

DIVERSITY READING LIST PRESENTS:

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

A DRL READING GROUP BLUEPRINT BY ANNE-MARIE MCCALLION
FUNDED BY AHRC

LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE

INTRODUCTION

This reading group blueprint offers an introductory overview to the topic of feminist philosophy. It explores key texts within the fields of feminist ecology, black feminist epistemology, Queer theory, and Marxist feminism. It offers students the opportunity to critically engage with a variety of global feminist issues as well as a series of thinkers who are situated across a variety of persuasions and feminist specialisms. There are eight texts in total contained in this blueprint and they are best accessed in the order that they are laid out as each text builds – in some way – on the one prior.

CATEGORIES

- Philosophy in Philosophy of Gender, Race, and Sexuality
- Critical Theory
- Black Feminism
- Indian Feminism
- Marxist and Socialist Feminism
- Ecofeminism

AVAILABLE ONLINE AT:

<https://diversityreadinglist.org/blueprint/feminist-philosophy/>

Topic 1

MENON, NIVEDITA. *SEEING LIKE A FEMINIST*

2012, Penguin India and Zubaan Books.

Difficulty: Easy

Fragment: Chapter 3: 'Desire', pp. 91-111.

ABSTRACT:

For Nivedita Menon, feminism is not about a moment of final triumph over patriarchy but about the gradual transformation of the social field so decisively that old markers shift forever. From sexual harassment charges against international figures to the challenge that caste politics poses to feminism, from the ban on the veil in France to the attempt to impose skirts on international women badminton players, from queer politics to domestic servants' unions to the Pink Chaddi campaign, Menon deftly illustrates how feminism complicates the field irrevocably. Incisive, eclectic and politically engaged, *Seeing like a Feminist* is a bold and wide-ranging book that reorders contemporary society.

COMMENT:

Nivedita Menon is an influential feminist academic, who briefly taught in Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, and is currently a professor of political science in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. What probably heightens her ability to see through the flawless nude makeup of our patriarchal culture is the fact that she was brought up in the Nair community of Kerala which, until her grandmother's generation, was matrilineal. *Seeing Like A Feminist* is about both the challenges faced by feminism in India as well as global and intersectional movements of feminism. It covers a wide range of issues like the Hindu Code Bills, the Pink Chaddi campaign that was heavily criticized by the media, 'gender verification' tests for the Olympic Games, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, gender performativity, the Women's Reservation Bill (Sharma, 2016). In this chapter, Menon critically examines the concept of 'nature' how it functions to corset our perception and actions, and in turn, constrain women's and LGBTQ+ emancipation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. "Selectively equating 'unnatural' with 'immoral' is a way of suffocating the debate" In what other social debates do we see this move being made? (p. 94)
2. Would you say 'nature' itself is an inherently politically loaded idea, or is it simply its persistent equivocation with normative ethical frameworks which has rendered it synonymous with an unquestionable necessity about the way things are/ought to be? (pp. 93-4)
3. Is describing queerness as the result of nature a solution to homophobia? (p. 97)
4. "But the whole unpredictable thing about politics is that, often, counterhegemonic voices are able to tip the scales within a constellation produced by range of heterogenous ideas and circumstances". What does Nivedita mean by this? And can you think of some examples of this? (p. 100)
5. What is the relationship between class and queerness? (pp. 103-104)
6. To what extent can hijras be said to share women's experiences? (pp. 105-106)
7. Should people everywhere be given the option of a third gender on passports and other legal documents? Should gender simply not be a question which is asked on such documents? (p. 106)
8. Would you say the 'glamorisation' of the gay 'lifestyle' has mostly helped or hindered the LGBTQ+ movement? (p. 109)
9. What are some of the central lessons which can be extracted from this chapter? (p. 110)

Topic 2

PLUMWOOD, VAL. *FEMINISM AND THE MYSTERY OF NATURE*

1994, Routledge.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 1: 'Feminism and Ecofeminism', pp. 19-41.

ABSTRACT:

Two of the most important political movements of the late twentieth century are those of environmentalism and feminism. In this book, Val Plumwood argues that feminist theory has an important opportunity to make a major contribution to the debates in political ecology and environmental philosophy. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* explains the relation between ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, and other feminist theories including radical green theories such as deep ecology. Val Plumwood provides a philosophically informed account of the relation of women and nature, and shows how relating male domination to the domination of nature is important and yet remains a dilemma for women.

