

‘Female Gladiators’ in Fourth Wave Feminism: Mona Eltahawy’s *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the fourth wave of feminism as a field of academic inquiry is the main focus of this article. It foregrounds the unique online digital orientation of Digital Feminism. Firstly, it discusses the origin, growth, and development of fourth wave feminism from an obscure movement to a global phenomenon. Secondly, it traces the boom in feminist texts authored by online digital feminists. Next, the article foregrounds anger, frustration, and militant aggressiveness in the fourth wave feminist texts and elaborates how the fourth-wave feminists emerge like female gladiators to indulge in combative feminism. It discusses the fiery feminist Mona Eltahawy who created a revolution with her online Mosque MeToo movement, and transferred her online activism to her literary texts *Hymens and Headscarves* and a seminal fourth wave feminist text, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women*. The article is a comprehensive critical analysis of the seven sins advocated for female emancipation. Finally, the conclusion is a cogent justification for her rage.

Keywords: Fourth wave digital feminism, online activism, militant feminism, mosque MeToo

Feminism is now much more conspicuous and vociferous than ever before, and the emergence of post-feminism has been proved wrong with the pervasive presence of now-raging feminist debates and movements on all platforms. Post-feminism can come only with the post-patriarchy era. Just as patriarchy is interminable, feminism, too, is eternal. It is

a dynamic concept that adapts to women's needs, shifting political landscapes and milieus. It has evolved from the first-wave Liberal Feminism and Suffragette movement to the fourth-wave Feminism. Its resurgence is much more prominent and complex vis a vis the other three waves in the oceanology of Feminism. The gravity and far-reaching resonances of the MeToo movement herald the new fourth wave of feminism. Heightened visibility of such movements globally and the sudden splurge in online activism led to Jessica Valenti's proclamation, "Maybe the fourth wave is online" (Solomon, 2009, para 6).

The fourth wave of feminism roughly began in 2008 when Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube gained strength and Feminist blogs like *Jezebel* and *Feministing* became popular. It captured our attention in 2012 with the MeToo movement. Born of the internet, the new-age feminism is grander in scope and subtler in magnitude. It is on the comprehensive digital platform that this new brand of feminism acquired more bearing. No wonder, it is putatively known as Hashtag Feminism or Digital Feminism. Feminists employed this unique platform for activism due to its efficacy to reach millions of like-minded women with just a click of one button. According to McLean and Maalsen, "The ubiquitous quality of this technology partially facilitates the continuation of political movements, connectivity and immediacy allow for ample opportunity for feminists to engage the broader public" (p. 254). Sexism, which was earlier hidden, comes under the public radar, and day-to-day bitter experiences of women are unfurled, creating a sense of community for those exploited and suppressed. Online conversations are perpetuated offline and have a global ripple-effect. Tierney (2013) believes that: "Social Media platforms play an important part in the process of building consensus, providing a sense of community, recruiting a critical mass and mobilizing action beyond the virtual and into the physical realm" (p. 18). It came to be known as Hashtag Feminism as it is a community-driven tagging system used on social media platforms to aggregate and track content using a hashtag. Sarah Kendzior rightly says: "Hashtag Feminism makes visible what was never truly invisible but what people refuse to see" (as cited in Loza, 2014). It expands the limits of feminism by politicizing personal experiences. Corroborating this point, Clark (2014) says: "Hashtag is the latest iteration in a long history of feminist conversation-expansion tactics that politicize personal experiences with all forms of patriarchy including media" (p. 1109). The digital feminists

create social justice campaigns “for construction of choreography of assembly” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5). It brings people on the same page and provides the public with suggestions on how to act.

