

# Why Are You a Feminist?

by *Samantha Sacks*

*L'auteure raconte les expériences personnelles qui l'ont menée à devenir féministe.*

"Oh, so you're in university...."

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*Feminism is about change, about a redistribution of power. It is about challenging the status quo. It is call for the redefinition of the family, the mosque, the temple, the church, the synagogue, and of love.*

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The eyes of those professing interest in my occupation light up; the prospect of an interesting area of study, maybe something they know. Hey, perhaps they think they can teach me a little, tell me what it was like in the good old days.

"What's your major?" asks my new-found friend.

And while the potential for sparkling conversation still lingers sweetly in the air, (I can almost hear the clinking of good cutlery and wine glasses), I alone have the seasoned prescience of a thousand encounters of an identical nature to know that momentarily I will squash out any titillating *tête-à-tête* with the oppressive weight of my major....

"Women's studies."

And of course, a glassy-eyed stare settles over my partner's face. Sometimes it conveys condescending humour, sometimes hate, sometimes astonishment, sometimes indifference spliced with ignorance. The combinations are endless. If I were to mix the ingredients of these myriad gawks and gapes and leers, I could make a vicious cocktail, as the one thing these ogles have in common is their absence of genuine interest.

Regardless, I will still be asked to testify on my own behalf....

"WHY ARE YOU A FEMINIST?"

And this is what I will say....

Because at the dawn of a new century we have so much death in our lives. Nature struggles to catch its breath. The earth heaves gently as the last drops of juice are sucked from its bowels. Sanitized lives hang leaden in the hot, rotting air. Intolerance seeps into our kitchens through radioactive TV screens. Breastless women, their faces lit with the gaunt glow of chemotherapy, cruise florescent supermarket aisles, where delicacies from the four corners of the earth meet in prepared meals, elegantly displayed on styrofoam trays—microwave-ready cultural diversity. The

first oxygen bar opens in Toronto and with AIDS comes the death of love.

Because the only security I feel leaving my home at night comes from countless self-defense courses. Because my body is qualified, quantified, valued, and valueless; bought and sold on every street corner and television advertisement that invades my solitude—on purpose. Because where would we be without hysteria? Without anxiety we may be able to get a grip, our claws in perhaps, to reality, or the power structures that comprise it.

Because our lives are histories. The culmination of a thousand stories, myths, and oracles; recorded over many thousands of years by the most prestigious members of the most powerful societies, throughout time—as they see it. A myopic vision, a false prophecy. Where am I in your history? I look in the mirror, craning my neck to see past a distorted body image, a castrated, manipulated sexual identity, to see myself. But you built the chrome and glass and you can't see me. In this world I don't count unless I raise my fucking voice.

"WHY ARE YOU A FEMINIST?"

Recently I was asked this question in a very different context. Last month I was in Honduras and had the opportunity to interview a group of women called "*Las Amas de Casa*," or "The Mistresses of the Home" or "The Housewives." It is community group comprised of single mothers whose husbands immigrated illegally to the United States to find work. For the most part their husbands found work, new wives, and new families. *Las Amas de Casa* is a group of single mothers. They secure latrines for their homes, build schools, and organize technical training programs.

After a thousand different questions from me regarding the role of feminism in Honduras, the relevancy of academics, and who they would or would not accept money from, and under which circumstances, the group's leader, Gloria Reina Santos Montes, with a cold stare asked me why I am a feminist.

And this is what I said....

Feminism is about change, about a redistribution of power. It is about challenging the status quo. It is call for the redefinition of the family, the mosque, the temple, the church, the synagogue, and of love. Change is threatening to those of us who wield power and those who do not. And because it is threatening, it is electric and alive and powerful and I want to touch it.

And Gloria Reina Santos Montes stared at me, from her world that looked like Eden fixed between a garbage dump and a Coca-Cola billboard, and said, (and I paraphrase)....

