

Men Explain Things To Me Study Guide

Men Explain Things To Me by Rebecca Solnit

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Contents

Men Explain Things To Me Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Summary.....	3
Chapter 1: Men Explain Things to Me.....	4
Chapter 2: The Longest War.....	6
Chapter 3: Worlds Collide in a Luxury Suite.....	9
Chapter 4: In Praise of the Threat and Chapter 5: Grandmother Spider.....	11
Chapter 6: Woolf's Darkness.....	13
Chapter 7: Cassandra Among the Creeps.....	16
Chapter 8: #YesAllWomen.....	18
Chapter 9: Pandora's Box and the Volunteer Police Force.....	20
Important People.....	22
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	28
Styles.....	32
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	37

Summary

In her book, *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit describes her own experiences with men who just because she's a woman have different expectations and a harsher set of standards for her. Right from the beginning the readers are treated to an incident in which a man is stunned when he realizes that the book he was bragging about and declared to be important was written by Rebecca. Without saying a word to her, she knew exactly what he was thinking. He turned ashen, mumbled and walked off. The question of how this young woman could have possibly written such an important book was written all over his face. Rebecca had to enjoy the moment.

But this light anecdote is just the tip of the iceberg because Rebecca expands her book to much more serious matters. Women have been silenced through the years. Over the centuries, women have been berated and beaten into silence. Men have much more control over a silent woman who doesn't threaten his status quo. Women who have been abused know that they face retribution, disbelief and even violence for reporting that they'd been sexually abused.

Women are raped at the rate of every 6.2 minutes, a statistic that is particularly jarring with the additional knowledge that many rapes are not reported. In the U.S. today's woman is savvy and sophisticated and is well-aware that when she reports a rape she will be facing harsh skepticism from the cops who interview her followed by the ordeal of a court trial during which many rape victims are depicted as sluts or delusional or even bitter for being rejected by the accused. One erudite professor asked a colleague why a rape investigation was being launched since only one woman reported it. The woman knew she was raped and who did it but it wasn't enough for the professor.

The United States has made great strides in the furtherance of women's rights beginning in the 1960s with the publication of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*. The book shed light on the oppression of women and their inequality with men. Words like misogyny, sexism and chauvinism became part of modern discourse. The many decades since feminism was born has shown great progress in societal mores and group think, in legislation, law enforcement and in the judicial system. Marital rape and date rape was recognized as real crimes. It was no longer a man's personal business what he did with his wife in his own home – it was domestic violence. Other pioneers in feminism that greatly impacted the movement and influenced author Solnit were Virginia Woolf and Susan Sontag who believed that venturing in the darkness into the unknown can have unexpected - yet positive - results.

The women of first world countries are fortunate to have laws and society behind them in seeking full equality with men. However, in regions like the Middle East, parts of Asia and in developing nations, women virtually have no rights – no right to be heard or educated or to even show their faces.



Chapter 1: Men Explain Things to Me

Summary

At a party in Aspen that were largely much older people than she and her friend, Sallie, one of the old men asked Rebecca about the books she'd written. She had written seven books by that time but decided to tell the man about her most recent book, *River of Shadows*. The man referred to a book that had been recently published and that was a very important book on the same topic as her book. Sallie interjected that the book he was referring to was Rebecca's book but he chose to ignore her. It took Sallie three more times before he grasped what she was saying. He turned ashen, had nothing to say and walked away.

It has been Rebecca's experience that many men feel they are superior to women and that they must "explain things" them. It keeps women from speaking up or from being heard if they get up the courage to speak. According to many men, women live in a world that belongs to men. Women deal with a war within themselves to either speak out or remain silent. Rebecca had been able to use the silence decree to her advantage. The self-doubt that it fostered made her more open to learning, seeing her own flaws and making progress. However, she also knew that keeping too much to herself or becoming overly confident were both debilitating. Women in the Middle East officially must keep quiet – they cannot testify in open court. A male witness must testify that he witnessed the rape of a woman who cannot testify to the crime herself.

Even in developed nations, many men do not believe that upstanding middle-class men are capable of abusing or killing their wives. Restraining orders are difficult to come by because of women's long-standing lack of credibility and if issued are generally ineffective. Three women each day are killed by husbands or ex-husbands in the U.S. alone. From the 1970s on, acts like marital rape, date rape and workplace sexual harassment have been taken more seriously and compelled laws to be passed to make them crimes. Rebecca's book *Wunderlust* helped her fight being bullied about her ideas and perspective and to reject the notion that the truth is the property of men. Men don't generally apologize for being wrong.

Men have been trampling on the potential of women for many generations and in many countries including the U.S. The war that women must fight with men will not be resolved any time soon. Rebecca had been toying with the idea of writing the essay "Men Explain Things to Me" for many years. She finally wrote the essay, posted it online and it went viral. Some men reacted well to the article and recognized the importance as well as the humor that Rebecca interjected into her words. Others claimed that women put themselves in the position of being patronized. A website called "Academic Men Explain Things to Me" was established where women could share their stories of being put down and patronized. The essay was reposted when Representative Todd Akin made his infamous statement about "legitimate rape." The point of Rebecca's



article was to open up the possibility for real and equal exchanges between men and women. The right to speak up is a fundamental of life and liberty.

Analysis

Author Rebecca Solnit begins this work with the personal experience of encountering an older man who was impressed with an “important book” until he realized that Rebecca had written it. The inference was obvious: this young woman wrote an important book?! But Rebecca was used to this reaction. She had written seven books by then and the man’s reaction was not unlike the reaction of other men who had doubted her ability to have profound thoughts and express them in writing.

But the substance of Solnit’s book goes much further than the rude treatment of a female writer by men who question her abilities and thought processes. For centuries, the prevailing belief across the globe had been that men were superior to women. Even women bought the concept. In today’s world, women in developing nations and regions like the Middle East and Asia are mistreated and abused and virtually have no rights. Women are the property of men. Although advancements have been made in first world nations like the U.S., there is still progress to be made.

“Men Explain Things to Me” began as an essay that Solnit posted on the Internet. It went viral and garnered great attention both pro and con. A spinoff of the essay was a website called “Academic Men Explains Things to Me” which was a forum where women could share their experiences of being patronized and mistreated.

Vocabulary

kilim, industrialization, annihilation, ingénue, irrelevant, trajectory, superfluity, subjective, archipelago, mellifluous, subjugation, dovetailed, misogyny



Chapter 2: The Longest War

Summary

One in five women will be raped during her lifetime. Rapes, gang rapes, murders of women around the world and assaults of young women who have been drugged are stories grabbed from the headlines. There is a broad pattern of violence against women across the globe. The disabled, the autistic, celebrities and innocent children have all been victims. Men are the chief perpetrators but only a small percentage of all men are guilty of this level of violence which has reached pandemic levels.

Although statistics demonstrate that there is a rape every 6.2 minutes, there are many unreported rapes that if reported would quintuple that number. If all rapes were reported in the U.S. there would be a rape a minute. For decades, university and even high school administrators seemed to be alarmingly disinterested in taking steps to prevent campus rape and assaults. The military is not an exception to this violence. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta estimated that there were 19,000 sexual assaults occurring among the four branches of the military in just 2010 alone. Most of the perpetrators go unpunished.

