

Literary Celebrity as Feminist Figure: Assessments of Twenty-First Century Feminism Through
the Role of the Author

by

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Abstract

The author has long been a public figure with influence over literary criticism, politics, and public opinion. In the twenty-first century, politics and political movements play out over the media landscape and celebrities or figures of influence use their popularity to negotiate such issues. This thesis examines the role of the author as celebrity with political influence in regards to twenty-first century feminism, using a case study model that considers the feminisms, works, and media perceptions of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rupi Kaur, and Marjane Satrapi. Through these case studies, a shared feminism emerges between the three authors: a feminism with the goals of visibility and empowerment for women. Placed in the context of other scholarship on feminist accountability, this form of feminism will be challenged and the roles of popular culture and of scholarship in promoting feminist goals will be addressed.

Chapter one addresses the multidisciplinary approach of the thesis, presenting three particular fields of study relevant and necessary to the case studies and broader analysis: transnational and intersectional feminist theories; discourse studies and cultural studies on mass media and social media; and literary celebrity and the role of celebrity in humanitarian or political issues.

Chapter two studies Rupi Kaur as an icon of social media and popular poetry, analyzing how the style of her poetry and her stylized persona project a feminism that consolidates the individual into the universal. The concept of metonymy and Kaur's metonymic representation of her readers and those of her identity defines her feminism.

Chapter three considers the tension between Marjane Satrapi's explicit disavowal of feminism while media and fans consider her and her work feminist. This case study ultimately demonstrates that popular feminism accommodates and accepts humanism while considering the cultural and individual reasons Satrapi rejects popular feminism that derives from the United States.

Chapter four considers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's total embrace by academic establishment, literary establishment, and popular culture. Adichie's close relationship to feminism defines her feminism, as well as a persona of likeability that nurtures her form of feminism and her profit from it.

Ultimately, the different feminisms represented by these three authors demonstrate the role of celebrity as gatekeeper between popular culture and feminism as a movement and scholastic area of study.

Keywords: literary celebrity, feminism, media, popular culture

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Introduction

As a child and a teenager, Emma Watson was my Hermione. As the bookish, quietly determined witch who helped Harry and Ron through their adventures, she seemed to reflect who I was and who I wanted to be. When the movie franchise concluded and Emma Watson moved on to work for the United Nations and launch the feminist campaign, HeforShe, she seemed to reflect the feminist identity that I hoped to embody. She even launched a digital feminist book club on goodreads.com titled “Our Shared Shelf.” She promoted reading, she promoted feminism, and she portrayed a deeply beloved character. For thirteen years of my twenty-one year life, Emma Watson was a role model to me.

Perhaps because of the personal position she held in my life, I only began to think critically about Watson’s politics and persona when I took a class on literature and human rights in college. We read *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, and I read an interview between Satrapi and Watson while researching for a paper. The interview is a question and answer style dialogue between Watson and Satrapi after Watson chose *Persepolis* for her monthly book on “Our Shared Shelf.” Satrapi made several debatable statements in that interview, such as “Your gender matters only when you are in love and when you are with your lover...The rest of the time, just behave like a human being.”¹ Watson’s responses did not seem to engage with the content of Satrapi’s statements, however. Instead, she responded with what seemed to me like generic statements: “What’s coming through, and what I really identify with, is that you really believe in human beings’ autonomy and their own innate power and ability to govern their circumstances.

¹ Marjane Satrapi, “Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi,” interview by Emma Watson, *Vogue*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

And I think that's awesome;" or "Yes, I agree girls and women have to be able to figure out ways to feel like we're more empowered."²

Who would disagree with women feeling empowered? Who would say they don't believe in the ability and power of human beings? But as a feminist icon for girls like me, I found myself asking why Emma Watson did not seem to genuinely engage with feminist debates or respond to Satrapi's precise points. These encounters embodied several elements of what I will study in this work: the role of celebrity in politics; the intimate position of celebrity in our lives; the international flow of feminisms across global differences; and the enabling of intimacy and political messaging through mass media. After reading that interview and recognizing how much Watson's words affected me, I realized in a new way that Watson embodied and espoused a specific form of feminism—specific to her, specific to her time period, specific to her platform—and that this form of feminism was spreading and affecting young women like myself because of her position of celebrity.

In this thesis, I will analyze the feminism of three celebrity authors to consider how social and mass media enables political activism as a form and function of celebrity. By depending on media sources and popular reactions for the case study of each author, I assert that academic study should treat popular media and popular opinion as legitimate and valuable primary sources. Through the study of such sources, the space of interaction between feminist celebrities and their followers emerges as a definitive feature of twenty-first century feminism as a whole. The authors of study all hold the unique author function of contemporary feminist literary celebrity, a function in which they serve as gatekeepers and intermediaries between consumers and

² Marjane Satrapi, "Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi," interview by Emma Watson, *Vogue*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

establishment—maintaining intimate relationships with both. The common feature between the feminisms of all three authors is their commitment to promoting visibility for women and increased understanding of women’s experiences, as well as promoting female empowerment. Ultimately, I will conclude that the promotion of visibility or empowerment feminism does not adequately and responsibly address gender inequality.

To contextualize and ground the role of mass media in enabling this intimate celebrity and this variety of celebrity political activism, some statistical realities of media use prove helpful. In research findings published by the American Press Institute on individuals ages 18-34 (often termed “millennials”), a study concluded that “82% of millennials get most of their news from online sources” and “69% of millennials get news at least once a day.”³ This news often arrived via social media: 88% of this age group reported getting news “regularly” from Facebook; 83% regularly got news from Youtube; and 50% used Instagram regularly as a news source.^{4 5} In other words, a majority of young adults use social media as a source of news. Other studies support that the use of multiple social media platforms among this age group also occurs at least once a day for the majority—if not more than once a day.⁶

While young Americans acquire their news from social media, they also demonstrate a distrust for consuming news and politics through it. When asked to respond to the question “I expect the news I see on social media will largely be accurate or largely be inaccurate,” 57%

³ “How Millennials Get News: Inside the habits of America’s first digital generation,” *American Press Institute*, March 16, 2016,

<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/millennials-news/>.

⁴ “How Millennials Get News: Inside the habits of America’s first digital generation,” *American Press Institute*, March 16, 2016.

⁵ “Millennials are hardly newsless, uninterested, or disengaged from news and the world around them,” *American Press Institute*, March 16, 2015,

<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/millennials-not-newsless/>.

⁶ Matt O’Brien and Barbara Ortutay, “Poll: Young Americans say online bullying a serious problem,” *Associated Press*, October 4, 2018, <https://apnews.com/f52ab056e47a4025ac8b10d67cca2949>.

responded that the news would largely be inaccurate.⁷ This implies that young Americans do not simply consume social media without critical thought, but rather, that they discriminate among different types of posts and media while they're scrolling. However, one feature in the media landscape that may interfere with our capacities as discerning consumers of media is the role of celebrity. Celebrity denotes credibility for many viewers. Because of the newly intimate position in the lives of fan—fans grappling with the credibility of the information they view—viewers might tacitly accept a celebrity's political ideology or stance without recognizing its position in larger dialogues. Because Emma Watson was a personal role model for me, I had accepted her politics without examining them fully.

In this way, for example, the particular type of celebrity of Marjane Satrapi can have a similar effect: the celebrity of an author. While the author was once paramount in textual interpretation or literary analysis, Foucault's 1969 essay "What is an Author?" and Barthes subsequent "The Death of Author" critiqued literary criticism that relied on interpreting the intentions and biographical information of the author. Foucault and Barthes recognized the influential role the author could have on the thinking of readers, provoking particular readings of texts based on the author's biographical information or opinions. While literary criticism developed methods of analysis that ignored or dealt with the author in conjunction with close reading, mass media created the possibility for authors to speak directly to their readers and recreate the influence of the author on her texts (as Satrapi does in her interview with *Vogue*). Barthes explained this phenomenon as the author "furnish[ing] a final signification" onto the

⁷ Katerina Eva Matsa and Elisa Shearer, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018," *Pew Research Center*, September 10, 2018, <http://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/>.

text.⁸ In the context of a celebrity mass media environment in which authors have access to multiple platforms to speak directly to their readers, the author can return to the power of the “author function” (a concept that will be further explained and explored in Chapter One) even as literary criticism tempers it. The politics authors espouse and promulgate are amplified by both celebrity and the renewed author function.

To study this author function and its relationship to feminism, this thesis will study three contemporary authors whose politics have been labeled as feminist by media and fans: Rupi Kaur; Marjane Satrapi; and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. All three authors are alive and under fifty, with Adichie at 41, Satrapi at 49, and Kaur at 26. While each author works in a different genre, every author writes on the lives of girls and women. While each author is not personally active on social media, every author participates in media conversations in some form. Additionally, the readers, viewers, and fans for these authors are heavily based in the millennial age group that is most active on social media.

Because these are contemporary authors working and living in our century, the material used to analyze their personas and their politics will be similarly contemporary. Particular works by the authors themselves will be presented, including *Persepolis* by Satrapi, *milk & honey* by Kaur, and *We Should All Be Feminists* by Adichie. The analysis of these works will contribute to understanding the intersection of the author’s own work and words, the author’s cultivated persona, and the perception of the author and her work. Several theoretical frameworks across disciplines will be utilized to examine the particular position of these authors as celebrities, writers, activists, and international figures. Chapter One will particularly focus on the importance

⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” originally published 1967, accessed online at <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/Gustafson/FILM%20162.W10/readings/barthes.death.pdf>.

of transnational and intersectional feminism, of the social media landscape, and of the idea of literary celebrity in approaching these authors. Because the authors are so contemporary, little scholarly literature exists about them; therefore, representations of them in popular media will be cited and studied.

To prepare for and contextualize the analysis of Kaur, Satrapi, and Adichie, the first chapter will present relevant theory and scholarship in the aforementioned areas of study: transnational and intersectional feminism, the social media landscape, and literary celebrity. Transnational feminism informs this study as it addresses the diasporic experience of these authors; they were born in Iran, India, and Nigeria, but currently reside in France, Canada, and the United States.⁹ Intersectional feminism necessarily complicates some elements of transnational feminism that neglect difference and provides a crucial approach to any feminist analysis. Analysis of the social media landscape adds another essential element to approaching feminist literary celebrity, informing the way in which ideas are dispersed and the way consumers engage with ideas and participate in dialogues. Finally, the study of literary celebrity acknowledges and analyzes how authors can interact with politics and how celebrity can stimulate this interaction.

Recognizing the wide variety of feminisms and the lack of a sole definition of feminism, the individual analysis of each author will determine the particular definition and version of feminism they embody, espouse, or encourage. Several questions will underlie the case studies: how does an author conceptualize feminism as a global or transnational phenomenon? How does she address her own position across categories of identity if she does at all? Does she address the

⁹ For the assurance of total clarity, Rupi Kaur was born in India and currently lives in Canada. Marjane Satrapi was born in Iran and currently lives in France. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria and currently lives in the United States.

differences between the feminisms of her birth country and her current country of residence? Individual analysis will also position each author within the broader tensions and debates within the feminist theory, media theory, and work on literary celebrity presented in Chapter One.

In the case of Rupi Kaur, the study of her extensive use of Instagram and Tumblr will demonstrate how her enormous fanbase can perform the act of self-mirroring through her media-oriented work. Through her claims to speaking for universal community beyond her own experience while engaging a confessional style of poetry, Kaur promotes a form of feminism that seeks to push women's voices and experiences into the mainstream. In doing so, Kaur espouses the idea that the female personal is the political; however, she does not adhere to the "personal" as representing her own experiences and politicizes the experiences of others in a personal poetic style. In doing so, she attempts to mediate her perception of a gap between the experiences of Southeast Asian women and women from Western countries. Kaur's feminism uses celebrity cultivated through social media as a metonymic practice for representing broader communities.

The feminism of Marjane Satrapi rejects celebrity as a form of metonymy, rather adhering to an individualistic approach that rejects feminism and embraces humanism—two terms that will be explored in contrast to each other in this section. Satrapi's practice of disavowing feminism and disregarding gender rejects the concept of the personal as political, ultimately embracing humanism dependent on globalization. By considering the designation of Satrapi and her work as feminist by popular media and figures, the practice of value-signaling arises as a way in which individuals like Satrapi can ascribe to feminist ideas in the abstract without promoting feminist actions.