COMMENT:

Val Plumwood (11 August 1939 – 29 February 2008) was an Australian philosopher and ecofeminist known for her work on anthropocentrism. From the 1970s she played a central role in the development of radical ecosophy. Working mostly as an independent scholar, she held positions at the University of Tasmania, North Carolina State University, the University of Montana, and the University of Sydney. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* draws on the feminist critique of reason to argue that the master form of rationality of western culture has been systematically unable to acknowledge dependency on nature, the sphere of those it has defined as 'inferior' others. Plumwood illuminates the relationship between women and nature, and between ecological feminism and other feminist theories. This chapter on Feminism and Ecofeminism is situated here in the list because it furthers the critical evaluation of nature which Menon draws by turning the discussion on its head. Whilst Menon illustrates the ways in which the concept of nature is utilised as a means of distorting 'moral' and political action, Plumwood illustrates the ways in which the concept of nature itself has been distorted and corrupted by colonial and patriarchal realities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is the relationship between nature and culture gendered?
2. What are the different ways in which feminists have theorised about the distinction between nature and culture?
3. What do you think about this distinction?
4. What is 'backgrounding'? And what other aspects of women's lives do you think are 'backgrounded'?
5. On page 32 Plumwood quotes Alison Jagger's discussion of gender roles leading to the overdevelopment/underdevelopment of certain aspects of our character. Do you agree with this? What are some ways this can be evidenced?
6. On page 37 Plumwood states that women have been associated with nature because of their 'uncontrollable' bodies. What does she mean by this?
7. In what ways have women's choices surrounding reproduction been constrained?
8. What do you think about the 'abstract pro-nature' approach to reproduction? Is there anything to be said in favour of it?
9. What is Plumwood's suggestion for how we ought to go about theorising about reproduction in light of her rejection of dualism?
10. Has this chapter changed your position/opinion on anything? If so, what.

Topic 3

DAVIS, ANGELA. *WOMEN, RACE, AND CLASS*

1981, Random House.

Difficulty: Easy

Fragment: Chapter 1: 'The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood'.

ABSTRACT:

Angela Davis provides a powerful history of the social and political influence of whiteness and elitism in feminism, from abolitionist days to the present, and demonstrates how the racist and classist biases of its leaders inevitably hampered any collective ambitions. While Black women were aided by some activists like Sarah and Angelina Grimke and the suffrage cause found unwavering support in Frederick Douglass, many women played on the fears of white supremacists for political gain rather than take an intersectional approach to liberation. Here, Davis not only contextualizes the legacy and pitfalls of civil and women's rights activists, but also discusses Communist women, the murder of Emmitt Till, and Margaret Sanger's racism. Davis shows readers how the inequalities between Black and white women influence the contemporary issues of rape, reproductive freedom, housework and child care in this bold and indispensable work.

COMMENT:

Angela Davis is an American political activist, philosopher, academic and author. She is a professor at the University of California and a longtime member of the Communist Party USA. She is also a founding member of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism (CCDS) and the author of over ten books on class, feminism, race, and the US prison system. *Women, Race and Class* is a Marxist feminist analysis of gender, race and class. The third book written by Davis, it covers U.S. history from the slave trade and abolitionism movements to the women's liberation movements which began in the 1960s. In this chapter, Davis examines and describes the unwritten history of black women slaves and their legacies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does the lack of scholarly engagement with the female slave tell us about historical scholarship more broadly? (p. 7)
2. To what extent does this alter the credibility of the scholarship which has already taken place on the black male slave?
3. What kind of labour was common for the female slave? And what can this tell us about contemporary notions of femininity? (p. 8)
4. "The special abuses inflicted on women thus facilitated the ruthless economic exploitation of their labour" (p. 10) This was the position of the Black Woman slave. To what extent can this be generalised as a universal remark upon the woman's condition?
5. What was the condition of pregnant slaves who laboured in the fields? (p. 11)
6. "As the ideology of femininity—a by-product of industrialization—was popularized and disseminated through the new ladies' magazines and romantic novels, white women came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work." What is the 'ideology of femininity'? (p. 12)
7. How was the 'matriarchal' family structure – which was supposedly present in slave families – utilised to legitimise the denigration of black men, women, and families?
8. "The salient theme emerging from domestic life in the slave quarters is one of sexual equality." Discuss. (p. 16)
9. Who was Harriet Tubman? Please feel free to revisit the text or use any other resources you have to hand at the moment to answer this question. (p. 18)

10. "This was one of the greatest ironies of the slave system, for in subjecting women to the most ruthless exploitation conceivable, exploitation which knew no sex distinctions, the groundwork was created not only for Black women to assert their equality through their social relations, but also to express it through their acts of resistance." Discuss.
11. Does the utilisation of rape as a method of intimidation tell us something salient about the eroticisation and hyper-sexualisation of women who belong to oppressed racial groups? (p. 19)
12. Discuss Genovese's diagnosis of the problem of rape committed by white men against black women. (p. 20)
13. "It was those women who passed on to their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality—in short, a legacy spelling out standards for a new womanhood". In what ways have you witnessed the standards of a new womanhood emerge in your own lives and in the lives of the women around you? (p. 21)

Fragment: Chapter 3: 'Good Little Women', pp 34-43

ABSTRACT:

1950s Calcutta. Seventeen-year-old Shankar walks on to Old Post Office Street to become a clerk in the Calcutta High Court. There he meets the last English barrister, and thus begins their unusual and unforgettable relationship.