Beyond workplace violence and assaults in the military and on campus, most assaults against women occur in the home. On the average, men murder more than 1,000 partners or former partners each year. American men commit murder/suicides at a rate of 12 per week. Statistics show that men are much more violent than women. Although there is easy availability of guns to everyone, men are responsible for 90% of all homicides.

There were vicious assaults on women in Cairo's Tahrir Square after it was thought that their status had changed after the Arab Spring. There are bride-burnings and honor killings in South Asia and the Middle East. South Africa has become the rape capital of the world; an estimated 600,000 rapes occurred there in just one year.

Rebecca's essay was inspired in part by an incident in San Francisco. After a woman walking alone on a street rejected the sexual advances of a complete stranger, he slashed her face and arms. He felt he had a right to punish her because he was rejected. He believed he had the right to make a life and death decision by asserting his power and control over her. In less dramatic instances, men often curse and threaten women who reject them. A woman is in danger when she breaks up with a man who has violent tendencies. Violent men are driven to acts of assault in their attempt to control women. Online threats to women by anonymous men have become common. Women playing in on-line gaming sites have been harassed and driven out of the sites by male gamers. Malala Yousafzai, a teenage Afghan was shot by the Taliban because she spoke out for the right for girls in her country to be educated. She survived the attack and captured the adoration of the international community.



Embedded in both the political and legal systems for many years was the failure to recognize domestic violence, sexual harassment, stalking and marital, domestic, date and acquaintance rape. Law enforcement and the courts for years questioned the victim and made the process such an ordeal that many women chose not to report incidents of rape. Congressional Republicans refused to renew the Violence Against Women Act because it protected immigrant, Native and transgender women. The Republicans continually pursue ways to limit and ban abortions and birth control. Law enforcement has also failed women allowing more than 400,000 rape kits to go untested. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has backed a bill that not only bans abortions it gives the rapist the right to sue a woman who aborted the baby that was conceived when he raped her.

Although there are cases of abuse committed by women, their numbers pale in comparison by those perpetrated by men. Less than 10% of those serving time for violent crimes in U.S. prisons are women. Many men support the movement against domestic violence. They understand the inequality that exists between the sexes and do not support it. Men are beginning to be less threatened by women assuming power – they understand that there is enough space for both men and women to be strong and vocal.

The threat of violence impacts the daily lives of women. Women are afraid to walk through different neighborhoods or be out late at night. A Native Canadian indigenous rights movement called Idle No More was established to fight violence against women. A Native woman was raped and severely beaten in retaliation against the efforts of the movement. Progress cannot be made unless everyone understands that violence against women is everyone's problem.

Analysis

The raping of women is not as much a sexual act on the part of the perpetrator but an expression of his power and his right to have sex with any woman he chooses. The female victims of rape, abuse and murder cut across all demographics that includes the disabled, the famous, the rich and innocent children. There was a stigma attached to rape – that it was brought on by the woman. Reporting rape, even in countries like the U.S., until recent years was often a humiliating ordeal for the victim. Police and prosecutors fail victims by treating them dismissively and with skepticism.

Domestic violence has gone on for centuries but it is just in recent years that it's been considered a crime. Law enforcement stayed away from domestic troubles thinking that it was a man's business how he treated his wife in his own home – as if she were his possession. While women commit acts of violence, there is no comparison to the vastly larger number of violent crimes committed by men.

Violence impacts the lives of women who have not been victims of rape or assault. They become afraid to leave their homes at night. There is a rape every 6.2 minutes; South Africa has earned the dubious title of rape capital of the world after some 600,000 rapes



were reported in just one year – and that doesn't count the many rapes that weren't reported.

Vocabulary

anomalies, incessantly, pandemic, quotidian, patriarchy, amorphous, lackadaisically, indigenous



Chapter 3: Worlds Collide in a Luxury Suite

Summary

Rebecca addresses the alleged rape by the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Dominique Strauss-Kahn was accused of rape by a maid in a New York City hotel. After reports of this incident surfaced, another woman spoke out and claimed that he had assaulted her as well. Another female, a Hungarian economist and colleague, claimed that Strauss-Kahn had also sexually harassed her.

Rebecca Solnit makes a comparison between the abuse that the head of the IMF had been accused of and the abusive policies of the IMF itself which had caused struggling and strife in various developing countries around the world. In the 1990s, instead of helping third world nations, the loans the IMF granted were used to gain power over the developing nations that received them. In the twenty-first century, however, the IMF began to lose its clout. Strauss-Kahn was named head of the organization to salvage it. Under his leadership, the IMF became a predatory force that destroyed economies in African and South American nations.

The New York Times dug into Strauss-Kahn's past and found other reports of sexually aggressive treatment of women including journalists, students and subordinates. He used his position to create a dangerous environment for women around him. He was charged with sexual assault in the New York City incident. It took a democracy where everyone's voice was heard to expose his abusive behavior. Every incident of abuse against a woman by a man is a reminder that women are living in a world that is controlled by men. What makes the assault of a poor black maid by the head of the powerful IMF sadly ironic is the damage that the organization has done to poverty-stricken nations. The IMF, World Bank and far-reaching trade agreements have created poverty, suffering, starvation and death. Strauss-Kahn tried to use the weakened state of Haiti in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake to force new loans on the already impoverished nation.

There is a paradox in the notion that a hotel maid may bring down one of the most powerful men in the world. He thought he could take advantage of a hotel maid who had no voice and no rights. In the end Strauss-Kahn's position and power was able to get his case dismissed. The maid was portrayed as a liar and treated like trash for a second time, this time in the courtroom and in the New York tabloids that referred to her as a slut and a prostitute. In an interview the maid said that she initially feared reporting the rape because of conditions in her home country. When evidence and witnesses were interviewed, the maid's version of the story held up to scrutiny; Strauss-Kahn's did not.

Charges from other women followed and it was revealed that the married Strauss-Kahn was in a sex-party ring whose relations with prostitutes broke French law. Strauss-Kahn



lost his position, his credibility and his reputation. The maid won her case in civil court against him.

Analysis

The focus of this chapter is on the abuse by the powerful of the voiceless. A world figure, Dominique Strauss-Kahn who was head of the International Monetary Fund was accused of rape by an immigrant maid in New York City. Solnit makes a link between the head of the IMF abusing an impoverished woman who felt she had no rights to the actions taken by the IMF in exploiting poor nations by forcing loans onto them and then taking over control of the countries -- a kind of metaphorical rape of the nations.

After the allegations surfaced, other women spoke out about being sexually harassed or abused by Strauss-Kahn. France, Strauss-Kahn's home country, chose to ignore the allegations. The U.S., however, decided to listen to the powerless woman and charge him with rape. His position and money eventually was instrumental in the dismissal of his case. However, the maid's story stood up to scrutiny but Strauss-Kahn's did not. The maid won a civil case against him. More women spoke out against him resulting in the loss of his position and reputation.

Strauss-Kahn was an abusive criminal and was the leader of an organization that routinely exploited poor nations. The man was brought down by an immigrant maid and a woman was named to replace him as the head of the IMF.