Finally, the chapter on Adichie will explore the general consensus around her persona, her writing, and public perception of her feminism. In contrast to Satrapi, what Adichie says about herself as a feminist and writes about feminism align with public perception of her feminism. Tension arises, however, when considering the approachability or likeability of her feminism as it appears in popular culture. The likeability of her feminism indicates her close relationship to structures of power and clashes with other feminist discourse—rather than projecting the universal acceptability her feminism projects.

The conclusion will connect the feminisms of each author, return to the arguments made throughout the thesis, and consider the new and unique version of the author function that these authors possess. Celebrity, popular feminism, the cultivation of persona, and social media in the twenty-first century all create and modify this author function—an author function made visible by Kaur, Satrapi, and Adichie.

Chapter 1: Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

To analyze each individual author and extrapolate broader themes from these analyses, a general understanding of the theory, research, and debates surrounding my questions is necessary and useful. To put it another way, this chapter will identify the relevant conversations that the chapters to come will join and to which they will contribute. As previously mentioned, my particular questions exist at the intersection of multiple fields of study; and certainly a vast array of conversations in media studies, feminist studies, and literary criticism could apply to this project. This chapter will identify and explore just three areas of study, however, as they prove the most pertinent to this study of Adichie, Kaur, and Satrapi and twenty-first century feminism.

The first section of this chapter will present discourses on intersectional and transnational feminism as particular categories of feminism. The second section will consider the mass media landscape in which this feminism operates and how this media shapes engagement with political movements. Finally, the third section will introduce ideas on literary celebrity and the role of celebrity in humanitarian and political issues. The combination of these realms of scholarship and these analyses will provide the context for understanding how these authors function at the intersections of these fields, establishing a unique junction made possible because of the developments in these areas of study.

Feminism: Transnational *and* Intersectional

The field of feminist studies comprises many subfields just as the word feminism can take many modifiers to specify a more particular form, time period, or politics—popular feminism, second-wave feminism, liberal feminism, postcolonial feminism, to name a few. While many of these subsections of feminism and feminist studies could prove relevant, I find the ideas of transnational and intersectional feminism to apply most significantly to the analysis to come. Two particular reasons make transnational feminism particularly relevant for this work: the three authors I will study were born in India, Nigeria, and Iran and all moved to North America or Europe later in life; and all three authors hold a level of international fame and recognition. While many scholars would argue that all feminism should be intersectional feminism, I will identify and explain it as a particular category because the idea of multiple identities intersecting is explicitly essential for the work to come. Intersectional feminism also nuances the ideas of transnational feminism, an idea I will explain more.

The idea of transnational feminism grew from the recognition that women around the world and in many, if not most, countries experience discrimination based on their gender.¹⁰ A transnational feminist view is “based on the observation of one specific, persistent source of imbalance in a stunningly unfair world,” as author Charlotte Shane writes in her essay “No Wave Feminism.”¹¹ The idea also grew from the decentralization of the white, middle class, Western feminist and a rejection of the dominance of Western models of feminism. Transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes this when considering women of color in opposition to imperialism, colonialism, racism, and sexism, using the phrase the “common context of struggle.”¹² Transnational feminism initially signified a bringing in of feminist voices from countries and women that did not receive the recognition or attention that Western feminists did.

The ways in which transnational feminism has been complicated are ways in which intersectional feminism becomes an essential partner concept. Because of its emphasis and reliance on global structures and globalization, critics have criticised transnational feminism for its lack of emphasis on local communities and questioned whether the concept really accommodates difference. While gender can be a unifying category, differences of economic status, race, education, geography, and culture can all be categories of inequality that complicate a singular focus on gender as a source of inequality.

¹⁰ A more thorough summary of the different aspects of transnational feminist theory can be found in the Oxford Bibliographies in the entry “Transnational Feminism” by Asha Nadkarni. My overview of it does not intend to present a comprehensive one, but to present the details most relevant to my own analysis.

¹¹ Charlotte Shane, “No Wave Feminism” in *Can We All Be Feminists?*, ed. June Eric-Udorie (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 5.

¹² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 7.

Intersectional feminism emerged from this recognition of the interrelated nature of all aspects of identity. Feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw created the term intersectionality in 1989 as “an attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should—highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand.”¹³

¹⁴ The term gave voice to both a way in which feminists of differing identities could connect and a method of critique for feminism that excluded considerations of aspects of identity besides gender and reinforced other structures of inequality. For the purpose of my analysis, intersectional and transnational feminism are categories that ask particular questions and create particular modes of study—questioning the authors’ positions in relation to global feminism, to multiple categories of identity, to differences across feminisms, to the perpetuation or fight against inequality.

The State of the Media Landscape

A study of twenty-first century feminism must contend with twenty-first century media. As referenced in the introduction, social media, technology, and widespread accessibility to the internet in the United States all affect how individuals interact with politics. Many individuals if not the majority of individuals turn to social media for news and political conversations. This

¹³ *Can We All Be Feminists?*, ed. June Eric-Udorie (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), xvi-xvii.

¹⁴ As writer and theorist Audre Lorde questions in her seminal work *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, “If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?” From *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-114.

section will present certain relevant features of this phenomenon and some of the relevant research around it with an emphasis on social media as opposed to mass journalistic media.¹⁵ First, this includes consideration of media as a forum for political discourse and the modes of interaction in such a forum. Second, this includes consideration of the landscape of media and the internet—not as a neutral, democratic forum or a “global village,” but a complex web of structures and power.¹⁶

On a micro-level, social media alters how people interact and express themselves; subsequently, this alters how people interact with political ideas and express their own. The field of discourse studies or discourse analysis has contributed significantly to an understanding of how social media changes patterns of language and how social media creates a particular context for discourse. As a partner of sorts to linguistic analysis, discourse analysis considers the use of language between people and contextualizes communicative language to better understand it. Taking a discursive approach to social media and mass media, particular features arise as definitive of context—and subsequently, altering how an individual might engage in political discourse or the discourse of feminism. First, social media is immediate and intimate to the average user in the United States with “Roughly three-quarters of Facebook users—and around six-in-ten Snapchat and Instagram users—visit[ing] each site daily.”¹⁷ Social media and mass

¹⁵ The decision to focus on social media as opposed to mass media like television or journalistic news sources stems from its relevance to the case studies and its predominance as a news source for the 18-34 year old age group.

¹⁶ I draw heavily from “What is a discourse approach to Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and other social media: connecting with other academic fields?” by Gwen Bouvier. Bouvier argues for discourse studies engaging with other disciplines and emphasizes a multicultural approach; she also does an adept job of summarizing a broad scope of research and distilling it into key areas of interest. I comment on a few of these categories here, but any queries of further detail or depth should reference her full article: Gwen Bouvier, “What is a discourse approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media: connecting with other academic fields?”, *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 10:2, 149-162.

¹⁷ Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2018,” *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>.

media can remain a constant presence in the life of an individual, and they are accessible any time of day for any length of time. As studies of social media have established, a dichotomy of an individual's online and offline life is difficult to establish, unproductive when considering iterations of individual identity, and ultimately inaccurate.¹⁸

Regarding identity and identity construction, the interaction between online and offline lives proves useful when considering how social media platforms provide opportunities for self-construction and self-presentation. Users can cultivate a persona through tweets, posts, photos, likes, and comments, creating a narrative of themselves that might diverge from their behaviors offline. This creates the opportunity to indicate a support for individuals, ideas, or values that would not otherwise be indicated in real life. The concept of value or virtue signaling characterizes this phenomenon, a term for when an individual indicates a value without acting in accordance with it or embodying it. Social media provides the perfect opportunity for individuals to assert what they think or believe without realizing that thought or belief in their offline lives.

Part of the limitation of social media in inciting action could lie in its limited modes of expressing ideas and complexity. While certain platforms and certainly some forms of mass media provide opportunities for longer or more complex writing, many forms of social media rely on instantaneous or limited modes of interaction. Across platforms, liking is a means of interacting with others that can occur in seconds. While debates may arise in the comments sections, any continued debate between users occurs at a slow pace relative to a conversation in person. Comments or ideas expressed on social media do not require follow up or continued engagement with a topic or debate; the user can disengage with no consequence. Thus, the

¹⁸ Gwen Bouvier, "What is a discourse approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media: connecting with other academic fields?", *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 10:2, 149-162.

context of social media creates an accessible platform for self-expression and identification without necessarily creating accountability. This is not to say that actions on social media lack consequences or that people are not held accountable for their actions on social media. This is to say that the features of social media create a context that encourages continual interaction and spectatorship without requiring engagement or commitment—nor requiring users to stand by what they say.

“Global Village”?

Now that particular features of the social media landscape have been established, the geographic positioning of this landscape can be considered. Since the rise of social media, scholars, cultural critics, and individuals have raised questions surrounding its capabilities as a democratizing forum, a source of information and learning, and a tool for cross-cultural interaction. While social media might appear equally accessible across countries, cultures, and socioeconomic status, many scholars have argued just the opposite. Rather than considering social media as a “global village” in which all people can speak and engage, social media represents a complex network reflective of preexisting power structures and biases in the flow and distribution of information.

As the recent book *Whose Global Village?* by Ramesh Srinivasan establishes in its introduction, “The new technology revolution is neither global nor cross-cultural. It is primarily produced and shaped by powerful corporations and institutions from Europe and North America, with various collaborations across the world.”¹⁹ Indeed, the Internet is itself a by-product of the

¹⁹ Ramesh Srinivasan, *Whose Global Village?* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 3.

efforts of the United States Defense Department, the Pentagon, and the National Science Foundation.²⁰ Social media networks are in fact commercial endeavors with “commercial priorities” based in Western countries, producing an “asymmetric diffusion” of ideas because of this interaction of social media, technology, and the economics of globalization. Rather than thinking of social media and its partner technologies as neutral platforms or conduits, Srinivasan advocates for thinking of social media as constructed by particular people in particular organizations that can influence a user’s experience on social media based on their own values and ideas. When considering the aforementioned features such as the modes of interaction on social media, an understanding of social media as crafted and influenced by this construction becomes apparent.

Rather than a global village model where each individual remains on equal footing, social media represents constructed apparatuses that favor certain modes of interaction. After this assessment is the opportune moment to address this work’s focus on social media and mass media deriving from the United States and media in English. Works like Srinivasan’s consider the cross-cultural consequences of technology and media in a way that this work can’t, and they also address the ways in which technology and social media affect populations with more limited access to them. Additionally, the three authors of study heavily participate in popular culture and popular media within the United States. The limitation of scope to consider this culture and media does not indicate a lack of interest or a lack of importance for considering the media cultures of other countries; rather, it addresses one of the dominant realms of popularity of these authors while adhering to a reasonable breadth of study.

²⁰ Roberto Simanowski, *Waste: A New Media Primer*, trans. Amanda Demarco and Susan H. Gillespie (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), x-xi.

Literary Celebrity

Particularly when disciplines like history have taken a turn towards popular and public history that focus on experiences and narratives of common individuals, the question of why a study of feminism should focus on celebrities arises. To address this question and to consider the particular position of contemporary literary celebrity, this section will present significant factors to keep in mind when approaching the subject of literary celebrity, introduce the concept of the author function, and present scholarship on the role of celebrity in humanitarian efforts and politics. As Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid, and Ann Steiner argue in an article for the journal *Celebrity Studies* published in 2014, “The concept of celebrity certainly deserves attention in literary studies. The anti-biographical stance towards the author figure is no longer tenable in today’s media-saturated society. The public *persona* of an author is undoubtedly an important part of his or her authorship.”²¹ This section addresses why I support this claim and how the particular subfields I outline within the general study of celebrity can facilitate the study of the positions of the three celebrity authors in the case studies to come.

To begin, how does one define celebrity? Certainly many people living within cultures with celebrity might have intuitive responses to this question; but scholars have identified specific approaches to understanding the phenomenon of celebrity that can valuably complicate those initial responses. In an article for the journal *Celebrity Studies* in 2014, Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid, and Ann Steiner outline three factors to complicate an automatic idea of

²¹ Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid, and Ann Steiner, “Literary celebrity reconsidered,” *Celebrity Studies* vol. 5, issue 1-2 (April 2014).

celebrity: the level and kind of cultural capital a celebrity holds; the geographic reach and influence of a celebrity; and an awareness of how the function of literary celebrity has changed over time (what they describe as a “diachronic approach”).²² All of these considerations identify celebrity as dependent on context. Perhaps this seems self-evident, but celebrities hold different levels of influence based on their cultural capital—a capital accrued through “visibility and recognition”—that in today’s media-saturated society is in high demand.”²³ Geographic considerations affect this visibility and recognition, particularly when considering the prevalence of social media in certain regions for certain people and its lack of presence in certain regions and for certain people.²⁴

The use of a diachronic approach to the concept of celebrity asserts that celebrity takes on different forms in different periods. In the study of literary celebrity, this takes on a particular importance as the role of the author in relation to society and in relation to her work has shifted across history—and relatively recently. Older schools of literary criticism focused on the history of the work and depended on the author’s biographical information for interpretation of the work. The movement of New Criticism that arose post-World War I in the United States and in Britain advocated for a divorce of the work from its author and for close reading of the text as a self-contained unit that informs understanding of its meaning. Post-structuralist critics Barthes and Foucault each wrote specific criticism in the 1960s on the role of the author in relation to the author’s writing and public reception of this work, taking a stance aligned with the anti-biographical ideas of the New Critics.

²² Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid, and Ann Steiner, “Literary celebrity reconsidered,” *Celebrity Studies* vol. 5, issue 1-2 (April 2014).

²³ Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid, and Ann Steiner, “Literary celebrity reconsidered,” *Celebrity Studies* vol. 5, issue 1-2 (April 2014).

²⁴ *Whose Global Village?* by Ramesh Srinivasan addresses this phenomenon.

In particular, Foucault's idea of the author function aids the study of the author in relation to culture and in relation to their work. Foucault does not consider the author as synonymous with the individual, but advocates for a separation of the author from the individual to better understand how the idea of the author influences discourse surrounding a work. Foucault takes the approach of New Criticism in encouraging the reading of text in and of itself, an approach that scholars have nuanced, complicated, and problematized for its neglect of historical context. Nonetheless, his idea of the author as a function of the discourse surrounding a work transitions smoothly into the study of celebrity and literary celebrity. Literary studies does not have to depend on a binary of reading with biographical context or performing close reading, but can consider how the author function and the author's status as a celebrity might abstract or alter the meaning of a work and the meaning of the author's persona. Celebrity authors can become signs—in the case of the authors studied in this work, signs of contemporary feminism—abstracted or interpreted by their audience to take on new meaning.

In this way, Adichie, Kaur, and Satrapi join the history of female authors that take on a particular function because of their gender and their writing. The term “poetess,” a term originally associated with female poets of the Victorian era, has come under more critical attention lately for how it denotes a particular form of author function. In her book *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* published in 2017, Tricia Lootens analyzes the attributes that constructed the author function of the popular poetess—particularly as the poetess operated at the intersection of politics, race, patriotism, poetics, and femininity.²⁵ I raise Lootens' work to illustrate the history of gender and politics

²⁵ Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

affecting the position of authors in society, as well as to affirm the value of analyzing the role of authors in such a manner in a variety of historical periods.

As quoted at the beginning of this section, the rise of a media-saturated society in the 1990s in the United States demands the study of celebrity and the role of the author. The role of contemporary celebrity in politics has been particularly analyzed in the fields of communication studies and human rights. In particular, Susan Hopkins' article "UN Celebrity 'It' girls as public relations-ised humanitarianism" in 2017 addresses the role of celebrities like Emma Watson, Angelina Jolie, and Nicole Kidman in working for humanitarian causes and for the United Nations. Hopkins argues:

...that feminist celebrity activists may inadvertently contradict the cause of global gender equality by operating within the limits of celebrity publicity images and discourses.

Moreover, the deployment of celebrity women, who have built their vast wealth and global influence through the commodification of Western ideals of beauty and femininity, betrays an approach to humanitarianism, which is grounded in the intersection of neocolonial global capitalism, liberal feminism and the ethics of competitive individualism.

The authors of the case studies to come can operate in different ways, perhaps, than just publicity or celebrity—namely, through their own writing and their own statements—but the idea of operating within or in close proximity to structures of power will prove important when considering the feminism of each author.

To prepare for the analysis in the case studies to follow, each of the sections in this chapter has raised a variety of scholarship from a variety of disciplines and fields. Considering

feminism, media studies, and celebrity primes the area of analysis of Kaur, Satrapi, and Adichie, preparing to question the versions of literary celebrity and feminism these women espouse and embody. The case studies will identify the particular locus of each celebrity author within this complex landscape of multiple forms of feminism, social media, history, activism, and celebrity. Each case study will identify the author's particular function and relate this function to the role of celebrity in contemporary feminism.

Chapter 2: Rupi Kaur: Social Media Structured Metonymy

Before becoming an acclaimed poetess of the Instagram age—“The Instagram Poet Outselling Homer Ten to One”—Rupi Kaur posted some grainy, low-resolution photos on the platform as a project for a visual rhetoric course her last year in college.^{26 27} Unobtrusive in their colors and their depictions of everyday scenes, the photographs potentially startle because of their presentations of menstrual blood. “The goal [of the photographs],” she states on her website, “was to challenge a taboo, tell a story without the use of words”—since “communities shun this natural process” and “some [communities] are more comfortable with the pornification of women, the sexualization of women, the violence and degradation of women than this.”²⁸

Instagram was perhaps one of those communities; it removed these photos from Kaur's profile not just once, but again after she reposted them. While Instagram ultimately apologized for the action and revised its policies, one outcome could not be reversed or altered: Kaur became “an accidental icon of a feminist movement” and the center of extensive international

²⁶ Molly Fischer, “Profile: Rupi Kaur, The Instagram Poet Outselling Homer Ten to One,” *The Cut*, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/10/profile-rupi-kaur-author-of-milk-and-honey.html>.

²⁷ “Period,” Rupi Kaur's author website, <https://rupikaur.com/period/>.

²⁸ “Period,” Rupi Kaur, <https://rupikaur.com/period/>.

media attention.^{29 30 31} Her medium transitioned from images to words as she criticized Instagram on Tumblr and Facebook, stating “...they want to censor all of that pain. Experience. Learning. No. Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is leaking. We will not be censored.”³² Instagram’s rejection of Kaur’s photographs revealed the conflict she aimed to demonstrate and challenge: a conflict in which authority or culture or society (she did not specify the “they” in her Facebook post) actively excludes female reality from the mainstream.

The mainstream became the space Kaur eventually dominated to an extreme level. Kaur initially self-published her first book, *milk & honey*, before its publication in 2015 by Andrews McMeel Publishing.³³ The book sold more than 2.5 million copies, remained on the New York Times bestseller list for more than 77 weeks, media attention on Kaur persisted, and her Instagram follower count kept climbing (at the moment of this writing, it sits at 3.1 million followers).^{34 35 36 37} Kaur was called everything from “the voice of her generation” to “the patron

²⁹ Caitlin Dewey, “Why did Instagram censor this photo of a fully clothed woman on her period?”, *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/03/27/why-did-instagram-censor-this-photo-of-a-fully-clothed-woman-on-her-period/?utm_term=.5362b5f56025.

³⁰ Brogan Driscoll, “Feminist Artist Rupri Kaur, Whose Period Photograph Was Removed from Instagram: ‘Men Need to See My Work Most,’” *Huffington Post UK*, July 23, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/07/23/rupi-kaur-instagram-censorship-artist-period-milk-and-honey_n_7836108.html?guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnLw&guce_referrer_cs=-FAbP4IBJfq13IVgMSOCg&guccounter=2.

³¹ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupri Kaur’s Poetry,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaur-poetry>.

³² Mallika Rao, “About that Period Photo That Broke the Internet,” *HuffPost*, May 6, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/06/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662.html.

³³ Worth noting is the general disdain for self-published books among those in the literary world. Self-published books are often thought of as less polished or less valuable since no editor at a publishing house chose and edited them (a stereotype, perhaps, not an absolute).

³⁴ Nilanjana Roy, “Voices of the new ‘Instagram poets,’” *Financial Times*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/34433034-1651-11e8-9e9c-25c814761640>.

³⁵ Carl Wilson, “Why Rupri Kaur and Her Peers Are the Most Popular Poets in the World,” *The New York Times*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/books/review/rupi-kaur-instapoets.html>.

³⁶ Tariro Mzezewa, “Rupri Kaur is Kicking Down the Doors of Publishing,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/fashion/rupi-kaur-poetry-the-sun-and-her-flowers.html>.

³⁷ Rupri Kaur’s Instagram account, first accessed in September 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/ruprikaur/>.

saint of millennial heartbreak” to the “the poet every woman needs to read” to the “Queen of the ‘Instapoets.’”^{38 39 40}

After the media recognition of Kaur’s profound popularity and renown came explanations on and puzzling over it. As a *New York Times* book reviewer put it, “Kaur is the kind of poet who prompts heated polemics, pro and con, from people you never otherwise hear mention poetry, because among other things she is young, female, from a Punjabi-Sikh immigrant family, relatively uncredentialed and insanely successful.”⁴¹ What made this poet—barely in her twenties, using the most simple of prose style—so much more popular than poets of the academy or seasoned poets or lyrical poets or poets that wouldn’t consider “every revolution starts and ends with his lips” a complete poem?⁴²

This chapter addresses three features of Kaur’s poetry—its relatability, its accessibility, and its instantaneousness—as features that feed into Kaur’s form of feminism. Kaur perfectly suits her work to Instagram and to her audience, an audience dominated by young women. Her use of Instagram and Tumblr allows her fanbase to perform the act of self-mirroring through her work; self-mirroring describes the way a viewer or consumer recognizes can recognize herself and her own experiences in Kaur’s work, projecting herself in all her unique experiences and complexity onto the sole figure of Kaur. Through the features of her poetry and her use of Instagram as a platform for intimate personal narratives, Kaur creates a feminism that mediates

³⁸ Danielle Groen, “How Rupri Kaur Became the Voice of Her Generation,” *Flare*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.flare.com/tv-movies/rupi-kaur-milk-and-honey-the-voice-of-her-generation/>.

³⁹ Erin Spencer, “Rupi Kaur: The Poet Every Woman Needs to Read,” *HuffPost*, January 22, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/erin-spencer/the-poet-every-woman-needs-to-read_b_6193740.html.

⁴⁰ Shannon Carlin, “Meet Rupri Kaur, Queen of the ‘Instapoets,’” *Rolling Stone*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/meet-rupi-kaur-queen-of-the-instapoets-129262/>.

⁴¹ Carl Wilson, “Why Rupri Kaur and Her Peers Are the Most Popular Poets in the World,” *The New York Times*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/books/review/rupi-kaur-instapoets.html>.

⁴² Rupri Kaur, *milk & honey* (Kansas City, Missouri: Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2015), 48.

community and diasporic identity through singular narrative and confessional style poetry. In doing so, Kaur promotes a form of feminism that seeks to push women's voices and experiences into the mainstream and declares the personal as public and political. Kaur's metonymic practice of using celebrity cultivated through social media to represent broader communities becomes a way in which she represents the "personal" of others and politicizes their experiences in a personal poetic style.

Relatability, Accessibility, and Instantaneousness

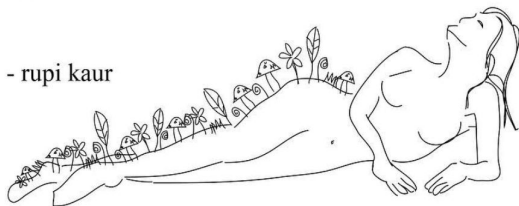
To reach this consideration of Kaur's feminism, the features of her poetry must first be established. While media speculation identifies these features as reasons for her popularity, this chapter will designate these features as directly related to the features of Kaur's feminism. To provide an idea of Kaur's poetic style and to establish its features, a close reading of a poem

from *milk & honey* proves useful.

The poem (to the left) is accompanied by a hand drawing done by Kaur herself. While the poem was published in print in *milk & honey*, Kaur also posted the photo on Instagram as it appears here; this particular poem received 301,129 likes.⁴³ The lines are short and sparse, and the poem's metaphor of the female body as a place the boy visits but does not inhabit is easily understood. The

the next time he
points out the
hair on your legs is
growing back remind
that boy your body
is not his home
he is a guest
warn him to
never outstep
his welcome
again

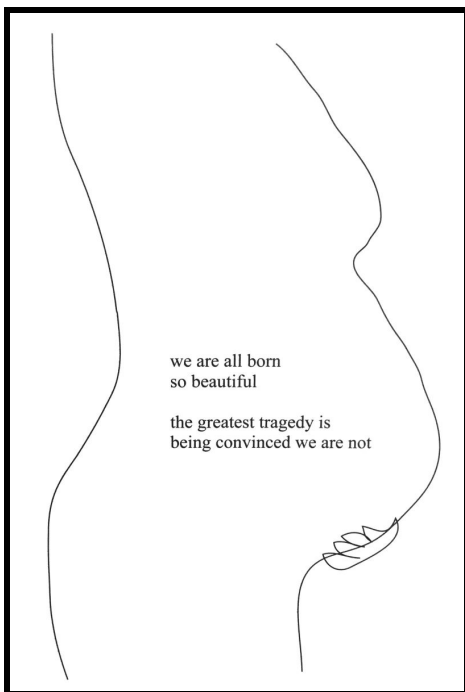
- rupi kaur



⁴³ The image to the left is Figure I, Rupi Kaur's Instagram post of poem originally posted August 8, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmPSzxYgEPG/>.

poem uses metaphor to address the speaker's attitude towards a male opinion of the female body, and the drawing of plants and flowers on the woman's leg equates her leg hair to natural growth. The speaker uses the second person "your" as if providing instruction to the reader as to how she should deal with a boy commenting on her body. The speaker is also not unknown; Kaur signs the poem with her own name, taking ownership of the words and the poem's statement.

