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Jessie Miller

We Should All Be Feminists, Behind the Beautiful Forevers, and Femininity

Historically, femininity has been viewed as a weakness, a flaw that impairs one both physically and mentally. Across countless cultures throughout human history, the presence of femininity has suggested physical fragility, emotional volatility, and mental incompetency; the absence of it, meanwhile, is associated with physical prowess, strict emotional control, and intellectual superiority. Excluding the exceptional outliers, this has been the general consensus until very recently.

In the past few decades, the feminist movement has revealed femininity as something that can be just as powerful as masculinity, something that women should embrace and harness rather than eschew. Traditional symbols of female oppression, such as high heels and makeup, are being championed as modern testaments to the power of womanhood. However, many feminists believe that things that were once trappings of oppression can never truly be empowering; they believe that finding power in femininity is simply a guise for exploiting womanhood for the benefit of the male gaze. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *We Should All Be Feminists*, and Asha from *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* are both powerful women who do not shy away from their femininity, but the two yield very different results from their professional expressions of womanhood. Their successes and setbacks throughout their careers ultimately demonstrate how femininity, when used as genuine self-expression, can legitimately help a powerful woman gain respect. However, femininity when used as a means of acquiring said power can only result in exploitation and oppression.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an accomplished writer and orator who has studied her craft at some of the most prestigious universities in America, such as Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Yale, and Harvard. She has earned her literary and academic reputation through her own individual merit and hard work. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, she ponders the delicate line that women in academia must toe between expressing their femininity and retaining respect from their colleagues and students. She reflects on how she suppressed her womanhood in the past in an attempt to prove her worth, writing, "I was worried that if I looked too feminine, I would not be taken seriously...I wore a very serious, very manly and very ugly suit" (Adichie 38). It is impossible to know how advantageous this clothing choice was or how much quantifiable benefit was gleaned from her choice to appear more masculine in her workplace. Perhaps she made a better first impression on the most misogynistic students in the classroom for her feminine restraint, or perhaps the more bigoted minds in the classroom read her masculine presentation as a militant feminist statement; there is no way to know. However, it is clear that because she denied herself free expression of her identity, Adichie felt suppressed and uncomfortable. She attests that this stifling of her personhood bled into the quality of her work: "I wish I had not worn that ugly suit that day. Had I then the confidence I have now to be myself, my students would have benefited even more from my teaching. Because I would have been more comfortable and more fully and truly myself" (Adichie 39). Demonstrated here is the feminine empowerment that has been recently hailed as a tenet of modern feminism. The power doesn't come from the feminine trappings, but it is the freedom and confidence that comes with expressing oneself fully that allows women to embrace the power that they earned through their individual professional merits. The idea that people who are allowed to express themselves

openly produce more genuine, thoughtful, and candid work is not a new or controversial one. It simply takes a conscious, deliberate effort to ensure that this truth extends to everyone, including women, wherever on the spectrum of femininity they lie.

In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Asha displays many similar qualities as Adichie: ambition, drive, intellect, and femininity. Like Adichie, Asha is very aware of the negative implications that her gender carries in the world of politics and leadership that she wants desperately to break into. However, instead of embracing her womanhood to support the power that she has gained through education or perseverance, Asha seeks to gain power by exploiting her femininity, making her womanhood a marketable good that she sells to the highest bidder. The narrator comments on Asha's relations with powerful men, noting that it "wasn't about lust or being modern...nor was it just about feeling loved and beautiful. This was about money and power" (Boo 150). Here, Asha uses her femininity as a tool to gain influence over powerful men, and one could argue that this is a form of empowerment, just as Adichie's acceptance of her femininity is. The key distinction between the two is that, while Adichie defies stereotypes by being simultaneously intelligent and feminine, Asha only plays into and supports patriarchal ideas by reinforcing the idea that women have nothing of intellectual value to offer. The unfortunate phenomenon is that, once a woman uses her body to earn power and respect, it often becomes imperative that she continue to use that strategy to maintain her power; any of her intellectual merits as a thinking, reasoning person will almost surely be discounted. As the work demonstrates, it is impossible to maintain this cycle forever: "gold pots flaked away, revealing mud pots. Asha's slavish attention to Corporator Subhash Sawant was the biggest mud pot" (Boo 221). In the end, it becomes apparent that Asha cannot keep her power forever when it is built so

fundamentally on the exchange of favors with powerful men. Embracing one's femininity as a form of self expression in order to take best advantage of one's power is perfectly legitimate and sustainable; on the other hand, Asha's story demonstrates that when femininity is used to gain influence from powerful men, men remain the only people in the situation who truly have any power.

In order for femininity to be empowering, the underlying power that is highlighted by the femininity must have been gained through the individual's own merit. Power gained through femininity and femininity alone cannot truly be empowering because it denies the idea that women are individuals separate from their womanhood. Instead, it allows women to continue to be defined by their femininity alone, in exclusion from all of the other qualities that they possess as intellectual, creative people.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Anchor Books, 2015.

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. Random House, 2012.