Vocabulary

axiom, ontogeny, phylogeny, embryonic, resonant, aggrandize, microcosms



Chapter 4: In Praise of the Threat and Chapter 5: Grandmother Spider

Summary

There is an on-going debate about marriage equality. While it is true that a man marrying another man doesn't directly impact a traditional marriage between a man and a woman it may affect it in a metaphysical sense. Advocates of same-sex marriage refuse to look at its threat to society while conservatives who believe in conventional marriage are vague about what the threat is. The term "same-sex marriage" has been largely replaced with "marriage equality." The problem with the new phrase is that marriage between a man and woman has not been equal for centuries. In days of yore, a man owned his wife. The British judge William Blackstone wrote in 1765 that a woman actually lost her legal existence when she married. Until the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, everything in the marriage belonged to the husband. The wife was a pauper even if she brought wealth to the marriage or inherited it during the marriage. Laws against wife beating in Great Britain were written in the late nineteenth century but rarely enforced until the 1970s. American conservatives fear an egalitarian society – one that is equal in every sense of the word. The argument that the purpose of marriage is to reproduce has lost its strength due to the many ways people can have children. Marriage equality is a threat to inequality.

It is not unusual for the names of females to be missing from family trees that go back generations. One traditional way of obliterating the women in a family is the accepted practice of the woman taking the surname of the man she marries. No one gave this practice much thought until relatively recently. In English law, a man and woman are one person. The women in many Middle Eastern nations are covered from head to toe in burkas, with only their eyes being visible. Three thousand years ago, Assyrian widows were veiled while prostitutes were prohibited from wearing them. The elaborate veils and burkas made it difficult for women to get around; they kept the women indoors and isolated.

In Argentina during the dirty war that took place between 1976 and 1983, people – both men and women – disappeared at the hands of the military junta. The first people to speak up against this horror were mothers who formed a group called Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. The women would gather in front of the presidential palace and express their grief over missing children and loved ones. Even though they were persecuted, arrested and assaulted the group gained membership and continued their protests.

When Rebecca attended college, the university administration advised female students to stay indoors at night after a series of rapes had occurred. Someone suggested that another solution to the problem would be to require the men on campus to stay in their dorms at night. The men were offended that they might have to give up their liberty. According to an organization formed by Italian actress Serena Dandino, 66,000 women



are killed by men around the globe each year. Most are killed by husbands or lovers. Murder is the extreme form of control and in the silencing of one's partner.

Analysis

Although the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled on the side of marriage equality in several cases before it, there is still a raging debate on the matter. The term "same-sex marriage" has been replaced by "marriage equality" which Solnit finds sadly ironic since women have not achieved full equality in traditional marriage. This tradition has gone on since times of yore. The British deemed women virtually non-existent when they married. The woman was a possession of the man. Any money that the woman brought to a marriage was automatically a sole possession of the men. The families of women were expected to provide a dowry of riches to the expectant grooms showing their gratitude that the men were good enough to marry their daughters.

For many generations, women were literally left out of family lineages. Although they were invisible on the chart, the chart wouldn't have existed without the children born to women who populated the family trees. Women to this day are made to be truly invisible in certain Middle East nations where they are required to be covered head to toe with burkas that allow only eye slits so the women can see where they're going.

But some women have spoken up against abuse over the years. During the dirty war in Argentina in the 70s and 80s, a group of mothers known as Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo protested at the presidential palace about loved ones who had "disappeared" at the hands of the militia. When Solnit attended a university, the female students were warned to stay in at night because of a series of rapes. When someone suggested that the men – which presumably include the perpetrator – stay inside at night, they were insulted and angered at even the suggestion that their freedom be taken from them.

Vocabulary

obliterated, lineage, lineages, enunciated, junta, gesticulates, metaphysically, egalitarian, patriarchal, advocate, feminism, surrogate

Chapter 6: Woolf's Darkness

Summary

Virginia Woolf went through periods of depression in the midst of World War I which led to a suicide attempt. In a diary entry she wrote that when there is danger it is best to be in the dark about outcomes that may be dire. Children are afraid of the dark; adults fear the darkness they call the unknown. Paradoxically, it is usually in darkness that love is made and new lives are conceived. There is another kind of darkness which emanates from closed eyes that refuse to see.

We are optimists who see the world that we think we see. However, it is easy for a person to see only what he wants to see, averting her eyes from the bumps in the road ahead. We speculate on what other people think or feel without any bases. Virginia Woolf's writing and her life were both inspirations to Rebecca Solnit. Author Susan Sontag began her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, with another reference to Virginia Woolf who rejected the term "we" in the sentence, "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" To Woolf there was no "we" about it. She said, "As a woman I have no country." Sontag believed that modern society is more inclusive of women. Even though society has experienced a desensitization of the world's atrocities, in the end they must be addressed.

Sontag urges the reader to embrace the darkness but doesn't mention one's inability to react to the unseen. We are desensitized by the rash of emails, messages, Twitters and news articles that tell us about a war that we only have remote knowledge of. Sontag began her writing career with an essay entitled, "Against Interpretation." But ironically she went on to live a life of interpretation and joined Woolf in avoiding oversimplifications and stereotyping. When Rebecca met Sontag she debated metaphysical darkness, Rebecca asserting that the future is dark as Woolf said and that we act in darkness. Rebecca wrote in *Hope in the Dark* about how she and other anti-nuclear activists did not shut down the Nevada Test Site but inspired the shutdown of the Soviet Test Site in Kazakhstan in 1990. Acting on principal as Sontag advocated resulted in a completely unexpected outcome that was created in the darkness of the unknown.

Working on principal can result in positive outcomes although results are unpredictable – one of the elements of working in the "darkness." Introspection is sometimes characterized as being shut up alone in a room. However, wandering about as Keats noted can foster creativity and innovation. Mild distraction rather than uninterrupted concentration can actually spark imagination. Just like the unknown and the darkness Woolf wrote about, creative work is often accomplished in unexpected ways. Sauntering about, one can get lost in a good way allowing oneself to open up to the unknown, to new ideas.



Woolf believed the unity of identity was a limitation, a repression. She wrote her characters with an air of mystery and multiplicity so that they were not easily defined – just as she saw people in real life. As an art critic, Rebecca was aware that museums tried to categorize it to make certain what was uncertain. Art should not be bound and limited. Art should be opened up to expansion and to all meanings and possibilities. Art, like beauty, is - or should be - in the eye of the beholder. Demands that art be defined kills its spirit. A critique of art should open up never-ending exchanges.

Woolf liberated her writing – the text and imagination and characters – and demanded the same of the readers, especially women. She celebrated the liberation of women; they should be able to move about the earth at will and be free to dream and imagine. In Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, women's lack of freedom is portrayed by Judith Shakespeare, William's sister, who was as talented as her brother but was prohibited from expressing her art. In her talk, "Professions for Women," Woolf portrays the ideal woman as meeting the needs of everyone but herself – the role that women often assume in real life. The freedom that Woolf seeks through her characters is to continue the hunt. "The journey is the destination." [Don Eldon]

One of Rebecca's goals has been to develop the language that describes the subtleties and incalculables that are difficult to define. What is quantifiable takes precedence over what is not measurable – profit over public good, productivity over enjoyment. The "tyranny of the quantifiable" is the failure of language to describe the complex and nuanced. It is difficult to recognize the value of something that cannot be named or described. A revolt against the destruction of the Earth is an insurgency of the imagination, an advocacy of the subtle and priceless joy and producing rather than consuming. In her writing, Woolf bestowed upon her readers a compass for getting lost – in a good way.

