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Book Review

Against White Feminism

Geetha Marcus ^{1*}

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Book's Author: Rafia Zakaria

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Once you see the world through the lens of patriarchy, the thought naturally arises: what would the world be like if it weren't there? In pursuit of this question, women have attempted to re-imagine another world. Some feminists have argued that if women gain equal rights in society, patriarchy will be at least sufficiently tempered. Others have argued that even if equality were achieved, patriarchy would still exist, because human institutions—political, legal, educational, cultural—are themselves, in their bones, patriarchal structures. White supremacy is one such enduring system, and within it, to the exclusion of all other women, lie mainly white feminists, mostly middle-class women, educated, privileged and mainstream. Despite the four waves of feminism since the 1960s, the discourse of white feminism is mostly unidimensional in that its ideology focuses solely on the equality of the sexes, and the betterment of women but still in the capitalist system devised by men for the benefit of men. Men against women and women against men was precisely the fuel that kept society, as it is currently constituted, running. By contrast, the African American feminist bell hooks resisted the notion that the primary conflict in society was one of 'men against women', which seemed inherent in radical definitions of 'patriarchy'. Patriarchy is not gendered. For her, it could be simply defined as 'institutionalised sexism'. In order to end it, everyone, male and female alike, must 'let go of sexist thoughts and action' (hooks, 2000: 9).

Of course, some men are oppressed more than some women; and not all women are oppressed in the same way. Writers such as hooks pointed out that for African American women, the family was not necessarily the site of oppression as it was for white people, representing a place of possible refuge from the traumas of white supremacy. The kind of workplaces available to many black women, too, were not of the liberating kind accessible to educated white women. As patriarchy is not a fixed ideology, so too has feminism evolved to challenge its shifting margins of operation. What has not changed, however, is the power of white women who are privileged to exact this change as they see it, in contrast to their sisters of colour across the globe. Despite its colossal complexity, patriarchy remains a useful tool to recognise the subtle depth of the forces that keep multiple oppressions in place, from the expectations about the behaviour of women in the home and the workplace to the way they are portrayed in the media, in the law and in general public discourse. White supremacy, as a type of patriarchy, works alongside white feminism, and vice versa, in mutually enabling the systems of oppression to exist for many across the globe. Intersectional feminism, as envisaged by Truth (1851), and later Crenshaw (1991) and others like hooks (2015), exposes the matrix of domination (Collins, 1994) that suppresses the lives of women of colour. Intersectional feminism is multidimensional, and it is very essence, to its very core, requires collaborative global feminist solidarity for the 21st century.

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For me, Zakaria's book is a landmark contribution to women's struggles, in decolonising and redefining feminism for the age in which we live. This book is 'not about feminist theory, but rather about feminist practice' (p. 9). It problematises the history of women's struggles for emancipation and equity in its collusion with colonialism, empire, racism, and the capitalist agenda. Zakaria declares that the theoretical foundation of her thesis stems from Spivak's critical essays on the silencing, marginalisation, and misrepresentation of the subaltern (1988); a potent philosophical and political stance that underpins this work.

Zakaria begins the book with the all too familiar story of casual sexism and racism spouted by her middle class 'woke' white friends as they enjoy drinks at a Manhattan wine bar. She lists the litany of inappropriate comments, questions, assumptions and the 'dysconscious' (King, 2004) othering that stems from white privilege, juxtaposed against the reality of her own backstory. She 'can feel the rising anger at having to "keep it light" and accommodate expectations of people unfamiliar with all the things that can and do go wrong for women like [her]' (p. 9). Zakaria sets the scene with unflinching precision, and the reader knows the rest of what follows will be an uncomfortable read, no matter where on the feminist spectrum one sits. With a kind of graceful anger, she critiques the feminist ideologies, movements and systems deeply enmeshed in white supremacy, that do not represent and exclude the majority of the world's women to this day.