The Great Unknown is the moving story of the many people Shankar meets in the courtrooms and lawyers' chambers of Old Post Office Street—some seeking justice, others watching the drama of life unfold. It offers a uniquely personal glimpse into their PBI – World of unfulfilled dreams and duplicity, of unexpected tragedy, as well as hope and exhilaration.

Here you will meet Marian Stuart, who journeys from Lebanon to PBI – India in search of a husband and happiness; the once-rich but now-destitute Englishman James Gould; Helen Grubert, the embittered Anglo-PBI – Indian typist, who wins her breach-of-promise case but has a miraculous change of heart; Nicholas Droulas, the betrayed Greek sailor desperate for revenge; Shefali Mitra, the distraught mother fighting to hold on to the daughter she did not give birth to; Chhoka-da, the benevolent babu who takes the young clerk under his wing; and the barrister sahib who profoundly enriches Shankar's life with his own experiences.

The Great Unknown (Kato Ajanarey), Sankar's debut novel, first appeared in Desh in 1955. An instant success, it remains immensely popular more than fifty years after its publication. This first-ever English translation captures the simplicity and poignancy of the original.

COMMENT:

Shilpa Phadke is a researcher, writer, and pedagogue. She is a Professor at the Tata Institute for Social Sciences and chairperson for the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Culture, School of Media and Cultural Studies. Her research interests include: gender and the politics of space, the middle classes, sexuality and the body, feminist politics among young women, reproductive subjectivities, feminist parenting, and pedagogic practices. Why Loiter presents an original take on women's safety in the cities of twenty-first century India, it maps the exclusions and negotiations that women from different classes and communities encounter in the nation's urban public spaces. Basing this book on more than three years of research in Mumbai, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade argue that though women's access to urban public space has increased, they still do not have an equal claim to public space in the city. And they raise the question: can women's access to public space be viewed in isolation from that of other marginal groups? In this chapter, Phadke explores the myth of the 'good woman' and how gendered virtues such as chastity and 'respect' function ultimately to inhibit women's safety on urban streets.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the images that come to mind when you think of the 'Good Woman'? And how much influence do you think this has had over your own life?
2. "She is the woman who can make the habitually apathetic Mumbaikars take to the streets in outrage when she is sexually assaulted" Do you think that public outrage at sexual assault is selective? If so, how much of this conditioned by the image of the 'good woman'? (pp. 34-35)

3. How is dialogue surrounding safety on the streets dominated by concerns for middle-class women? Would you say that working-class women are entirely excluded from consideration on this matter? (pp. 36-7)
4. Are there other performative displays of respectability that you can think of? (p. 37)
5. Do you agree that the binary between public/private perfectly maps onto the binary between good/bad women? If so, can you think of any further examples to illustrate this? (p. 38)
6. Do you think there is a general anxiety surrounding being able to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' women? If so, does it express itself differently in men than it does in women? (p. 39)
7. What does the lack of public outrage at rape cases which are committed against sex workers tell us about hegemonic depictions of women's sexuality, and women's societal position more broadly? (p. 40)
8. The author points out that the general reluctance to press charges after sexual assault reveals the embedded shame that families (and women themselves) prioritise over the mental and physical health of the victim of the crime. What else might this tell us? (p. 41)
9. Discuss some of the ways in which "The inextricable connection of safety to respectability" bars women from safety (p. 42)

Fragment: Chapter 2: 'Justice: Childhood Love Lessons'

ABSTRACT:

All About Love offers radical new ways to think about love by showing its interconnectedness in our private and public lives. In eleven concise chapters, hooks explains how our everyday notions of what it means to give and receive love often fail us, and how these ideals are established in early childhood. She offers a rethinking of self-love (without narcissism) that will bring peace and compassion to our personal and professional lives, and asserts the place of love to end struggles between individuals, in communities, and among societies. Moving from the cultural to the intimate, hooks notes the ties between love and loss and challenges the prevailing notion that romantic love is the most important love of all.

