

Feminism: Concepts and Theories
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Feminisms: Fourth Wave, Popular Culture and Social Media - Part - II – Texts

Feminism Concepts and Theories, welcome to lecture 23. As promised, I am going to go through some of the texts that I think typify fourth wave of feminism and I want you to keep your attention focused on a couple of things. Like I said, fourth wave of feminism is very much about the values of feminism as we understand it, but in a much more widespread communicative fashion, not necessarily in a vocabulary familiar to feminist theory.

At the same time, we now have an unprecedented increase in the ways in which feminism is being discussed and these texts typify these common sensical ways of understanding the goals of feminism. So, pay attention to the language, pay attention to the ways in which these issues are being simplified, they are being personalized, they are particular to a form of individual storytelling, and how is it that you can then analyse them in relation to the trajectory of the feminist movement in general.

So, the first text that I want to read from is Chimamanda Adichie's, "We Should All Be Feminists." Now, for those who are not familiar, Adichie is a very prolific and well-known novelist and feminist. Her little essay, We Should All Be Feminists, has been widely quoted and read, and has become greatly popular fodder for a common sensical understanding of contemporary feminism. I want to read through it in entirety and not offer you much analysis. I want this to be a kind of homework, for you to locate it within everything that you have read of feminism thus far.

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We Should All Be Feminists

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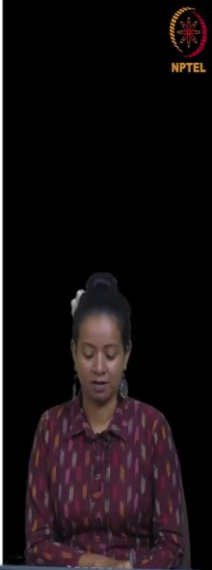

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So I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist.

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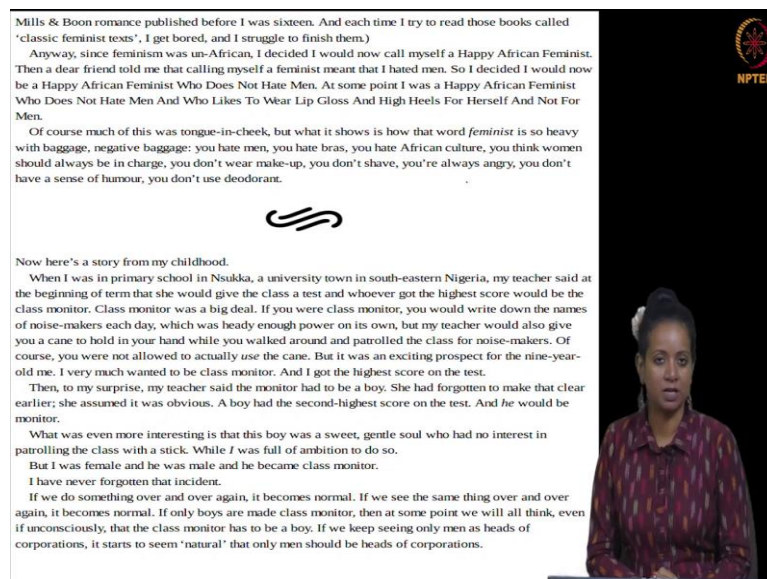
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Anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a Happy African Feminist. Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men.

Of course much of this was tongue-in-cheek, but what it shows is how that word *feminist* is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don't wear make-up, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humour, you don't use deodorant.

Now here's a story from my childhood.

When I was in primary school in Nsukka, a university town in south-eastern Nigeria, my teacher said at the beginning of term that she would give the class a test and whoever got the highest score would be the class monitor. Class monitor was a big deal. If you were class monitor, you would write down the names of noise-makers each day, which was heady enough power on its own, but my teacher would also give you a cane to hold in your hand while you walked around and patrolled the class for noise-makers. Of course, you were not allowed to actually use the cane. But it was an exciting prospect for the nine-year-old me. I very much wanted to be class monitor. And I got the highest score on the test.

Then, to my surprise, my teacher said the monitor had to be a boy. She had forgotten to make that clear earlier; she assumed it was obvious. A boy had the second-highest score on the test. And he would be monitor.

What was even more interesting is that this boy was a sweet, gentle soul who had no interest in patrolling the class with a stick. While I was full of ambition to do so.