The book is divided into eight chapters, Chapter 1 charts the difference in the struggle for the vote between white women and brown women, entangled with the scourge of imperialism, and the fight for independence in India. Chapter 2 offers the reader a critique of several key white feminists – de Beauvoir, Friedan, Millet, juxtaposing their work alongside the work of Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Martha Jones. She reminds the reader of the work of these white feminist stalwarts, set within the context of historical events, and uses these to demonstrate the Euro-centric, exclusive and essentialist nature of their thinking. Solidarity she concludes is a lie. Chapter 3 examines the work of various NGOs and development agencies and issues a searing attack on what *can* be their white savior complex, including the unfinished work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, as having failed in its path forward for the world's women. Chapter 4 offers insights into the role of white women in media, police, and military, battling men for equal opportunities, instead of fighting their neo-liberal, neo-imperialist practices, 'carrying forward the racial hierarchies and self-interested exploitation of the colonial era' (p. 86). Chapter 5 highlights several tensions and contradictions – the disconnect between sexual pleasure and sexual politics, and the yawning gap between white interpretations of sex, sexuality, and gender identities between white and brown/Black/Muslim feminists. 'There is no Black protagonist in *Sex and the City*' (p. 115). Global media industries define and showcase a brand of feminism as acceptable. Conversely, we are reminded of the hyper-sexualisation of subaltern women since colonial times, and their threat to white standards of feminine decency.

Chapter 6 continues in this vein, shedding light on the searing hypocrisy and double standards applied to the use and misuse of black and brown bodies, *vis-à-vis* their white female counterparts. The rise of inappropriate labelling and cultural prejudices, enshrined in law, to seemingly protect and save 'brown women from their brown men' (Spivak, 1988), is disturbing discourse that yet again uplifts the status of white feminist supremacy, whilst discounting the perspectives and voices of women in other parts of the world. Furthermore, the violence of white men is seen as acceptable in ways that the violence of men of colour are not. There is a tendency, for example, for us to excuse the violence of white gunmen as a product of mental health issues, whilst men of colour wielding violence are terrorists with grossly skewed mental perspectives. As Zakaria provides a coruscating critique of the rhetoric used, she tackles this sensitive topic in a way that lays testament to her legal mindset. In Chapter 7, Zakaria discusses the ways in which feminists of colour are compelled, cajoled, and enticed into enabling white feminist supremacy, and renounce their own cultural practices, in order to have a seat at the table of the white feminist temple. They become acceptable, are rewarded and it is the only path some women of colour feel they have to take in order to be successful in a white man's world.

Finally, in Chapter 8, after having methodically deconstructed the systems and practices of white feminist supremacy, she re-builds for the future and forges ideas that will transcend the four waves of white feminism, the feminism of women of colour around the world, to a global vision of solidarity in our collective fight against centuries of racialised, gendered and classed patriarchy.

Overall, this powerful, elegant, transformative book gives not only the academic community, but women of all hues, a thought provoking and riveting read. Zakaria's work is rightly both personal and political. As a postcolonial feminist and woman of colour, I laughed, nodded, and cried with anger and sadness. The book stands proudly with the works of other intersectional feminists – Lorde, Crenshaw, hooks, Davis, Mirza, and Ahmed – as an incisive critique of white feminism(s) for its brutal exclusiveness and myopia. One of the key strengths of this book is that Zakaria, armed with undeniable evidence and captivating narratives, argues eloquently for a better world. She speaks truth to power and underscores the urgent need for collaborative solidarity across all divides. She calls for a 'reconstructed feminism' (p. 172), and a re-framing of traditional power politics, such that women give each other the privilege and brave spaces to debate, agree and, most importantly, to disagree. This choice she contends is 'essential for the constitution of a movement' (p. 173) because as hooks (2015) also argues, 'the absence

of [political and social] choices' is what excludes and oppresses women and denies them the freedom to think and act. Zakaria maintains, as others have done before her, that it is only when we embrace feminism's messy complexities and tensions that it becomes 'a force for real change' (p.173). The book will appeal to academics and students working in a range of disciplines—sociology, philosophy, politics, law—and is accessible to anyone interested in feminist movements.

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