Visionary and original, hooks shows how love heals the wounds we bear as individuals and as a nation, for it is the cornerstone of compassion and forgiveness and holds the power to overcome shame.

For readers who have found ongoing delight and wisdom in bell hooks's life and work, and for those who are just now discovering her, *All About Love* is essential reading and a brilliant book that will change how we think about love, our culture-and one another.

COMMENT:

bell hooks, is an American author, professor, feminist, and social activist. The name "bell hooks" is borrowed from her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks. The focus of her writing is the intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender, and what she describes as their ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and class domination. *All About Love* offers radical new ways to think about love by showing its interconnectedness in our private and public lives. In this book, hooks explains how our everyday notions of that it means to give and receive love often fail us, and how these ideals are established in early childhood. In this chapter on Justice, hooks confronts the injustice of childhood by critically examining the lack of autonomy and respect often endured by children. She gracefully articulates the manner in which this injustice lays the groundwork for further distortions and injustices in the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Would you say it was fair to claim that our conception of 'discipline' particularly when it is applied to children – is 'masculinised'?
2. "There can be no love without Justice" Discuss
3. Do you agree that there should be some systems in place to uphold 'children's rights'?
4. Is the neglect and abuse of children a structural injustice? If so, to what extent does Hooks's proposition for a children's 'rights' represent an individualistic solution to a structural problem?
5. Is there a chance that such systems may disproportionately legislate against and penalise actions by mothers as opposed to fathers?
6. How might such systems be potentially distorted by sexist ideals of the 'good' mother?
7. What does Hooks's analysis of popular support for physical punishment of children tell us about dominant attitudes towards violence?

Topic 6

HILL COLLINS, PATRICIA. *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT*

2000, 2nd Edition. Routledge.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 11: 'Black Feminist Epistemology' pp. 251-271

ABSTRACT:

In spite of the double burden of racial and gender discrimination, African-American women have developed a rich intellectual tradition that is not widely known. In *Black Feminist Thought*, originally published in 1990, Patricia Hill Collins set out to explore the words and ideas of Black feminist intellectuals and writers, both within the academy and without. Here Collins provides an interpretive framework for the work of such prominent Black feminist thinkers as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde. Drawing from fiction, poetry, music and oral history, the result is a book that provided the first synthetic overview of Black feminist thought and its canon.

COMMENT:

Patricia Hill Collins is an American academic specializing in race, class, and gender. She is a Distinguished University Professor of Sociology Emerita at the University of Maryland. She was the 100th president of the ASA and the first African-American woman to hold this position. Collins's work primarily concerns issues involving race, gender, and social inequality within the African-American community. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins sets out to explore the words and ideas of Black feminist intellectuals and writers, both within the academy and without. Here Collins provides an interpretive framework for the work of such prominent Black feminist thinkers as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde. In this chapter, Collins outlines and illuminates the framework for a black feminist epistemology by juxtaposing it against Western epistemologies that have dominated and hindered thought. In doing so, Collins also underlines the necessity of alternative epistemologies to render the lives of black women intelligible.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the difference between an epistemology, paradigm, and methodology? (p. 252)
2. Can you think of some examples of how knowledge validation processes reflect the interests of elite white men? (p. 253)
3. Collins claims that part of the way Black feminist thought is kept out of legitimised spheres of knowledge is by allowing a few select black women into the academy and encouraging them to espouse the same Eurocentric 'universally' accepted knowledges as their white male colleagues. Do you agree with this? If so, do you think black women are the only marginalised group that we can observe this happening to? (p. 254)
4. Do you agree with the claim that women are more likely to rely on first-hand experience than men? If so, why? (p. 259)
5. "the differences distinguishing U.S. Black women from other groups, even those close to them, lies less in Black women's race or gender identity than in access to social institutions that support an ethic of caring in their lives". Do you agree with this claim? (pp. 264-5)
6. Many feminist scholars have pointed out that the widespread exclusion of situated perspectives and situated knowledge is damaging to women, but why is it so central to Black women's oppression in particular?
7. Does the 'universal' emerge from attending to the fine details of the particular? (pp. 268-9)
8. "Partiality, and not universality, is the condition of being heard" What does Collins mean by this? (p. 270)

9. How does the existence of Black Feminist Epistemology challenge what currently passes for Truth? Be as specific as possible.

ABSTRACT:

One of the most talked-about scholarly works of the past fifty years, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is as celebrated as it is controversial. Arguing that traditional feminism is wrong to look to a natural, 'essential' notion of the female, or indeed of sex or gender, Butler starts by questioning the category 'woman' and continues in this vein with examinations of 'the masculine' and 'the feminine'. Best known however, but also most often misinterpreted, is Butler's concept of gender as a reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality. Thrilling and provocative, few other academic works have roused passions to the same extent.

