

February 2022

## Book Review Essay: What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo

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### Recommended Citation

Bhutani, Asmita (2022). Book Review Essay: What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 23(1), 417-420.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol23/iss1/28>

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## Book Review Essay: What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo<sup>1</sup>

By Asmita Bhutani<sup>2</sup>

*What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo* comes at a time when the world is wrapped in the grip of a pandemic spotlighting the failing social, political and economic systems around us. #MeToo is already recognized as a complex movement debated across feminist spaces for its significance in the larger project of emancipation from patriarchy. However, the book is more than what the title suggests. Wypijewski brings a collection of stories about sexual politics from several decades of political journalism. Stories spread across sixteen chapters go beyond #MeToo cases questioning, reflecting and debating monolith narratives of individual subjects and the consequent actions by law, media and other institutions. The selection of stories, Wypijewski writes, is about "uncovering stories that are unattended to" as digital activism escalates. She considers sexual abuse and harassment as nuanced and that it has "more heads than any story or group of stories can describe" (p. 41) and hence, the underlying questions that thread the book include, What are the reasons, the causes and complications beneath the roar of the crowd, the stories we think we all know? and What are the consequences of joining in?

Wypijewski claims that in 2006, civil rights activist Tarana Burke used the idiom "Me Too," by and for working-class women of colour to help young women speak about experiences of abuse and complexities of gendered life. Since then, the movement has grown. Discourse across media and many scholar-activists position it as a movement of solidarity transcending spatiality of the workplace, streets, and home. On the other hand, feminists have criticized the #MeToo movement as reductive and simplistic, delegitimizing the long struggle against sexual harassment. Wypijewski urges us not to take this collectivity on face value and pay attention to how the movement fits in the larger context of sexual politics where "unity through vengeance" becomes modus operandi to seek justice. This "poisoned solidarity", she demonstrates, is especially evident across media, dominant educational institutions, political parties and legal institutions.

How is such poisoned solidarity achieved on a large scale? Wypijewski brings forth notions of "moral panic" and "cultural consensus" that normalize institutions looking for instant punishment and guilty figures, which takes away focus from the need to fix permanent fears and insecurity that many women and workers live in. Wypijewski exposes the hypocrisy of institutional media that apes the police and prosecution as it suits them and assumes agency to resolve "moral panic" (p.xvi) by creating easy targets for that time's social-political context. She also laments the impulsiveness of media to shape actions taken in #MeToo cases to solve the patriarchal crisis itself. For instance, Harvard Law professor, Ronald Sullivan, was forced to withdraw as Weinstein's defence due to campus activism, and the media was quick to describe the relief of student activists on a "victory against rape culture." Such an urge to portray outcomes larger than what they stand for or to demonize individuals, according to Wypijewski, brings about

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<sup>1</sup> Wypijewski, J. (2020). *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.

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a "substitution effect" that either masks or prevents the need to dismantle robust structures. The substitution effect also creates an illusion that the problem is solved, albeit momentarily partially.

The politics of fear emerges as one of the most powerful analytical tools in the book to assess the complexity of narratives surrounding HIV, the priest scandals and the War on drugs. Taking a deep dive into multiple cases of sexual assaults, Wypijewski establishes how an allegation of sexual assault can soon change into dehumanizing the guilty based on their confessions, reactions, previous actions, or sometimes, simply unspoken knowledge. The urgency to solve uncertainty and insecurity by basing collective judgement on an ambiguous assumption about truth – that when multiple people say it, it must be true and that truth lies in the teller. She notes that such ambiguous definitions are not coincidental and remarks, "In the cauldrons of panic, definitions collapse. Abuse might be a comment, a caress or a violent act. Suspicion of deeds rouses the same alarm as deeds." (p. 46) The media, law institutions, the government and communities alike capitalize on the politics of fear as demonstrated in Wypijewski's commentary on the 2016 US elections showing how votes were won through "fear-mongering" (Wypijewski, 2017). In the realm of sexual politics too, the above actors deliberately evade the complexity of issues and rather move towards quick resolution that suit the interests of the hegemonic institutions. Wypijewski emphasizes through the book that simplifying many-layered stories of sexism, violation, and human weakness to a "bleached tale of monstrosity" is simplifying sexual politics to a level where nothing can be done.

*What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo* brings up the safety versus violence debate to call attention to how police, law and society use the narrative of protecting women or violating them as it suits their interests. When the institutions are impatient to pinpoint a perpetrator for instant justice, they consider that women's sexuality is a vulnerability that must be protected. Wypijewski considers that this justifies heightened physical and digital surveillance, which is an alibi for incarcerating Black and racialized men. On the other hand, life is "lethal" for American women at work, at home, and in the streets. Despite perpetrators being punished one after the other, the freedom of mobility or autonomy of women's sexuality does not improve. In fact, in the case of Nushawn Williams, a HIV-positive patient declared as a sexually dangerous person, women stated that sexual intimacy with him was the only "safe" experience they had ever since growing up in conditions of precarity. Further and relating, Wypijewski brings forth the strong ties that society places on the morality of women as a precondition to their safety. She quotes an AIDS Community Services worker who asks, "If you're a bad girl, maybe people think you have no right to safety but if you are a good girl, you have no need for safety" (p. 25).

From a personal perspective, as a reviewer and scholar working in the Global South spaces, there is a lot that the book provides as agendas for activism and struggle internationally. African feminists in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa have used the #MeToo movement to generate conversations on reclaiming markets and streets, bus stops and public parks, insisting that girls and women have the right to share and enjoy public spaces without harassment. Wypijewski rather briefly hints at the need to dismantle connections between the sexual politics, private property and race. She considers that such dismantling is long due when in the last chapter dedicated to Baldwin, she states that "No American writer since DuBois dissected the problem of colour line with such intimate and ferocious grace" (p.247). In the context of countries like India, with a prevalent caste system, Dalit feminists as Cynthia Stephen point out that the #MeToo movement has been largely oblivious to the voices of Dalit women, and this is in spite of the fact that a Dalit feminist, Raya Sarkar among others, first brought the movement to attention in India. Instead, the movement is palatable to those with economic power, access to social media and less useable by those at the

margins. And hence, those most vulnerable to workplace abuse, i.e. working-class people, especially women and queers of colour, migrants, and domestic and sex workers, are among those #MeToo left behind.

Students of sexual politics and legal studies across the disciplines of Gender, Social Work, Law and Journalism will find *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo* insightful. Wypijewski's work is a reflection of our times and hence useful for gender justice organizers and feminist collectives.

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