The boom in digital spaces has led to several social justice feminist campaigns and brought a sea-change in the nature of feminist protests. Also known as “E-Movements”, these campaigns have created a sense of solidarity and brought people of all races, castes, and religions together. In the South Asian perspective, digital feminism has limited applicability since many women are illiterate. Though activism has managed to impact the collective consciousness of women as shown by the Shaheen Bagh protests. There were sundry #Hashtag campaigns, which were spatially dispersed and socially diverse, but few campaigns hit the headlines and became controversial. The fourth wave digital feminism is not just synonymous with the MeToo Movement, but also other digital campaigns like #Who Needs Feminism, #Yes All Women, #Everyday Sexism Project, #No More Page 3, # Ni Una Menos, #Stop Bid Sexism, #Free the Nipple, #SlutWalk, #One Billion Rising, # Mattress Performance and #10 Hours of Walking in NYC. The WhoNeedsFeminism Campaign, a final year project of 16 Duke University students became an international movement. The YESALLWOMEN, a Twitter hashtag and social media campaign, fought against misogyny. However, the feminist digital campaign that took the world by storm is the MeToo movement. A digital campaign transformed itself into a social movement against sexual abuse and harassment. The term “MeToo” was used in 2006 on MySpace by sexual harassment survivor and activist Tarana Burke. The movement became viral post the Henry Weinstein case in 2017 as a hashtag on social media. The purpose of the MeToo campaign was to empower women through empathy.

The essence of fourth-wave feminism lies in its increased engagement with online activism. A visible swell in feminist texts also characterizes this wave. Powerful texts of this phase are Jessica Valenti’s *The Purity Myth, Sex Object: a Memoir*, Caitlin Moran’s *How to Be a Woman*, Rebecca Solnit’s *Men Explain Things to Me*, *Bad Feminist* by Roxanne Gay, Jessa Crispin’s *Why I Am Not a Feminist*, Laurie Penny’s *Bitch Doctrine: Essays for Dissenting Adults* and Baxter and Cosslett’s *The Vagenda*. Massive feminist activities and the reactions it received piqued the curiosity of the readers. Media and publishing houses showed interest in publishing what the new age bloggers and feminists had to say. Nearly all the

online feminist website owners were commissioned to write books and memoirs. Laura Bates' book *Everyday Sexism* (2014), an offshoot of the real-life experiences of women makes it a brilliant example of authenticity and individuation. All the feminist texts shed the mild, sophisticated, and diluted feminism of the past and take the monster of patriarchy head-on. They brace common issues of toxic masculinity, rape culture, and sexual objectification.

I propose that all fourth-wave feminists are female gladiators who indulge in aggressive and combative feminism. The term female gladiator applies to the aggressive women who battle to usher in an era of post-patriarchy so that the acts of omissions and commissions by the male victimizer do not go unpunished. Women's aggressive attitude shown in their recent books and their behaviour amply justifies this expression. The gladiators of the Roman period faced their opponents bravely and pinned them down to the ground. After this, the audience urged them to kill the defendant. The fourth wave of feminism has moved a step further from being simply defensive to aggressively offensive. Female gladiators/feminists of the fourth wave call for an aggressive, radical, impatient feminism which requires a zero-tolerance policy towards flashing, groping, gazing and other forms of violence against women.

Mona Eltahawy is an Egyptian freelance journalist, columnist, and an international lecturer. She shot to fame after the publication of her article 'Why They Hate Us?' written post her traumatic tortuous imprisonment for participation in the Arab Spring revolution. Writing for all the top leading newspapers of the globe, she became a significant voice of Muslim women and Middle Eastern politics. Her audacity and intrepidity fetched her commendable titles including being among "100 Most Powerful Arab Women" and "150 Fearless Women of 2012," etc. Mona Eltahawy wrote *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* (2019) after the success of her first book, *Hymens and Headscarves* (2015), which focused on the plight of Muslim women. The Mosque MeToo Movement, exposure to Twitter and the unruly world matured her perspective to write her recent book. This book emerges as a New-Age Feminist text with a muscular out-loud and audacious message. It is a rampaging manifesto for women and a positive channelized manifestation of her rage which is enough to fuel a rocket. Her book *Hymens and Headscarves* facilitated the administrative safety measures for female Haj pilgrims, which further strengthened her view that

silence will never protect women. This book is, therefore, a powerful and vehement attack on the ubiquitous universal monster called Patriarchy. Calling for universal Feminism to combat systemic Patriarchy, Eltahawy refuses to give band-aids towards temporary relief, and instead believes in defying, disobeying, and disrupting Patriarchy. Drawing a parallel with the seven deadly sins of Christianity, Eltahawy prescribes seven attributes of women for dismantling Patriarchy—Anger, Attention, Profanity, Power, Ambition, Violence, and Lust.