But I was female and he was male and he became class monitor.

I have never forgotten that incident.

If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations.

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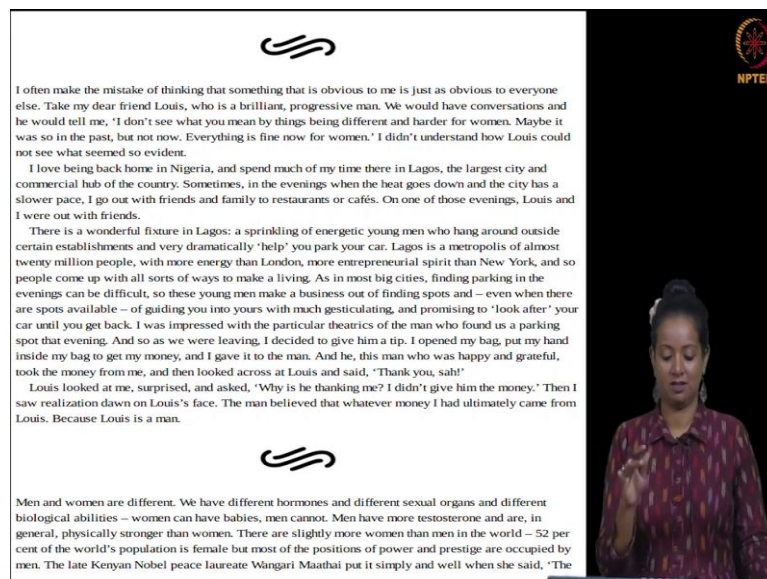
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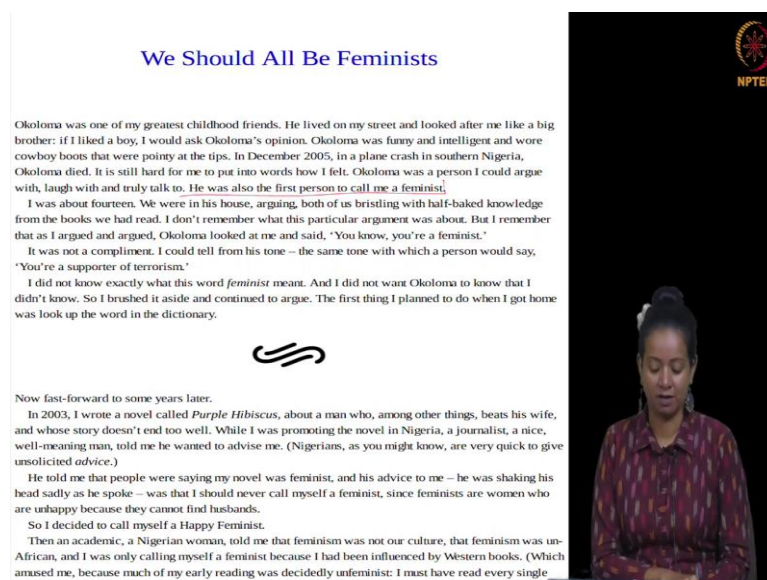
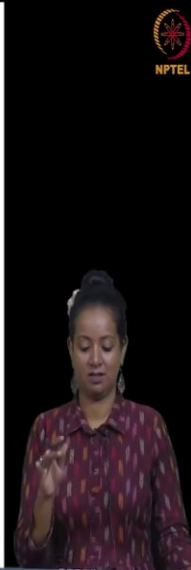
I often make the mistake of thinking that something that is obvious to me is just as obvious to everyone else. Take my dear friend Louis, who is a brilliant, progressive man. We would have conversations and he would tell me, 'I don't see what you mean by things being different and harder for women. Maybe it was so in the past, but not now. Everything is fine now for women.' I didn't understand how Louis could not see what seemed so evident.

I love being back home in Nigeria, and spend much of my time there in Lagos, the largest city and commercial hub of the country. Sometimes, in the evenings when the heat goes down and the city has a slower pace, I go out with friends and family to restaurants or cafés. On one of those evenings, Louis and I were out with friends.

