

To Be or Not to Be, Nude! The Predictable Feminist Outrage

Written by Swati Parashar

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SWATI PARASHAR, JUN 10 2013

Feminism seems to be tracing its step back, and perhaps all for a good cause. The anxiety about location, positionality and authenticity, which feminists had thought was all resolved at the onset of the third wave and its emphasis on diversity of women's issues and feminist voices, has resurfaced in no uncertain terms.[1] At the International Studies Convention in San Francisco (April 3-6) this year, many panels and round table discussions were devoted to feminism's ongoing intellectual dilemmas and interventions around diversity, difference and authenticity. One significant argument that emerged out of such discussions was how anger can be instrumental in shaping feminist politics and its radical positions. After all, you don't study, read feminism, you 'do' it, 'live' it. Feminist anger is very much in focus these days, but all for the wrong reasons. It is doing the job it does better than defending women: stifling debate, condemning and criticising a group of women activists who choose to protest in the most radical of ways, by going nude (ie. only if you think nude protests are radical in the first place!)

FEMEN and Its Critics

In March 2013, Tunisian student, Amina Tyler posted topless photos of herself on Facebook, with the slogans "Fuck Your Morals" and "My Body Belongs To Me, And Is Not The Source Of Anyone's Honor," painted on her body. Her cause was further taken up by the Ukraine based feminist group, FEMEN with whom she shared her activism. In support of Tyler's plight, FEMEN labelled 4 April 2013 as "International Topless Jihad Day" and organized bare breasted protests across Europe. The provocative protests have led to reactions from many left-liberal and Muslim feminists worldwide who have argued that the mode of protests purely represent an attention seeking mentality devoid of feminist ethics and solidarity. "This is prejudice, racism and imperialism, dressed up in the apparently scant clothing of women's rights", wrote Susan Carland in her article on the ABC. Naheed Mustafa admonished in her Foreign Policy article, "Basically, ladies, keep your tits out of my fight. And put your shirts back on." Chitra Nagarajan cautioned against imposing values on communities by arguing in the Guardian that "FEMEN's obsession with nudity feeds a racist colonial feminism." Sydney based writer, Ruby Hamad, in a slightly more nuanced analysis cautioned how protests must be culturally appropriate and how Amina's protest "simply has no relevance, no point of reference, in an Islamic society." [2] Several more writings and analyses continue to dominate social and popular media, expressing outrage at FEMEN's nude tactics as a direct insult to Muslim women fighting sexism in their countries.

Offense taking in the name of anti-racism, anti-colonialism and against cultural imperialism is becoming a feminist obsession that generates disproportionate reactions globally. This is indeed puzzling given the backlash on women's rights everywhere and especially in the Global South where the fight for women's equality and freedom not only necessitates solidarity across borders but an understanding of the diversity and differences in the language and metaphor of protest and resistance. The serious questions emerging from the responses to FEMEN's nude protests are: what constitutes legitimate protests? What is legitimate solidarity that a feminist group is allowed to demonstrate and who gets to call the shots? Where are the boundaries of such legitimacy and of offense taking in general? What might be legitimate articulation to one group might always be potentially offensive to another. This politics of 'offense-taking' and 'victimhood' is becoming increasingly popular and is devoid of any nuanced understanding of issues at stake; it is actually insecurity of courageous women who take unpopular positions against their own societies, families

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and cultures, at a great risk to their personal safety and well-being.[3]

Nude Protests Are Not New

What should have been most obvious to feminists particularly interested in women's resistance strategies, and who seem deeply troubled by nudity as a mode of feminist protest, is that this is not the first time women bared it all. In July 2004, a group of women participated in nude demonstrations in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters in Manipur, a state in the north eastern part of India. They were protesting against the brutal murder and rape of Thangjam Manorama, who was charged with being an insurgent and taken into custody. The nude protestors shouted loudly "Indian Army Rape Us! Kill us! We are all Manorama's mothers!" The pictures were shocking although one did not witness any strong debate on whether the nude female body was the best weapon of protest. The protestors' outrage was targeted at the Indian army and the impunity it continues to enjoy in conflict areas of India. The protesting women stood in solidarity with Manorama and drew attention to her cruel fate with their bold action.

More recently, at least 31 people, including women, clashed with the police and protested semi-nude against South Korean steel major Posco's plant in the Indian state of Odisha in March 2013. Hundreds of bare breasted, semi-nude women protested in Osogbo, capital of Osun state in Nigeria against increase in the activities of ritual killers in December 2012. Nude protests are, in fact, not unknown in several parts of Africa including Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya and Uganda for over a century. According to Trishima Mitra-Kahn, Policy Officer with the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA), many women globally, "have all laid claim to this time tested feminist repertoire of registering protest and dissent within different temporal spaces using the (nude) body." [4] This makes it difficult to fully grasp the critiques of FEMEN. Again, I share Trishima's angst, "Is the feminist outrage more about nudity itself being used to register symbolic and performative subversion or about 'who' was using nudity and on whose behalf?" [5] If the latter is more of a concern here, it speaks of an anxiety borne not out of genuine respect for diversity and understanding of positionality, but out of a superficial and unconvincing sense of anti-racism, anti-colonialism that does not recognise/prioritise gender politics.

