

MUSINGS

Hetero-Love in Patriarchy: An Autobiographical Substantiation

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THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL—AGAIN

Feminist theorists have been leading in questioning notions of objectivity that omit the personal standpoint from processes of truth inquiry. Nonetheless, the taboo on drawing on the personal has a lingering presence even in feminist work. There seems to be no doubt, for example, that Luce Irigaray's work on love (Irigaray 1996; 2002) or Teresa Brennan's theory of affective transmission (Brennan 2004) are saturated with personal experiences, which, however, are never let out of their closet of implicitness. The background of this piece is an awkwardness with my own silence about the role played by my personal experiences in the unfolding of my book *The Contradictions of Love* (Gunnarsson 2014). In the book I theorize the power relations between women and men as constituted in and through love, drawing in particular on Anna G. Jónasdóttir's theorization of men's exploitation of women's love (Jónasdóttir 1994; 2009). I highlight the structural constraints that this exploitative order imposes on women, often leaving them in "a continuous struggle on the boundaries of 'poverty' in terms of their possibilities to operate in society as self-assured and self-evidently worthy people exerting their capacities effectively and legitimately" (Jónasdóttir 1994, 225). I argue that the general tendency of female sociosexual poverty, coupled with the "surplus worthiness" (227) accumulated by men through their appropriation of women's love, tends to make women's need for men more acute than men's need for women, creating painful contradictions that are most accentuated in heterosexual couple love but that also structure woman–man encounters more broadly.

Having put much energy into arguing in my book for how "external" social conditions relentlessly hamper women's possibilities of acquiring worthiness and being appropriately loved, I then go on, paradoxically it may seem, to emphasize women's own agency and need to take responsibility for their situation. This is done in a broader context of relativizing my initial claims about the reality of patriarchal constraint, where I argue that there is a deeper reality at the level of which women's

structurally produced unworthiness and dependency are illusory. Drawing on spiritual modes of thought as articulated in particular by Roy Bhaskar and Luce Irigaray (Bhaskar 2002; Irigaray 2002), I contend that, *really*, women “have it all in themselves” and that they can dissolve their painful dependency on nonreciprocating men by turning “inward” and letting go, instead of focusing on men’s need to change.

These spiritual themes made my book controversial in the eyes of that significant lot of critical thinkers who see spirituality as not only apolitically private and individualist but also somewhat embarrassing (cf. Robinson 2001, 588). Since my theorization of how women might dissolve their dependency on men “from within” had little explicit empirical underpinning, transparency about how my own experiences informed these claims could give them more force in the face of such skepticism.

Feminist theory builds on the assumption that personal experiences are structured by broader social relations. My experience is of course unique if taken in its concrete entirety. Still, there are structural dilemmas that permeate the lives of all heterosexual women, played out in an array of different ways yet creating a *tendency* for heterosexual women to have *similar* (not identical) experiences (Gunnarsson 2011). By delving deeper into one such experience, these structural features can be made visible and made sense of to a certain degree, if only from one particular embodied-minded vantage point.

Perhaps the most pertinent rationale for exploring one’s own experiences as a social theorist is the immediacy whereby we can access this “material.” Any theory about gendered power must have some empirical basis. And whereas interview data, statistics, novels, and so forth provide robust external anchorage points that work against subjectivism, self-inquiry has an alternative advantage of providing immediate access to a *complete* experience. Far from stating that we have full access to our own reality, nor that it is unmediated, my point is that self-analysis provides a valuable opportunity for a more intense and unconstrained dialectic between the theoretical and the empirical than those interpretive dialectics at play in the analysis of the necessarily more selective and mediated data collected from outside of ourselves. Hence, here is a story from my life.

LOVE, PATRIARCHY, AND PAIN

In all my romantic relations, all of them with men, my feminist sensibilities have boosted my aggressive and confrontational traits. Feminist consciousness has made me afraid of being treated unjustly without even being aware of it, given the subtle and covert ways that gendered injustices often operate. A few experiences of being treated badly in not so subtle or covert ways also made me read my love reality in paranoid rather than reparative ways, to invoke the theme of the recently announced “reparative turn” (Sedgwick 2003; Wiegman 2014). It was only with my present partner that I started to doubt the productivity of my dualistic mode of relating to men.