Several features of this poem are emblematic of Kaur's work overall: her use of line drawings to accompany words; her short, sparse lines; her use of natural metaphors; her focus on male and female relationships and power dynamics; and her personal ownership of the poems as



her own direct statements. These features directly relate to the features of Kaur's work as it appears on social media and its overwhelming popularity: its relatability, its accessibility, and its instantaneousness. All of these features function particularly for a young, female audience.⁴⁴

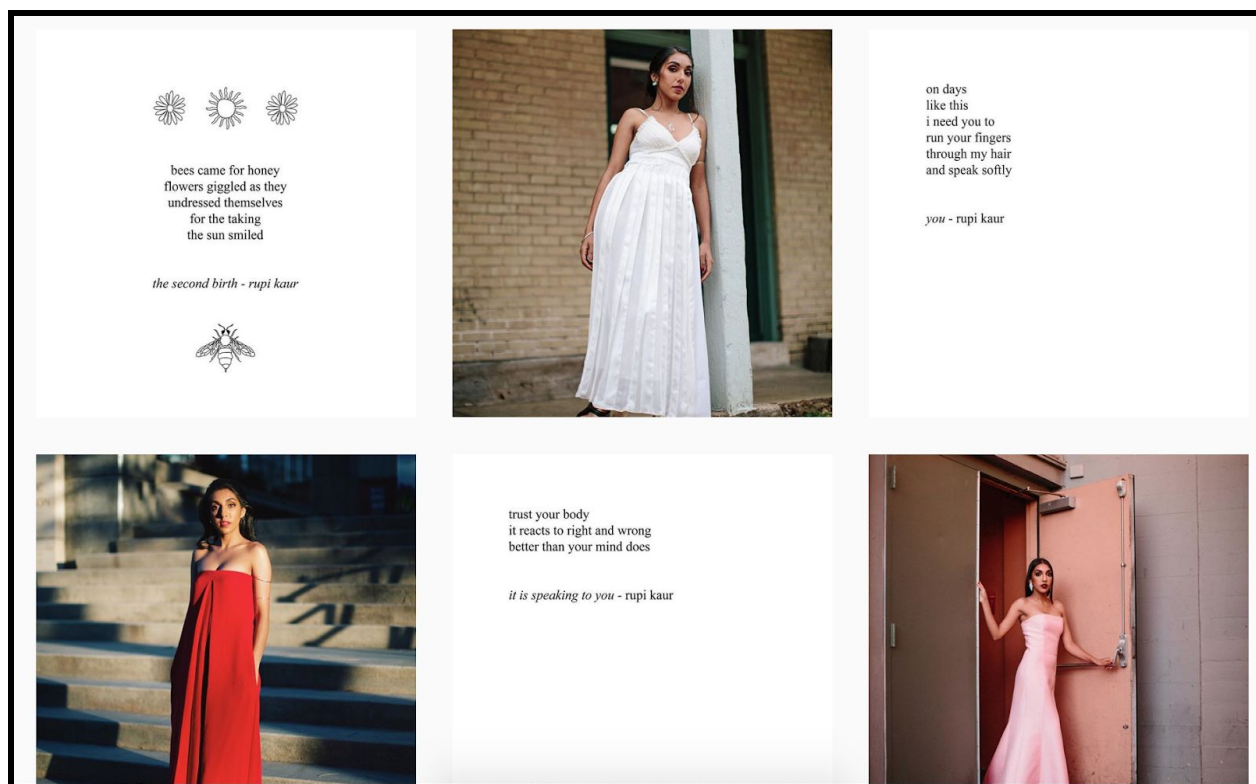
Kaur's poetry is relatable because of its subject matter and presentation. It feels confessional as it handles universal experiences of hurt, love, heartbreak, healing, and female experiences of gender inequality. Kaur indicates in

interviews that the confessional, journalistic tone of her work was in fact its source: "I wasn't trying to write a book," said Kaur, "...I was posting stuff online just because it made me feel relieved—as a way of getting things off my chest."⁴⁵ The use of line drawings to accompany the

⁴⁴ The image to the left is Figure II from Rupi Kaur's *milk & honey* (also retrievable from her Instagram).

⁴⁵ Rob Walker, "The young 'Instapoet' Rupi Kaur: from social media star to bestselling writer," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2017,

poems creates another point of visual relatability for the reader, depicting common images in simple forms that visually connect the reader to the thought of the poem. The subject matter is familiar—particularly for female readers—and the style is familiar.⁴⁶



In addition to the relatable nature of Kaur’s poetry, her poetry is accessible to the young women that would relate to it because of social media. Kaur herself has explicitly said as much: “Instagram makes my work so accessible and I was able to build a readership,” and “My book would have never been published without social media.”⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ Considering 77 percent of Americans own a smartphone that presumably supports social media capabilities, these

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/27/rupi-kaur-i-dont-fit-age-race-class-of-bestselling-poet-milk-and-honey>.

⁴⁶ The image below is Figure III, a screenshot of Rupi Kaur’s Instagram grid.

⁴⁷ Tariro Mzezewa, “Rupi Kaur is Kicking Down the Doors of Publishing,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/fashion/rupi-kaur-poetry-the-sun-and-her-flowers.html>.

⁴⁸ Rob Walker, “The young ‘Instapoet’ Rupi Kaur.”

statements may very well prove true.⁴⁹ When Kaur announced the publication of her second collection, *the sun and her flowers*, she did so on Instagram through a series of images. Each garnered over 100,000 likes.⁵⁰ Her Instagram also strikes an ideal aesthetic similar to popular fashion bloggers on Instagram in using a tiled structure for her feed—an alternating pattern of stylized photos of herself with her work.

Finally, her poetry tailors to social media in its instantaneousness. Her poems do not rely on abstractions or unrecognizable metaphors; as previously mentioned, her common metaphors are of natural images like the sun, sunflowers, butterflies, and the sky. Kaur has indicated a sense of self-awareness in this regard: “People aren’t used to poetry that’s so easy and simple.”⁵¹ Her poems remain short, most under a page long and never more than two pages; often a poem will contain one single sentence broken up across lines. This style perfectly suits reading on social media: the reader can read the poem and understand its content or its meaning (an understanding further facilitated by her inclusion of her drawings). While this has drawn critique of her work as not fulfilling the conventions of poetry as an art form, it certainly allows followers on social media to interact with her work and decide if they like it or not—and decide to literally like it or not—without extensive parsing out of complex language and without the pressure of academic analysis or an academic “reading” of the poetry.

⁴⁹ “Mobile Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, February 5, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/>.

⁵⁰ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur’s Poetry,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaur-poetry>.

⁵¹ Rob Walker, “The young ‘Instapoet’ Rupi Kaur: from social media star to bestselling writer.” <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/27/rupi-kaur-i-dont-fit-age-race-class-of-best-selling-poet-milk-and-honey>.

Metonymic Representation: Making the Universal Her Personal

The contemporary nature of Kaur means scholarship has not caught up, and more measured, extensive criticism of Kaur and her poetry is sparse. The best available criticism when considering Kaur's mediation of identities and feminisms across geography comes from Chiara Giovanni, a PhD candidate in comparative literature at Stanford University—and the sole person cited under “controversies” on Kaur's Wikipedia page.^{52 53} Giovanni's piece “The Problem With Rupi Kaur's Poetry” addresses Kaur's use of trauma and abuse as personal subject material.⁵⁴

Giovanni challenges how Kaur pairs her personal, subjective voice with narratives on the collective abuse suffered by women and South Asian women in particular. Giovanni remarks on Kaur's collective perception and communication of trauma and abuse, citing the FAQ section on Kaur's website that describes this collective nature by saying “we know sexual violence intimately. we experience alarming rates of rape. from thousands of years of shame and oppression. from the community and from colonizer after colonizer.”⁵⁵ Coupled with the vagueness of Kaur's poetry that allows readers to project themselves onto it, Giovanni argues, Kaur creates a perceived universality that other minority writers interpreting their own personal experiences of trauma and abuse are not granted. Rather, these minority writers are typically marginalized for being overly explicit regarding their personal experiences of trauma, abuse, or discrimination.

⁵² Tariro Mzezewa, “Rupi Kaur is Kicking Down the Doors of Publishing,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/fashion/rupi-kaur-poetry-the-sun-and-her-flowers.html>.

⁵³ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur's Poetry,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaur-poetry>.

⁵⁴ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur's Poetry.”

⁵⁵ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur's Poetry,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaur-poetry>.

This characteristic of Kaur’s work creates a point of tension within her feminism; while Kaur claims a deep personal relationship with her work, she also intends for it to speak for thousands of women in a different geographical location and culture than the one in which she has lived for most of her life. Through her work and her own statements, Kaur claims a feminism that uses privileged platforms to speak for the experiences of women in suffering—even and especially when these women do not speak for themselves in the public media. Kaur lays great claim to personal narrative in her work and in her statements on her work, describing *milk & honey* as her “baby” and “writing her ‘most honest act of living.’”⁵⁶ Conversely, Kaur uses a collective “we” when describing colonial violence towards women in Southeast Asia, saying “our trauma escapes the confines of our times. We’re not just healing from what’s been inflicted onto us as children. My experiences have happened to my mother and her mother and her mother before that. It is generations of pain embedded into our souls.”⁵⁷ While the idea of generations of trauma is widely studied and accepted, Kaur’s own status as a survivor of such trauma remains ambiguous. What remains certain is her intent to represent and speak for the collective of women that have suffered trauma and abuse.

Kaur’s feminism, then, does not seek to accommodate the difference between herself or her mother or her grandmother or women in Southeast Asia. Rather, it seeks to coalesce these narratives into an almost universally-relatable narrative that the average young woman on Instagram could identify with. Kaur’s feminism identifies a universal struggle with gender inequality as the foundation of a female collective—or in this case, her audience as a collective. Giovanni criticizes this reduction of complex narratives as a way Kaur can market to her two

⁵⁶ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur’s Poetry.”

⁵⁷ Rupi Kaur’s “frequently asked questions” page on her author website, <https://rupikaur.com/faq/#writing>.

main audiences, “white Westerners...and her loyal grassroots fan base that includes a large contingent of young people of color across the world.”⁵⁸ Giovanni raises the question of responsibility, however, acknowledging that Kaur might simply be reacting to a Western literary market that demands “confessional writing that is colored by just the right amount of postcolonial authenticity, ensuring that it is exotic enough to be attractive without making white Western readers uncomfortable.”⁵⁹

My analysis of Kaur’s approach to difference and her poetic style’s connection to social media supports Giovanni’s reading that Kaur neglects difference in favor of accessibility and popularity. While commenting on her intentions proves difficult, her style and persona fit the demand for more accessible, “higher” media like poetry that can be accessed through more common media like social media. Kaur’s approach to feminism is an author function that actively consolidates the meaning of her work with her authorial persona. In doing so, she asserts her experience and her persona can be considered as universal. Kaur’s reorientation of the universal simultaneously occurs with her financial and personal gain, coming off as motivated more by personal benefit than by consideration of the collective of voices for which she attempts to speak. However, Giovanni’s point about Kaur finding a way to enter the Western literary market raises serious questions regarding the responsibility of literary establishment; in other words, did the demand created by consumers and literary establishment influence Kaur’s attempts at universalization? This idea of the responsibility of authority and audience will be returned to in the conclusion as Kaur is certainly not alone in attempting to create a universal to

⁵⁸ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur’s Poetry,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaurs-poetry>.

⁵⁹ Chiara Giovanni, “The Problem With Rupi Kaur’s Poetry.”

connect with a diversity of individuals. The next chapter will analyze Satrapi's form of universalizing politics: humanism.

