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# Therapeutic Feminism

Empowering psychology  
for women seeking their own voice

Translated by Charlotte Coombe

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### ***Acknowledgements***

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## ***Feminism Is Therapeutic***

In the first part of this book we concentrated on connecting, working and looking inward, but in this part we will shift the focus onto certain aspects of our ways of understanding life which, although we may not know it, end up impacting our mental health, our relationship with ourselves and the world around us. These aspects make up the filter through which we understand the world, and they affect all of our behaviour, something we will explore more thoroughly in the third part.

The idea that underpins this entire book is exactly that: feminism is therapeutic, and without the perspective that knowledge of it gives us, there is no way of finding your own voice. The gender perspective is healing, although in principle it might appear to be the opposite. I understand that opening our eyes to inequality, acknowledging the disadvantage and embracing our vulnerability essentially does not seem to be a good way of regaining control and empowering ourselves, but I think we can all agree that denying the evidence will not get us far either.

One way or another, I think that once you understand what I am going to tell you, for a while you will be annoyed: once you start seeing what many women and men already see, you may very possibly come close to exploding with rage.

But anger is necessary. Anger is therapeutic; it is liberating; it is empowering. It is cathartic, and it is also more than that: anger is also the true emotion, the authentic emotion that arises when we understand that our life has been and continues to be silenced. That although we can now vote and the law takes us into account, although our husbands no longer have to give us their signature so that we can have our own bank account, there is still a lot for us to conquer. Probably a great deal more than what we have already conquered. And, however obvious it may seem, many women and men appear to have forgotten that.

Anger is just the first step, and it isn't my intention for you to live in constant anxiety; I want you to go through the natural emotions that arise, quite rightly, when you discover injustice: not to silence them and connect them with an uncomfortable reality, but to accept those uncomfortable emotions as part of this journey, and use them to mobilise energies and push you towards action.

We will discuss in more depth how the personal is political, and how there are no shortcuts for individual and social change. Although the first step is feeling anger when you see things clearly, and not as you did before, I maintain the promise that I made to you when you first opened this book: feminism is therapeutic, and it is the logical path towards finding your own voice.

I am going to explain why.

***Mental Health Is Not Compatible with Shallowness***

“Balance does not mean the avoidance of conflict; it implies the strength to live through painful emotions and to cope with them. If painful emotions are excessively split off, this restricts the personality and leads to inhibitions of various kinds. [...] It is evident from my description that mental health is not compatible with shallowness. For shallowness is bound up with denial of inner conflict and of external difficulties. Denial is resorted to excessively because the ego is not strong enough to cope with pain.”

Melanie Klein

Accepting the gender perspective means having to return part of the symptom to the political sphere and no longer owning —or rather, blaming ourselves for— something we should never have accepted as ours.

It is literally impossible to fight against oppression we cannot see, but that does not prevent the oppression from having an impact on our mental health. Male chauvinism, like any other form of intersectional oppression (racism, classism), has tentacles that are almost imperceptible and highly complex: the eye must be trained to perceive the subtlety of its behaviour and to be able to protect ourselves against it. Freedom is control over oneself.

### ***We Are Still Hysterical***

The experience of being a woman has been pathologized since the very beginning of time. So much so that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, madness became to be located in a specific place in the body: the uterus. Hysteria (from the Greek *hysteria* (ὑστέρα), meaning uterus) was a condition attributed exclusively to women, characterised by uncontrolled behaviours and high neuroticism, which had been used since the time of Hippocrates as an umbrella term for virtually any problem related to female health for which the doctors of the time could not find an explanation.

Symptoms such as tiredness, irritability, the tendency to want to cause problems or self-centredness —yes, self-centredness— were also attributed to a pathological defect that originated in the uterus. By Victorian times, it had become the preferred diagnosis, given to one in four women who went to see their doctor, and the treatment for this condition ranged from prescribing marriage to single women, or ‘pelvic massage’ —which today we call masturbation— carried out by the doctor, until the woman reached ‘hysterical paroxysm’, which today we simply call orgasm.

Hysteria became a very real concern at the time, but it is impossible for us to understand the concern of those women without taking into account the context in which the symptom occurred.

We can fall into the trap of thinking that all this belongs in the past, that this context is already so far removed from us, that today we are not faced with a problem of sufficient magnitude. We might think that we can now vote, and that as women in the free world, we can do whatever we want. And I think that we can say with pride —and with a lot of

gratitude to those women who came before us— that there is a lot of truth in this: the liberation of women over the past fifty years has probably been the most dramatic so far; there is no doubt that change has accelerated exponentially. But we are far from having reached equality in all areas, and we run the risk of never doing so if we deny the idea of inequality and if we stop fighting for what is ours. We owe it to the women who came before, but above all to those who will come later.

After the fifties, the APA (American Psychological Association) officially withdrew the diagnosis of hysteria, but that did not put an end to the feminisation of madness. We know that, even today, the percentage of women prescribed pharmaceuticals for depression and anxiety is three to four times higher than that of men; in the same way that a century ago, women were being diagnosed as hysterical. The name (and probably part of the taboo surrounding it) has changed, but essentially the fallacy remains the same: the dissatisfaction of women has been stripped of any context. We are doing it today the same way we have been doing it since the second century A.D. Nobody seems to realise that even if the data reflected the reality —three or four times more depression and anxiety in women than in men—, the dissatisfaction is directly related to women being in a position of complete disadvantage: a position that, despite having improved substantially in the nineteen centuries since Galen, the scales are still firmly tilted one way.

