

Misogynies

Joan Smith. London: The Westbourne Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Helen Williams

Last year, *Misogynies* was re-released alongside Smith's new Book *The Public Woman*. Deemed a classic piece of feminist literature, *Misogynies* was first published back in 1989 and received critical acclaim. It was thought to have been responsible for invigorating feminism after a decade of new feminist and anti-feminist analyses such as Shirley Conran's 'insightful' encyclopaedia of household management, *Superwoman* and Camille Paglia's feminist attack, *Sexual Personae*. The author, Joan Smith, is a novelist, columnist and human rights activist who restates the radical feminist position of discrimination based on sex (Brook, 1999). For Smith, we live in a misogynistic society which not only restricts female freedom but threatens any woman who dares step outside of the narrowly defined gendered lines it dictates.

Misogynies consists of 18 short chapters or essays which explore and critically analyse various nuances of misogyny, drawing on examples from history, literature and popular culture. Chapters such as *Doubting Thomas* (chapter 1) and *M'Learned Friends* (chapter 2) draw attention to cases of rape and sexual harassment such as the legal case of Hill versus Thomas in 1991. A case, which although heralded for putting workplace harassment on the political agenda, ultimately led to defeat for Hill. While deemed a credible witness, passing a lie detector test, and whose testimony led to a number of other, previous employees coming forward to share their experiences of harassment at the hands of Thomas, Hill was made out to be a woman scorned, weaving malicious fantasies to get revenge over her ex-boss (20). Furthermore, her calculated and 'unfeminine' character was called into question and was ultimately her downfall. For Smith, this case demonstrates how women are 'the victim of preconceptions, of stereotypes, of outdated notions about how a particular type of human being should behave' (25).

Chapter 2, *M'Learned Friends* follows a similar line of enquiry, highlighting cases of rape, assault and murder in which women, the victims, are somehow considered to be to blame for the crimes carried out against their bodies. In the chapter, Smith outlines various examples, such as a 1988 rape case in which a 12 year old girl is told by a judge that she 'acted foolishly' (27) whilst in another a judge declares 'women who say no don't always mean no' (28). The same chapter also provides a detailed analysis of a quite remarkable murder trial in which a husband killed, dissected and cooked his wife's body, and deposited it all across London. Astonishingly,

Boyce, the husband, was cleared of murder and was sentenced instead to a meagre three years for manslaughter. The reason for such a pitiful sentence was that Christobel, the victim, had not sufficiently performed her dutiful role of wife within the marriage and 'rightfully', Boyce had asserted his control over his wife (33). Like the case of Hill, both the judge and jury held antiquated and outdated notions of how a woman should behave, a case in which Christobel, the family's breadwinner, was guilty of 'undermining her husband's masculinity by usurping his role as chief provider...which is exactly what a wife is supposed not to do' (32).

Although the manifestations of misogyny discussed above are not too dissimilar, Smith goes on to consider a number of quite diverse and disparate manifestations of male hatred: from slasher movies, and the Roman Empire to discussions of Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana, Margaret Thatcher and page three models. The book even includes a simple domestic conversation between a husband, wife and visiting gas man and an analysis of a squadron's song book in a chapter entitled *Crawling from the Wreckage*.

The central tenet of the book, however, and what links all of the chapters is clear – men (some/most) have an intense dislike of and disrespect for women, with the examples drawn on by Smith representing man's hatred of woman. For Smith, extracting from her own experiences as a journalist during Peter Sutcliffe's murderous spree, it is this outward hatred that enabled the serial killer and prolific woman hater, Sutcliffe – the Yorkshire Ripper – to attack and maim seven women and murder thirteen, suggesting that only in a society which nurtures and encourages a deep seated hatred of women, can a mass murderer such as Sutcliffe be produced (14). Such deep-seated, visceral hatred was also the reason Sutcliffe was able to go undetected and continue his deadly activity for such a long time because the police could not distinguish him from any of the other men questioned or from society at large. This is because Sutcliffe was no 'accident' but a by-product of society, of humanity's most prevailing prejudice – misogyny (Holland, 2006).