Analysis

The focus of this chapter is on the writing and philosophy of Virginia Woolf who was a great inspiration to author Rebecca Solnit. She refers to Woolf's allusions about darkness which is a metaphor for the unknown. Woolf believed that the unknown and working in the darkness had a positive impact on creativity. Not knowing how something will work out allows creativity to be liberated and fosters innovation.

Another writer that Solnit admires, Susan Sontag, had also been inspired by Virginia Woolf. Rebecca actually debated the darkness that Woolf had alluded to with Sontag. The work of the two celebrated writers led to Solnit writing *Hope in the Dark* in which she discussed how her and anti-nuclear activists were not able to shut down the Nevada test site but inspired activists across the world in Kazakhstan to shutdown the Soviet test site there. It was an unexpected result of working "in the darkness."

Virginia Woolf wrote as she lived. She didn't like being limited by the identities that others attached to her. For that reason she created her characters with an air of mystery and multiplicity that to her was more real than sharply defined characters. Woolf wrote



with the hope that the liberation that she wrote into her works would be embraced by the women who read them.

Vocabulary

pantheon, torrent, interpolated, posthumous, leavened, introspection, strictures, diaphanous, nebulous



Chapter 7: Cassandra Among the Creeps

Summary

When a woman speaks out and impugns a man especially about sexual assault, they are met with skepticism and questions about her right to speak out. Women are seen as “asking for it” or “delusional” or is characterized as a woman scorned. Rush Limbaugh called Sandra Fluke a “slut” for defending a woman’s right to have access to birth control methods. Rachel Carson who wrote *Silent Spring* which exposed the dangers of DDT and other pesticides was referred to as “too hysterical.” Even *Time Magazine* called her assertions about unsafe chemicals unfair and one-sided. She was right about the dangers; her exposé led to the banning of DDT and other harmful pesticides and herbicides and ultimately to the founding of the Environmental Protection Administration.

The term hysteria which was Greek for uterus was for centuries a term reserved just for women. When Sigmund Freud was a young therapist he had a number of female patients who suffered from childhood sexual abuse. It was difficult for them to articulate what they had experienced just like any trauma victim because it is a violation of the victim’s bodily integrity and freedom. It is through therapy that victims of sexual abuse can finally express their feelings about what happened to them. But Freud was troubled with the social implications of his thesis because the obvious perpetrator in many cases was the father of the young victim. He would be forced to question patriarchal authority if he believed them. Later, Freud even hinted that women may long for abusive sexual encounters.

Silence fosters self doubt, repression, shame and confused memories. Those abused in childhood fear recrimination or worse if they speak out. They have a childish reaction because the assaults happened when they were children and the trauma is still part of their psyche. There are many cases of women mustering up the courage to speak out especially in high school or college only to be harassed, ridiculed and threatened. After speaking out, the victim has to face the scrutiny and skepticism of law enforcement and the judicial system.

Feminists in the 1970s did not push for legislation but shined a light on the abuse of power that questioned the authority of men. They created a support network for victims of incest, child abuse, rape and domestic violence. Authorities in that era had difficulty knowing how to talk to children of abuse. In the *McMartin Preschool* incident, experts cajoled children into fabricating stories of abuse that in the end were completely false.

In 1991, Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in the confirmation hearing of Clarence Thomas who was nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court. She testified that he had sexually harassed her when she worked for him in the private sector. Thomas was nominated by a Republican president; the Republican senators at the hearing treated her like she was lying or hysterical or had sexual fantasies about Thomas. Thomas was confirmed and Anita Hill was roundly smeared in the press. Even



in modern times, a woman is taking a risk accusing a man of sexual harassment or assault.

A men's rights movement in modern times has spread the idea that the growing number of sexual assaults are largely groundless. Movements like this throw shade on the accuser and serve to repress and silence victims. Of course, women and children lie but not with more frequency than men do. An erudite professor asked his colleague why an investigation into sexual assault would be launched when only one woman reported it. Such a mindset is offensive and arrogant. Conservative columnist George Will questioned whether there was really an epidemic of rape at universities and suggested that victimhood had become a coveted identity for women.

Analysis

Even though the U.S. and other first world nations have made great strides in advancing the rights of women, there is still resistance to seeing them as equals to men. Rush Limbaugh called Sandra Fluke who spoke out in defense of a woman's right to access birth control methods a "slut." To him, Fluke only wanted birth control so she could sleep with every man she met. When Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* she was called delusional and hysterical. In *Silent Spring*, Carson exposed the real dangers of DDT and other pesticides and herbicides. Even *Time Magazine*, usually considered part of the liberal media, claimed that she was overly critical and unfair. But Carson was right. DDT was eventually banned along with other harmful pesticides and herbicides. And her work led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Administration.

Even Sigmund Freud was averse to women speaking out. When he was a young therapist he had a series of young women who claimed they were sexually abused. He concluded that the crimes occurred when they were children. It, of course, occurred to him that it was probably the father in the family who abused the children. If he were to expose these criminals, it would question the entire patriarchal structure of the family. It was better to remain silent.

Silence causes a woman to suffer from self doubt, repression, shame and memories that are confused and troubling. The victim must speak out in cases of childhood abuse or the pain will suffer and cause a lifetime of depression and misery.

Vocabulary

impugns, hysteria, annihilation, concentric, ostracized, exculpatory, jocular, litany



Chapter 8: #YesAllWomen

Summary

Rebecca raises the possibility that our society has fostered the violence committed by the insane. In India when voices are heard by a schizophrenic, the person is probably being told to clean the house. In America, the voice says to start shooting. Students in Isla Vista, California, were ambushed and killed by one of their peers. The killer was termed as “aberrant” suggesting that no one else at the school was like him. Men were also killed in this assault; however, the women at a sorority were the targets. Apparently, he was bitter over not having sex with these women.

In a discussion about the incident, a young woman started tweeting about the violent act using the hashtag #YesAll Women. By the next day, a half million tweets with the hashtag appeared all around the world. Some men who joined in the conversation were insulted and seemed to want credit for not being murderers and rapists. After the slaughter, feminist Laurie Penny blogged that she was tired of hearing that she should empathize with the perpetrators of violent acts when her focus was on the victims. Betty Friedan’s 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, spawned the use of new terms like chauvinism, sexism and misogyny and presented the concept of the inequality and oppression of women. The term sexual harassment was first used in 1980 and given legal status by the Supreme Court in 1986. The crime of sexual harassment played out in the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearing. There is appreciably less sexual harassment in the workplace as a result of this legislation.

Women are still beaten at a rate of one a minute and now have recourse through the courts. Beatings are the main cause of injury to women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four. It is only in recent times that a man can be prosecuted for raping his wife. Words have meaning and power. One new phrase of modern times is “rape culture” indicating that the raping of women has been normalized in some nations and excused by those societies. A study about rape in Asia found that the motivation behind rape is often the man’s concept of “sexual entitlement.” A man’s right to have sex has priority over a woman’s decision not to. The sexual rejection of a man can lead to abuse or murder. The discussions that were held in social media after the Isla Vista massacre represented a turning point in the struggle against the abuse of women because so many were able to share their own experiences.