"I don't care what you call it, I just want to feed my babies and maybe someday shit in a toilet."

Then the world stands still. The earth stops spinning, the sun shines in one single long ray and except for my pulse throbbing gently in my ears, silence is everywhere. For a wrinkle in time I'm breathless and speechless and I want to puke because no matter how many post-colonial, post-modern binary pedagogues I suck from the lily white asshole of some underexposed academic, YOU CAN'T THEORIZE BREAKFAST.

Hungry children are not concerned about political nuances.

Where is the value of my course in Strategic Adjustment Policy in this land where the American-owned Standard Fruit Company is mother's milk, the juice of life, fueling the Honduran economy while matricide pulses through the blood of the people? Who do I think I am in this wild west armed only with a university degree?

And Maria Reina Santos Montes and I lock eyes and I recognize what it is I have seen in her stare from the moment we met. She knows me. She was expecting my arma-ment of questions, my textbook sensitivity. She has merely been watching to see if I will recognize myself. If I will catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirrors that are her eyes.

And now that I have, what will I do? Will I escape from this parallel universe, slinking away, tail between my legs in search of a more comfortable reality? Will I return to fill my head with someone else's words? Until I forget the hot green stink of the earth and those omniscient eyes, my thoughts sterilized and sanitized, my brain rocked into an academic stupor by the embryonic lull of saniflush? Or perhaps I will go home to twist, bend and shape my words until, like bulimic consumption and eruption of meaning, I can purge my mixed-up self. And pass it on to you.

So as I stand before you, my bones racked with the ache of expulsion, perhaps we can build a bridge, or do something lyrical and metaphorical and uplifting. That will make us all feel better. Conflict resolution. Or closure, or some such thing.

Or maybe, for a brief moment, we will take a breath between the spewing forth of academic bile. Because if somebody says the word "problematic" one more time, I'm going to scream. A silent beat between syllables. In our ugly language, our long vowels that reek of imperialism. We will stop and shiver as a gust of reality makes this comfortably heated room seem cold. And know ourselves.

And now the shimmering edges between questions and answers become blurred, wavering in the stifling heat of revelation. And I'm still wondering....

WHY AM I A FEMINIST?

*Samantha Sacks is a recent graduate of York University, with an honours degree in English Literature and Women's Studies. She is an avid rock climber and inveterate traveller, having travelled extensively in South East Asia and Central America. She is currently in the Phillipines where she is planning to combine her interests to make documentaries on rock climbing, nature, and the status of women.*

## PHERYNE WILLIAMS THATCHER

### The Fire

I can't remember what I looked like,  
With no childhood photographs to show  
To either my children or me .....

My Father lit the kitchen wood stove  
In a drunken stupor. He left  
My Mother to sleep upstairs.

It was a two-storey house, circa 1910  
Unpainted grey, clapboard exterior,  
With original cedar shakes.

Within minutes, they said, engulfed in flames,  
Like a tinder torch; directly above  
The kitchen, my bedroom.

Mother fell from her window. Suffering  
Smoke inhalation and broken bones,  
She was rushed to The Toronto General.

Earlier, we'd had another horrible row.  
In defiance, I stomped out, spent the night  
With friends in Sprucedale.

Mom was six months recovering in hospital.  
She wrote, but she never came back to us,  
And Daddy soon spent the insurance.

*Pheryne Williams Thatcher is a teacher. She lives in Vancouver.*

## ELAINE RUTH MITCHELL

### For my daughter

The only good from the divorce  
for you  
are the loopholes in the dense pattern  
knitted by 25 generations  
(on both sides)  
the wool is unwinding  
your sweater looks as if it were bought  
in one of those shops in Kensington Market  
as if we don't give you a clothing allowance  
kind of embarrassing at a family party  
But light gets through the constellated gaps  
And your whole body can breathe

*Elaine Ruth Mitchell is a feminist and a teacher at an alternative high school. She has previously published some short stories, and has just started writing poetry.*