Misogynies, although now quite dated, having been written back in 1989 and only updated with a preface for the 2013 edition is as relevant and pertinent today as it was then. The case studies drawn on by Smith were and still are representative of men's general dislike and loathing of women in that unfortunately we still live in a society characterised by an abhorrence and hatred of women. An aversion which is evidenced by high profile examples such as; the brutal rape and murder of a medical student on a Delhi bus in 2012, the shooting of Malala Yousafzai by the Taliban in 2012, the kidnapping of 250 Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram in 2014, the barrage of rape threats targeted at Caroline Criado-Perez in 2013 for campaigning for celebrated female figures to be printed on bank notes, and the 125 million young girls and women who are living with the consequences of female genital mutilation. Furthermore, with the rise of the internet and the advent of social media, I would argue that misogyny is now at its peak, in that incidences such as that of the threats to Criado-Perez and others such as Anita Sarkeesian are not all that uncommon.

Today in a world in which post-feminist ideas seem ascendant, a new misogyny, garnered by female success is rife (Genz, 2009 and McRobbie, 2004). A misogyny aided by social media has both bolstered misogynistic and sexist language so that online trolls and Facebook pages dedicated to female violence or rape threats to-

wards what seems to be any woman in a position of power and who is in the public eye, now appear to be part of our culture. The magnitude of the internet and the scale of social media such as Facebook, has the potential to boost and I would argue has boosted, misogynistic and other harmful content to a bigger audience and is going some way to embed misogyny into everyday language. This is evidenced by the sheer volume of pages such as 'I kill bitches like you' in which violence towards women is categorised as humour. The categorisation of such content serves to dilute and neutralise the language used, which some would say has led to a degree of tolerance towards the degradation and objectification of girls and women (Chemaly, 2013). Classic feminist books such as *Misogynies* as well as more recent publications highlight and provide a forum for the discussion of such male hatred (Holland, 2006; Jane, 2014; Mantilla, 2013 and Smith, 2013b).

The continued success and relevance of *Misogynies* is also illustrative of Smith's excellent writing and analysis. Early on in the book, in the chapter entitled *M'learned Friends*, Smith notes, 'Three or four times a year, we in Britain go through a ritual known as Outcry Over Judges Remarks in Rape Case' (26). A ritual that continues to this day in that despite legal change that suggests a more equal scrutiny of defendants and victims, the persistence of the focus on women's culpability is still evident. This is because, as Smith highlights, many victims of both rape and murder are seen as somehow deserving of their fate, a fate bestowed on them by Christianity's pathological hatred of women, which can be traced back to traditional teleological constructions of femininity in which every woman is Eve, a temptress.

Figures from research headed by the Ministry of Justice, the Office of National Statistics and the Home Office (2013) which indicate that 85,000 women a year in Britain are the victims of rape, but that only 1,070 end in conviction points to the perseverance of such archaic constructions. Whilst women may experience greater equality in terms of law, such as the abolition of 18th century marital exemption from rape laws (1992) in which a man could lawfully rape his wife, certain misogynistic thinking and judicial attitudes towards women persist, blaming the victims of sexual and violent offences, claiming they 'should have known best'. The continuation of such attitudes can be seen to convey the level of woman hating that Smith argues underpins a misogynistic society like ours.

Examples of such attitudes are evidenced by an ICM opinion poll for Amnesty international (2005) which highlighted societal attitudes to sexual offences. The poll revealed how 1 in 3 believe a woman who flirts is partially to blame, whilst 1 in 4 believe a woman who is drunk or is wearing provocative clothing is partially to blame for the violations carried out against her body. Such beliefs can be evidenced by a 2012 rape case which was ultimately dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service due to the fact that the female victim was wearing apparently 'sexy' body-contouring Spanx underwear (Newman and Wright, 2014). More recently, Roger Helmer, a UKIP candidate suggested that women should be held accountable for date rape under certain circumstances, claiming, 'women should take reasonable care not to put themselves in danger of the crime – in the same way that people going on holiday should lock their front door' (Mason, 2014). These recent examples of misogyny highlight two things; they demonstrate that the world's oldest prejudice is still very much alive and kicking (Holland, 2006) and also underpin the continued relevance

of Smith's analysis – women are defined and limited by their gender and as a result men dislike, disrespect and hate us.

