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Illusion of Empowerment: Choice Feminism as False Consciousness

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Abstract

Choice feminism is an orientation in feminist politics that recognizes women's individual choices to be potentially feminist, if given thought and made with political consciousness (Baumgardner and Richards 450). In this paper, I argue that choice feminism constitutes a form of false consciousness—a pseudo-feminism that (1) ignores the social and material contexts shaping women's decisions, (2) fetishizes choice itself as the sole determinant of feminism, (3) depoliticizes feminist discourse by collapsing structural critique into personal preference, and (4) appropriates the concept of "choice" to sustain patriarchal and capitalist interests.

False consciousness, drawn from Marxist theory, illustrates how individuals under capitalism misrecognize their exploitation as freedom by internalizing the ideology of the ruling class (Eyerman 44). Likewise, under neoliberal patriarchy, women are encouraged to view self-objectification, overwork, or compliance with beauty standards as acts of empowerment. The illusion of choice masks the reality that these "choices" ultimately serve patriarchal and market interests, legitimizing oppression by disguising it as agency.

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The Social Context of Choices

Individuals never choose in a vacuum, especially women in this social climate. Choice feminism has the tendency to ignore the context of an agent's assumptions, judgements, and even the sense of self being formed through the social, cultural, and economic structures that shape our world. Its appeal rests on its validation of women's choices so long as they have been given thought and made with political consciousness (Baumgardner and Richards 450). Yet, it overlooks the conditions of contexts within which choices arise.

For example, a Catholic woman raised within a conservative religious tradition may internalize certain beliefs about sexuality, motherhood, or marriage. Her choices, may it be to remain celibate before marriage or to oppose abortion, have the tendency to appear autonomous but are mediated through a lens of inherited social values. Unless she encounters alternative perspectives through dialogue and social interaction, her decision remains tethered to her upbringing's ideological constraints.

Moreover, what appears as a choice borne from individual freedom may actually be the internalization of patriarchal norms. Cosmetic surgery, as a case in point, is marketed to be "empowering" but capitalizes off of women's insecurities to conform to socially constructed beauty standards. The 'choice' to alter one's body, then, is not made in a vacuum; it is shaped by decades of social conditioning, media representation, and capitalist commodification of female insecurity. What seems to be an act of agency may, in fact, reflect the subtle coercion of patriarchal ideals disguised as empowerment.

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The Fetishization of Choice

Choice feminism posits choice to be the sole determinant of feminism. Moreover, the increased quantity of choices available to women, as compared to before, is an exceptional mark of progression in this framework. Yet, an increase in available options does not guarantee liberation if those options remain structured by patriarchal and capitalist ideology. Increased quantity does not necessitate quality, in terms of advancing feminism, as choices can still be mechanized for patriarchal and capitalistic interests.

Feminist freedom should be defined not just by the quantity of choices but by their relation to dismantling systemic inequality. For example, a woman's ability to choose between different forms of cosmetic surgery or self-objectifying labor does not constitute empowerment if both options reinforce beauty norms that subordinate women. As Nancy Fraser notes, neoliberalism has co-opted the language of feminism to promote individualism and market participation rather than collective emancipation (Fraser 9).

While social relations and contexts are structurally constrained, so too are the choices made within them. Choice feminism not only obscures the understanding of how choices arise, but also conceals the structural forces that shape and delimit those choices (i.e. surrogacy, sex work, cosmetic surgery, and more are often regarded as empowering rather than a patriarchal



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and/or a capitalistic manifestation and internalization). Choice arguments rest on the false premise that women enjoy unlimited freedom, when in reality their choices are structurally constrained.

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Depoliticization of Feminism

Choice feminism disregards a structural-level analysis of oppressive structures. While it lets women be, it also lets oppressive structures be. It tolerates the inability to criticize and deconstruct oppressive social systems and institutions. It reframes oppressive patriarchal practices as mere “personal choices” which further enable and maintain the patriarchal status quo. It also misleadingly suggests that since choices are individual, they have no social consequences; women are therefore relieved of responsibility for considering the broader implications of their decisions (Ferguson 250).

