



Being Feminist: Living With a Man by Heather Clare Bain: Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1986

Reviewed by

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Heather Bain's thesis intrigues us with the provocative title: *Being Feminist: Living With a Man*. She orients us to the fundamental contradiction experienced by many women—the social space where the personal and the political meet. Feminism is unique as a revolutionary movement, for it is the only domain in which the oppressed is in intimate relationship to the oppressor. It is this contradictory aspect of being a woman that the thesis explores.

Seven feminist women were engaged in “hermeneutic” conversation, “to explore what it means to be a feminist and intimately linked with men” (p. 4). The “conversationalists,” as Bain called the women, were characterized according to Bardwick's (1979) typology, as “radical” feminists, which means “women who wish to change the basic structure and institutions of society.” Such feminists also choose to live in an intimate relationship with a man as lover or husband, and thus are distinctly heterosexual.

Bain describes the hermeneutical task of her research as being directed toward authentic understanding, in which “the interpreter allows herself to be questioned by her interaction with the other, such that the horizons of her own world, her self-understandings, are broadened; she sees in a different way, adopts a fresh view of life, in such a way as to become more fully present to herself. Thus, while a question is addressed to a text, an event, a ‘thou,’ in a deeper sense the ‘thou’ in turn questions her interpreter” (p. 28).

The seven women were chosen for their “biographical variability.” They differed in age, racial and national origins, educational attainment, and family make-up. They also shared commonalities of identity and situation: All identified themselves as feminist (this was understood to be an important part of their self-definition); all were currently involved with feminist organizations and actions; and all were living within a heterosexual relationship.

The conversations with the women occurred in the comfortable atmosphere of their homes or offices. Bain talked with all but one of them on two separate occasions, and the total length of conversation extended from two to six hours with each person. The conversations opened with the general question “Can you tell me what it's like for you to be in this relationship?” Next they focused on a number of

issues, such as “the meaning of being feminist; valued/enjoyed aspects of the relationship; disliked/resented aspects of the relationship; household task division; workforce participation; sexuality; resolution of conflict, relationships with other women; relationships with other men; and being feminist and heterosexual” (p. 33).

The study marked a personal transition point for Bain herself. In an autobiographical account “The Edge of a Crevasse . . . He totters . . . She totters,” she describes her own coming to the questioning of the study. I found this segment to be the most compelling part of the entire study. She later describes the tottering which gave rise to the question as: “A time of intense confusion and some despair. The combination of feminism and heterosexuality had become an uneasy one and the two commitments were beginning to feel as if they embodied irreconcilable distinctions” (p. 182). For me, the contribution of Bain’s study lies precisely in this description of her personal journey—her questioning and opening of herself to other women in like circumstance.

Methodologically, Bain’s first step involved the conversations with the women. The second step is described as bringing her “pre-understanding of significant issues together with the conversationalists’ experience of significance in their life-worlds” (p. 46). From this, topics were derived; a step which involved shaping the conversations into summary statements. A next step entailed “clustering similar statements together into essential nonredundant themes” for each participant and each conversation, in attempting to arrive at the “very kernel of experience” (p. 53). Finally, the conversations were compared in order to locate themes that were common to all and themes that were unique to each person. In a lengthy reporting section, Bain utilizes illustrative segments from the conversations to describe 11 themes which mark the women’s experience of living with a man. The themes are affirmation, ambivalence, difficulty, task division, economics, sexuality, relationships with women, children, coming to consensus, the dance, and being feminist and heterosexual.

Bain did not give a reason for including seven women in her study. They were chosen, as she states, “to yield the possibility of a continuum, of integrating information along connecting themes” (p. 31). Yet, as a reader I would have favored fewer people, if that would have resulted in prolonged and deeper insights into their experiences. I found myself wanting to know the women more fully, but Bain’s account permitted to see only fragments of them through illustrations of the various themes. Throughout the reading I couldn’t really appreciate the seven women before me as separate individuals, and I found myself distracted by the themes. It was not always clear how the discussion of the various themes really helped us to understand the feminist experience of living with a man.

I am not sure either how well Bain's search for commonalities and uniqueness in themes among the women worked. I fear this search may have led the researcher to a posture of commiseration and affirmation with the women rather than to a genuine questioning and opening of their experiences. The biographical differences of the women were an important dimension for variability, but this was not linked into the matters at hand.

For me, as reader, the most captivating parts of the study were the autobiographical and discussion section. The autobiographical reflection conveyed a profound sense of the struggle involved in being a feminist while living with a man. The subthemes which Bain developed around this central theme were evocative, such as: the first landslide; an individual excursion; the feminist prince; the second landslide; the edge of the crevasse, and so forth. As a reader I wished this kind of rich description could have been sustained throughout the work.

In the discussion section, Bain explored the topic being feminist and heterosexual as the "realm of the between." She draws on the insights of Maurice Friedman (1983), Martin Buber (1965, 1966), and Humberto Maturana (1980, 1983) concerning the tension of contradictory being. She describes it this way:

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To stand within this tension, as a heterosexual feminist, is to stand in ambivalence toward maleness. To stand within this tension is to stand amidst the possibility for conflict, on the one hand, and the possibility for genuine personhood, on the other hand. (p. 149)

In concluding her study, Bain reflects on her own journey, one which led her to

drawing new distinctions, with allowing flexibility of distinction, with finding a new language to bring to words half spoken experience and with reaffirming a commitment to my personal knowledge and expression in the world. I am still a feminist. I still live with the same man. And I've come to enjoy them both. The combination has transformed to a lively I-thou meeting, allowing for both the confrontation and confirmation of our mutual uniqueness. (p. 183)

Bain leaves us on a positive note by stating that it is possible to be happy as a feminist/heterosexual. She reassures us that a good relationship with a man does not mean abandoning the feminist cause. Rather, she suggests, an authentic I-thou relationship with men can free women to devote more energy to the cause of feminism.

In conclusion, I would say that this dissertation is ultimately a personal account balanced with more universal descriptions about living with a man. I have to confess that at I found myself hopelessly entangled in a number of questions. Sometimes, I wondered if it mattered that these women were feminist. They sounded like any

other group of women talking about trying to live in a family setting. Is the “ambivalence toward maleness” that feminists experience any different from the experience of other women? I wondered too if the positive tension which Bain locates in the “realm of the between” necessitates the public/private dichotomy which theoretically feminism has opposed? Was public affirmation of women the only *raison d'être* of feminism? Has feminism not always been about a vision of social justice? In addressing the lived contradiction of being both feminist and heterosexual, Bain's thesis provides valuable insights into both the faults and future of feminism.

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