The abuse of women is a many-faceted topic. To understand it, one must see the parts, not focus on the whole. A man’s feeling that a woman has no right to express herself can manifest in a variety of ways from cutting off a woman’s dinner conversation to silencing her by beating or murdering her. Threats of rape and murder should be taken seriously because often they are. More men are becoming involved in organizations that fight the abuse of women. There’s been good progress since Betty Friedan first spoke out but more progress is needed.

Analysis

This chapter is devoted to the escalation of anger and violence that can result in horrific mass murders of innocents. The author focuses on one of these assaults, the mass killing at Isla Vista near Santa Barbara, California. The man killed six fellow students and then committed suicide. Although some men were killed as bystanders, the target of the male killer was female students who he felt had rejected him sexually.

When one door is closed, another door opens. There is good to be found in the darkness and in the unknown. A Twitter feed was immediately set up after with a hashtag that was repeated in the millions around the world within a day. It was a way for people to grieve for their losses and to share their own experiences with violence and sexual abuse. The feminist movement was started in the 60s by Betty Friedan who wrote the book *The Feminine Mystique*. The book shed first light on equal rights for women. Words like chauvinism, sexism and misogyny and concepts like the oppression of women, even in their own homes.

Although women are threatened with murder and rape in social media and on the Internet, the electronic age has provided a venue for women to share their experiences and to learn about their rights and how to get help if they are in stressful situations.

Vocabulary

insatiable, aberrant, watershed, manifesto, chauvinism, manifesto, linguistic, omnipresent



Chapter 9: Pandora's Box and the Volunteer Police Force

Summary

The feminist movement addressed a long-standing, deeply rooted element in society. The inequality and abuse that women suffered has been widespread and entrenched into most of the world's cultures. The majority of change has taken place in the last few decades. There have been fits and starts but there have been real advancements in women's liberation. The Fourteenth Amendment, which was the result of the anti-slavery movement, has been a vehicle of support for the equality for women. Legislation about women's reproductive rights has been presented and passed but it does not convince women that they do not have the right to control their own body.

Following in the steps of the advancements in women's rights are the rights of gays, lesbians and transgender people. Not that long ago such people were shunned, considered mentally ill or punished severely. In America homophobia is in great decline which is due to the brave gay and lesbian people who came out of the closet and ended their silence to state who they are and to demand equality.

Domestic violence is also out of the closet. It had long been invisible and ignored. Feminists shined the light on the abuse that many women suffer in their own homes. Although the police and judiciary need to do more in the enforcement of domestic violence laws and in the prosecution of violators, it is no longer acceptable under any circumstances to state that a man beating his wife is his business. One movement leads to another. The Russian Revolution of 1917, in addition to the advancement of Soviet communism, also made way for the New Deal and European welfare states. The most recent global revolution which occurred in 1968 activists spoke out against corrupt state bureaucracies in such diverse locations as Mexico to China which helped to advance other movements including feminism.

There are always forces that strive to repress movements because many want to maintain the status quo. In Susan Faludi's book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, she addresses the yin and yang of the movement. On one hand women are congratulated for their progress in gaining equality while on the other hand they are told they are lonely, miserable and incomplete.

The Internet is populated with many critics of the feminist movement lacing their comments with threats of rape and murder. These critics, the majority of whom are men, are threatened by feminism. Even a respected news publication like the *Wall Street Journal* got into the mix by blaming fatherless children on career-minded women. Tabloids focus on the personal lives of female celebrities who are characterized as too fat, not sexy enough or bad mothers. There is an unspoken belief that a female singer or actress really wants to stay home and be a wife and mother and not pursue a career.



in entertainment. It's a war that conservative forces are not winning. Women may have to fight to maintain the advancements they made but they are not going backwards.

While women are scrutinized for their level of misery, there is little focus on the happiness factor of men. Perhaps they merit more attention since men commit suicide more often than women. Women are attending college at a higher rate than men. Men have suffered more severely in the 2008 economic downturn. There is more focus on rape as a cultural issue rather than a series of isolated incidents. Young women do not buy the advice of some law enforcement agencies and universities who tell them not to dress like sluts. Independent women dress how they please. Women's activist movements have helped to change laws and the cultures in universities and in the military.

The feminist movement will change, support and blend in with other causes. The Zapatista revolution supports feminist, environmental and economic issues. Other similar movements examine who we are and how we want to live. These movements have enlightened women who formerly thought they had no rights.

Woman is walking down the pathway of equality and independence. She has a long way to go but she's not turning back and is not walking alone.

Analysis

Author Solnit discusses how the abuse and unfair treatment has been an element in all societies for centuries. The majority of the positive changes to women's rights has been realized in the recent past. The Fourteenth Amendment which was the result of the abolitionist movement for the eradication of slavery helped in the feminist movement. Law enforcement and the judicial system have improved their treatment of rape victims but more work is needed. No longer is a man beating his wife just his personal business.

Solnit demonstrates how the progress on one cause can help another unrelated cause. The feminist movement that fought for women's rights made way for the advancements made for the rights of gays, lesbians and transgendered people. Not many years ago these people were shunned, abused or considered mentally ill. Inspired by the success of feminists, gay activists spoke out and demanded their rights. The Russian Revolution actually inspired the New Deal and the European welfare states.

The Zapatista revolution is an organization that supports feminism, environmental concerns and economic issues. There are other similar groups that address fairness and equality on many levels and have goals to help men and women figure out who they are and what they want to become.

Vocabulary

promulgated, complacency, subjugation, pathological, machismo, myriad



Important People

Rebecca Solnit

Rebecca Solnit is a writer, feminist, activist and art critic. She is the author of a dozen books for which she has won critical acclaim and national literary awards. When she attended a party of people quite a bit older than her and her friend, they encountered a man who boasted about an important book that was just published. When the man learned that Rebecca was the author, he turned pale and walked away without a word. Rebecca had encountered this same reaction many times in her writing career. She tackled complicated and substantive subjects in her writing which surprised the old man at the party and other men she encountered along the way.

Rebecca was an anti-nuclear activist whose group tried to force the closing of the Nevada test site but were unable to do so. However, she felt great satisfaction to learn that an anti-nuclear group in Kazakhstan was inspired by her group's efforts and were successful in shutting down a Soviet test site in their nation. It was one of those unexpected results that come from good intentions.

Rebecca was inspired by writer/feminists who had gone before her like Virginia Woolf, Susan Sontag and Betty Friedan. She was able to meet with Sontag in her apartment when she was up in years. She served Rebecca dandelion-root tea which Rebecca suspected was probably decades old. They discussed the future in darkness theory conceived by Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf was a celebrated writer and a feminist who in many ways was way ahead of her times. She went through a dark period during the years World War I was raging. She was depressed and nearly committed suicide. It took her six months to recover from her emotional distress. It seemed her mental problem and the war were following the same calendar. Later, she would write that there was no "we" in ending a war because she felt she had no country. She obviously survived to go onto a career as an activist, writer and opinion-maker.

During the war she wrote in her diary that the future was in the dark and the dark was the best place for the future to be in. What she was saying was that the future is unknown to everyone. By working in the "darkness" there will be no preconceived ideas that will dampen creativity. Woolf believed in the freedom of her words and wrote her characters as somewhat mysterious and undefined to match her ideology. They could grow and change and surprise and she hoped her readers - especially women - would get that message and pursue their own best pathway as long as it was in darkness.

