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Why ‘Identity Feminism’ Divides Rather Than Conquers

By Adele Wilde-Blavatsky

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Women’s rights and feminism has come a long way in the past 100 years. Many women worldwide now have the right to vote, to travel freely without a male companion, to get an education, to work, to marry and divorce out of choice, to take control of reproduction, sex and family planning and get a decent wage for their work. There is still much work to be done though, with some countries still suffering from unacceptably low levels of gender equality and human rights for females.

For some on the bourgeois ‘Liberal-Left’, or what feminists like Aayan Hirsi Ali accurately call the Regressive Left, the reason why women of colour still lag behind on human rights and freedom in the vast majority of countries is partly due to European colonialism and ‘white feminists’ ignoring the plight of their sisters. Although there is no doubt some truth in this assertion, to simplify it in such a manner also glosses over and diminishes the patriarchy and misogyny present in these cultures long before any ‘white colonialism’ arrived. In addition, the global internet, media and greater levels of education, travel and literacy have only recently given ‘white women’ access to information about the situation of women of colour in distant lands.

The claim that women of colour have been ignored by white feminists (and are even being undermined by them) so often dominates debate and narratives, particularly in the US, to such an extent that any discussion of misogyny or inequality in people of colour cultures or religions is

immediately derailed by accusations of racism and white supremacy. My essay ‘The Hoodie and the Hijab are Not Equals’ and the controversy it created with over 80 North American academics issuing a letter to condemn it, is an example of how this works. This reactionary ideology has also driven an increase in ‘Identity Feminism’, (‘Intersectional Feminism’ suggests these groups recognise the intersectionality of all racial groups which they often don’t); feminist groups associated with a particular race, religion or nationality.

For example, I spent a few years living and working with the Tibetan community in exile in India and Nepal, countries which have some of the lowest levels of gender equality in the world and have written about issues related to gender and patriarchy in these communities. Last year, a small group of ethnic Tibetan women (based predominantly in the USA) founded a group called the ‘Tibetan Feminist Collective’(TFC), inspired, in a back-handed way, by criticism of the Tibetan patriarchal culture by nonTibetan women. Their first essay complained about my critique of Tibetan exile patriarchs as unfair because (according to their logic) I am white and any critique of Tibetan patriarchy or culture should come from an ethnic Tibetan.

While the creation of such a group is to be welcomed if it helps empower Tibetan women, ironically, despite the fact that the majority of Tibetan women live in Tibet, India and Nepal, the majority of TFC’s social media posts have been US-centric and dominated by a brand of feminism that grew out of the black civil rights movement in the USA. In addition, they rarely support or encourage solidarity with Indian or Nepali feminist groups or writers, which are the natural allies to look to in terms of dealing directly with issues that affect the majority of Tibetan women in exile. Issues such as the continuing male dominance of Tibetan Buddhism are still left largely unchallenged outside of western, academic circles.

This ideology and tendency is not unique to a small group of Tibetan-American women though. In fact, one could say that ‘Identity Feminism’, which claims to offer a ‘unique’ perspective for that particular race, nationality or religion, is often nothing other than thinly-disguised ethnic or cultural nationalism or religious propaganda or denial. It is no accident that many men (and women) on the Religious Right in deeply patriarchal cultures often cite and use ‘Identity Feminism’ (and its continual attacks, stereotyping and degradation of ‘white women’ and ‘the West’) to prop up and support misogynist culture and practice.

Although there is no doubt that race is a factor that cannot be ignored in feminist discourse, to blame that on some kind of inherent racism or supremacy in white feminism is simplistic and also, at times, serving the patriarchal status quo. As Nushin Arbabzadah who was raised in Afghanistan and fled to Europe as a refugee says in her article *In My Life, Headscarves Have Been Symbols of Oppression, Not Solidarity* in relation to American women showing ‘solidarity’ with Muslim women by donning headscarves:

Women may want to express “solidarity” with Muslim women by covering up. But Muslim women don’t need to cover up. This act of solidarity perpetuates a version of Islam that says it’s O.K. to poison little girls who dare to feel the sunlight on their heads.



ExMuslim feminists and activists like Maryam Namazie continually protest the convenient Regressive Left Myth that homogenises women who have grown up in Muslim-majority countries as supporting the hijab or even see it as an expression of Muslim identity:

Nonetheless, many post-modernist and culturally relativist Leftists, liberals, and feminists remain firmly on the side of the Islamists. Any opposition to Sharia law, (which is based on the Koran, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence), the veil, and Islamic misogyny are met with charges of racism and Islamophobia, cultural imperialism and more. Those who say so though have bought into the culturally-relativist notion that societies in the Middle East and North Africa (and even the “Muslim community” in the west) are homogeneous, “Islamic” and “conservative”. But there is no one homogeneous culture anywhere. Since it is those in power that determine the dominant culture, this point of view sees Islamist values and sensibilities as that of “authentic Muslims’Those who assert that a demand for secularism and opposition to the veil and Sharia law are “foreign” and “culturally inappropriate” are only considering Islamism’s sensibilities and values, not that of the many who resist.

This ‘Liberal’ attitude towards Islamists or misogyny also reared its ugly head on New Year’s Eve in Germany, Finland and Switzerland, where over one hundred women were robbed and sexually assaulted by a group of men of ‘Arab and North African’ origin (many of whom have been identified as asylum seekers), in what appear to be co-ordinated attacks. Such crimes are unprecedented in these countries but yet again in social media, there was denial and dismissal of the hundreds of eyewitness reports by women and police with suggestions that such reports were racist or promoted racism and that the ethnicity or culture of the men should be ignored as irrelevant.

The question to ask any ‘Identity Feminist’ group is how does being X really make a difference to your ultimate goals of human rights and equality for women? Of course, race, gender, class, sexuality and economic power need to be considered when dealing with inequality but how does being a certain race or nationality make the goal or ideology different? The question here is about whether human rights are culturally relative or universal. I, and many other women (including those from Muslim-majority countries) assert that such rights are universal and any attempt to make them culturally or racially relative sadly serves patriarchy more than women.

In fact, such attempts are symptoms of ‘the racism of lower expectations’ which ‘expects less’ from the ‘Other’ because ‘that’s their culture or religion’. Ironically, by pandering to the idea of ‘difference’ it divides women and puts them on the side of the patriarchy and misogynists. As the

14th Dalai Lama has often emphasised when talking about ways to solve conflict, inequality and division:

What is important is finding the common ground between religions and therefore cultures, identifying those common morals that can unite us all. Multiculturalism, then, is not so much about celebrating differences, but emphasising our similarities.

The common unity to be found in feminism is how ALL females are oppressed and suffer through gender inequality, patriarchy and misogyny, and by prejudicial gross stereotypes that reduce a whole race or nation to a 'single story'. As we all know, the best strategy for achieving control in any situation is to 'divide and conquer' and that is why the patriarchs are still in control.