Chapter Three: Marjane Satrapi: Feminist Author?

In Marjane Satrapi's own words, she is "extremely attached to her own thinking," "not at all a moral person," and "not a member of any political party."⁶⁰ For a person with such a marked disavowal of collective identity, political affiliation, or moral posture, both scholars and journalists alike characterize Satrapi and her work as feminist.⁶¹ In June of 2016, Emma Watson chose Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* for her digital feminist book club that features "books and essays about equality."⁶² In an interview of Satrapi by Watson for *Vogue*, Watson emphasizes the presence of female empowerment in Satrapi's work and ends by emphasizing the female empowerment encouraged by Satrapi's persona—saying "I feel completely energized and empowered as a result of having spoken with [Satrapi]."⁶³

But Satrapi does not just deny membership to a political party; she specifically denies affiliation to feminism. In an interview with ABC, she explains this when the interviewer asks "People see a compelling story of women in struggle in your work, but you object to being called a feminist?":

⁶⁰ Marjane Satrapi, "If I have to spend a year in jail I prefer to die," interview by Tobias Grey, *The Financial Times*, May 26, 2007.

⁶¹ "A Word to You Feminist Women': The Parallel Legacies of Feminism and Underground Comics" by Susan Kirtley in *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel*, accessed online at <https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/core/books/cambridge-history-of-the-graphic-novel/word-to-you-feminist-women-the-parallel-legacies-of-feminism-and-underground-comics/A89F976609EDF36DAED1CBDE9EFD76/core-reader>.

⁶² Quoted from Emma Watson's description of the "Our Shared Shelf" digital book club on Goodreads, accessed online at <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/179584-our-shared-shelf>.

⁶³ Much more could be said of this interview—I found it remarkably bizarre. Marjane Satrapi, "Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi," interview by Emma Watson, *Vogue*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

I am absolutely not a feminist, I am against stupidity, and if it comes from males or females it doesn't change anything. If it means that women and men, they are equal, then OK, certainly I am a feminist. It happens that I am a woman, so [*Persepolis*] becomes a "woman coming of age story." I think if I was a man it wouldn't change so much, they never call it a "man coming of age story." It is a human coming of age story, let's go for the humanity and humanism.⁶⁴

If feminism indicates equality, Satrapi supports it. If feminism indicates a rebuttal against the particular stupidity or malaction of men, Satrapi does not support it. Instead, she argues for a humanism that would allow her work and her persona to be considered in genderless terms.

Can we still call Satrapi a feminist, then? In this section, I will scrutinize the the tension between popular perceptions of Satrapi as a feminist author and her rejection of the identity. This tension reveals how Satrapi has mediated her identity through appeals to humanism and globalization.. Ultimately, this exploration will present two conclusions: that public embrace of Satrapi's humanism under the label of feminism indicates a form of feminism that embraces value signaling over feminism as a vehicle of political, structural change; and that Satrapi's childhood in Iran may have contributed to her particular relationship to Western feminism.

The Personal Is Not Political

Across interviews, statements, and articles, Satrapi adheres to the idea that her personal does not have to be particularly political or politicized; instead, she espouses the idea that humanity and human capability prevail over gender divisions. In the aforementioned interview

⁶⁴ Marjane Satrapi, "Questions for Marjane Satrapi," interview by Arash Ghadishah/ABC News, February 22, 2008, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=4332648&page=1>.

with Emma Watson, Satrapi praises her own parents for raising her “with the idea that ‘you are a human being’ rather than ‘you are a girl.’”⁶⁵ Furthermore, Satrapi claims that “Your gender matters only when you are in love and when you are with your lover, yes your gender matters...The rest of the time, just behave like a human being.”⁶⁶

Satrapi makes these claims while simultaneously acknowledging the particular struggles of girls and women. Prior to France’s decision to ban the veil (along with other symbols of religious identity) in public schools across the country, Satrapi vehemently argued that forcing girls to not wear the veil was “as bad as forcing them to” in an editorial article for the Guardian.

⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ “I passionately believe that the young women who have been expelled from school for wearing a veil should have the freedom to choose,” Satrapi states in the article.⁶⁹ “It is surely a basic human right that someone can choose what she wears without interference from the state.”

⁷⁰ Satrapi particularly questions the effects of legislation on women and female freedom, interrogating “...if tomorrow we take off the veil, will the problems of which it is a symbol be solved? Will these women suddenly become equal and emancipated?”⁷¹ ⁷²

⁶⁵ Marjane Satrapi, “Emma Waston Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi,” interview by Emma Watson, *Vogue*, August 1, 2016,

<https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

⁶⁶ Marjane Satrapi, “Emma Waston Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi,”

<https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

⁶⁷ Marjane Satrapi, “Veiled threat,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2003,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/12/gender.uk>.

⁶⁸ For more information on the ban:

Elaine Sciolono, “French Assembly Votes to Ban Religious Symbols in Schools,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2004,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/11/world/french-assembly-votes-to-ban-religious-symbols-in-schools.html>,

and Neil Schoenner, “Why the French government banned headscarves in schools,” *The Source* (*Washington University in St. Louis*), December 14, 2006,

<https://source.wustl.edu/2006/12/why-the-french-government-banned-headscarves-in-schools/>.

⁶⁹ Marjane Satrapi, “Veiled threat,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2003,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/12/gender.uk>.

⁷⁰ Marjane Satrapi, “Veiled threat.”

⁷¹ Marjane Satrapi, “Veiled threat.”

From the cited statements and interviews, three particular characteristics of Satrapi's feminist sensibility (if I can term it as such) arise: her recognition of the distinct status of women; her emphasis on humanism as a means of uplifting the status of women; and her refusal to ascribe to feminism if it presents as a specific critique of patriarchy. Satrapi seems to identify a particular female struggle in society while refusing feminism that attacks patriarchy as the source of this disadvantage and struggle.

A similar tension emerges when considering Satrapi's explicit statements disavowing feminism against the narrative of her own work, *Persepolis*. The autobiographical graphic novel details Satrapi's development from her childhood at the beginning of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to her experiences as a young adult. While Satrapi recounts the effects of the revolution on both men and women, the detailing of her own experiences as a girl and a young woman acknowledges that particular effects were specific to women because of their gender. Satrapi claims that gender only matters in romantic or sexual relations, but the depiction of her own experiences in *Persepolis* demonstrates how gender can matter outside of love, outside of sexual relations, inside a particular society, and inside a particular geographic area.⁷³

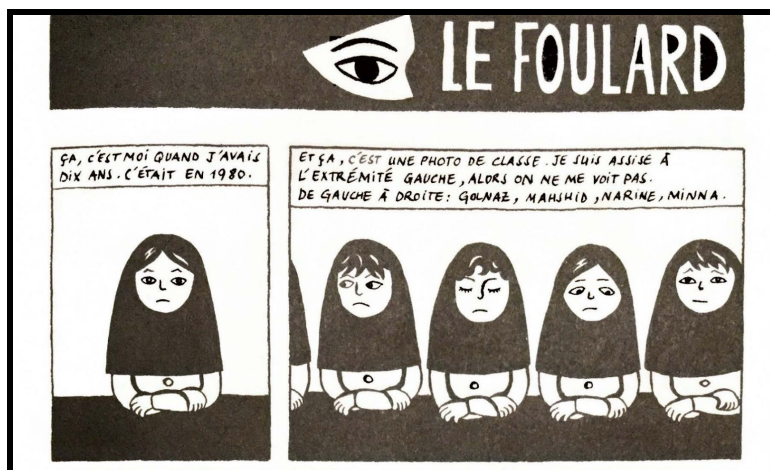
The first and most obvious contradiction to Satrapi's claim is the differing expectations for the attire of men and women. Both volumes of *Persepolis* contain a chapter titled "Le Foulard," a garment particular to girls and women.⁷⁴ Satrapi illustrates these expectations of dress under the new regime for men and women with "la femme intégriste" covered everywhere

⁷² For clarification: the problem Satrapi associates with the veil is the "exclusion from society" of immigrant women to France that use the veil as a way to express "their religious identity." Marjane Satrapi, "Veiled threat," *The Guardian*.

⁷³ Marjane Satrapi, "Emma Waston Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi," interview by Emma Watson, *Vogue*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

⁷⁴ *Persepolis* was originally written in French. "Le foulard" can translate as scarf or head scarf.

besides her face and hands while “l’homme intégriste” wears form-fitting clothing with his hands



and ears displayed.^{75 76} I do not intend to play into any kind of narrative that considers a hijab or headscarf as automatically oppressive; I simply intend to remark on the differing expectations of dress and the different treatment of individuals

based on their perceived gender identity.^{77 78}



A page later, Marji’s mother permits her to protest because Marji “must learn to defend *her* rights,” and Marji hands out leaflets at a demonstration of women that is eventually overrun by aggressive men. The roles of men and women continue to separate visually when a bomb explodes on Marji’s street. Marji fights through a crowd dominated by male faces to run into the arms of her mother, their attire and facial expressions almost

⁷⁵ “Le Voyage,” first chapter of Volume 2, *Persepolis*.

⁷⁶ “L’homme intégriste” translates as the fundamentalist man. “La femme intégriste” is a fundamentalist woman.

⁷⁷ Figure IV is the top left image, depicting Satrapi and her classmates in the chapter titled “Le Foulard,” or “The Head Scarf” in Volume I of *Persepolis*. Figure V is the bottom left image in which Satrapi attempts to move through the crowd.

⁷⁸ I agree with Satrapi’s position regarding the veil. Her article “Veiled threat” in the Guardian published December 12, 2003 outlines her position as supporting the freedom to choose to wear the veil or not. The article responds to the French government’s ban of religious symbols in public schools which included veils and headscarves for Muslims. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/12/gender.uk>.

identical as Marji cries out “Maman.”⁷⁹ As Marji processes the incident, she covers her face with her hands and her headscarf covers her head; when combined, Marji’s identity visually shrinks behind the grief she shares with her mother in the moment and the veil she shares with the women of her country.⁸⁰

What is the significance of this distinctly female presence on the page and in Marji’s story? Satrapi’s statement in the interview with Emma Watson on being a human being over being male or female could be supported by these particular examples; after all, many people wear attire that is deemed acceptable in some capacity, most individuals seek comfort from loved ones, all individuals grieve in the face of loss. Yet what Satrapi’s statement fails to articulate is



that these universal human experiences are colored by gender, that gender proves significant in the realities of everyday life. As Satrapi depicts in these scenes from *Persepolis*, gender can directly affect actions, personal appearance, mannerisms, and public spaces. Why, then, does she insist on a disaffiliation with feminism if one of its core tenets is considering the

unique experiences of women that occur because of their gender? Why does Satrapi insist on universal and humanist language to describe her vision for gender equality?

⁷⁹ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (New York: French and European Publications, 2007), “Le Shabbat” in Volume 2.

⁸⁰ The panel to the left is Figure VII, showing Marjane covering her face in sadness.

Humanism or Feminism?

Before moving into analysis of Satrapi's perspective and addressing these questions, I should make a necessary, valuable aside and establish the difference between humanism and feminism. As I explained in a previous chapter, feminism derives from a recognition of women's disadvantaged position in societies across the world and a desire to both improve that position and challenge the structures that perpetuate the subjugation of women. To revisit and reinforce bell hook's definition, "Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression" that "compels us to centralize the experiences and the social predicaments of women who bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of women."⁸¹

Just as feminism contains a myriad of meanings, the term humanism holds a long history and a diverse number of signified meanings.⁸² In brief, humanism espouses the improvement of the individual as the means to improve society at large. While feminism focuses on ending sexist expression, humanism focuses on the secular development of individual ethics and the political, societal benefits of individual virtue. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, humanism parallels humanitarianism and humanitarian efforts. As then-director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Irina Bokova stated in her text "A New Humanism for the Twenty-First Century" from 2010, the "self-fashioning" of the self encouraged by humanism "is a collective requirement" to preserve "one common human

⁸¹ From bell hooks' *Feminist Theory*; discovered and quoted from June Eric-Udorie, *Can We All Be Feminists?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), xii-xiii.

