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bell hooks and Online Feminism

By Hazel T. Biana¹

Abstract

Feminist theorist and cultural critic bell hooks was known for calling out modern-day feminists for failing to take into consideration the plight of other non-privileged women. She intricately analyzed how various factors of oppression form a web, which contributes to the complexities of women's marginalization. The vision of hooks, thus, is a revolutionary type of feminism which is inclusive and for everybody. This means that everyone, all persons of various races or classes, should become enlightened witnesses and be a part of the struggle towards eradicating what she refers to as White Capitalist Supremacist Patriarchy. Such vision, however, seems to be already included within fourth wave feminism. Also known as digital or online feminism, the fourth wave movement has taken to heart the vision of replacing oppressive thought and action with feminist thought and action. The question that arises, however, is whether this new online society is the type of global transformation or revolutionary change that hooks envisioned. Based on hooks' works, I examine the concepts, nuances, and problematic aspects of online feminism through the lens of bell hook's theories. Additionally, I consider how bell hooks' feminist framework can be used to re-envision and improve online feminism.

Keywords: bell hooks, Feminism, Online Feminism, Fourth Wave, Digital Activism

Introduction

Feminist theorist and cultural critic bell hooks (1952-2021) was known for calling out modern-day feminists for failing to take into consideration the plight of other non-privileged women. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000b), she intricately analyzed how various factors of oppression form a web, which contributes to the complexities of women's marginalization. To address the oppression of women, hooks (2000a) envisioned a revolutionary type of inclusive feminism. This means that all people of various sexes, races, or classes would be a part of the movement and the struggle towards eradicating what she refers to as White Capitalist Supremacist Patriarchy. Alongside this vision, moreover, hooks also proposes the fostering of a critical consciousness through a cultural critique of representations. She claims that only enlightened witnesses who recognize and critique motivated representations can instigate social changes (hooks, 1997, 2006).

Fourth wave feminism, particularly online or digital feminism, seems to have adopted similar insights. As with hooks' vision of replacing oppressive thought and action with supposed feminist thought and action (hooks, 2000b), the fourth wave online feminist movement echoes the call for a "more holistic actualization of the self that can eventually give birth to a global political restructuring" (Biana, 2020, p. 17). The online movement, for instance, champions the fight against

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sexism and gender-based injustices, calls out oppressive actions and systems, and develops the authentic feminist self through perfection and discipline (Jackson, 2018; Kanai, 2020). Zoya Rehman (2017, pp. 151–2) refers to the online feminist awakening as an “overtly feminist consciousness” that has accelerated “traditional forms of grassroots activism and resistance.” As a result, online feminism has been said to improve the political participation of women, thereby leveling up their internal political efficacy (Heger & Hoffmann, 2021).

Recently, however, some feminists have engaged in a type of “feminist nostalgia” recalling the times when feminism was not centered on individualized online activism or when “sisterhood” was a prevalent idea (Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). Online feminism has also been criticized for supposedly bringing back gender-based issues from the public to the private sphere, which does not, in turn, solve broader social issues (Jane, 2016). Stephanie Ricker Schulte (2011), for example, asks whether digital feminism indeed liberates women through collective action or whether it merely distracts us from real problems. Charges of misappropriation of feminism have also been made against online feminists, and how they tend to divide women and other groups rather than unify them toward a common cause (Biana, 2022; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). The rise of popular feminism online, on another note, has been said to give rise to popular misogyny. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) claims that the visibility of popular feminism has likewise led to the networking triumph of popular misogynists.

The question that arises, therefore, is whether this new society which brought forth online feminist movements such as “call-out,” “cancel culture,” and the #MeToo movement is the type of global transformation or revolutionary change that hooks envisioned. Based on hooks’ works, I examine the concepts, ideals, and nuances of online feminism, and contemplate what bell hooks might have said about online feminism. I also wonder how online feminism can be re-envisioned through hooks’ feminist framework. With the emergence of online feminism in the last decade, it would not only be informative but beneficial to rethink bell hooks’ ideas against these more contemporary movements.

bell hooks’ Revolutionary Feminism

In the 1980s, the cause of feminism was attributed exclusively to a homogenous group of women. Bell hooks, therefore, called out white feminists for failing to take into consideration the plight of other, non-privileged women such as women of color and poor women. She analyzed how various factors such as sex, race, and class all contribute to women’s oppressions and came up with a framework known as Revolutionary Feminism (in contrast to Reformist Feminism). Revolutionary Feminism asserts that feminism must be inclusive in that it recognizes the oppression and marginalization of women of all races and classes. As hooks (2000b, p. 31) argues, the “foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression.” Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long-range impact. To eradicate oppression caused by White Capitalist Supremacist Patriarchy, hooks (2000b, p. 15) invites the use of “special vantage points” to look at “the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony.”