Virginia Woolf has been an inspiration to Rebecca Solnit's life and writing. She references Woolf in five of her books including *Hope in the Dark* in which she embraces



Woolf's concept about the achieving success in darkness. Rebecca and a group of fellow anti-nuclear activists were unsuccessful in shutting down the test center in Nevada but inspired an activist group clear across the globe to shut down a Soviet test site in Kazakhstan.

Coleen Rowley

Coleen Rowley was the FBI agent who first issued warnings about Al-Qaeda in 2001. But it was a time when agents knew that it was politically indelicate to speak up about Al-Qaeda having no link to Iraq or that there were no weapons of mass destruction or that winning the war against Al-Qaeda would be anything but a cake-walk.

Maria Lauterbach

Marine Lance Corporate Maria Lauterbach was killed the night before she was prepared to testify that a higher ranking officer had raped her. The murderer killed her and burned her remains in the fire pit in his backyard.

Tariq Ali

Tariq Ali, a Marxist writer, invited Rebecca out to dinner with a male writer and three young women who remained silent during the meeting. One of the male dinner guests was annoyed when Rebecca discussed the House Committee on Un-American Activities and how it had been taken down by the Women Strike for Peace. According to this man, she had her facts all wrong. But checking them again, she learned that it was the man who was wrong.

Todd Aiken

Todd Aiken was a U.S. Congressman from Missouri who was running for the U.S. Senate when he made the statement in an interview that there was something called "legitimate rape." He inferred that there was a crime called rape and that other so-called rapes were questionable and fabricated by the victim. He added that women who were raped were protected from becoming pregnant because a woman can shut their systems down. He lost the election to a woman, U.S. Senator Claire McCaskill.

Malala Yousafzai

Malala Yousafzai, a 14-year-old Afghan was targeted for execution by the Taliban for speaking out about women's rights in her country, particularly the right to an education. She was shot in the head but survived the assault and went on to become an international figure and won the Nobel Peace Prize.



Meg Whitman

When running for governor of California, Meg Whitman joined in the attack on undocumented immigrants. She was humiliated when it was learned that her housekeeper was undocumented. Whitman contended that after nine years of employing the woman she had no idea that the woman wasn't in the U.S. legally. She fired the woman and refused to pay her final unpaid wages of just over \$6,000. The woman probably needed the money. For her "largesse" Whitman lost the election in a landslide.

Ariel Castro

Ariel Castro held three women captive in his Cleveland, Ohio, residence for ten years. They were raped, tortured, threatened with their lives and kept in chains. One was finally able to escape and the horrors were exposed. Castro was probably compelled by a need for power and control more than by sex.

Cassandra

Cassandra was the daughter of the king of Troy. She was blessed with the gift of prophecy but no one would believe what she told them. She was called a liar and thought to be insane. Cassandra was taken as a spoil of war by Agamemnon and slain. Rebecca Solnit drew a comparison between Cassandra and abused women who are afraid to speak up.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn

Dominique Strauss-Kahn was the head of the International Monetary Fund. He was accused of rape by an immigrant maid in a New York City Hotel. The maid's story was at first dismissed. He was all powerful and she had no voice. Another allegation surfaced after the maid was brave enough to speak up. Strauss-Kahn was arrested by the New York Police. He was prosecuted but his case was dismissed. The maid won a civil suit she filed against him. Many more women then came forward with claims about his sexual abuse and harassment of them. The married Strauss-Kahn was found to belong to a sex ring that associated with prostitutes which was a crime in France. Strauss-Kahn lost his position with the IMF and lost his credibility and status. An immigrant hotel maid brought down the powerful.

Betty Friedan

Betty Friedan wrote the *Feminine Mystique* which was published in 1963. It launched the feminist movement by shedding light on the inequality that women lived under and the unfair treatment and abuse that many women suffered from.



Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag was a cultural critic, essayist and early feminist who was the author of many books including *Regarding the Pain of Others* and *On Photography*. She was an inspiration to Rebecca Solnit who met with the famous writer when she was up in years. They discussed the darkness as the future concept put forward by Virginia Woolf.



Objects/Places

Aspen Chalet

The “Ralph Laurence” style chalet was the location of the party that Rebecca and Sallie attended. The men and women at the party were so old that they felt like the young ladies of the fete. A man was telling her about an important book. When he realized she had written it, he didn’t want to talk to her any more.

Wanderlust

Rebecca Solnit’s 2000 book entitled *Wanderlust* helped her overcome her reluctance to fight men who bullied her about her own perceptions and interpretations. With each book or work she wrote her confidence in herself and who she was grew.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)

When Rebecca met with a male writer he became incensed when she mentioned that the Women Strike for Peace movement helped cause the collapse of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The man sneered at Rebecca’s assertion that a women’s group would have that much power. It was a matter that Rebecca had thorough researched and she was correct about her claim.

Academic Men Explain Things to Me

“Academic Men Explain Things to Me” is a website that was established as a venue for women to share their stories of being mistreated and patronized. It was spawned after author Rebecca Solnit posted her essay, “Men Explain Things to Me” which went viral.

Mansplaining

The term “mansplaining” was coined after the “Academic Men Explain Things to Me” website was launched. Since the website was a spin-off of Rebecca Solnit’s essay, “Men Explain Things to Me” was posted on the Internet and went viral. She was credited with coining the phrase “mansplaining” but claims that someone on the website actually came up with the word which became one of the New York Times’ word of the year.



Tahrir Square

Following the Arab Spring, Tahrir Square in Cairo became a center for the assault, harassment and rape of women who gathered there. The freedom that these women thought they had won in the revolutionary Arab Spring made them think that it was safe to move about openly and freely but things quickly devolved back to old traditional ways in which women were under the control of men.

Violence Against Women Act

Congressional Republicans refused to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act because its protection was broadened to include Native American women, transgendered women and immigrant women. This was one example of Republican obstructionism that resulted in the loss of women's rights.

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo was a group comprised of mothers who stood up against the military junta in Argentina during the dirty war that took place from 1976 to 1983. The military would make people "disappear" in a stealth manner so that no one initially knew they were missing, where they were taken or what fate befell them. These mothers protested in front of the presidential palace despite the threats they received and the assaults they suffered.

The Clarence Thomas Hearing

President George H. W. Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to fill a vacancy in the U.S. Supreme Court. During the hearing Anita Hill testified that when she worked for Thomas in the private sector he had sexually harassed her. She was excoriated by the Republican Senators who inferred that she was lying, hysterical or bitter. "I believe you, Anita" became a feminist slogan. Hill's experience launched recognition of workplace sexual harassment.

Isla Vista Massacre

The Isla Vista massacre occurred at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The killer was a student who felt that a group of sorority girls had rejected him sexually. He killed six fellow students and injured fourteen others then committed suicide. Although some boys were killed and injured in the massacre, the killer targeted the girls who had rejected him.



Themes

Women's Rights

For centuries women were considered the lesser of the sexes. In fact, they were deemed by law in Great Britain as recently as the eighteenth century that they were the possession of their husband and that they in fact no longer existed. The celebrated British judge William Blackstone wrote that a woman lost her legal existence after she married. Even if the woman brought wealth to the marriage, she became a pauper as soon as she said "I do." If the woman inherited money from her family after she married, the money was under the immediate possession of the husband. Great Britain passed legislation in the late 1800s but it wasn't effectively enforced until a hundred years later.

