

Feminist Book Club as a Reparative Method and a Form of Female Pleasure

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This article is an attempt to theorise the *Sisterhood¹ of the Proud Dolphin* feminist book club as a method of feminist reparation and empowerment. The article is based on 6 years of continuous monitoring, attending and co-leading of the club, which is still ongoing at the time of writing. The club is voluntary, attended by participants of diverse age and socio-economic status, their number varying depending on individual meetings and reading seasons. Currently, the meetings take place once a month. The literature ranges from prose and poetry to theoretical works and is decided at each meeting according to the interest of the participants.

A reading space is a safe space – that’s how it all starts

First, “the story must begin at the end.” Or today, when the *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin* feminist book club has evolved into something that can already be called a story. And if we can call it a story, then we can also draw lessons from it for our feminist action. Thus, the attempt to articulate its meaning has come at the right moment (at a time when the book club already has a decently long history) and has encouraged a welcome reflection on what we really do at our meetings. Yes, we read and discuss feminist works – that is the basic concept. However, while trying to define the *Sisterhood*, it also became clear that the club, through meetings, reading and talking, has many other effects that were not planned when the first reading group was formed. And yet these effects have happened (and developed) to the extent that it has become apparent that over the years of its continuous activity, the book club has also unconsciously succeeded in establishing itself as a method of feminist practice that implements several feminist principles – sisterhood² and supportive community, empowerment of the individual, acknowledgment of the value of individual experiences, sharing everyday tactics of resistance to patriarchy, and creating a safe environment that allows for experiencing different, possibly contradictory thoughts and emotions as well as for participating in feminist action.

¹ “Sisterhood” is a translation of the Slovene word “sestrovščina” which is unlike “sestrščina” nonexistent and could therefore be better represented by an English neologism, for example “sisterity”.

² “Modern patriarchy is fraternal in form, and the original social contract is essentially a fraternal agreement based on the exclusion and exploitation of women, writes Carole Pateman in *The Sexual Contract*. Therefore, we do not counter the notion of fraternity with the notion of sorority, which would simply be a social formation gender-wise reversed but otherwise equivalent to fraternity. If fraternity is based precisely on the domination of women, a sisterly association that mirrors it and is equivalent to it is not possible. And since feminism cannot aim merely at being a reverse mirror image of patriarchy, and since patriarchy is not only a women’s problem, we are inventing a neologism for ‘sisterhood’ that is not gender-exclusive. [...] What we would like to cultivate is also called a friendship, an alliance, a kinship, which differs from the as-if-blood-ties of ‘brothers’ (who together are supposed to defeat their father). The union of brothers or fraternity pretends to be universal, but it is always a union between men, and therefore, at least gender-wise, blood-related and exclusive. What we are striving for is even something other than the sisterhood of African American women – the latter, while empowering and necessary in a certain socio-historical context, is nonetheless racially and sexually exclusive. In contrast to sorority and fraternity, then, we want to create an alliance of sisterhood/sisterity that is not based on family, gender-as-kinship, or blood (racial) ties. What we have in common is the recognition of common problems.” (*Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin: A Provisional Manifesto*, in *Dialogi 11-12*, Maribor: Založba Aristej, 2017, p. 46.).

Discovering the story of the book club “at its end” started precisely with the realisation that the reading circle is a safe space. This was also a precondition for other processes and effects to spread in and through it. The “plot twist” of the story, however, is that the book club was never intentionally set up as a safe space. It started as a simple aspiration for feminists and future feminists to meet, learn about and discuss feminism, without any specific rules or regulations on how to do so.

Safe spaces – safe resistances. Safe space is, of course, not a foreign concept to the Dolphines, the female participants of the book club. However, we have never actively thought of it as a basis of our activity, even though we are – apparently unconsciously – constantly establishing it.