Hooks also rallied for the investigation of romanticized versions of freedom that fails to instigate political action. She criticizes feminists who merely describe their personal woes. These actions will not rid society of domination or oppression. Such praxis will not rock the status quo. Hooks (2000b, p. 11), therefore, calls for a critique of the prevailing (1980s-90s) movements, and challenges feminists to “assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas.” After all, women

cannot become feminists without “fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture” (hooks, 2000b, p. 6). Change can only be affected with the necessary struggle and a fostering of critical political consciousness. Starting off with the acceptance that everyone is guilty of perpetuating sexism, it should be remembered that “all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action” (hooks, 2000b, pp. viii–ix). The solution is to switch to feminist thought and action, along with the acknowledgment of a mutual ethos amongst all human beings. The global revolution of sustained freedom, justice, and peace will then be anchored in human beings' self-actualization. Vision, not exclusion, is vital for a revolution, and this vision ensures a transformation of global politics that would revise the dynamics of domination.

Alongside this vision, hooks proposes the fostering of critical consciousness through a cultural critique of representations. She claims that only enlightened witnesses who are conscious of motivated representations and critique these can instigate social change (hooks, 1997, 2006). Hooks discusses how feminists can critique such cultural and motivated representations in her works *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996), *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (2006) and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (2014a). Each points to the claim that radical resistances and transformation of culture happen with continued critical discourses on (pop) culture and representations (Biana, 2022).

Online Feminism

In the last two decades, feminism has shifted into a multi-dimensional movement that combines previous waves of feminism. This combination, known as the fourth wave or online/digital feminism, aspires to end the war against women by fighting for social justice and continuing the earlier discourses on sexism and misogyny via online platforms (Biana, 2022). Feminism's online wave, which began in the 2000s, affirms that the “Internet is the key to the future of feminism” and that feminist activism will henceforth be influenced by computer-networking technologies (Schulte, 2011, p. 728). Throughout the years, various spinoffs and terms emerged from digital feminism. Some of these include (but are not limited to) popular feminism, cyberfeminism, feminist cyberactivism, discursive feminism or activism, online feminist activism, feminist digilantism, social media activism, and Facebook feminism. To further their causes, these movements have used online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and Pinterest.

Online feminism is sometimes classified under the bigger umbrella of popular feminism. Popular feminism has three characteristics; it is feminism that is: 1) manifested in popular and commercial discourses such as mainstream media or social media spaces, such as blogs, Instagram, and Twitter, 2) composed of like-minded or self-admiring people or groups, and 3) readily accessible across multiple platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism is also embodied in celebrity feminism. Branded as commercial feminism, mediated feminism or a trendy and stylish feminism, celebrity feminism is anchored in celebrities' success and market appeal (Tennent & Jackson, 2019). Accordingly, the entry point of this discourse is commodification, as the type of feminist ideas espoused is reliant on the image of the feminist celebrity (Riordan, 2001; Tennent & Jackson, 2019). Both popular and celebrity feminists use online spaces, particularly social media, to further their causes.

The use of online platforms for feminism has long been a characteristic of cyberfeminists, feminist cyberactivists, and online feminist activists. These feminists have one central pursuit: they affirm that feminists can use technology to bring down patriarchy (Schulte, 2011). Using

cyberspaces, feminists liberate and theorize beyond the limitations of traditional media, politics, and hierarchies (Milford, 2017). The Internet has thus created a (new or alternative) space for feminist collective action. If the Riot Grrrls had to resort to the production and distribution of zines through photocopiers in the 1990s, present day online feminists must be connected online to get their messages through. Across the globe, some examples of these cyberfeminist praxes include the fight against violence against women in Spain (Nuñez Puente, 2011), responses to misogynistic and male-dominated South Korean culture (Jeong & Lee, 2018), online petitions of Turkish women on abortion policies (Eslen-Ziya, 2013), and critical responses to victim-blaming in India (Guha, 2015). Online feminist praxis has also given birth to a call-out or cancel culture wherein unacceptable sexist behavior by individuals or groups are confronted or boycotted online (Biana, 2022). Laura Bates' *Everyday Sexism Project* and of course the #MeToo movement are famous examples. These projects helped demonstrate the prevalence of sexual violence in the workplace. They have created safer spaces and venues for women and other marginalized groups, so that they may call out both explicit and implicit discrimination online. The #MeToo movement made women realize that sexual assault and class oppression are very common and that collectively demanding justice is a weapon against patriarchal power (Jaffe, 2018).

