, something changed. It came to define how I think about feminism and its goals. The phrase stuck with me because it was different to what I saw in the mainstream. ‘Feminist work is justice work’ proposes that feminism has a purpose beyond just highlighting the ways women are ‘discriminated’ against. It taught me that feminism’s task is to remedy the

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consequences of gendered oppression through organising and by proposing new ways to think about our potential as human beings. For me, 'justice work' involves reimagining the world we live in and working towards a liberated future for all. But how do we begin to reimagine? We refuse to remain silent about how our lives are limited by heterosexist, racist, capitalist patriarchy. We invest in a political education that seeks above all, to make injustice impossible to ignore. We ensure that nobody is allowed to suffer in silence, that no one's pain goes unseen.

Feminism has re-entered the public imagination in a big way. Where the word was once taboo, young people are being exposed to it now more than ever. We have to ask whether its rebellious roots are still at the core of our understanding. Has feminism lost its radical implications?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's Ted Talk popularised by Beyonce in 2013 was not only a cultural moment, but a good example of how feminism has been packaged and resold to a younger audience. T-shirts and tote bags abound. The feminism on sale was stripped of a structural analysis and instead became solely about behaviours, attitudes and 'teaching' men to be better. This opened the floodgates. Debates about which celebrities identify as 'feminist' took centre stage in magazines, interviews and press junkets. While critiquing this trend is a necessity, it is also important to remember that, when used strategically, public narrative and mainstream discussions can be a useful tool to make oppression visible and give people the strategies to combat it. Cultural conversations about feminism have a purpose; they can do the work of bringing the problem to attention. Artistic creations provide an avenue for reflection on the dynamics that govern our lives. They bolster what Gramsci called 'optimism of the will,' having the courage to believe that a more dignified world is possible, reinvigorating movements that have lost their

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energy. Pop culture and mainstream narratives can democratise feminist theory, remove it from the realm of the academic and shine a light on important grassroots struggle, reminding us that feminism belongs to no one.

We all begin somewhere. A feminist understanding is not inherent; it is something that must be crafted. Theory does not only mean reading dense academic texts. Theory can be *lived*, held, shared. It is a breathing, changeable thing that can be infused in many political and artistic forms. Learning requires the patience and empathy of those around you and an investment in the importance of radical education. This radical education comes in many forms. When feminism enters the mainstream, it does not automatically lose its meaning or its appeal. What matters is the way it is discussed and whether or not that discussion challenges or affirms the status quo. How often have the articles about feminism in mainstream publications inspired revolt? We have to ask what comes next after identifying the problem. As a starting point, can we move mainstream conversations about period poverty beyond the clutches of feminine hygiene companies and towards the fundamental idea that we cannot tackle this problem without ending austerity? Can we link the public disclosures of trauma facilitated by #MeToo to the fact that many victims and survivors cannot leave violent situations because of the lack of available social housing or domestic violence provisions? Can we use intersectionality as it was intended, a meaningful framework that exposes a matrix of domination, and seeks to improve vital women's services, and not a vehicle for a laundry list of our identities?

### **Feminist visions**

Feminism provokes a kind of feeling, a reaction, repulsion in the eyes of its detractors, and rightfully so. There are men

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who have built their careers on deriding us, media outlets that gleefully malign the seriousness of the task at hand. In 2018, Sp!ked Magazine ran two articles with the following headlines: ‘No, women aren’t at risk from men’<sup>2</sup> and ‘Not everything is a feminist issue’<sup>3</sup> A great deal of recruitment of young men into fascism and Incel communities relies heavily on disproving or finding the logical ‘flaws’ in feminist ideology. ‘Feminism is cancer’ is a common slogan. Feminism is a threat. It is also a call to action. ‘How should we think about the world?’ remains one of the most important, frustrating, joyful questions to answer because it requires a recognition that our lives, our fate, our successes and disappointments are all connected. When we do feminist work, we are doing the kind of work that changes the world for everybody. It is important to feel free but it is more important to make sure we get free – socially, politically, economically, artistically. Here we see why the decisions we make early on about what kind of feminists we will be are so important; it is vital to correct the misinformation about what it means to be a feminist in theory and in practice.

Imagine this: A world where the quality of your life is not determined by how much money you have. You do not have to sell your labour to survive. Labour is not tied to capitalism, profit or wage. Borders do not exist; we are free to move without consequence. The nuclear family does not exist; children are raised collectively; reproduction takes on new meanings. In this world, the way we carry out dull domestic labour is transformed and nobody is forced to rely on their partner economically to survive. The principles of transformative justice

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2 [www.spiked-online.com/2018/08/02/no-women-arent-at-risk-from-men/](http://www.spiked-online.com/2018/08/02/no-women-arent-at-risk-from-men/) (last accessed 11/2018).

3 [www.spiked-online.com/2018/07/25/not-everything-is-a-feminist-issue/](http://www.spiked-online.com/2018/07/25/not-everything-is-a-feminist-issue/) (last accessed 11/2018).

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are used to rectify harm. Critical and comprehensive sex education exists for all from an early age. We are liberated from the gender binary's strangling grip and the demands it places on our bodies. Sex work does not exist because work does not exist. Education and transport are free, from cradle to grave. We are forced to reckon with and rectify histories of imperialism, colonial exploitation, and warfare collectively. We have freedom *to*, not just freedom *from*. Specialist mental health services and community care are integral to our societies. There is no 'state' as we know it; nobody dies in 'suspicious circumstances' at its hands; no person has to navigate sexism, racism, disabilism or homophobia to survive. Detention centres do not exist. Prisons do not exist, nor do the police. The military and their weapons are disbanded across nations. Resources are reorganised to adequately address climate catastrophe. No person is without a home or loving community. We love one another, without possession or exploitation or extraction. We all have enough to eat well due to redistribution of wealth and resource. We all have the means and the environment to make art, if we so wish. All cultural gatekeepers are destroyed.

Now imagine this vision not as utopian, but as something well within our reach.

The vision I have presented has its limitations. There are gaps, contradictions and things that have been omitted. But without the capacity to imagine in this way, feminism is purposeless. Let us fight over a vision because our demands must spring from somewhere. This is the task handed down to us and we must approach it with the urgency it demands. We must rise to the challenge with a revolutionary and collective sense of determination; knowing that if we do not see this world, someone else will.