⁸² An intentional reference to Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," originally using notes from Saussure's lectures given at the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1911, accessed online at <http://home.wlu.edu/~levys/courses/anth252f2006/saussure.pdf>.

culture.”⁸³ “Beyond our diversity” she even states, “we all share one human culture.”⁸⁴

Humanism also posits intellect and intellectual, artistic pursuits as the source of self-fashioning and virtue (a feature to return to in relation to Satrapi later on). As Bokova argues in her text, “There can be no lasting peace and prosperity without the intellectual and moral cooperation of humanity.”⁸⁵

As separate philosophies and movements, feminism and humanism centralize different goals in the name of human progress. Much scholarship has considered the relationship between the two, however, and how feminism might or might not benefit from a humanist approach. Feminism has been characterized as “radical humanism” while many feminist scholars have critiqued the limitations and exclusions of humanism.^{86 87 88} Some feminists reject humanism for its “[obscuration or denial] of differences based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual difference” in its reduction of all individuals to simply human.⁸⁹ I do not attempt to represent the debate and relationship between feminism and humanism; rather, I present them in relation to each other to better understand Marjane Satrapi’s relationship to them both.

⁸³ Irina Bokova, “A New Humanism for the Twenty-First Century,” the Sector for External Relations and Public Information of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2010, 3.

⁸⁴ Irina Bokova, “A New Humanism for the Twenty-First Century,” 4.

⁸⁵ Irina Bokova, “A New Humanism for the Twenty-First Century,” 4.

⁸⁶ Pauline Johnson, “Feminism as Radical Humanism, Review,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 16, no. 3, Summer 1996, 142-143.

⁸⁷ Nina Pelikan Straus, “Rethinking Feminist Humanism,” *Philosophy and Literature* 14, no. 2, October 1, 1990, 284.

⁸⁸ Sara Ahmed, “Beyond Humanism and Postmodernism: Theorizing a Feminist Practice,” *Hypatia* 11, no. 2, 1996, 71-93.

⁸⁹ Karen Struening, “Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminism Theory; Feminism as Radical Humanism,” *Women and Politics* 17, no. 4, September 30, 1997: 103.

Humanism through Intellectualism and Humor

With a better sense of humanism in relation to feminism, we return to Satrapi's relationship to feminism. Satrapi addresses the two in saying "You know, the feminists become very angry when I say that I am not a feminist. I am a humanist. I believe in human beings."⁹⁰ Satrapi also professes a position almost identical to that of a classic humanist in saying "I think the only universal thing is one individual."⁹¹ Her position begs the question: why? If Satrapi recognizes the particular position of women and girls, why support humanism that focuses on a projection of equality rather than feminism that focuses on advancing the position of women? Satrapi's views on France and her home country of Iran provide insight into how she mediates her diasporic identity through her focus on humanism—rather than the feminism assigned to her by fans, members of the media, or other celebrity figures.

Satrapi makes much of her relationship to Iran as one of emotion and affect, and her relationship to the West as solely intellectual.⁹² In her own words: "My affection is Iranian. And it will always be Iranian. My affection will never become Western."⁹³ When describing her relationship to Iran, Satrapi describes her relationship to the West as contrasting because "[she has] a very good intellectual understanding of France" and "[her understanding] of Western society will always be an intellectual understanding because [she has] made an effort to know it,

⁹⁰ Marjane Satrapi, "An Interview with Marjane Satrapi," interview by Annie Tully, *Bookslut*, October 2004, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2004_10_003261.php.

⁹¹ Beth Accomando, "Persepolis/Interview with Marjane Satrapi," *KPBS*, January 17, 2008, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2008/jan/17/persepolisinterview-with-marjane-satrapi/>.

⁹² Marjane Satrapi, "An Interview with Marjane Satrapi," interview by Annie Tully, *Bookslut*, October 2004, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2004_10_003261.php.

⁹³ Marjane Satrapi, "Marjane Satrapi: 'I Will Always Be Iranian,'" interview by Nermeen Shaikh, *Asia Society*, <https://asiasociety.org/marjane-satrapi-i-will-always-be-iranian>.

[she's] not born in it.”⁹⁴ While Satrapi claims an Iranian identity, she claims an intellectual relationship with the West.⁹⁵

Satrapi's other strategy of mediating her cultural identities is humor—a trait much remarked upon in media coverage of her work and her international success. Satrapi perceives humor as “the height of understanding the other one” and a primary form of communication across regions and nations.⁹⁶ Both humor and intellectual understanding appear as universal and inherent traits of individuals, regardless of country of origin or culture. In Satrapi's view, both can transcend barriers of culture or identity. Engagement with either does not require a particular identity, and neither requires engagement with disparities between genders.

The question remains, however: why does her Western audience still insist on viewing Satrapi as a feminist? For one, her remarkable humor in handling tragic circumstances and discussing cross-cultural interactions appeals to Western media (without having to relate to the identity of an Iranian woman or grapple with the political issues she raises in her work). In an article in *Variety* magazine titled “Femmes Find Mideast Funnybone,” the author attributes Satrapi's financial success—surpassing her “male counterparts”—to her use of humor as “a more successful path amid the turmoil” of her personal experiences depicted in *Persepolis*.⁹⁷ In this article, Satrapi positions humor as the opposite of fanaticism and again posits it as a tool to encourage “people to think and be pragmatic.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Marjane Satrapi, “Marjane Satrapi: ‘I Will Always Be Iranian,’” interview by Nermeen Shaikh, *Asia Society*, <https://asiasociety.org/marjane-satrapi-i-will-always-be-iranian>.

⁹⁵ I use the term “the West” because Satrapi uses it, though I recognize the debate surrounding the term and the qualms with it.

⁹⁶ Beth Accomando, “Persepolis/Interview with Marjane Satrapi,” *KPBS*, January 17, 2008, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2008/jan/17/persepolisinterview-with-marjane-satrapi/>.

⁹⁷ Ali Jaafar, “Femmes Find Mideast Funnybone,” *Variety*, January 7-13, 2008, 19.

⁹⁸ Ali Jaafar, “Femmes Find Mideast Funnybone.”

Satrapi's adherence to humor and the media perception of it also encourages a particular reading of her personality and her work as masculine because of their strict allegiance to rationale and reason over emotion or characteristics traditionally coded as feminine. Combined with Satrapi's intellect and financial success, Satrapi embodies traits traditionally coded as powerful and masculine. Articles make extensive description of Satrapi's financial success.^{99 100} Her "biting sarcasm," "refreshing candor," "her typical hyperbole," "her customary frankness," her ability to speak multiple languages, her straight-up way of depicting and speaking of the world all create an image of a masculine woman. Satrapi herself emphasizes intellect and reason as her means of communicating and associating with the West. In other words, Satrapi is digestible to an audience and a society that implicitly values stereotypical strength rather than what might be perceived as profuse exhibition of emotion (a femininely coded characteristic).

Implications and Ramifications for Twenty-First Century Feminism

So what? What does it mean that Satrapi as a humanist, masculinized figure is simultaneously understood to be a feminist one? One response recalls Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" and a central dilemma in feminism. As Butler explains the predicament, "...in effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category, feminists run the risk of rendering visible a category which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women."¹⁰¹ The category of "woman" can become reductionist when

⁹⁹ Tobias Grey, "If I have to spend a year in jail, I prefer to die': Interview, Marjane Satrapi," *The Financial Times*, May 26, 2007, accessed via Business Insights: Global online database.

¹⁰⁰ Ramin Setoodeh, "This Year's 'Amelie?'," *Newsweek International*, August 20, 2012, accessed via Business Insights: Global online database.

¹⁰¹ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), 519-31.

attempting to represent every woman across the feminist movement and across the world. If a definition and conception of “woman” is necessary for feminism, then feminism cannot be successful. Humanism, then, solves the issue by doing away with the necessity of categorizing or defining women.

Another explanation might be Satrapi’s position of relative privilege and security, as well as her positioning of the West as normative in several of her statements. Much more in depth and expansive scholarship has criticized universalist or humanist approaches to social progress for neglecting difference (as previously referenced). Concurrently, scholars have troubled the concepts of neutrality and rationality as centering and normalizing particular identities and cultures.¹⁰² These criticisms could certainly be rendered against Satrapi and her perpetuation of certain norms.

To return to Satrapi’s strange *Vogue* interview with Emma Watson, I am convinced that the comfort with Satrapi as a feminist figure who disavows feminism derives from a comfort with feminism as signaling value and raising female stories instead of necessitating action. Watson’s references to Satrapi encouraging female empowerment derive simply from Satrapi’s depiction of her own experiences in her work and from Satrapi’s statements supporting freedom for women.¹⁰³ Satrapi tells stories of women. She is an outspoken woman of financial,

¹⁰² The troubling of the concept of the universal raised in scholarship on international law and human rights is particularly illuminating. For reference: Alexandra Huneus and Mikael Rask Madsen, “Between Universalism and Regional Law and Politics: A Comparative History of the American, European, and African Human Rights Systems,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, May 2017. Hilary Charlesworth, “International human rights law: A portmanteau for feminist norms?”, in *Feminist Strategies in International Governance*, ed. Gülay Caglar, Elisabeth Prügl, and Susanne Zwingel (London: Routledge, 2013). Allida Black, “Are Women ‘Human’?: The UN and the Struggle to Recognize Women’s Rights as Human Rights,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰³ Marjane Satrapi, “Emma Waston Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi,” interview by Emma Watson, *Vogue*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>.

international success. She fits the brand of “Lean In feminism” that considers any woman that succeeds in patriarchal structures as a feminist figure.¹⁰⁴ One of the goals of such a feminism appears as the visibility and prominence of women; since Satrapi achieves both through personal narrative, personal success, and personal statements, some might consider her a feminist in this strain of feminism.

This approach to feminism is not without its criticism, however. As June Eric-Udorie describes in her introduction to *Can We All Be Feminists*, Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In campaign aimed to address issues women face in the workforce and a lack of equal representation in the workplace. As Eric-Udorie criticizes, however, the campaign depended on assumptions and platitudes—that “having more women is better, period,” thereby “relinquish[ing] the opportunity to question what is the corporation does (read: who it harms and how it harms them, what’s inherently good about climbing to the top of any hierarchy, or how it socially benefits all women for one particular woman to earn an obscene amount of money.”¹⁰⁵ Essentially, climbing to the top of structures that have enabled discrimination against women in the past does not necessarily end or prevent sexist discrimination.

In prescribing to a variety of humanism dependent on globalization, Satrapi creates and communicates female stories without making them feminist enough to challenge hegemonic structures. With her humor and intellect, Satrapi becomes an embraced, digestible figure to a Western media audience. The feminism people assign to her is one of “female empowerment” and ‘strong women’ and ‘girl power,’ similarly digestible concepts of female strength.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Reference the introduction of *Can We All Be Feminists?*, ed. June Eric-Udorie, and Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2013).

¹⁰⁵ June Eric-Udorie, *Can We All Be Feminists* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 5-7.

¹⁰⁶ June Eric-Udorie, *Can We All Be Feminists* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 5.

How much of this particular, rather passive feminist persona is encouraged by Satrapi, and how much of it is cultivated by media, United States' culture, prevailing economic structures, the public? I would argue both, or all. Satrapi lays claim to a humanism—and an intellect and sense of humor—that can transcend countries and build the kind of “one human culture” Irina Bokova described in her call for twenty-first century humanism. In effect, this would create an extension of globalization as a movement to erode national and cultural boundaries in development of one global capitalist market and culture. Satrapi appeals to globalist tendencies and preexisting structures, and in turn she is embraced for her (obviously laudable) skills and personality. By mediating her multinational background through humanism and globalization, Satrapi's form of feminism reinforces economic and social structures—ultimately, to her own benefit, as Western audiences embrace her work and her personality.

Another potential conclusion to explain Satrapi's support of humanism comes from the ideas and observations of Nima Naghibi in her book *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*. Naghibi studies the history of “Western women's involvement in Persia from the mid-nineteenth century to the present time,” noting that Western narratives of “self-empowerment” feminism have influenced Iran in a way that contests “indigenous Iranian feminists in their own narratives of self-representation.”¹⁰⁷ While Satrapi might fall more under Naghibi's category of privileged and elite Persian women that positioned themselves with the West, certainly Satrapi might have apprehensions regarding alignment with Western narratives of feminism and with assumptions made about her work by a Western audience. She might also consider other categories of experience as more urgent or important than gender; while she

¹⁰⁷ Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xvi-xvii.

illustrates “la femme intégriste,” she also illustrated the effects of the new regime on “l’homme intégriste.” Perhaps political climate or political affiliation appeared as more significant and influential than feminism from Satrapi’s perspective as she witnessed the revolution and moved to Europe.

Nonetheless, Satrapi engages with humanism in a way that appears problematic because of how she glosses over or ignores difference and individual experiences. Arguably more problematic, however, is the embrace of this by popular feminists like Emma Watson. Satrapi can function as an author espousing humanism and rejecting feminism—and still be considered a feminist. This indicates the prevalence of a kind of “Lean In” feminism that simply intends for women to be visible and heard and therefore interprets a visible, heard woman as a feminist one. Contrasting Satrapi’s humanist stance, the next chapter on Adichie will explore her decidedly feminist position and its relationship to the structures that support it.

