

Sexual politics - kate millet (1970)



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Summary of document

This article enables the reader to understand the difficulties of gaining equal rights and respect which women faced during the second wave of feminism (1970s). Though it can be possible for females to appear to have a higher class to some men due to the 'economic, social and educational purposes' (Millet, 1970, p36). The writer suggests that 'the castelike status of a female within patriarchy is most liable for confusion' (Millet, 1970, p36). This is due to the writer suggesting a two-tier caste system which meant despite some females may be born into a higher class than some males, it meant that due to the domination of sexual status, patriarchy society has been formed. There are two examples from the text which backs up the point that the writer was making. These are: a black lawyer has a higher status than a white farmer. However, race itself can be used in a caste system which overrides class. This means the white farmer belongs to a higher order of life just as it oppresses the professional in spirit. Also, much of the literature between 1940s -1970s has shown the caste system towards male triumphs over the social status of wealthy and educated women. (Millet, 1970, p36) The writer also suggests that males use 'bullying and hostile remarks' (Millet, 1970, p36) as a 'psychological' (Millet, 1970, p36) form of dominant power.

Class divisions are not threatened by 'expressions of enmity or the existence of sexual hierarchy which has been reaffirmed to punish the female quite effectively' (Millet, 1970, p36). The writer suggests that the

function of class in patriarchy is dependent on how expressive the masculine supremacy allows itself to become in society. However, the writer states a paradox to this point. She states: ' while in the lower status strata, the male is more likely to claim authority on the strength of his sex alone, he is actually obliged more often to share power with the women of his class who are economically productive. Whereas in the middle and upper classes, there is less tendency to assert a blunt patriarchal dominance, as men who enjoy such status have more power in any case.' (Millet, 1970, p36)

The writer suggests that Western patriarchy are interested in concepts of romantic love compared to Eastern patriarchy, but this interest could be used to conceal the patriarchal nature of society. She states that ' it was a Victorian habit, for example, to insist the female assume the function of serving as the male's conscience and living the life of goodness he found tedious but felt someone ought to do anyway.' (Millet, 1970, p37) She suggests that the concept of romantic love can be used as 'emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit' (Millet, 1970, p37). This is convenient to both genders due to dominance gained by the male and the concealed realities of the female status and their burden of economic dependency. One of the main effects of class within patriarchy is ' to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between career woman and housewife.' (Millet, 1970, p38) This means that ' one envies the other " security" and prestige, while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be the other's freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world'. (Millet, 1970, p38)

Women have 'less investment in the class system' (Millet, 1970, p38). This is due to women having fewer permanent class associations compared to males, also not many women rise above working class in 'personal prestige and economic power' (Millet, 1970, p38) so women do not enjoy the benefits that higher class will offer the males. Usually the white male concedes the female to a higher status than the black male. However, due to white racist ideology being exposed; this has meant these ideological attitudes of racism has now changed to sexism. The writer states 'the priorities of maintaining supremacy might outweigh even those of white supremacy; sexism may be endemic in our own society than racism.' (Millet, 1970, p39)

Wider social, economic and political context

This book was written during the 1970s which was during the second wave feminism. This second wave of feminism was focused on advocacy of women's rights, in particular equal pay, sex discrimination laws, right to contraception and the legalization of abortion. It can be argued that 'Radical feminism is opening out the revolutionary struggle in new areas we want control not only over the means of production but over reproduction.' (London Feminist Movement, 2010) It is hard to imagine that these women were seen as sexual objects as well not even allowed a view. One of the campaigns was the personal is political. This is where women spoke out about constant sexual harassment, major crimes like rape, as well as being seen as inferior to men. Some important events happened during the 1970s. The Miss World protest in 1970 was significant due to women protesting against the objectification of women as judging women only on their looks is insulting. (British Library, 2014) In 1973, the first Rape Crisis centre was

formed in England and Wales to ‘ provide co-ordination and support to affiliated member groups and campaigns and lobbies to raise awareness of the issues of sexual violence in the wider community and with local, regional and national government.’ (British Library, 2014) In 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act was made to ‘ render unlawful certain kinds of sex discrimination and discrimination on the ground of marriage and establish a commission with the function of working towards the elimination of such discrimination.’ (British Library, 2014) Also in 1975, the Employment Protection Act made maternity pay a requirement for employers and stopped employers dismissing when women get pregnant. (British Library, 2014) The Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act in 1976 allowed women to obtain a court order against violent husbands without divorce proceedings. (British Library, 2014) One of the positives that came from 1970s especially for feminists was that Margaret Thatcher becomes Prime Minister in 1979. (British Library, 2014)

Author’s motives

Kate Millett book was one of the first second wave texts to use the term patriarchy to describe the different structures of male power. She believed that patriarchy controlled every aspect of women’s lives from sexuality, family, etc. She suggests patriarchy has the power to shape how women thought as well as how they lived their lives. (Hannam, 2006) Millett suggests that personal lives were affected by the state and by patriarchy, so this enabled the opportunity for feminists to challenge the divisions between the public and the private that was central to liberal political thought. (Hannam,

2006) However, Millett was criticised for being anti-male and maybe seen as radical feminist.

Target audience

The target audience of this document would be feminists. This is because the document supports feminist ideals even though to some feminists it can seem anti-male. This document allows feminists but any reader to understand her opinions and beliefs during the second wave of feminism as well as using the term patriarchy to describe different structures of male power which was not seen til Kate Millett wrote her book.

Usefulness of document

This document is useful because this book inspired a new wave of feminism which was revolutionary and radical enough to create change for the women who lived in this period. Without vocal writers like Kate Millett, women may have gained as many rights as they did during this period. It can be argued her book was controversial however, her opinion is praised and attacked but her text is used in women studies which means her aim to get more female literature into education succeeded. Though it can be argued that other feminist wrote the same ideals before Kate Millett, but no one was as bold as her when writing their opinions onto paper.

Conclusion

Sexual Politics still remains to be one of the founding pieces of the second wave of feminism. Many Feminists have continued Millett's criticism with their own opinions to feminism and society. This book will always inspire

another generation of feminists due to passionate and boldness she puts into her book.

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