







April 27, 2013

Dear Anne,

Can there be degrees of feminism, as there are degrees of oppression? Or is there only one absolute standard, which we can raise in the face of any climate and any culture -- whether it is steeped in patriarchy or if it only bears vague signs of this? I suppose if you think about it, there is no culture only bearing vague signs of patriarchy except perhaps in Iceland where a unique sense of reverence is paid to the earth. Can you follow a patriarchal religion and be a feminist? Does the belief that God is male relinquish feminism, choking the flame at its source? Can you be a Muslim and a Feminist?

I decided to ask Google. I find: Let me, a Muslim feminist, confuse you. It was three on the list. The first is a Wikipedia page about Islamic Feminism. It says "Islamic Feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam." I'm thinking about this concept of Universal Feminism. Is freedom an absolute truth or is it something that can be defined according to circumstances and conditions? The Muslimahs say "my jilbab is my liberation." What are they being liberated from besides the lurid gaze of men?

"I received death threats," Amina said. "But I don't think that what will happen to me can be worse than the situation of women. [...] When a woman takes off her shirt, that means she has reached the breaking point and can't take it anymore." Sometime around 2005, I'd say, my sister and I had had enough and off went our shirts. It was summer in NYC and we rode around the neighborhood topless, my sister punching car windows of men who had stopped driving all together in an eye-popping stupor.

I associate Jesus with the crazy delusions of men who claim to know god and that god is a man and also men who think that they are god. Is Allah different from, what's his name, Heshiva? Is it just the prophets who are different, but they all prophesize about the same god? I'm confused. I never cared for history. It never seemed like a good idea to memorize all that stuff. Intuitively I felt it wasn't a good idea to fill up on it, like junk food before a wholesome meal. It seems to me like most religions are all wrapped around a man's penis and lots of the time he doesn't even know it. Or, maybe he does. If men are so obsessed with women and their bodies why can't they show a little love? If "God" had an awesome wife that he adored, whom he submitted to as the "creator" of the family, as "the source" then perhaps men would behave accordingly. But, what am I talking about? I'm criticizing "god," a man-made construct that seems to have been designed especially to put women down by blaming all of human sin on them and their whorish bodies. Vessels of sin. If you make a penis want to enter you then you are a whore and you are forcing him to sin. Women are like lepers, are they not?

B.

June 5, 2013

Dear Bianca,

I cherish your image of "God" loving his awesome wife with respect and admiration. Why is that picture so dangerous? It would appear to be so subversive that huge armies, corporations and world powers will do anything to keep it out of our minds, to say nothing of major religious leaders. To counter these forces, we all need to consider your inquiry on degrees of feminism and fundamental, hateful attitudes towards women. I think your umbrella term "Universal Feminism" is good. It opens the door to all the shades and possibilities of ways to respond. We can start small. While putting our first issue of GAG together, I was reminded many times that the personal is political -- from Alice O'Malley's essay about the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment to Gabby Bess's discussion about defining a "feminine voice" in her writing. Small acts of rebellion undertaken by a single person can be as significant as any sweeping legislation. We need heroes. As a child, Vaginal Davis was first inspired by the inclusive, gracious words of the activist Angela Davis. We need to trust ourselves. Alexyys K. Tylor's motto is "Vagina Power" which, to me, inspires women to reconnect with their own instincts. There are lessons to relearn about individual survival and the survival of our planet from older stories, fables and myths. They remind us of the need to read our experiences through our bodies.

As you say, there is something very wrong with the pervasive attitudes of subjugation, exploitation and violence toward women around the world. You can feel it on the street and in the air. It also surfaces in the classroom where bias distracts access to deeper levels of learning; in popular culture where seeing emotionally healthy relationships and women protagonists are so rare as to spark headlines when they occur; in the workplace where here in the US equal pay has not been achieved despite federal legislation 50 years ago and support for daycare has just been slashed; in government where women are under-represented; in organized religion where dogma silences and erases the active presence of women; and finally in homes and within families where the potential of women and girls is thwarted. It can be even much more dangerous for women to thrive in places with active political unrest and in times of war. Amidst all of this oppression, we are dedicating this issue to Lama al-Ghamdi, to honor her life and spirit. Throughout the magazine we have considered her grievous story of abuse and murder from different perspectives. We look ultimately to art, music and literature to express our mourning for her loss. Yasmine Hamdan's music opens a wide window to Arab traditions and culture from a woman's perspective. Melanie Bonajo's interactive art projects exemplify the importance of moving forward together and engaging in discussion and dialogue.

Just using the word "feminism" is a revolutionary act. Over the last few years, I've sensed that the consciousness raising achieved by prior feminists movements has nearly all evaporated. The issues and problems are still there, but we've taken steps back. I'm pleased to report some good news, however, in this first issue of GAG. Many have recently picked up the banner and are embracing the term "feminism" again. The story of Pussy Riot's arrest and imprisonment for protesting the Church's backing of Putin's oppressive politics has ignited new energy. Femen's "sextemist" protest methods are emphatically revolutionizing prior conceptions of the female body. The Future Feminists are calling for new applications of feminism to fight environmental destruction. Its time for everyone to be a feminist; the future is feminine.

Love,

Anne