Online feminism survives and thrives because of its discursive nature. As a discursive type of feminism, mobilizing online has proved to be a “powerful tactic” for battling gender inequalities all over the world (Clark, 2016, p. 788). Importantly, “hashtag feminism” created opportunities for feminists to be visible despite their geopolitical locations (Alingasa & Ofreneo, 2021). The #MeToo movement, more specifically, continued its discourse through hashtags. Also known as hashtag feminism, the success of a feminist protest is dependent on its dramatic and narrative elements, which can move from the mere expression of personal experiences online to online collective action (Clark, 2016). In Ukraine, the successful #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt online campaign circulated conversations and stories about experiences of injustices shared on Facebook. The campaign was a reaction to rampant sexual violence and harassment in the country (Lokot, 2018). In the Philippines, the #BabaeAko and #LalabanAko (translated to “I am a woman” and “I will fight”) advocacy campaigns called out the explicit misogyny of then-President Rodrigo Duterte. They hoped to establish women’s solidarity towards the resistance to structural inequalities perpetuated by the Philippine government (Alingasa & Ofreneo, 2021).

Whether a “digital girl army” (Clark-Parsons, 2018) will be mobilized or not depends on the impact or “stickiness” of the feminist narrative. In a lot of instances, however, violence and cyberviolence against women and girls have worsened. Thus, feminists resort to “digilante” interventions. Feminist digilantism, another form of online feminism, is part of the “vengeance culture” online wherein digilantes mete out extrajudicial punishment through public shaming in blogs, Facebook posts, websites, and hashtags (Jane, 2016). As a reaction against the slow pace of judicial systems to prosecute crimes against women, feminist digilantes take matters into their own hands and expose the alleged wrongdoings of perpetrators through online platforms.

Criticisms of Online Feminism

Online feminism has been the subject of opposing views. There are quite a few who applaud how readily accessible online spaces are for collective action. Since anyone who has an internet connection can become a feminist activist, anyone can call out oppressive systems and actions. Online platforms have become a breeding ground for “overtly feminist consciousness” that accelerates “traditional forms of grassroots activism and resistance” (Rehman, 2017, pp. 151–2), which thereby dynamizes the participation of women in social and political settings (Heger &

Hoffmann, 2021). There are some, however, who have expressed their dismay over online feminism.

Some feminists, for instance, miss the earlier waves of feminism and have engaged in a type of feminist nostalgia. Before there was a prevalence of online feminism, some claimed that there was unity and sisterhood among feminists (Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). The individualized actions of digital feminists do not, in the eyes of some critics, solve broader social issues and are mere distractions from real problems (Jane, 2016; Schulte, 2011). Online celebrity feminism, for example, has been criticized as trendy, apolitical, and basic. It is said to be a “rhetoric of equal rights, devoid of intersectional values” which lacks “political activism” (Jackson, 2018, p. 1072). Another critic also calls it “empty” and “devoid of political traction” (Tennent & Jackson, 2019, p. 225). Popular feminism, on the other hand, apparently fails to disrupt capitalist and conventional politics, and it does not do enough to challenge systems and structures of domination (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Callie Beusman (2014) points out the problem with trendy, faddish, or stylish feminism. She claims that it reduces feminism to shallowness and disingenuity which may reinforce patriarchy even further. Feminism should not be an accessory conveniently worn when in season.

Another problem with such feminisms is that anybody can pretend to be a feminist to appear trendy and stylish. Such feminist online activism has also been termed as “slacktivism” or the mimicking of content through online word-of-mouth to show that one is involved in a feminist cause (Daamen, 2021). By simply sharing a hashtag, online feminists may simply be riding on grave incidents of sexual abuse or accusations, which may thereby reduce the significance of the serious cause (Daamen, 2021) and the complicatedness of oppressive institutional and structural systems.