The first chapter hinges on the integral prohibitory sin of “Anger”. Eltahawy narrates her despicable encounter with a man who waved his penis at her, and that too at a young age so that she could not avoid waving her slipper furiously back at him. Unashamed and unabashed about it, she announces proudly that “she was born with a pilot light of anger, tenacious and sure of it right to flare whenever treated unjustly” (Eltahawy, 2019, para 4). She acknowledges justifiable anger and presses for nurturing and encouraging the expression of anger the same way as reading skill is encouraged. Anger is a necessary bridge that carries feminism from idea to being. Making a strong plea for the subversion of stereotypes, she raises the issue of sexual assault and its association with female attire. The onus of assault is on the predators, and not the way girls dress. June Jordan, a fiery feminist writer, also considers anger to be the fuel of feminist revolution (para 55).

In the second chapter entitled “Attention”, Eltahawy examines the cruel ways in which Patriarchy operates to suppress women and ensures their invisibility. The Patriarchy monster thinks only about men who raise the slogan of “Me, Myself and I” by demeaning the women with the statement of “Who do you think you are?” (para 1). Eltahawy talks furiously about defeating Patriarchy by subverting it by demanding, commanding, and saying that attention defies Patriarchy, and declares that ‘I’ counts. Patriarchy in the modern age has resurfaced again and again with renewed strength, which is popularly called Neo-Patriarchy. This control freak and insecure structure tries to brainwash women with their rules for ideal feminism. It has soiled the concept of attention and has convinced women that wanting attention is like wanting something shameful much like sex. Attention is a thing for men. Men demand attention for 23 hours and 55 minutes, allowing only five minutes for women. It is a sheer pleasure for men, and the women are denied strongly, for they equate attention with power. Women who command

attention command power. A woman who vies for it is labelled as an "attention whore" (para 5) so that no woman desires for it. Eltahawy, as an arch enemy of Patriarchy, knows with accuracy what factors will subvert it. Thus, she pushes for attention with vehemence. It was attention, which she continuously got from her Twitter followers and fans, that rescued her from the police in the Tahrir Square revolution and the Racist Ad controversy in America. She rebuts the accusation of doing all these things for attention, with the clear message that attention doesn't sully her message, rather it enables it. Patriarchy wants to control what it fears and destroys what it cannot. Eltahawy corroborates it with nightmarish incidents where the Attention Detecting Brigade killed Frederic Wilson, Democratic US Representative, and Amber Rose, a gender activist, for the sin of "attention seeking" (para 25). In 2018, prominent beauty professionals and social media stars who dared to be visible, were murdered. Mona Eltahawy is aware of the strength of this anti-patriarchy weapon called attention. Thus, she does everything possible to be visibly conspicuous.

The third chapter entitled "Profanity" begins with Eltahawy's audacious declaration of faith "fuck the patriarchy" (para 1) and her brazen confession that the choice of this word is deliberate as almost nothing can match the power of profanity delivered by a woman. Patriarchy socializes women to shrink physically and intellectually, and this extends to language as well. The concept of civility is the essence of patriarchal policing. Women, using indecent language with unapproved swear words, are considered profane. Profanity is the verbal equivalent of civil disobedience for women. Eltahawy substantiates her argument with a pan-global example from Uganda of a shero named Stella Nyanzi, a university professor and women's rights activist who emerged as one of the most formidable challengers to the fourth-longest serving leader of Uganda, Museveni. Nyanza dared to use profanity to offend the patriarch by calling him a pair of buttocks on Facebook and later posted a six-stanza poem from his mother's perspective who laments the birth of a son like him and wishes he had died at childbirth. Nyanzi was questioned by the criminal directorate and was imprisoned for a year because "dictators, authoritarians and patriarchs demand obedience, despise disruption and are especially angered by disrespect" (para 34). Patriarchy becomes the controlling authority that permits women to use the terms related to their own female body. Donald Trump's use of the

statement 'grab them by the pussy' was permissible, but women were denied the use of profanity. Eltahawy ends her chapter with the motto: "I own my body, and I own my language" (para 84).