COMMENT:

Judith Pamela Butler is an American philosopher and gender theorist whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics, and the fields of third-wave feminist, queer, and literary theory. In 1993, Butler began teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, where they have served, beginning in 1998, as the Maxine Elliot Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory. They are also the Hannah Arendt Chair at the European Graduate School. In *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that gender is a kind of improvised performance. The work is influential in feminism, women's studies, and lesbian and gay studies, and has also enjoyed widespread popularity outside of traditional academic circles. Butler's ideas about gender came to be seen as foundational to queer theory and the advancing of dissident sexual practices during the 1990s. In this chapter, Butler critically assesses central literatures that have sought to define and illuminate gender and sexuality; in doing so, they lay the groundwork for their subsequent critique of hegemonic depictions of gender binaries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Paraphrasing Foucault, Butler writes: "Juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent". What does this mean? (p. 2)
2. Do you agree with Butler's claim that the existence of the 'subject' should be understood as arising from the mythical state of nature hypothesis and illusionary social contract? (p. 2)
3. What is political 'representation'? And is there an alternative to the 'stable subject'? (p. 4)
4. What is the central point of Butler's discussion of De Beauvoir and Irigaray? (p. 10)
5. Do you think the destruction of 'sex' would lead to women assuming the status of the universal subject? (pp. 18-20)
6. Is this a desirable goal? (pp. 18-20)
7. What does Haar mean by "All psychological categories ... derive from the illusion of substantial identity"? (pp. 20-21)
8. What does Butler mean by "it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only and artificial effect, but essentially superfluous"? (p. 24)
9. Do you agree with Wittig that 'Sex' does not precede oppression? (p. 25)
10. How significant do you think the role of language is in 'marking' gender? (p. 25)
11. Discuss the claim that Butler extracts from Foucault that "the subject" does not have access to a sexuality that is somehow 'outside' or 'before' the power that prohibits, regulates, and creates it. (p. 29)
12. What are some of the "contingent acts" that present gender as a "naturalistic necessity"? (p. 33)

Topic 8

PLUMWOOD, VAL. *FEMINISM AND THE MYSTERY OF NATURE*

1994, Routledge.

Difficulty: Intermediate-Advanced

Fragment: Dualism and the Logic of Colonisation', pp. 41-69

ABSTRACT:

Two of the most important political movements of the late twentieth century are those of environmentalism and feminism. In this book, Val Plumwood argues that feminist theory has an important opportunity to make a major contribution to the debates in political ecology and environmental philosophy. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* explains the relation between ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, and other feminist theories including radical green theories such as deep ecology. Val Plumwood provides a philosophically informed account of the relation of women and nature, and shows how relating male domination to the domination of nature is important and yet remains a dilemma for women.

COMMENT:

Here we return to *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Plumwood, but this time to the second chapter which discusses Dualism. This chapter is situated here in the list to provoke discussion of the gender binary and the extent to which critical analysis of dualism can be utilised to dismantle dominant depictions of sex and gender. In this chapter, Plumwood argues that the dualisms like man/woman, black/white, and good/bad all possess the same logical form and they are what underlie the logic of colonisation, domination and patriarchy. In making this argument, Plumwood gives us reason to be sceptical of other philosophical dualisms like subject/object, reason/emotion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree with Plumwood that colonisation creates the identity of the colonised? (p. 41-2) And that 'woman' is made from the dross and refuse of a man? (p. 44)
2. Is there anything you don't understand about the list of dualisms which is presented on page 43?
3. What do you make of Plumwood's assessment of Aristotle's justification for various forms of dominion on page 46? Do you agree that they are all inseparably interconnected?
4. Is it true that the more unstable a 'master's identity' the more aggressively it needs to be asserted? Can you think of any additional examples for this?
5. In what ways has 'Inclusion' impacted women and – what has historically been segregated as – women's work?
6. Do you think homogenisation and stereotyping happens only to oppressed classes of people? Is there a difference between the stereotypes we have for men and the ones we have for women?
7. If there is a difference here, do you think it is morally significant?
8. What is the difference between a dualism and a distinction? (p. 59)
9. Are there any instances in which it may be suitable to adopt the cavern of reversal strategy? (p. 62)
10. What do you think of the Mackinnon quote captured on page 65?
11. Do you agree with Plumwood that a desolution of gendered dualisms necessitates the weaving of this dualism into other dualisms?