There is a wonderful fixture in Lagos: a sprinkling of energetic young men who hang around outside certain establishments and very dramatically 'help' you park your car. Lagos is a metropolis of almost twenty million people, with more energy than London, more entrepreneurial spirit than New York, and so people come up with all sorts of ways to make a living. As in most big cities, finding parking in the evenings can be difficult, so these young men make a business out of finding spots and – even when there are spots available – of guiding you into yours with much gesticulating, and promising to 'look after' your car until you get back. I was impressed with the particular theatrics of the man who found us a parking spot that evening. And so as we were leaving, I decided to give him a tip. I opened my bag, put my hand inside my bag to get my money, and I gave it to the man. And he, this man who was happy and grateful, took the money from me, and then looked across at Louis and said, "Thank you, sah!"

Louis looked at me, surprised, and asked, "Why is he thanking me? I didn't give him the money." Then I saw realization dawn on Louis's face. The man believed that whatever money I had ultimately came from Louis. Because Louis is a man.

Men and women are different. We have different hormones and different sexual organs and different biological abilities – women can have babies, men cannot. Men have more testosterone and are, in general, physically stronger than women. There are slightly more women than men in the world – 52 per cent of the world's population is female but most of the positions of power and prestige are occupied by men. The late Kenyan Nobel peace laureate Wangari Maathai put it simply and well when she said, "The



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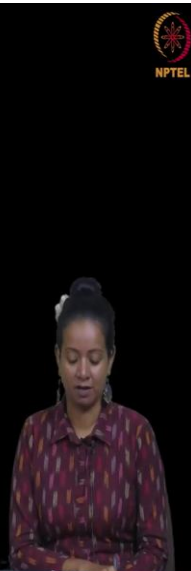
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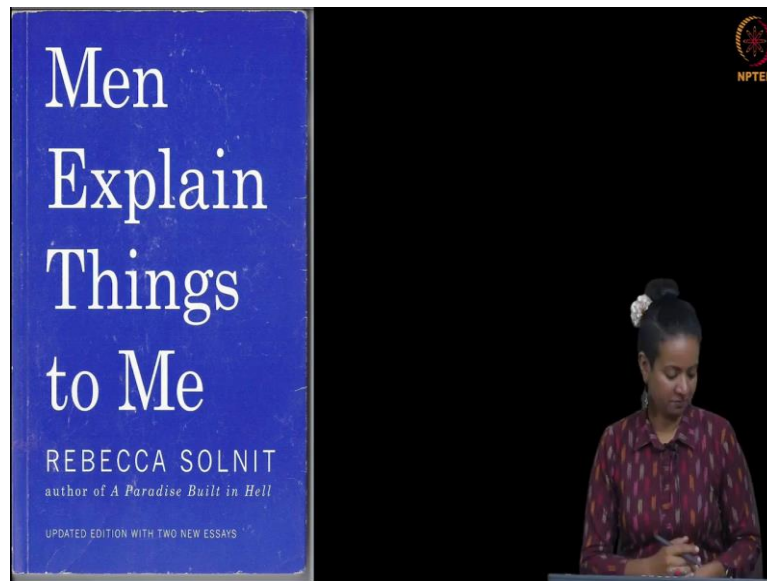
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This is just a small excerpt to tell you what are the ways in which forms of writing can also produce understandings about feminism and feminist theory. And of course, Adichie is a gifted writer. She is able to convey to you all of the things that are being struggling to do through feminist theory in just a few pages. We are talking about cultural understandings of men and women, we are talking about women's right to work and have money, about women's capacity to be professional, about feminism itself as composed of angry women, that she conveys so beautifully in just a few pages and in speaking in the personal. By assuming a voice that is very much about feminist consciousness, in that the personal is political. And this has been a very widely read book among fourth wave feminists and in the contemporary reading public.