Unlike previous boyfriends, my present partner has stood stubbornly by my side throughout intense conflicts, while I have repeatedly considered leaving him. Our typical conflict would build up like this: I express a desire for intimacy, affection, or sex. He says no in a rather unsmooth way, making me feel painfully rejected. I

express feelings of hurt and anger. He responds with coldness or anger, upset that I do not respect his “no.” For him, my intense reaction is evidence of what was his initial reason for rejecting my move toward him: what he experiences as a demanding neediness and sense of entitlement on my part. I feel that he cruelly disrespects my needs for affection by rendering them into a “demand” and become furious and miserable from feelings of abandonment.

In these conflicts I saw in my partner the typical masculine tendencies underpinning patriarchal asymmetries: the lack of empathy and care, the view of my needs as difficult demands, the unrealistic standards of self-sufficiency. I feared he was bad (for me) and that my staying with him was a sign of the carelessness toward oneself that patriarchy tends to induce in women. However, I was not sure. In my partner's view, I had some pain to work through that was not of his making. Somewhere deep I felt he might be right. But I was also terribly afraid of “giving in” to his analysis, since that seemed to fit too well with the scheme of female submission to male authority. For quite some time I was tormented by my wobbling between these two worldviews.

Finally I realized I had to try something new. Since apparently I was not ready to actualize my thoughts of leaving the relationship and since my current way of being changed nothing for the better, I decided to make a change, despite the fact that I felt this change exposed me to the risk of submission. Instead of propelling my pain outward when overwhelmed by rage or abandonment, I started to just accept and stay with my feelings. The intensity of the pain gave me a deeper understanding of the compulsive force involved in my previous mode of acting out. The door to grieving opened up, grieving of old childhood wounds, of the ways that injustices penetrate our selves to the bone, of the fact that my partner was not the way I thought I needed him to be. And the fine thing about grieving is that it heals and resolves. That is why the reparation alluded to in the “reparative turn” is bound up with taking up the “depressive position” (Klein 1946). Grieving slowly dissolves the pain that is the cause of the very grieving.

And things changed. The part of me that feared my letting go would put me in a submissive position got evidence to the contrary. When I softened, my partner softened and love got more room to flow between us, unblocked by images of what the other should be like. When gradually freed from my own pain I could better see my partner's vulnerability, his experience of me as wanting to make *use* of him rather than valuing him in his own right. Indeed, it is ironic to detect the reversed gendered roles in the meshwork of crisscrossing facets of reality that make up our relationship, like any relationship. I am convinced that the painful patterns we were in, and partly still are in, do indeed mirror patriarchal power dynamics quite perfectly. However, there is so much more to it. The multifaceted character of reality is a central theme in *Contradictions*, and I think it is a crucial contribution of the book. It would have been so easy to comprehend my relationship in the simple terms of male power and female victimhood, but there are other, deeper layers of reality that contradict and transcend that reality. The great challenge is to harbor rather than deny such ontological tensions, so that we can draw on the transformative power they generate if lived through (Gunnarsson, n.d.).

We are against oppressive social orders because they distribute pain unjustly. Women with a feminist consciousness know that the pain they experience in heterosexual love is not simply “existential” and individual, but political and systematic. Hence, it is a logical reaction that when we suffer from patriarchal pain it feels like a feminist thing not to accept this pain; we want those pain-inducing men to change, so that pain can be lifted from our shoulders. At least this is the logic that informed my own vain doings in love. In *Contradictions* I claim that, instead, heterosexual women need to accept the pain caused by their entanglement in patriarchal contradictions, and I seek to elucidate why this is *not* the same as accepting subordination. The basic philosophical argument here, drawing in particular on Bhaskar’s interpretation of insights that underpin many spiritual traditions, is that in order to be able to intervene efficaciously in the world, we have to really be in it. This entails fully accepting what this world is like, including how it is anchored in ourselves. Bhaskar highlights the primacy of self-change in social transformation, putting forward that “your response to the situation you are in [is] the only thing that you can immediately affect,” meaning that “shifting... the blame on to another agent or the situation itself, immediately disempowers the agent, dualistically splitting and undermining his response” (Bhaskar 2002, 241).

These statements may appear provocatively nonsociological. Do they not amount to an individualistic perspective that ignores how people are constrained by forces outside of their control? Indeed, “it has been a defining feature of feminism to displace responsibility from women onto men and the structures underpinning their power. Too long women have been forced to carry burdens that are not really theirs, and it has been a central feminist imperative that responsibility be attributed to where it belongs” (Gunnarsson 2014, 154). At the same time, however, if women’s structurally produced, asymmetrical dependency on men is the problem, putting energy into getting men to change cannot be the solution since it only affirms female dependency on men. We need to let go of men, however difficult this might be for heterosexual women in a state of “sociosexual poverty.”