Chapter 4 "Ambition" takes up a futuristic trajectory and opens in a feminist utopia in 2050 where three women are about to resume unbelievable authoritarian positions of power: Donya Zaki, is going to become Egypt's first woman president; Areej Mohd is going to be Saudi Arabia's first mufti, and Octavia is about to become the third consecutive woman president of USA. These iconic women belong to the fiery feminist activist group and have reached the top, fighting patriarchal brutalities. Donya Zaki participated in the 2010 Egyptian revolution and joined the Anarcho-feminist movement, Sekhmet's Sisters. Areej's training in Khadija's Daughter's Brigade, an underground radical feminist movement, made her a tough fighter who busted the driving ban and the guardian system imposed on women in Saudi Arabia. Eltahawy punctures Patriarchy's vicious designs to discombobulate ambition in women. It is a sin to be ambitious as Patriarchy socializes women into being submissive wives and mothers only. Misogyny in language is effectively exploited to humiliate ambitious women with epithets like bossy, bitchy, show-off, selfish and pushy. Unfurling the devious machinations of Patriarchy, the author elaborates how it works in tandem with other forms of oppression like Racism and Capitalism. By narrating her own school experiences in London where her teacher asked her the regular conventional question about her father's profession, she points to her teacher's inability to imagine agency for a Muslim mother, which according to her, can be ascribed to Patriarchy. Corroborating her argument with the example of Desiree Martinez, a black student, who was discouraged by her teacher not to apply for UCLA as it would be too high an aim for her. Patriarchy plays foul on all fronts to crush women from coming to the forefront. It prohibited Af Klint from being recognized as a significant painter and discouraged Vicky Sparks, the first woman commentator for football, to continue football commentary.

In the richly argued, thought-provoking chapter entitled "Power", Eltahawy exposes the true nature of Patriarchy and redefines the established misconceptions related to Feminism. She frames arguments to help us distinguish between the power that serves Patriarchy and that which dismantles Patriarchy. "Solidly patriarchal" (para 6) countries like Brazil may have elected a female president, but it doesn't let

women become powerful. Roussef, the honest, committed, and feminist Brazilian President, was impeached in 2016 for breaking budget rules. Her ousting was accelerated by patriarchs like Bolsonaro, a misogynist, racist and homophobic who became the President in 2018. For his disdain, condescension, and offence against women, gay and indigenous people, he was compared to Donald Trump and was called the "Trump of Tropics" (para 9). He openly confessed to giving less salary to women as compared to men because the former get pregnant. Patriarchy doesn't grant power to women. It elevates only those women to power positions who accept the crumbs of Patriarchy and promise to remain silent without challenging Patriarchy. Trump appointed Gina Haspel as head of the CIA and flaunted it as an achievement of their government. Kaspel played into the hands of Patriarchy and played a vital role in the "extraordinary rendition," which allowed the CIA to torture prisoners in foreign lands. Patriarchy granted trophy power to Kaspel because she adhered to the dictates given by them. Eltahawy sarcastically concludes that "Patriarchy is reluctant to allow women to be powerful outside the lines that Patriarchy has drawn for them, and independently of the roles it has assigned to them. Be without ambition, be without ego, be unselfish, and we will extend an unprecedented anchor...." (para 45). Amina Wadud combats this notion of Patriarchy by affirming with her bold actions that it is high time that women assumed their power on their own. She believes that the Holy Quran gives women spiritual equality, which grants political equality to women, thereby nullifying patriarchal authority to grant power to women. Amina Wadud led the prayer in a mosque and prepared the jurisprudence to justify it on her own.

