

From **Taking it Like a Woman** (1984)

Women: what revolution?

It's well known among those who read the feminist literature that, if women are going to experience a revolution, it will be the longest revolution of all.' I don't want to end this book by discussing the causes and cures of women's oppression, by referring in detail to the debate between Marxist and radical feminist modes of analysis: the place for that is elsewhere. But I do want to address myself to the problem that this book raises more questions than it answers. The questions I began with were: what makes a feminist? what is a feminist? what sense does feminism make of a society organized in terms of sexual difference and the family? what is heterosexual love? in what ways should we allow our mortality to condition our lives?

The themes wrapped up in these questions can be put in terms of opposites:

love and the family

dependency and autonomy

emotion and intellect

sacrifice and protest

depression and ecstasy

If you arrange them this way, they become human issues, the unresolved problems of the human condition.

However, they are also women's problems, and it is with women that I'm most concerned. Why? I've explained why—the answer's a historical one. Feminists, like women, are not born but made. I can't speak for all feminists, nor do I really approve of the attempt to work out which social factors turn some women one way and others another. But in my own life I can see the significance of some factors, viz:

being born to parents who did not in their own personalities conform to conventional gender role stereotypes (though they did in their roles);

perceiving the difficult reality, for my mother, of a traditional marriage;

having a close intellectual and emotional relationship with my father;

imbibing in childhood and adolescence the theory and sentiments of socialism, i.e. a moral condemnation of social and economic inequality;

receiving conflicting expectations from both my parents and my formal education that I would fulfil myself as a woman (by marrying and bearing children and caring for them myself), but would also achieve a brilliantly successful career (in the masculine manner).

When I say I'm a feminist, what do I mean? I mean that I believe that women are an oppressed social group, a group of people sharing a common exclusion from full participation in certain key social institutions (and being over-represented in others). Women in Britain in the 1980s are still subject to the awful soul-destroying tyranny of being told the meaning of their lives by others in terms which are not theirs.

Feminism means being more involved on a political level with the situation of women than with that of any other minority or majority group (which immediately makes much of what goes under the heading of 'politics' uninteresting to feminists). To be a feminist means putting women first. The meaning of such questions as 'What about

men?' is a meaning invented by other people: as my friend Dale Spender has said, who says we should lead meaningful lives, thus defined?'

Much of this book has been about men. Is this not in itself a most objectionable contradiction? I think it is, but that it also must be understood as a cultural product. One of women's difficulties with each other is that they take each other for granted. All women are feminists at heart. In their psychology lies a great love for women as a class. But it's interred beneath a mound of rubbish. Personally, I could not make sense of my life without the support, fidelity and love of women-not in a general sense but in the very specific sense of there being in my life a number of women who are important to me, to whom I can turn at any moment with any problem and to whom I offer (I hope) the same service. It is most important to me to try never to let women down - although clearly I am bound to fail, often. It is important to me to promote a feeling of self-esteem, power and control in women whenever I can, and to look for that gift for myself. I am not naive enough to believe that all women are my sisters (except in a metatheoretical sense): but I do want them to be. I am always hurt by the most minor cruelty perpetrated towards me by a woman, whereas I long ago gave up my faith in the loyalty and commitment of men as a class.

But if women cease to be the problem, because one sees both how women are constructed out of the problems and how they must repudiate them for advances to be made, then men, somewhat inevitably, become the problem instead. We come upon the paradox Sheila Rowbotham has described as 'ecstatic subjugation'. How can women love men without being oppressed in, and by means of, this love and that which is, or is not, given in return?...

I begin with Robin Morgan's remark about men's misuse of women in pornography: 'man-hater as I am, I love men too much to believe that they really want to do that to us.' I understand that male chauvinism is as much a social product as feminism. The men who strut and expound their ideas at conferences and in governments, and who equate feminism with a personal attack on their genitals, can't admit the possibility of error, of weakness, of self-doubt, on the subject of their masculinity. To be right and strong is so much a part of being male that men may only cry or give themselves up to listening to others by abrogating their maleness. Now, this isn't such an awful step to take, but they don't know it.

But the question, for many women, is not, how can men be loved, but how can such love be stopped?....

Male-dominated culture has designated as female all labours of emotional connectedness. As I have already said, the greater sensitivity of women means that they possess an enhanced capacity to relate to others and find themselves very often in the position of being the only ones able to carry out this life-saving task. The principal mode of developing this sensitivity in women is the gender-differentiated nuclear family. Women mother. Daughters are transformed into mothers. An autonomous sense of self, a self which exists outside and independently of relationships with others, does not need to develop; there are no factors that encourage it and many that militate against it. Women's sense of identity is thus dangerously bound up from early childhood with the identities of others. Not so for men, who as little boys look into their mothers' faces and see what they learn is not a reflection of their own. Everything conspires to make them learn this lesson, or nearly

everything.

So, if it isn't in love that women are lost, it's in the family. The tension between the interests of the family and the interests of women as individuals has been rising for some two centuries. It is not possible for these interests to be reconciled. But I know what path women will choose (be pressured to choose) in the future.

I don't hold out much hope. But it is true that the most important battles are even now being fought, as individual women look at the circumstances of their lives, not just through a glass, darkly, but face to face; and in so looking determine, most bravely, not to be overcome. 'I used to want to lodge in someone's pocket and be able to jump in and out whenever it suited me. Now I go round listening for cries from women who I imagine are locked in others' pockets.'¹

¹ L Ullman (1977) *Changing*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.