Over the centuries men were treated as first-class citizens and women were subservient to them and basically had only the rights that the husband decided to bestow upon her. Men, therefore, were like spoiled children who always had their way. There was little motivation for men to change. They enjoyed the status quo and didn't want things to change. The liberation of women was a threat to the only life they and their father and their father's father before him knew. Boys were raised to believe that they were superior to girls. Society and authorities supported that notion.

America has made great strides but there is still progress to be made. In other countries women are still treated as possessions. Women in some Middle East countries are required to cover themselves from head to toe wearing burkas with only their eyes visible so they can see to walk. In some Asian nations, there are "bride-burnings" and "honor killings." There are examples of those who speak out under even perilous circumstances. Malala Yousafzai an Afghan teenager was a vocal advocate of the right of young Afghan girls to have an education. There was an attempt on her life for her outspokenness. She was shot in the face but survived to become an international figure and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Male Violence

While violence is not limited to men, the vast majority of incidents of violence and violent crime is committed by men. In fact only one mass murder was committed by a woman of the sixty-two mass shootings in the United States in thirty years. Two-thirds of the women killed by guns are at the hands of husbands, lovers, partners or ex-partners. A woman is beaten usually by a man every nine seconds in the U.S. alone and that is with the caveat that all such crimes are not reported. Being beaten is the number one injury suffered by women in America. One-hundred forty-five thousand of women reporting this abuse wind up in the hospital. It's a serious problem that can escalate to murder.

There are tapes of Nicole Brown calling the police for help. In these tapes she is terrified that he will return and find her on the phone. Although she reached out, she did not get



the help and protection she needed. Part of the problem may have been the mindset that the football hero couldn't be capable of domestic violence. But he was guilty of beating his wife and arrested and tried for killing her. He was found not guilty but most people doubt the verdict because of the history between the two of them. She had divorced him and wasn't under his control any longer and he couldn't take it.

People worry about cancer or being killed or seriously injured in an auto accident, but male domestic abuse is responsible for more deaths and maiming than cancer and accidents and malaria put together. Society still averts its eyes from domestic abuse. Only those women who are suffering from this abuse and those who support them are keenly aware of its existence.

Darkness

There are many illusions throughout *Men Explain Things to Me* about darkness. While the word evokes images of negativity and even fear, the use of the word in this work has a totally different meaning. The first reference to darkness is when author Rebecca Solnit discusses Woolf's early days during the First World War, when she was suffering from a deep depression that seemed to run parallel with the war. She was on the verge of suicide when she was hospitalized for six months.

Virginia Woolf was in a very dark place that seemed to have no future. During her depression she wrote in a journal that the future was dark and that the dark was the best place for the future to be in. What she was saying was that it was best for the future to be in the dark – dark being a metaphor for the unknown. It was Woolf's belief that knowing what the future holds would depress creativity while not knowing would open up a myriad of possibilities and allow the freedom for creativity.

The writer and feminist Susan Sontag also urged women to embrace the darkness, the unknown. The known, she wrote, can numb feeling just as it can awaken it. Virginia Woolf lived and died long before Rebecca was born but Rebecca was able to meet with Sontag when she was advanced in years. They had a discussion about the darkness that both she and Woolf referred to. Rebecca, inspired by two of her favorite writers, ultimately wrote the book entitled *Hope in the Dark* which was a book about power and change.

A Man's World

For many centuries - perhaps even from the beginning of time - it has been a man's world. Things are changing in modern times but there are still obstacles for women to overcome in order to attain the equality that they want and deserve. The Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay law was the first bill passed in the first year of the Obama administration. The law expanded the rights of equal pay in the workplace. However, it was not comprehensive and women are still paid at an average lower wage than men for doing the same job.



Men have enjoyed the freedom to live their lives as they chose to. Men are called the “head of the household” or “the king of his castle.” Monarchies in Europe were passed to the next born boy. Many ordinary families wanted their first born to be boys. In modern-day China, families are restricted to having just one child, recently changed to two children. As a result, many Chinese girl babies were abandoned on the streets because the families wanted boys. The question looms about how the parents felt, especially the mother, tossing her girl baby to the fates.

As Rebecca Solnit points out, the celebrated British Judge Blackstone wrote law that made women virtually disappear. The law stated that once a woman married she became a possession of her husband and would no longer have any legal existence under British law. A woman was penniless once she married even if she brought more money to the marriage than her husband did. She just didn’t count. The control that men had over women was dangerous and what was largely behind the abuse, rape and murder of women.

It is not surprising that when women began to speak out and demand more rights that men rebelled. They had it all their way for centuries and were raised to believe they were superior to women. The feminist movement has made great strides and has been helped along by men who agree that women are their equals. These men have ceded the long-held belief that it’s a man’s world and that there’s plenty of room for women to walk beside them.

The Power of Words

That words have power is obvious from the importance that writing has had in the history of man. Language is power although sometimes it is inadequate in describing the intricacies and complexities of a subject like domestic abuse or sexism. Euphemisms are used to soften words that some find too harsh or blunt. Some examples include changing “torture” to “enhanced interrogation” or changing “murdered children” in the bombing of third world countries to “collateral damage.” The power of language is somewhat broken or weakened by this nuanced approach.

Virginia Woolf used the word “darkness” to describe the future. It’s an apt description although it may not be politically correct in today’s world. The power of words can bury ideas or shed light on them. When something occurs, a phenomenon that that world has yet to experience, there may be no existing words to describe it, and therefore a new word must be coined. After Rebecca Solnit wrote *Men Explain Things to Me* the word “mansplaining” was coined and became one of the New York Times’ words of the year.

When Betty Friedan published her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she launched a movement without a name. It wasn’t long before the word “feminism” was coined and became the face and name of the fight for women’s equality. After Friedan’s book was published, there were existing words that were not part of the everyday vernacular but soon became relevant with meanings that conveyed the crux of the feminist movement. Words like chauvinism, sexism and misogyny were words that had never come up in

crossword puzzles or were used in games of Scrabble. But they became part of modern-day discourse. Language is powerful and, like man himself, is ever-evolving.

Styles

Structure

Men Explain Things to Me is a non-fiction book that focuses on the fight for women's equality and the suffering of women from abuse, rape and murder at the hands of violent men who seek power and control more than they seek sexual pleasure. The book begins with an anecdote in which Rebecca Solnit, the book's author, encounters a man that cannot believe she wrote the important book he was crowing about.

Solnit then discusses the long war that women have been waging with men for equal rights. She describes the sex abuse that women have been subjected to over many centuries and how women were once considered possessions and in some nations of the world still have that status. The next chapter discusses the powerful versus the voiceless and how the head of an international monetary organization was taken down by an immigrant chambermaid.

Solnit devotes a big portion of a chapter on the invisibility of women and how women were left off family trees and considered non-existent after they married. She pays homage to writer/feminists who inspired her like Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan and Susan Sontag. A chapter is devoted to the silencing of women by controlling men and authorities and how difficult it is for women to speak up and demand fair and equal treatment.