Choice feminism depoliticizes feminism itself. Sex work, as a case in point, is often associated with choice feminism because under the “choice” framework, participation in sex work is justified through exercising agency and personal choice. The choice to participate in sex work becomes analogous to any other personal choice. It debases the value of any other choices (i.e. sex work as patriarchal and capitalist) and reduces it as a personal feminist choice. When all choices are deemed equally feminist, feminism loses its capacity for critique (Thwaites 57). As Hirshman wrote, “[a] movement that stands for everything ultimately stands for nothing” (2). It creates tolerance that masquerades as inclusivity but functions against the very essence of feminism. It produces what political theorist Wendy Brown calls “wounded attachments,” wherein the language of freedom becomes bound to the very structures it seeks to escape (Brown 74).

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In choice feminism, the political becomes personal, and thus, private. However, what is personal for any other woman is also essentially political (Ferguson 247). Not because choices are individual does not mean they do not contribute to the politics and does not perpetuate existing oppressive structures. The social consequences of choices are obscured by the rhetoric of individualism. Moreover, criticizing sex work under choice feminism makes the critique appear more as a personal targeted remark to the agent rather than a critique against the oppressive social structures itself because it is a “choice” made personally by the agent.

The hegemony of choice is radically depoliticizing: it discourages agents from forming judgments about the value of different choices, it discourages them from giving a rational justification for the choices they make, it shuts down critical discussion about which choices should be valued and which choices are mere illusions (Ferguson 250). Depoliticization serves patriarchy and capitalism. It dissolves the collective energy of feminism into a diffuse celebration of personal satisfaction, preventing systemic critique and collective resistance.

Appropriation of Choice

The concept of ‘choice’ has been appropriated within liberal discourse to legitimize practices that ultimately reinforce patriarchal and capitalistic interests. Liberal discourse reframes acquiescence to patriarchal practices as “empowerment”. Within this ideology, women’s “freedom” is equated with their capacity to participate as consumers, workers, and entrepreneurs in the market economy.

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It uncritically embraces consumerism, and most problematically for the future of feminism, it deters women from being active in politics to improve childcare, public schools, and working conditions—all of which are deemed private matters. (Ferguson 250). Marx's concept of false consciousness provides a critical lens here: under capitalism, individuals misrecognize their exploitation as freedom, adopting the ideology of the ruling class that legitimizes the system itself (Eyerman 44). Similarly, under neoliberal patriarchy, women are encouraged to view self-objectification, overwork, or compliance with beauty standards as acts of empowerment. The illusion of choice conceals the fact that these "choices" primarily serve market and patriarchal interests. Herein, oppression against women is legitimized as it is disguised as agency. Capitalism and patriarchy benefits off of this by framing oppressive structures and norms as "empowering". For instance, sex work, cosmetic surgery, surrogacy and the like has been labeled as an expression of agency and bodily autonomy undermining its capacity to dehumanize and objectify women.

Choice feminism envisions a utopia with its expressions (Ferguson 250), it situates feminism outside of the politics. Yet, as this paper argues, everything personal is inherently political. What makes certain issues appear merely personal is the veil of privilege, which obscures the structural forces shaping those choices. Choices are and will always be a political illusion made to appropriate freedom to mechanize women to continue subscribing to the status quo. Moreover, this appropriation discourages collective struggle. If every woman's individual path is equally feminist, then there is no shared ground for solidarity or political reform

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(Thwaites 57). Issues are redefined as private problems to be solved through personal choice rather than political mobilization. The result is a depoliticized feminism that mirrors neoliberal rationality: atomized, market-driven, and fundamentally conservative.

Objections

The following section examines several objections that challenge the internal coherence of this critique, namely: (1) that the critique of choice feminism is itself a product of social structures, (2) that feminism must respect women's agency, and (3) that choice feminism represents an evolutionary step in destigmatizing women and feminism.