Amina's Story

The fact that a Tunisian female student started the protests, and went into forced isolation after being openly threatened by Islamists, faded into the background. Disproportionate amounts of intellectual discussion, instead, remain focussed on FEMEN's nudity and its (un)intended messages for/to Muslim women and other 'women of colour'. Amina Tyler's family feared the worst for her and hoped she would leave Tunisia. Amina said in an interview before going underground that she believed she would be beaten or raped if the Tunisian police found her. Media reports suggest that she has gone on trial in the city of Kairouan, Tunisia with religious conservatives protesting outside the court, accusing her of insulting Islam. None of this seems to have been seriously considered by defenders of cultural rights and anti-racist, anti-colonial politics. Tunisia's revolution has emboldened religious radicals, as we have also witnessed in the case of Egypt, Libya and Syria. Women have been rendered particularly vulnerable to threats, intimidation, physical attacks and state sponsored sexual violence against them. It is then, puzzling that feminist solidarity is uncritically extended to cultures and societies where oppression of women is an everyday practice. What is so fundamentally radical about any feminist position (including that of FEMEN) that cultures and religions oppress women; why does this articulation in any form of protest unsettle and outrage feminists?

Chitra Nagarajan writes, "a more holistic and nuanced approach would consider how patriarchy combines with racism, neo-colonialism and global capitalism to create a fundamentally unjust world." I argue that this is unhelpful in understanding how patriarchy and even misogyny work in societies that are supposedly 'non racist' (after all race is not just about skin colour and operates in different forms of 'othering') and have been victims of colonialism and global capitalism. Oppression and marginalisation of women operate in complex ways in all societies. I have elsewhere argued (reflecting on the Indian situation after the Delhi gang rape) [6] that non Western societies have alarming levels of gender based violence (especially against women and girls) which is normalised and culturally acceptable; and states are unable to adopt stringent measures to deal with them, despite legal and constitutional provisions. I am concerned that anti-race politics is obfuscating some of the deep rooted gender based violence in

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the Global South.

The Politics of 'Legitimate' Storytelling

The Arab world and Muslim societies are no exceptions when it comes to oppression of women and minorities and to gender based violence. The racism of the Arab world is not a matter of distant academic discourse but the lived reality of millions of migrant workers from South Asia, subjected to worst forms of human rights violations. The appalling treatment of women migrant workers is not a unique story in the Arab world where women are second class citizens anyways. So, is the problem seriously about who gets to say all this, from what location? FEMEN doesn't; Amina Tyler doesn't; Mona Eltahawy doesn't. Who is included in the 'legitimate' storytelling?

There is no doubt a diversity of women's experiences and resistance strategies in Muslim societies. Feminist posturing, worried about the unintended consequences and racism of FEMEN's unrest leave no space for those Muslim/non-Muslim women who may feel empathetic towards Amina Tyler and towards FEMEN,[7] just as those defending the Burqa as an assertion of cultural rights and individual agency leave no space for those who find it symbolic of patriarchal control over and policing of women's bodies. Ironically, the anti-racist, anti-colonial brigade find themselves on the same side of the debate as radical fundamentalists everywhere, especially on the issue of women's rights: that cultures and religious groups get to decide how women should be represented, what protest is culturally acceptable and what the 'authentic' voice of women is. Amidst this outrage, one needs to revisit Cynthia Enloe's vital feminist question, just WHERE are the 'WOMEN'?

Kiran Grewal's insightful engagement with Ayan Hirsi Ali, the controversial Somalian-Dutch feminist can serve as a conversation starter on some of these issues about authenticity and positionality. Grewal argues, "...it is we who assert a commitment to both anti-racism and feminism that must find appropriate ways to respond to her (Hirsi Ali). This is partly in order not to fall into the very trap of doing what we have so long worked to critique: silencing a different and challenging voice." [8] FEMEN is that different and challenging voice, as are many others. Neither belligerent censorship nor animated outrage against them can be an appropriate feminist response.

Sorry, all ye who take offense to the bare breast. If anything, it has a huge place in feminist resistance and struggle world over. I am reminded of Golshifteh Farhani, Iran's biggest film star who bared her breast in a French video, only to be banished, threatened and hounded out of the country. Her bared breast triggered a 'cultural earthquake' as the Sydney Morning Herald reported in 2012. Her parents were threatened by a man claiming to be an official of the supreme court of the Islamic Republic of Iran who said that their daughter would be punished, that her breasts would be cut off and presented to them on a plate! There is everything radical about the breast (traditionally considered the site of nurture as well as the erotic male gaze) becoming a feminist tool of protest. Wendy Squires, in another 'breastly' context, puts it really well, "perhaps, if we show a little more tolerance in regards to the small and petty, we may have more focus on the relevant and necessary. Let's try to keep our powder dry for the big issues, and not blow it on bozos and boobs."

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[1] For the concerns within third wave feminism, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2002, vol. 28, no. 2. The US based online feminist forum, The Feminist Wire recently hosted a forum on "Across Difference, Toward Liberation: An Introduction to TFW's Forum on Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism within Feminism".

[3] Christine Sylvester has articulated this position of feminists insecuring other women really well. See Sylvester (2010) "Tensions in Feminist Security Studies", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 41, no. 6

[4] Trishima Mitra Kahn made this comment in a social networking debate on facebook on the issue of FEMEN's

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tactics.

[5] Ibid

[6] See “Violence Against Women: India’s Winding Road Ahead” in Asian Currents (Feb. 2013) (pages 19-20); “The Delhi Rape Case: Rethinking Feminism and Violence Against Women” in e-International Relations (Feb. 2013); “The Silent Feminism”, ABC Drum Opinion (accessed 3 June 2013).

[7] This has been articulated well by a facebook group called Muslim and Exmuslim Women for FEMEN accessed 3 June 2013.

[8] Kiran Grewal (2012): “Reclaiming The Voice Of The ‘Third World Woman’”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 14:4, 569-590 (pp 589).

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