Chapter Four: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Consonance Through Contact with Establishment

“Fame is the sum of misunderstandings that have gathered around the person,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says to Hillary Clinton.¹⁰⁸ Adichie interviewed Clinton after Clinton’s Freedom to Write Lecture at the PEN World Voices Festival, an event held by PEN America (one of the United States’ premier literary organizations). For Adichie, however, this adage does not seem to apply. The sum of understandings of Adichie as celebrated feminist gathered around her just as she self-defined herself as feminist in published writing and popular

¹⁰⁸ Hillary Clinton interviewed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “2018 #FreedomTo Write Lecture: Hillary Rodham Clinton with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,” YouTube video, uploaded by PEN America, April 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kemFB24Xhs>.

media. PEN's choice of Adichie to interview Clinton, an iconic figure in American politics, also speaks to an understanding of Adichie as an emerging icon in United States' culture. Born and raised in Nigeria, Adichie attended college and completed two master's degrees in the United States; she attended fellowships at both Princeton and Harvard. She holds multiple honorary degrees from multiple American universities. Her fiction has been featured in the New York Times and received prestigious literary awards the likes of the O. Henry Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award; she won a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant in 2008. In other words, Adichie is widely celebrated and widely successful in American academia and literary circles.

As this chapter will explore, Adichie's celebrated position within American academic and literary culture affects the public embrace of her as a feminist figure. In contrast to the discontinuity between Satrapi's conception of her politics and a public understanding of them as feminist, Adichie's self-definition and the definition of her by media, academia, and fans are concordant. In contrast to Kaur, Adichie's popularity derives from both a large fan base and the American academy. As Adichie occupies and embraces liminal spaces—between Nigeria and the United States, between popular culture and American institutions—a persona of humility and an approachable feminism arises that builds her authority. Adichie models the success of an author as a political thinker and figure in the United States, and her widespread acceptance both demonstrates a popular approach to feminism and increases the power of her feminist author function. Her success, however, might indicate a reliance and intimate relationship with structures of power and her engagement in what one scholar terms “the liberal bargain” (a concept to be explored in this chapter).

Consonance, Not Dissonance: Adichie, Her Writing, and Her Reception

As previously stated, a dissonance between persona, personal statements, and reception does not exist for Adichie as it does for Satrapi; rather, a distinct consonance arises between her own statements, the feminism she espouses in *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* and *We Should All Be Feminists*, and how the media interprets and describes Adichie. Across all of these mediums, three particular attributes of Adichie's feminism arise: her use of personal anecdotes as sources of feminist authority; her concerns about women's silence; and her consideration of men and the benefits of feminism to them.

Similar to the beginning of this thesis and similar to other feminist writers like June Eric-Udorie in *Can We All Be Feminists*, Adichie enters into the feminist conversation through personal anecdotes that provide an authority for her presence in feminist debates. When Christiane Amanpour interviewed Adichie in a television segment for CNN published in April 2018, Amanpour questions how a personal experience of sexual harassment or assault made Adichie “the feminist [she is] today.”¹⁰⁹ Adichie responds: “You know, I think I was a feminist before then. I’ve been a feminist for as long as I can remember;” but in her short book *We Should All Be Feminists*, she cites a few particular anecdotes that brought her to the self-definition of feminist. *We Should All Be Feminists* begins with a story from childhood in which a friend, Okoloma, calls Adichie a feminist— “And it was not a compliment,” she states.¹¹⁰ She follows with another personal anecdote years later when a journalist raises the point of her novel being

¹⁰⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, interviewed by Trevor Noah, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie- ‘Dear Ijeawele’ & Raising A Child To Be A Feminist | The Daily Show,” YouTube video, uploaded by The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, June 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czogWQ34X1Y>.

¹¹⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014).

feminist. In relationship to the idea of the personal as political, Adichie sides with feminists that regard the personal as a point of entry and reason for participation in the political.

Adichie's concern about the silencing and the silence of women constitutes the next point of accord across her own speech, her writing, and media interpretation of her. In her 2009 TED talk "The danger of a single story" (which has garnered 16,941,714 views, at the time of writing this), Adichie warns against flattening identities into single stories or popular, singular representations. When recounting her discovery of African literature, she states that:

“...because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could exist in literature.”¹¹¹

She continued to express her concern over the representation of female voices during the interview with Hillary Clinton, denouncing the criticism leveled against Clinton for continuing to speak in public after her loss of the 2016 presidential election.¹¹² In an interview with the Guardian the same month as her interview with Clinton, Adichie addressed the same issue in saying “People now say to [Clinton] ‘shut up and go away’—that whole idea of silencing women. I kind of like what’s happening to her now, it feels as though that ‘fuck it’ I wish she had said before, she seems to be saying now.”¹¹³ Reception of her work and her own comments similarly remark on Adichie's speaking against silence—whether as “A voice of empowerment”

¹¹¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The danger of a single story,” TED Talk, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.

¹¹² Hillary Clinton interviewed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “2018 #FreedomTo Write Lecture: Hillary Rodham Clinton with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,” YouTube video, 1:31:36, uploaded by PEN America, April 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kemFB24Xhs>.

¹¹³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: ‘This could be the beginning of a revolution,’” *The Guardian*, April 28, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/28/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-feminism-racism-sexism-gender-metoo>.

in her fiction, “the Voice of the Third Generation” of Nigerian literature, or as someone that “Will Not ‘Shut Up’” and considers this “a time for new voices.”^{114 115 116}

Adichie’s address of the role of men in feminism and the benefits of feminism for men creates the final attribute of consonance across her feminism. The title of her book *We Should All Be Feminists* hints at her attitude of inclusion, but this attitude becomes explicit in the book itself as Adichie raises how gender roles confine and harm men as well as women. She uses a collective “we” to take responsibility for toxic masculinity on cultural patterns and expectations, stating “...by far the worst thing we do to males—by making them feel they have to be hard—is that we leave them with *very* fragile egos. And then we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males.”¹¹⁷ Adichie enters into the feminist conversation using her own personal narratives, she invests in supporting the voices of women and in their narratives, and she promotes an inclusive feminism that also addresses masculinity and men.

Consonance: Why and How?

Now that these three main points of accord are identified, the why and how of such consonance can be explored. What differentiates Adichie’s feminism from Satrapi’s or Kaur’s, and how does this create a unity across her persona, her works, and public perception of both?

¹¹⁴ Martina Camenzuli, “A voice of empowerment: a study on the portrayal of female characters in the literary works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie” (honors thesis for B.A. in English, L-Università ta’ Malta, 2017), https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/stable/40239030?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹¹⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Why Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Will Not ‘Shut Up,’” *Publishers Weekly*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/Frankfurt-Book-Fair/article/78342-frankfurt-book-fair-2018-why-chimamanda-adichie-will-not-shut-up.html>.

¹¹⁶ Heather Hewett, “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation,” *English in Africa*, vol. 32, no. 1 (May 2005), 73-97.

¹¹⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014).

Two key categories of Adichie’s feminism arise to answer these questions: the humility and embrace of imperfection present in her persona and ideology; and the accessibility and approachability of her and her feminism.

Adichie recognizes her own limitations and inability to always fully live up to a feminist ideal, joining the likes of Roxane Gay in *Bad Feminist* to project a feminism that does not demand perfection or exclude based on shortcomings. When considering how to raise a feminist child in *Dear Ijeawale*, Adichie says “I understand what you mean by not always knowing what the feminist response to situations should be.”¹¹⁸ While Adichie states across interviews and her writing that she retrospectively understands herself to be a feminist for as long as she can remember, she acknowledges in the CNN interview that “...being this feminist icon, which is something I feel very ambivalent about...it was never the plan.”¹¹⁹ She also reiterates across mediums that she did not formally participate or enter into feminism through feminist texts or an affiliation with the waves of feminism present in the United States—rather, she simply recognized the injustice based on gender in her own life and in the world around her.¹²⁰ Her motivation to talk publicly on feminism came with her popularity, she says: “Talking about things that matter to me happened because I had this platform that came with my fiction writing.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele* (London: 4th Estate, 2017).

¹¹⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie interviewed by Christiane Amanpour, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks feminism, #MeToo movement,” YouTube video, uploaded by CNN, April 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA8DTumShwU>.

¹²⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie interviewed by Christiane Amanpour, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks feminism, #MeToo movement,” YouTube video, uploaded by CNN, April 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA8DTumShwU>.

¹²¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie interviewed by Christiane Amanpour, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks feminism, #MeToo movement,” YouTube video, uploaded by CNN, April 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA8DTumShwU>.

Adichie's entrance into her status as a feminist figure, therefore, appears unthreatening. It also aligns with the attitude of popular author Roxane Gay, particularly in Gay's collection of essays titled *Bad Feminist*. Just as June Eric-Udorie did in her introduction to *Can We All Be Feminists*, Gay recognizes limitations within and flaws of feminism as an ideology and a movement. Gay places this on the imperfection of the people within the movement, however, stating "feminism is flawed because it is a movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed."¹²² Gay even addresses women like Adichie who are placed on "the Feminist Pedestal," asserting that "we conflate feminism with women who advocate feminism as part of their personal brand. When these figureheads say what we want to hear, we put them up...and when they do something we don't like, we knock them right off and then say there's something wrong with feminism."¹²³ Gay's solution is to embrace the moniker "bad feminist," a feminist who is not "well versed in feminist history" who is "flawed and human."¹²⁴ In identifying herself as an imperfect feminist, Adichie creates (as Gay does) a sense of humility in both her persona and her feminism. Others see her as a feminist figure; Adichie accepts the role with the acknowledgement that she is limited and imperfect.¹²⁵

This acknowledgement directly leads into the next attribute of her feminism: its accessibility and approachability. In a 2018 interview with Trevor Noah, Noah makes much of Adichie creating a sense of feminism as feasible and sensible. When discussing *Dear Ijeawale*,

¹²² Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), introduction.

¹²³ Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*, introduction.

¹²⁴ Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*, introduction.

¹²⁵ Naomi Wolf, "Bad Feminist, Great Rhetorician," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 41, issue 3 (February 16, 2016).

he jokes that Adichie “keep[s] making it easier to be feminist” as the book goes on.¹²⁶ Noah identifies Adichie’s approach to feminism as an inclusive one, an assessment certainly backed by her title *We Should All Be Feminists*. Adichie recognizes the difficulty of feminism as a subject and works to make it accessible. “Gender is not an easy conversation to have,” she says in *We Should All Be Feminists*, “It makes people uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable. Both men and women are resistant to talk about gender, or are quick to dismiss the problems of gender.”¹²⁷ To bring them into the conversation, Adichie presents her definition of a feminist as “a man or a woman who says, ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better.’”¹²⁸ Adichie’s definition might appear simple in comparison to aforementioned definitions of feminism or in light of debates within feminism; nonetheless, her feminism is accessible and approachable no matter the reader, viewer, or listener.

Dissonance: Accessibility, Approachability, and “The Liberal Bargain”

While certainly this accessibility and approachability seems to create accord across Adichie’s work and public perception, it also creates dissonance within her own ideology. As much as Adichie denounces likeability as a virtue or goal for women, her own ideology caters to being likeable and easy to support. Adichie’s rejection of likeability is so central to her feminism that she includes it as the eighth of fifteen feminist manifestos to teach a child. As Adichie puts it in *Dear Ijeawale*, “[A woman’s] job is not to make herself likeable, her job is to be her full self,

¹²⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, interviewed by Trevor Noah, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie- ‘Dear Ijeawale’ & Raising A Child To Be A Feminist | The Daily Show,” YouTube video, uploaded by The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, June 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czogWQ34X1Y>.

¹²⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 40.

¹²⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 48.

a self that is honest and aware of the equal humanity of other people.”¹²⁹ For an individual lauded on social media, affirmed by millions of TED talk viewers, and celebrated with several awards by literary and academic institutions—a woman with Hillary Clinton, Oprah, and Beyonce in her fan base—Adichie’s placement of likeability and feminism as mutually exclusive creates a strange dissonance between her persona and her feminism.