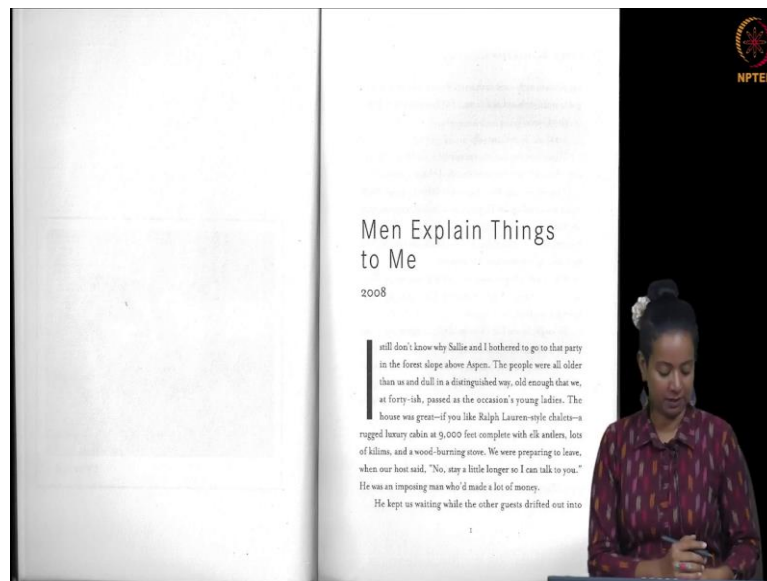
One reason of course, is that Adichie is a very successful novelist. And two, she wears the badge of a feminist and takes it seriously. This book came out of a TED talk, where she spoke precisely in these words, about coming to feminism through her own life experiences, about having always already been a feminist.

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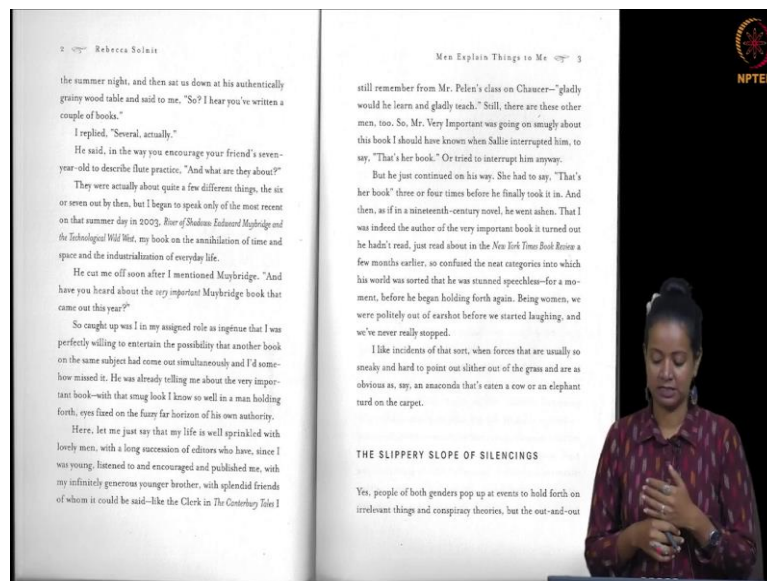
The second text that I want to read from for you today, is Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me*, the origin of the by now common phrase mansplaining.

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Men explain things to me, 2008. I still do not know why Sallie and I bothered to go to that party in the forest slope above Aspen. The people were all older than us and dull in a distinguished way, old enough that we at forty-ish, passed as the occasion's young ladies. The house was great, if you like Ralph Lauren style chalets, a rugged luxury cabin at 9000 feet, complete with elk antlers, lots of kilims, and a wood burning stove. We were preparing to leave when our host said, no, stay a little longer so I can talk to you. He was an imposing man who had made a lot of money.

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He kept us waiting, while the other guests drifted out into the summer night and then sat us down at his authentically grainy wood table and said to me, so, I hear you have written a couple of books. I replied, several, actually. He said, in the way you encourage your friend's 7-year-old to describe flute practice, and what are they about? They were actually about quite a few different things, the 6 or 7 out by then.

But I began to speak only of the most recent on that summer day in 2003. *River of Shadows, Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, my book on the annihilation of time and space and the industrialization of everyday life. He cut me off soon after I mentioned Muybridge. And have you heard about the very important Muybridge book that came out this year? So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingenue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I had somehow missed it.

He was already telling me about the very important book with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority. Here, let me just say that my life is well sprinkled with lovely men, with a long succession of editors, who have since I was young, listened to and encouraged and published me, with my infinitely generous younger brother, with splendid friends of whom it could be said, like the Clark in the *Canterbury Tales*, I still remember from Mr. Pelen's class on Chaucer, gladly would he learn and gladly teach. Still, there are these other men too.

So, Mr. Very Important was going on smugly about this book I should have known when Sallie interrupted him to say, that is her book. Or tried to interrupt him anyway. But he just continued on his way. She had to say, that is her book, three or four times before he finally took it in. And then, as if in a nineteenth century novel, he went ashen.