LEAVING ROOM FOR CHANGE

Going deeper into ourselves gives us access to that level of reality that dissolves dualisms between self and other, inner and outer. Hence, against common assumptions, an Irigarayan shift of attention toward one’s “own interiority as a space inside and outside the whole” (Irigaray 2002, 173) is not at odds with but is a premise for acting efficaciously in and on the world, and for connecting deeply with others. It was only when I fully embraced my *own* reality, including the pain, that I could really take in my partner’s being in the world, basically since connection with others, indeed with reality as a whole, can only go via one’s own self. I am convinced that *had* I found myself in a relationship with a person who was truly bad for me, deciding to leave him would have been premised on this same process of accepting my pain rather than trying to get this person to change. Only then would I have been

able to really take in the reality of my relationship's destructiveness (cf. Lerner 1985).

If letting go is a premise for getting rooted in reality, it also engenders the independence needed for leaving a relationship, or for being a stable and distinct self within a relationship. I have powerful experiences of how accepting my partner's ways and the feelings they provoke always paves the way for a suddenly emerging mix of strength, dignity, courage, and clarity, which allows me to assert myself in a more independent and firm, yet connected and open way. Although I am now quite familiar with this process, it does not stop amazing me.

Paradoxically, then, accepting and living through the pain of dependency gave rise to a new kind of independence in me, soft, worthy, and warm. If neediness tries to get rid of vulnerability, the independence I talk of here involves bravely being in one's vulnerability, that beautiful phenomenon that softens our boundaries so that we become larger and more connected with the life forces. This process of dissolving the dualism between vulnerability and strength is in my view powerfully subversive in a general social context that falsely pits them against each other (Gunnarsson, n.d.).

When I stopped seeking relief for my pain outside of myself, what finally settled in my body-and-soul was the insight that *after all I was quite alright*, despite the fact that my partner did not meet (what I thought were) my needs. This relates to my argument in *Contradictions* that although women's relatively acute dependency on men is a real feature under patriarchal conditions, it is a reality ultimately based on illusions; hence, there are ways of uncovering and actualizing a deeper reality where women are not so needy. Due to the congealed circuits of patriarchal contradictions, this is likely to involve quite a degree of painful dying of the selves we think we are, though.

My relationship is not perfect, probably not even equal. But my changed attitude has helped transform a very difficult relationship into quite a fulfilling one, although sometimes challenging, as life itself is. At times my partner and I enter a state of terrible mismatch, and there is nothing we can do about it but be in it. I have learned that by being patient with rather than trying to do away with such recurring waves of "impossibility," love's return is most powerfully enabled. We live in a culture that tends to think of change in terms of *getting* things to change, and I think this is intimately connected with the violent character of our world. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick highlights, often when we try to *remedy* a problem, this just "adds propulsive energy" to that very problem (Sedgwick 2007, 635). In love it becomes clearer than in other domains that letting go and letting be is often the most deeply transformative act, premised on the healing power of life itself. Love does not like being forced.

The main purpose of this intervention has been to share some insights from my own life precisely about transformation, an issue at the heart of the feminist project. I state elsewhere that if we really want change, we need to become better at "disentangling the moral issue of who is to blame, of who *should* change, from what will *actually* effectuate change" (Gunnarsson 2015, 5; original emphasis). A friend who read a draft of this essay wondered why I do not raise the issue of my partner's responsibility for the quality of our relationship. But my point here is precisely that most of us

need to constantly remind ourselves to shift focus to our own role in the drama, since this is the only thing we can immediately affect. Such subtle but qualitatively radical shifts will inevitably affect people around us too. We do not yet know much about how this kind of causality works, but testimonies about it abound.

My efforts to let go of my partner have carried in their train an equally humbling and joyful experience of his kernel of unintelligible wonder. This has been associated with a letting go of ideas of love as a *fit* between two persons. The promise of love seems to lie in being open to the unfathomable in the other, which is the opposite of evaluating them in terms of how well they match our preconceptions about what we need from a partner. We need, with Irigaray, to “silenc[e] what we already know . . . in order to let the other appear, and light ourselves up through this entry into presence irreducible to our knowledge” (Irigaray 2002, 165).

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