However, there are also drawbacks to this book. Firstly, Smith herself extends this notion of victim-blaming to her discussion of Hollywood actress and sex siren Marilyn Monroe in the chapter entitled *Gentlemen Prefer Dead Blondes* (chapter 12), as well as to page three models such as Samantha Fox in the chapter entitled *Touch Me* (chapter 4). Here, Smith could be charged with assuming that some women, such as Monroe and Fox are somehow 'asking for it' and are responsible for their own destruction in that whilst rape victims firmly have the right to say 'no', others such as page three models are not afforded the same luxury. Smith alludes to this when she states 'I hope [they] got their money back' (42) in reference to the men who had paid to see their favourite page three model, but due to a public mauling was cut short. Here, Smith falls into the trap of radical feminism by imposing a moral prohibition on women who choose to work in certain industries such as the sex industry or who demonstrate an engagement with traditional femininity such as Monroe and her emphasised femininity (Dworkin, 1974; Greer, 1970 and Millet, 1970).

Just like the judge in a rape case or police in a murder investigation, some of the very men she seeks to condemn, Smith too is guilty of blaming some women for the manifestations of misogyny they experience. For Smith, Fox was somehow deserving of the barrage of male attention which placed her in danger because she was a page three model and got her 'tits out for the lads'. Smith is therefore guilty of holding the very same attitudes she seeks to disrupt. Smith is highly critical of the police investigation of Sutcliffe and highlights how the victims were placed in one of two camps – deserving victims (prostitutes and loose women) and innocent victims. Is Smith not guilty of drawing the same analogy when discussing rape victims who have the right to say no and page three models who do not?

Furthermore, Smith can be charged with assuming a lack of agency on behalf of the women she discusses such as Monroe and Fox and does not address the idea that some women, in an act of self-empowerment may knowingly use their bodies and their sexuality to take advantage of men for their own financial gain. In 2011, Katie Price aka Jordan was invited to Oxford University to discuss her life and successful career, a career which is premised on her body and appearance. For Price, sex sells and is illustrated by her huge business empire which is said to be worth in excess of 40 million. I would hardly consider women such as Katie Price a victim. But what Price and others such as Miley Cyrus and Britney Spears are victims of, however, is complicity to a set of limited gendered roles in which women are narrowly defined by their appearance. Such complicity is therefore not surprising given the very few opportunities that exist for women to achieve financial independence. So whether women such as Fox, Price and Spears are complicit or are indeed exercising agency, it is an agency that is ultimately confined and limited by the conditions of heteronormativity (Jackson, 2006 and Rich, 1980). A sentiment echoed by Smith when she states 'femininity is a straightjacket' (202).

Critique aside, the message of this book is still powerful and as relevant as it was 25 years ago. Society then and now is still premised on a deep seated hatred of women – misogyny is not only surviving but thriving and for this reason *Misogynies* is as poignant and significant as ever; a must read for anyone interested in why half of

the world's population appears to dislike the other half. Whilst some of the manifestations of misogyny Smith considers are now quite dated, partly due to the fact that *Misogynies* is a reprint, there are new and more recent articulations of misogyny to consider especially in our internet age. However, if read in conjunction with Smith's new book, *The Public Woman*, which continues the pioneering work of *Misogynies* but in a modern context, the reader will come away with a succinct understanding and awareness of the parasitic and patriarchal social processes which continue to infect society with certain sexist attitudes towards women. *Misogynies* reminds women not only of the struggle women once experienced but also of the struggle that remains for all is not as it seems and a fight is still very much on our hands.

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