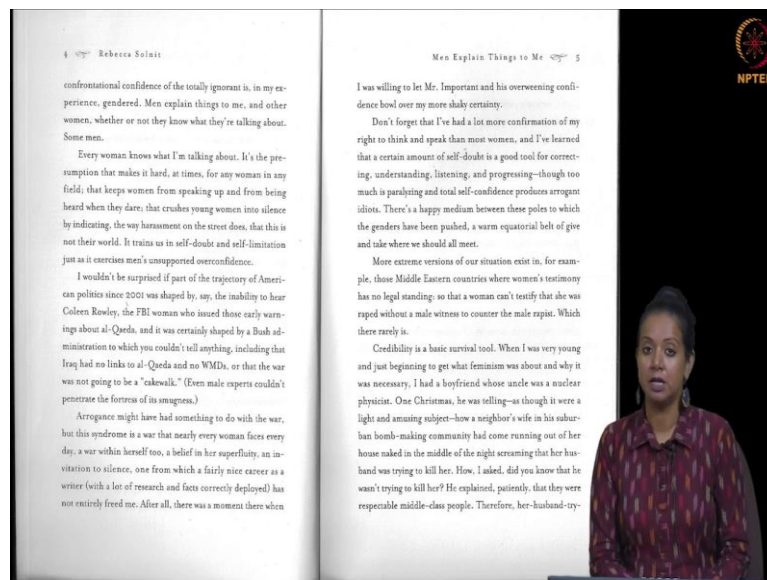
That I was indeed the author of the very important book, it turned out he had not read, just read about it in New York Times Book Review a few months earlier, so confused the neat categories into which his world was sorted that he was stunned speechless for a moment, before he began holding forth again. Being women, we were politely out of earshot before we started laughing and we have never really stopped.

I like incidents of that sort, when forces that are usually so sneaky and hard to point out, slither out of the grass and are as obvious as, say, an anaconda that has eaten a cow or an elephant turd on the carpet.

The Slippery Slope of Silencings.

Yes, people of both genders pop up at events to hold forth on irrelevant things and conspiracy theories.

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But the out and out confrontational experience of the totally ignorant is, in my experience, gendered. Men explain things to me and other women, whether or not they know what they are talking about. Some men. Every woman knows what I am talking about. It is the presumption that makes it hard at times for any woman in any field. That keeps women from

speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world.

It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence. I would not be surprised if part of the trajectory of American politics since 2001 was shaped by, say the inability to hear Coleen Rowley, the FBI woman who issued those early warnings about al-Qaeda, and it was certainly shaped by a Bush administration to which you could not tell anything, including that Iraq had no links to al-Qaeda and no WMDs, or that the war was not going to be a "cakewalk". Even male experts could not penetrate the fortress of its smugness.

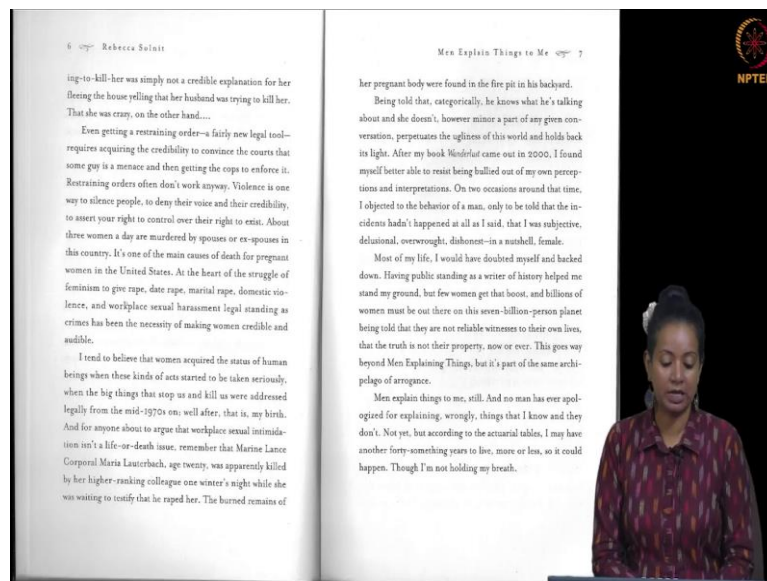
Arrogance might have had something to do with the war, but this syndrome is a war that nearly every woman faces every day, a war within herself too, a belief in her superfluity, an invitation to silence, one from which a fairly nice career as a writer, with a lot of research and facts correctly deployed has not entirely freed me. After all, there was a moment there when I was willing to let Mr. Important and his overweening confidence bowl over my more shaky uncertainty, bowl over my more shaky certainty.