Choice Feminism Itself Is a Product of Social Structures

It could be argued that this critique is in and of itself a mere product of the same structures it wishes to collapse; there is no criteria to hold this critique privileged than the other as it is made within the same social structure. By claiming that women's choices are shaped by patriarchal and cultural contexts, the thesis of this critique risks collapsing into a form of contextual determinism, where no individual can be said to act autonomously or develop genuine political consciousness. If every belief and decision, including feminist critique, is shaped by external forces, then no one, including the critic, can claim a privileged standpoint from which to expose false consciousness.

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While this objection holds the potential self-defeating nature of structural critique, it conflates situatedness with determinism. To acknowledge that agents are socially situated is not to deny their capacity for critical reflection; rather, it situates that capacity within historically and materially specific conditions. Knowledge and agency are always situated yet it does not foreclose the possibility of critique. This is a key feature of standpoint epistemology, the recognition that marginalized perspectives can offer a more accurate view of social reality because of their location in terms of power and exclusion. The recognition of social and structural conditioning of choice is in and of itself an act of critical consciousness: one that is aware of its own conditioning and uses that awareness to question dominant ideologies.

Moreover, the objection's demand for a fully autonomous, context-free agency reinstates the very liberal individualism that feminism seeks to critique. Agency need not be understood as absolute independence from structure; it can be conceived as the capacity to act within and against those structures. As Judith Butler argues, agency is not the negation of power but its rearticulation—the ability to subvert and resignify existing norms from within them (18).

Respecting Women's Agency

It could be argued that even if choices are socially influenced, feminism requires respecting women's agency and capacity to make choices for themselves. Continuously questioning and critiquing women's choices might risk paternalism.

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While it is true that feminism reinforces respect and autonomy to women and their lives it should not disregard context and consequences. Reinforcing respect towards all choices that women make is counterproductive as it disregards contexts, choices, and the very social structure that shapes contexts and choices. To interrogate the conditions under which choices are made is not to deny agency but to contextualize it. True respect for women's agency requires acknowledging the structural limitations that shape it. Agency divorced from critique becomes complicity. For instance, when women voluntarily conform to oppressive beauty norms, they exercise agency, but that agency is conditioned by social expectations of femininity. To label this uncritically as empowerment risks validating oppression as choice.

Choice Feminism as a Step Toward Liberation

Arguably, choice feminism even though it has its flaws have been evolutionary in advancing feminist thought. It acknowledges individual autonomy and diversity further resisting dogmatism and validates multiple forms of female identity. Choice feminism's inclusivity paved the way for liberatory occupations and/or practices as well as the decriminalization of some of it (i.e. sex work).

While it is true that choice feminism acknowledges the plurality and the diverse potential there is for women, it overlooks pluralism without critique which could potentially relapse into relativism. Not every choice that women make can or should be considered feminist. A framework that lacks normative evaluation cannot distinguish between liberation and

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subjugation. If a choice contributes to the maintenance of sexism, no matter how voluntarily made, it cannot be feminist in substance. Moreover, while choice feminism's inclusivity is commendable, its refusal to make political distinctions undermines the emancipatory purpose of feminism itself.

Conclusion

Choice feminism operates as a form of false-consciousness: women are encouraged to view participation in patriarchal and capitalist systems as expressions of freedom, even as those systems exploit and constrain them. By centering the personal and ignoring the political, it reduces feminism to a politics of lifestyle and consumption. It mistakes self-expression for liberation and substitutes moral relativism for political critique.

It is not to invalidate herein, what choices are valid or not, the task here is to reconstruct what it means to be a feminist and what it means for choices to be feminist. Feminism must therefore move beyond “choice” as an end in itself. The task ahead is to reconstruct a politics grounded in solidarity, structural analysis, and the pursuit of collective freedom. Only then can feminism reclaim its radical promise: not to validate every choice women make, but to create a world where choices are no longer shaped by oppression.

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