In the case of feminist digilantism, feminism is used as a reason to seek vengeance through derogatory and oppressive online means. It has also been used to exclude other groups that are not part of one’s own homogenous group. For example, Womad, a South Korean community, went under fire for its exclusionary politics as it promotes hatred against biological males and non-Koreans (Koo, 2020). Some feminist communities also engage in trolling, which promotes hate politics and a man vs. woman rhetoric (Koo, 2020). Such feminism excludes people who are not like-minded. Since it is based on popularity, there is an insistence on a universal gender identity or image for that matter (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, those who do not engage in like-minded online feminism tend to be ostracized. For example, being silent on social media about women’s trauma, women’s rights, gender mainstreaming, or sexual harassment can be misconstrued as not supporting the feminist cause (Biana, 2022).

Re-envisioning a hooks-Inspired Online Feminism

The fourth wave of feminism, as opposed to earlier (first and second) waves, focuses on activism rather than reforming laws. Fourth wave feminists are less concerned with legal rights and more concerned with interpersonal empowerment and the deconstruction of societal barriers that prevent an equal opportunity for all genders. They also focus less on the concept of the glass ceiling and more on issues like violence against women and rape culture. Online feminism uses social media and internet forums as catalysts for the development of new feminist ideas.

With the concepts and nuances of online feminism subject to criticisms, I propose to analyze online feminism through a hooks-inspired framework. Following hooks’ revolutionary feminist framework, online feminism must work towards the eradication of sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, should be based on the actualization of the self, and should promote

a critical political consciousness, global transformation, and a new social order. Furthermore, it should not be exclusionary but rather visionary.

The most novel and important idea of online feminism is that it focuses on intersectionality and emphasizes the interrelation of identities, their construction, and the experience of oppression at the intersections of these constructed identities. This reflects hooks' idea of a web of oppressive factors, or intersectionality so to speak. Online feminism, therefore, asserts that one's personal experience cannot be reduced just to one identity but requires a more thorough account of multiple intersecting identities. The online wave is based on the new perspectives, concerns, and life experiences of women from a wide variety of racial, class, sexual orientation, and cultural backgrounds (Donovan, 2012). This reflects hooks' earlier criticisms of the first wave of feminists who failed to acknowledge the plight of women of color.

The fourth wave of feminism takes the ideals of the third wave of feminism further. One criticism of it, though, is that the activist voice is limited to the use of mobile or technology devices. There has also been disapproval of the movement's attack against those who supposedly do not recognize misogyny, and the movement has been accused of being "FemiNazism." Mohammed Ntshangase (2021) claims that these more extreme feminist positions have led to a failure of many feminists to engage with criticism from other perspectives on issues such as racism and patriarchy, which are critical to any discussion about what constitutes good feminism (or bad feminism). Ntshangase (2021) suggests that there are some ways in which contemporary feminists could better engage with their critics through dialogue rather than through silence or accusations.

Feminists, whether online or offline, are called by hooks, without fear or guilt, to examine the political implications of their work (hooks, 2014b). This can only happen if there is self-reflection, dialogue, and confrontation between feminists, and an examination and appreciation of a global culture and cross-cultural exchange. Hooks (2006, p. 110), therefore, suggests the creation of a context wherein feminists can "engage in open critical dialogue with one another," where there can be a debate without "fear of emotional collapse." Cyberspace should be a venue where the differences and complexities of various experiences are valued. Even Jurgen Habermas proposes a type of deliberation that is public and inclusive, where proponents are critically evaluative of others to achieve communicative agreement (Payne & Samhat, 2004). With proper self-interrogation and critical evaluation, it becomes vital to be aware of who controls the feminist discourse and how it relates to intersectional factors such as race, class, and other social structures (Jain, 2020). In summary, online feminists should engage in honest confrontation, dialogue, and reciprocal interaction. Feminists should constantly engage in self-reflection or self-interrogation, as a response to hooks' feminist normative of self-actualization.

In appreciation of the global culture, the challenge is for online feminists to be more inclusive to all (including those who have limited internet access). Furthermore, scholars propose a reimagining of online feminism as less toxic, wherein feminists affirm that they can learn from each other, reminiscent of hooks' proposal for dialogue. This presupposes the championing of successful intersectional online feminist movements that work across differences (Thelandersson, 2014). Through a combination of online and offline efforts or a hybrid of feminist activist efforts, feminists can recalibrate their approaches to collectivism (Jane, 2016). This, according to Fredrika Thelandersson (2014), will enable online feminism to live up to the potential of revolutionary action and perhaps enact the move toward global transformation and a new social order.

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