This extreme likeability and popularity within popular culture creates another point of dissonance between Adichie and her feminism. Adichie’s words from *We Should All Be Feminists* appear on Beyoncé’s 2013 single “Flawless.” Adichie seemed to approve of this usage, saying:

...of course Beyoncé asked permission to use my texts, and I did give her permission. I think she’s lovely and I am convinced that she has nothing but the best intentions. In addition, Beyoncé is a celebrity of the first order and with this song she has reached many people who would otherwise probably never have heard the word feminism, let alone gone out and buy my essay.¹³⁰

On the other hand, Adichie makes clear that Beyoncé’s feminism is not her type of feminism:

As it is the kind that, at the same time, gives quite a lot of space to the necessity of men. I think men are lovely, but I don't think that women should relate everything they do to men: did he hurt me, do I forgive him, did he put a ring on my finger? We women are so conditioned to relate everything to men.¹³¹

¹²⁹Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), 14 and 25.

¹³⁰ Ben Dandridge-Lemco, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Beyoncé: ‘Her Type of Feminism Is Not Mine,’” *The Fader*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.thefader.com/2016/10/07/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-beyoncs-feminism-comment>.

¹³¹ Ben Dandridge-Lemco, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Beyoncé: ‘Her Type of Feminism Is Not Mine,’” *The Fader*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.thefader.com/2016/10/07/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-beyoncs-feminism-comment>.

This comment illuminates a tension between her own writing; in *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie specifically addresses the responsibilities of feminism to address masculinity and the role of men in feminism. The inclusion of men within the feminist movement certainly does not equate to “relat[ing] everything [women] do to men,” but Adichie’s comment insinuating that Beyoncé’s feminism necessitates men calls into question Adichie’s own position regarding male participation in feminism. Her comment on listeners to Beyonce probably otherwise not hearing the word feminist can also imply a lack of the humility reflected in her other statements and writings. Her relationship to those needing motivation to join the feminist movement remains a point of tension and a point of ambiguity.

Another point of tension arises from Adichie’s permission for Dior to use her title “We Should All Be Feminists” on t-shirts that sold for \$710 each.¹³² This does not present a direct contradiction within Adichie’s feminism, but it presents another point provoking Adichie’s participation in what cultural anthropologist Amalia Sa’ar has named the “liberal bargain.” The term derives from Deniz Kandiyoti’s “patriarchal bargain” and Cynthia Cockburn’s “ethnic bargain,” phrases used to describe how a marginalized individual might engage with hegemonic power structures to better succeed individually.¹³³ The liberal bargain draws on both the patriarchal bargain and the ethnic bargain, referring to “the process whereby members of disadvantaged groups become identified with hegemonic order, at least to a degree.”¹³⁴ “Within the discourse of postcolonial feminism, the concept is intended to promote the discussion of

¹³²Shea Simmons, “Where to Buy Rihanna’s We Should All Be Feminists Shirts to Support Her Charity,” *Bustle*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.bustle.com/p/where-to-buy-rihannas-we-should-all-be-feminist-shirts-to-support-her-charity-41431>.

¹³³ Amalia Sa’ar, “Postcolonial Feminism, the Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain,” *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 5 (October 2005), 680-700.

¹³⁴ Amalia Sa’ar, “Postcolonial Feminism, the Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain.”

power differentials between women,” and the term can describe the different statuses of women because of their relationships to structures of power.¹³⁵

This concept, the Dior shirts, and Beyoncé’s “Flawless” all raise the question of Adichie’s relationship to hegemonic structures of power, particularly whiteness, academia, and capitalism. Is Adichie’s feminism also characteristic of a close relationship and acceptance of dominant opinions and attitudes—a relationship that she personally profits and benefits from? Certainly some critics have made this assessment. After her interview with Hillary Clinton, the *Guardian* published an opinion piece by Fatima Bhutto titled “When Chimamanda met Hillary: a tale of how liberals cosy up to power” in which Bhutto criticizes Adichie “for fail[ing] to confront the violence inflicted by the west, but actually celebrat[ing] it.”¹³⁶ Bhutto attributes this to Adichie existing in “the depoliticised world of celebrity,” but Adichie’s lack of addressing Clinton’s controversial policies can instead be read as a very political choice. Adichie did not see or did not define her feminism as a reason to challenge Clinton’s more violent policies. Instead, she aligns her politics with Clinton’s for what is a pleasant, mutually loving exchange between them both.¹³⁷

To return to the initial question of this chapter, what creates the consonance across Adichie’s persona, her writing, and public perception of her feminism? The personable, humble quality to her feminism and its accessibility and inclusion of men were all identified and explored. Dissonance rises, however, when considering how Adichie’s feminism might hold a

¹³⁵ Amalia Sa’ar, “Postcolonial Feminism, the Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain.”

¹³⁶ Fatima Bhutto, “When Chimamanda met Hillary: a tale of how liberals cosy up to power,” *The Guardian*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/27/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-hillary-clinton-liberal-literati-coddling-powerful>.

¹³⁷ Adichie really does use the world love to describe her feeling towards Clinton in the PEN America interview.

strong relationship or kinship with dominant culture, dominant figures, and dominant societal structures. While the general consonance surrounding Adichie and her feminism seemed to place her in contrast to Satrapi, her embrace and popular position within these dominant structures creates a similarity between her feminism, Kaur's feminism, and Satrapi's feminism. Does Adichie define her feminism in certain ways because she operates at an elite level of society, a level in which she is embraced? The question of relationship to establishment and the similarity between the authors will be explored in the next chapter, as well as an identification of broader trends across the individual versions of feminism that have been presented.

In Conclusion

Before returning to the broader questions and implications for the role of literary celebrity and for twenty-first century feminism, we should revisit the arguments made in the individual case studies. The chapter on Rupi Kaur considered her status as an icon of social media and popular poetry, analyzing how the style of her poetry and her stylized persona project a feminism that consolidates the individual into the universal. The concept of metonymy and Kaur's metonymic representation of her readers and those of her identity defines her feminism. The chapter on Marjane Satrapi grappled with her professed humanism and the public's simultaneous designation of her and her work as feminist, ultimately concluding that popular feminism accommodates humanism. Finally, the chapter on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie considered her embrace by the literary and academic establishment as well as popular culture, demonstrating her feminism's close relationship to academic and literary establishment.

Concerning the method by which I derived each author's feminism, each case study combined analysis of media articles, close reading of the author's own texts or statements, and the nature of the author's beliefs or actions in relation to feminist debates to derive the author's feminism. This analysis depended on a wide variety of popular media sources, intersectional feminist theory, scholarship on celebrity and the role of the author, and quantitative data on the consumption of mass media by adults in the United States. By depending on media sources and popular reactions for each feminist analysis, I have made two arguments: that popular opinion and popular media should be treated as legitimate and valuable primary sources; and that the space of interaction between feminist celebrities and their followers can define a feature of twenty-first century feminism as a whole. What feature of feminism does this interaction between celebrities and followers define, though? Considering the differences between the versions of feminism embodied and espoused by each author, what significant similarity can exist to help us answer broader questions about the state of feminism today?

The significant similarity is what their celebrity does for feminism as a broader movement, and the definitive feature can be conceptualized as the unique author function of the feminist literary celebrity. In this new author function, feminist literary celebrities serve as gatekeepers and intermediaries between fans and establishment. Though gatekeepers have long existed in many aspects of society, the need for an interlocutor in this scenario arises because of the effects of social media on individual political participation and political discourses. Social media and the internet are often considered democratizing because they enable broader access to information and create platforms for individuals to express themselves to individuals outside of their physical, immediate social circles. This supposed democratization changes or destroys the

role of gatekeepers to information and to platforms. In literary culture, the rise of self-publishing and publishing online challenges and changes the role of publishers and publishing houses. In industries of information, a divide has grown between previous centers of authority and individuals that hold a new authority because of their access to information.

Yet this access to information can prove overwhelming to an individual, and this is how the role of gatekeepers has regrown. In the case of feminism, the complexity and breadth of meanings and beliefs can overwhelm an individual learning about feminism online or through social media. Authors like Kaur, Adichie, and Satrapi become a new kind of gatekeeper for twenty-first century feminism. In a somewhat new but not unprecedented way, these authors and their new author function become to negotiate, explain and embody a complex political movement for their readers, viewers, and mass media. Because of the authority they garner from being women and writing about women, they hold the implicit trust of fans and are already considered significant figures.

Certainly each author holds a different position in this space between establishment sources of authority and individuals, and this space is not simply a spectrum from the individual to established authority. As I explored with Rupi Kaur, a figure that initially rejects establishment through self-publishing might reinforce establishment by failing to accommodate difference and by performing metonymic celebrity. What's notable is that social media and the internet have not pulled the space of feminism away from the space of contention between individuals and established authority. Despite a sense of democratization and despite potential platforms for individuals created with social media and the internet, celebrities and notable figures still dominate the popular discourse that individuals consume through mass media.

The overarching significance of my research and study of these authors is identifying the conversation of feminism that Kaur, Satrapi, and Adichie are all creating, perpetuating, and participating in. This conversation identifies visibility as the goal and understanding as the means of producing equality. If more people recognized the struggles of women, if more people sincerely listened to women, if more people identified as feminist and recognized the merits of feminism, then gender equality could be attained. While Satrapi rejects feminism, she still supports this narrative of increased understanding and increased empathy for others as a means of producing equality across identities.

I do not wish to dismiss the hope and optimism of this perspective; however, visibility and recognition constitute a stage or a piece of the development to equality—not its entirety. The idea of increasing visibility and promoting feminism implies that at least some people do not discuss feminism or find it necessary and important. Whether or not this is the case is hard to ascertain statistically, and I make no claims to it. Nonetheless, the vocal fans of these authors works are predominantly women. Certainly encouraging women to participate in feminism and amplifying their experiences could be empowering, but is empowerment enough for equality? Empowerment certainly affects individual lives and cultural climate, but does it move beyond that? Does a conversation of visibility and empowerment address sources of inequality? The answer, as many scholars, thinkers, and critics have answered before me, is no.

In this regard, the feminist accountability approach presented by Ann Russo becomes essential. As Ann Russo argues in *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power*, we have to do more than work on “*inclusion* (come join us on our terms)”

or “*saving* (we’ll come save you so you can become more like us).¹³⁸ We have to work using a feminist accountability approach in which we recognize that we work within systems that oppress people—racism, patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism. As Russo explains, we’re so embedded in these systems that we often “reproduce the very violence that we are striving to transform. This is the case not because we are individual failures but rather because of how enmeshed we are in the very systems we are organizing to change.”¹³⁹ In other words, we might behave in a way that perpetuates harmful structures with the best intentions to counteract the harm—and we are fully accountable for these behaviors.

Adichie, Kaur, and Satrapi are not just accountable to their fans. As figures close to power—the power of extreme popularity, the power of a visible platform, the power of being highly regarded, the power of financial stability or monetary success—they are accountable to an audience beyond that of their respective works. Obviously I do not know every action performed by Adichie, Kaur, Satrapi, and therefore I do not present definitive judgements of how “feminist” their actions are or how much they contribute to the fight for equality; I can and have only evaluated their public actions and personas. For those in positions of power, mistakes and successes are magnified and affect more people. As Roxane Gay adeptly explains in her introduction to *Bad Feminist*, feminism lives as an ideal of individual actions collectively leading to equality. While we can’t be perfect, we can hold each other accountable and collectively construct ideas of how we might better fight for equality.

¹³⁸ Ann Russo, *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power* (New York: New York University, 2019), 7.

¹³⁹ Ann Russo, *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power* (New York: New York University, 2019), 2.

My initial question in writing this thesis was what the individual feminisms of Adichie, Kaur, and Satrapi indicated about the state of twenty-first century feminism. My question now is what a vision of accountability and a vision of feminism looks like. What can individuals like me do about how celebrity affects and directs popular feminism? Is our support of these figures simply a way in which we participate in a passive discourse of liking? How do we hold those in power accountable across the distance between them and us? How do we navigate collective goals with our personal reasons and experiences for engaging with feminism?

Some of these questions may never be answered decisively or entirely, but further research could certainly engage with them more than I can in the confines of this work. One of the concrete answers I can provide to my own line of questioning is that scholarly work and research provides a method of interrogating and exploring what feminism and accountability can look like in our current moment. Scholarship can work to bridge and address the divide between popular culture and the academy, presenting important questions across sections of culture and society.

Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time and the arena and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle wherever we are standing. It does not matter too much if it is in the radiation lab or a doctor's office or the telephone company, the streets, the welfare department, or the classroom. The real blessing is to be able to use whoever I am wherever I am, in concert with as many others as possible, or alone if needs be.

—Audre Lorde, November 13, 1986, New York City, from *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*.

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