It is with great sadness that Solnit writes about the mass murder at the University of California at Santa Barbara by a deranged student who felt rejected by a group of sorority girls. A Twitter hashtag went around the world about the incident and provided a forum for people to grieve and discuss their experiences with violence and abuse. The final chapter sums up the progress made thus far and the progress still to be made.

Perspective

Men Explain Things to Me by Rebecca Solnit is written in the first person. Solnit describes her experience as a writer and as a woman who has encountered a dismissive attitude from some men about her writing. She expands her book beyond her own experiences to the larger population of the ordinary woman who for centuries had been considered possession of a man or an invisible entity without a voice.

Solnit provides statistics on the rape and sexual assault of women as well as anecdotal incidents about specific cases of abuse and mistreatment. She describes the personal horror she felt about the mass murder at Isla Vista near Santa Barbara, California, in which six were slain by a student who felt rejected by girls at a sorority. Solnit explains how the society has fostered the belief in some men that they have "sexual entitlement" and that women should be under their control. When deranged men with violent



tendencies don't get their way, they turn to violence. Men often rape and murder women for the need to control more than the need for sex.

Solnit discusses those who she has been inspired by including the writer Virginia Woolf, Susan Sontag, Betty Friedan and other feminists who have pioneered the way for the improved conditions that modern women can enjoy. Progress in a cause lends support to other unrelated causes. The abolitionist movement helped feminism; the Russian Revolution helped spawn the New Deal; and, feminism helped to advance the causes of the gay and lesbian community.

Tone

Rebecca Solnit narrates her book, *Men Explain Things to Me*. She is the author of dozen of books and has received national awards for her work. She is also an art critic and a feminist. She writes with great authority on the subject of women's rights and pays homage to women like Virginia Woolf, Susan Sontag and Betty Friedan who were celebrated writers and feminists who inspired her in her writing and philosophy.

Other than the first incident in which an old man was speechless when he realized that the "important" book he was boasting about was written by Rebecca. The revelation left him speechless - something that Rebecca had to enjoy. However, the remainder of the story is appropriately serious without a hint of humor. Rebecca provides the reader with statistics and evidence of the abuse that women have been subjected to over the centuries. She also provides the emotional reactions that women have after being abused or raped and anecdotes that provide further evidence that there is more progress to be made in the furtherance of women's rights.

Rebecca Solnit's overall tone is serious and direct. Her words are written with clarity for ease of understanding and she does not demagogue the material she covers simply because the subject matter is so jarring that she doesn't have to.



Quotes

Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they're talking about. Some men."

-- Rebecca Solnit (chapter 1 paragraph 12)

Importance: It was her experience that men feel they are superior to women and feel the need to "explain things" to women. Not all men are like that but many are.

Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and their credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist."

-- Rebecca Solnit (chapter 1 paragraph 19)

Importance: Rebecca Solnit is referring to men who keep their wives silent with threat of violence. Men like this want to control women and are not concerned with stripping fundamental rights away from the women they are supposed to love.

Violence doesn't have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender."

-- Rebecca Solnit (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

Importance: Rebecca points out that violence against women is a worldwide problem that knows no pattern. Every woman no matter where she lives and what her pursuits are is a potential victim of violence.

Being male has been identified as a risk factor for violent criminal behavior in several studies, as have exposure to tobacco smoke before birth, having antisocial parents, and belonging to a poor family."

-- Anonymous (chapter 2 paragraph 13)

Importance: Research has been conducted in an effort to discover what factors create a violent person. A few of these elements are listed in the quote.

The future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think."

-- Virginia Woolf (chapter 6 paragraph 1)

Importance: The celebrated author Virginia Woolf wrote this in her daily log on January 18, 1915. She was referring to the First World War and alluding to the possibility that an unknown future is perhaps better than knowing what it is.

The plan, a memory of the future, tries on reality to see if it fits."

-- Laurence Gonzalez (chapter 6 paragraph 4)

Importance: These were the words of wilderness author Laurence Gonzalez. He refers to man's tendency to hold onto a plan even when it becomes obvious that it is not practical.



The unofficial history of the world shows that dedicated individuals and popular movements can shape history and have, though how and when we might win and how long it takes is not predictable.”

-- Rebecca Solnit (chapter 6 paragraph 21)

Importance: This comment is part of Rebecca Solnit’s discussion on the darkness of the unknown. Working on principle and not knowing the future one’s efforts can result in positive - though unpredictable - outcomes.

But her [Virginia Woolf] ideal is of a liberation that must also be internal, emotional, intellectual.”

-- Rebecca Solnit (chapter 6 paragraph 44)

Importance: The works of legendary writer Virginia Woolf often focused on elements of freedom, especially for women. She advocated complete liberation in body, heart and mind which relates to Rebecca Solnit’s focus on the freedom and equality of women.

I therefore put forward the thesis that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience.

-- Sigmund Freud (chapter 7 paragraph 8)

Importance: As a young therapist, Freud had a number of female patients who he believed to be victims of childhood sexual abuse. The “hysteria” that he refers to is the victim’s inability to articulate what happened to them because as a child they lacked an understanding of what they were being subjected to.

As Astra Taylor has pointed out in her new book, *The People’s Platform*, the language of free speech is used to protect hate speech, itself an attempt to deprive others of their freedom of speech, to scare them into shutting up.”

-- Rebecca Solnit/Astra Taylor (chapter 8 paragraph 17)

Importance: Societal mores are structured to appear open for expression; however, they are often designed to have the opposite effect. Women have been silenced for centuries about the abuse they have been made to suffer. In modern days, there are laws against abuse but they are often weak and misused.

The problem that has no name – which is simply the fact that American women are kept from growing to their full human capacities – is taking a far greater toll on the physical and mental health of our country than any known disease.”

-- Betty Friedan (chapter 8 paragraph 20)

Importance: Feminist Betty Friedan made this statement in her book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan was one of the first to tie societal violence to the abuse of women.

Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”

-- Marie Sheer (chapter 9 paragraph 34)

Importance: Writer Marie Sheer captured the simplicity of the women's movement and states the obvious in her succinct statement.



Topics for Discussion

1

Why was the man at the party that Rebecca attended surprised that she had written *River of Shadows*? What larger problem did this incident point to?

2

What was the impact of the essay, “Men Explain Things to Me” have? What did the website, “Academic Men Explain Things to Me” provide to visitors to the site?

3

What did U.S. Congressman Todd Aiken mean by the term “legitimate rape”, and what was he referring to when he said that women can “shut that thing down?”

4

How does control and power factor into the sexual abuse of women? What were the reasons that domestic violence and marital rape were largely ignored for centuries?

5

Who was Dominique Strauss-Kahn and what was he accused of? What was the result of the incident? How did Rebecca Solnit compare Straus-Kahn to the organization he headed?

6

What progress has been made in gay rights and marriage equality? Why does Rebecca Solnit question the term “marriage equality” as it relates to traditional marriage between a man and woman?

7

What was Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and what was their purpose? What was taking place at the time of their formation?



8

What did Virginia Woolf mean by the liberation of her writing? Why is the story of Judith Shakespeare in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* relevant to the women's rights movement?

9

What was the significance of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*? What current governmental agency did it lead to?

10

What was difficult for Sigmund Freud in the treatment of childhood sex abuse? Why do victims of childhood sex abuse need therapy to describe their experiences and express their feelings?