I think it is necessary to highlight that this tilting of the scales is real; it is not imaginary or invented. It is not a simple narrative. Sexist violence kills thousands of women every year throughout the world; women suffer more sexual abuse from a young age — abuse that is systematically perpetrated by a mostly male population—; they have fewer educational opportunities; they earn less money for doing the same job; and they suffer more exploitation. This occurs even in the academic world, where women occupy most of the entry-level positions in the scientific field but once they reach a certain professional category, they suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke. The sphere of leadership is saturated by men.

Only 4.8% of the world's richest CEOs are women, and salary differences are not only found among women who are employed by others: self-employed women stipulate a lower price for their services than men in the same market, and in the same role. Remember that discrimination is internalised.

Women spend around two hours per day more than men on household tasks, and that includes looking after children, which is an obvious barrier to their integration and work performance. We know that the greater this difference in the distribution of household tasks, the greater the gap in labour participation. The home is still a prison for many women.

In this section we will also address the issue of the beauty trap for women, and the expenditure this incurs on a monthly and annual basis, and more importantly, the cost of this expenditure at the expense of other things which in principle should seem more important to use: savings, housing, training or culture. By this, I do not mean to say that savings, housing, training or culture are not part of the fundamental expenses of today's woman, but the imposition and pressure on the part of the media invites —rather, forces— women to dedicate a good portion of their earnings to keep up an image, leaving them once again at a clear disadvantage to men.

The reality is that we are still hysterical and if we aren't, then something very bad must be going on, because the numbers aren't looking good. Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, talks about how at one time women who wanted to be authentically feminine did not aspire to pursue a career, achieve higher education or obtain certain political rights.

Even today, the women who want all that feel as if their values are conflicting: this is what causes issues with the term 'feminism' itself, this sense of being ill at ease with waving that flag and defending it against a world that constantly reminds us that being feminine —whatever that means— (and feminist) brings with it certain disadvantages, and certain losses.

Faced with the seeming happiness that Virginia Woolf defined as the angel in the house (and from which she fiercely encouraged us to flee), Friedan uncovered the so-called 'problem that has no name':

“The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night -- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question -- ‘Is this all?’”

Betty Friedan

Accepting the gender perspective involves depathologizing the feminine experience and daring to name that problem that appears to be nameless. It involves accepting the changes associated with the menstrual cycle and reclaiming them as the norm, as opposed to the symptom; understanding dissatisfaction and anger as a natural and logical consequence within a context of obvious disadvantage, patriarchal condescension, —something that Rebecca Solnit, the author of *Men Explain Things To Me* knows all about— and abuse.

As Melanie Klein explained to us, mental health —happiness, peace of mind— is not compatible with shallowness. So, as much as it hurts to open our eyes to this reality, we need to do it.

### ***Why We Still Need to Talk about Feminism***

I would hope that by this point in the book and in the chapter, I shouldn't need to convince you otherwise: talking about feminism is still very necessary, and it is important to leave aside the complexities that in recent years have arisen around its usage.

Feminism is the correct term, not humanism or egalitarianism, that I am sure we will agree correspond to different struggles. As the African writer Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie said: “to choose to use the vague expression [human rights] is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender”.

From now on, I'd like to encourage you to own the term. I am not going to waste time explaining that feminists do not need to burn their bras, hate men or any of the things associated with the cause. But having said that, I must also say that if that is what you think you need to do, then do it. There are various strains of feminism, and each one has its own nuances. Feminism is not homogenous, nor does it constitute a closed body of action, but whatever its form, it always expresses women's struggle against any form of discrimination, and in the end, that is the idea that unites us to all the women and men working towards a world that is fairer and more balanced.

Remember that the reason we need to continue talking about feminism is because sexism is not out there, but inside us. Simone de Beauvoir said that, “The oppressor would not be so strong if he did not have accomplices among the oppressed themselves”. On this point, I'd also like to bring up what explained in the first part of the book, about compassion: the issue is a complex one, and jumping to conclusions is not fair in this case. Be compassionate towards women who carry sexism inside them, because that woman is also you, and she is also me. In some way, at some point, we have all borne some responsibility for the problem not yet being eradicated.

### ***What I Mean When I Talk about Therapeutic Feminism***

When I talk about feminism being therapeutic, what I mean is that the gender perspective is tremendously liberating. I am talking about reclaiming our space, not that of men, but our own space; about nurturing a sense of community and sisterhood that creates a space in which the psychological complexities, the underground and contradictory forces that drive women to find themselves in constant conflict, are recognised.

I am talking about understanding that a large part of the symptom —the dissatisfaction, the hysteria, the problem that has no name— is political. I am talking about how, sometimes, as Krishnamurti said, “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society”, and that it is through acknowledging the disadvantage, opening the door to anger, that we begin to examine what is within, in relation to external forces. From this perspective, identity is a social construct: our sense of self is inevitably formed within a certain context, and this defines not only who we have been, but who we are capable of being.

When we understand all this, with its blacks and whites and its hundreds of shades of grey, that is when we finally find ourselves in the position to start seeking our voice in the world.