Chapter 6, entitled "Violence", justifies militant feminism with Lorraine Hansberry's epigraph: "Oppressed people react militantly ...twice militant means twice oppressed" (para 1). Eltahawy's utopian fantasy conjures the imaginary underground movement called Fuck the Patriarchy (FTP), which has put the world on notice of killing men till Patriarchy sends a representative to talk. An ultimatum to dismantle Patriarchy is issued, failing which innumerable men will be killed every week. The very thought of it bestows immense pleasure, and Eltahawy asks innumerable questions: "How many men would need to be killed in that imaginary scenario for Patriarchy to take us seriously?" (para 5). Objecting to the perennial socialization of women into being non-violent which makes them defunct even for self-defence, even, the

author espouses justified violence for women. She rightly affirms that “Society would be better off as a whole if more women were willing to engage in justified violence against men. To that end, women’s justified violence against men should be encouraged, protected, and publicized” (para 25). Society and judiciary become agencies of the suppression of female violence. All are aware of the indoctrination of passivity into women by family, but the judiciary plays no less a vicious role. Eltahawy discusses how women receive harsher sentences for killing their male partners than men receive for killing their female partners. Lenore Walker highlights this stark discrimination in her book *Battered Woman Syndrome* that when an accused presents a successful defence, she is not supposed to be angry because the penalty is harsher for women who killed out of anger rather than fear. Moving away from domestic violence, Eltahawy takes up the issue of sexual violence. Women have been the proxy battlegrounds for men in any conflict situation. The Nobel Prize committee expressed their concern and sensitivity for sexual violence victims by giving the Nobel Peace Prize 2018 to Nadia Murad and Denis Mukwege. Eltahawy believes that along with these two women, Tarana Burke should have been a recipient too. Doing so would have established a connection between sexual violence in conflict zones and sexual violence in everyday life. Sexual violence can vanish only, and when women will use violence as a weapon. Assata Shakur, a former Black Panther writer, feels that “violence is a legitimate form of resistance” (para 76). All forms of violence can only end when women resort to justified violence. Eltahawy concludes the chapter by saying that “to move the use of violence between men and women to the optimal level, women must increase their willingness and ability to use violence against men” (para 78).

The seventh chapter, “Lust,” encapsulates the seventh sin, which is capable of defying Patriarchy. The powerful declaration “I own my body” gives women immense pleasure as it is an expression of their choice and not an imposition from Patriarchy. She boldly submits in the book: “It is my right to decide how I express my sexuality, as it is the right of every consenting adult. How consenting adults express their sexuality is nobody’s business because the keywords here are ‘consenting’ and adults” (para 2). Eltahawy audaciously expresses the need to exercise free choice in having sexual relationships. All over the world, sex-positive attitudes are visible in digital projects like *Agents of*

Ishq (run by Paromita Vohra) and hashtag movements like *Fill Up This Pussy*, which talk of consent, slut-shaming, and women's pleasure. Along with many other things, patriarchy controls sexuality too. It privileges heterosexual relationships and issues of desire and pleasure. Eltahawy dismantles the existing binaries of sexuality and heteronormativity. Instead of fighting for queer rights, she attacks the very concept which questions queer sexuality.

Repressive patriarchal atrocities and consequent boom of feminist pursuits impacted the oceanography of feminism and triggered a surge of the new wave of feminism. It is the apparent newness of the digital medium that lends the magnitude of cultural relevance to this wave. The new wave can be viewed as a paradigm shift generating dynamic hashtag movements and phenomenal feminist texts charged with tremendous aggressive energy. Among all the feminists, Mona Eltahawy's militant drive and fury censure patriarchy and preconceived notions of a feminist. She defies the established norms and creates her own rules to follow. Her rage and anger are vitally crucial as the globe needs a heat-seeking missile to smash the firestorm of global feminist conflict. Aware of the harsh reality that this is no time for meek feminism, she plunged into militancy by writing her anti-patriarchal manifesto. She raises a coliseum of female empowerment that rests on the seven pillars or what she calls 'sins'. She speaks with stark brazenness to raise the pitch of resistance and tells the girls and women that be women and girls in the way we are not supposed to be. Like a gladiator, she brutally wounds and mutilates patriarchy with her words. The vehemence and aggressiveness of the gladiator are reflected in the uncensored and unsanitized language, thoughts, and proactive praxis. The fourth wave feminism does not believe in the glib talk of women's liberation per se. It seeks real action on the part of already liberated but internally colonized psyche of women; it should be kept in mind that Roman gladiators won their freedom from slavery by being more and more brutal. Women have to be gladiators vis-à-vis patriarchy to enjoy real freedom and autonomy. Violence against women can only be removed by justifiable violence against because patriarchy is incorrigible.

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