Do not forget that I have had a lot more confirmation of my right to think and speak than most women and I have learnt that a certain amount of self-doubt is a good tool for correcting, understanding, listening, and progressing, though too much is paralyzing and total self-confidence produces arrogant idiots.

There is a happy medium between these poles to which the genders have been pushed, a warm equatorial belt of give and take where we should all meet. More extreme versions of our situation exist, in for example, those Middle Eastern countries where women's testimony has no legal standing, so that a woman cannot testify that she was raped without a male witness to counter the male rapist. Which there rarely is. Credibility is a basic survival tool. When I was very young and just beginning to get what feminism was about and why it was necessary, I had a boyfriend whose uncle was a nuclear physicist.

One Christmas, he was telling, as though it were a light and amusing subject, how a neighbour's wife in suburban bomb making community had come out, had come running out of her house naked in the middle of the night screaming that her husband was trying to kill her. How, I asked did you know that he was not trying to kill her? He explained patiently that they were respectable middle-class people.

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Therefore, her husband trying to kill her was simply not a credible explanation for her fleeing the house yelling that her husband was trying to kill her. That she was crazy, on the other hand. Even getting a restraining order, a fairly new legal tool requires acquiring the credibility, to convince the courts that some guy is a menace and then getting the cops to enforce it. Restraining orders often do not work anyway. Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist.

About 3 women a day are murdered by spouses or ex-spouses in this country, in the US. It is one of the main causes of death for pregnant women in the United States. At the heart of the struggle of feminism, to give rape, date rape, marital rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment, legal standing as crimes has been the necessity of making women credible and audible. I tend to believe that women acquired the status of human beings when these kinds of acts started to be taken seriously, when the big things that stop us and kill us were addressed legally from the mid-1970s on; well after, that is my birth.

And for anyone about to argue that workplace sexual intimidation is not a life or death issue, remember that Marine Lance Maria Lauterbach, aged 20 was apparently killed by her higher-ranking colleague one winter's night while she was waiting to testify that he raped her. The burnt remains of her pregnant body were found in the firepit in his backyard. Being told that, categorically, he knows what he is talking about and she does not, however minor a part of any given conversation, perpetuates the ugliness of this world and holds back its light.

After my book *Wanderlust* came out in 2000, I found myself better able to resist being bullied out of my own perceptions and interpretations. On two occasions around that time, I objected to the behaviour of a man only to be told that the incidents had not happened at all as I said, that I was subjective, delusional, overwrought, dishonest, in a nutshell, female. Most of my life I would have doubted myself and backed down.

Having public standing as a writer of history helped me stand my ground, but few women get that boost and billions of women must be out there on the 7 billion percent planet being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property, now or ever. This goes way beyond men explaining things, but now it's part of the same archipelago of arrogance.

Men explain things to me, still. And no man has ever apologized for explaining, wrongly, things that I know and they do not. Not yet, but according to the actuarial tables, I may have another 40 something years to live, more or less, so it could happen. Though I am not holding my breath.”

Let's pause a few minutes to also draw out some commonalities between Adichie's text and Solnit's text.

We are again talking about those who are writing from their own experiences and drawing broad generalizations about the relationships between men and women. But you also see in Solnit's instance that she is making connections between the small instance of a man explaining her own book to her and a larger world in which women are not taken seriously, where their credibility is constantly questioned and what that might mean for matters of life and death.

In both these texts, there might be a sense that there is a simplistic understanding of who is a man and who is a woman, very much not in keeping with how we have been discussing gender across these weeks. However, it is important to remember that to bridge theory and practice, to be able to look at everyday experience as not bearing one on one consonance with the movement of theory, we have to understand gender across all these fronts. Of theory as not separate from practice, but of radical imaginative possibilities for a world still beleaguered by binary gender understandings.

In other words, we need all forms of writing to be able to move forward the feminist project. That is all I have for you this week. We will continue our discussions on queer theory, gender post structuralism in the next week. Until then...