“A safe place was where people could find practical resistance to political and social repression, [...] is a place where [...] people [...] can just be themselves. It's the same basic idea for other groups, like women and people of color, who tend to be less well-represented or well-respected by society at large. People whose voices are quite literally heard less than those of white men, since white men still tend to dominate conversations in media, classrooms, boardrooms, politics, and everyday life.”³

A common practice in other reading groups that focus on feminist texts is to assume a shared consensus on how the group should operate, with the primary aim of providing a safe space for speaking and thinking. A feminist reading group or club is not only a reading group, it is also a way of resisting the system, and as such it must ensure the conditions of safe resistance as well as the conditions of safe reflection on one's own experience of repression. The safety of a space is established through a pre-existing agreement that must be accepted if one is to participate in such a space or activity. This is not the case with the *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin*, even though it fulfils all the conditions of a safe space. The way the book club functions is re-designed each reading season – implicitly through the pre-existing practice of the participants of previous reading seasons, which is adapted to the current wishes and needs of the active members.

A safe space also for Dolphins. “Safe spaces are about selective inclusion; they will not include everyone because everyone abides by a different system of beliefs and values. The goal [...] is to uphold a system that protects their beliefs.”⁴ While the book club is not intended exclusively for female Dolphines, Dolphins are expected to pay extra attention to how their presence may hinder the discussion due to mistrust or previous bad experiences with men in other groups or public discussions. There, men often usurp the debate or want to call the shots, are poor at listening to and accepting others' opinions, rarely show a willingness to change their minds even after hearing different arguments, and are generally unwilling to admit that their understanding of the “female experience” is to some extent thwarted, and that sometimes the only thing left to do is to simply believe women and their experience of the (patriarchal) world.

We do not want to be guided by patriarchal academic principles, where those who can get the most say are also the most heard and the most successful. For us, feminism is also about reflecting on the most basic principles of how to be together. At the same time, we want to be

³ Emily Crockett, *Safe spaces, explained*, Vox, 2016, accessible at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/5/11949258/safe-spaces-explained> (last accessed 7 February 2024).

⁴ Ibid.

*together without leaders, without fathers, without mothers, without male or female mentors, so that we can find our own voice.*⁵

“Safe spaces aren’t always about literal physical safety from violence; sometimes they’re a refuge, a place to relax. Yet emotional states are also physical states.”⁶ Therefore, safe spaces are also spaces where there is no need for a constant state of alertness on how to react to the immediate surroundings. Men who wish to participate are expected to ensure that their presence does not cause distress to women. They are expected to be aware that this may happen even if they do not perceive themselves as disruptive and unsympathetic, that they have yet to gain the trust of the members and earn their place in the reading club.

Reading and book club as reparative methods (and what pleasure has to do with it)

Why such a long introduction about something so self-evident? Perhaps because the basic principles are usually the most difficult to put into practice. Expecting them to happen spontaneously is a bold hope without much likelihood of success, but trying to implement them through rules can quickly turn into a sense of (external) coercion, creating a hierarchy between those who follow the rules and those who control them. The fact is, however, that in order to establish feminist principles, sometimes it is simply necessary to “jump into the water and swim,” trusting that one day a group of Dolphines will gather who, on the basis of their own inclusive ways of acting as well as swimming together, will manage to create a space of safe feminist community. When this happened in the case of the *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin*, it allowed room for other important feminist processes – the community could become a space for healing patriarchal wounds or reparation, it could become a space for forging resistance, and it could become a space for appropriating (male) activities or female pleasure.

A theoretical answer to personal experience. Reading feminist texts offers the participants answers to their traumatic experiences and experiences of living in a patriarchal world. By traumatic experiences we do not mean experiences of gender-based violence or abuse, nor do we imply that the experience of trauma is the main reason for attending the club (i.e. that the meetings are primarily intended for processing these experiences). Rather, we mean various experiences that have negatively affected the participants’ sense of self-worth. These have occurred as a consequence of being a woman – negative experiences and situations have taken place because of the gender which the members inhabit. Reading feminist theory and fiction that address similar issues enables them to stop feeling “guilty” for having had negative experiences and helps them to understand that these were not caused by “something bad in themselves” but rather by the way society treats and (dis-)values women. The selected texts also help them to make more sense of their experiences and explain why they occurred. In this way, the negative experiences are given a positive side – from the understanding of their structural causes, the Dolphines draw the desire and will to actively resist the patriarchal system.

Discussion about texts that build trust. In addition to reading and processing negative experiences, an important practice that develops at the meetings is the sharing of these experiences with other participants of the reading circle. Often these are personal stories that come to light after a certain period of time – that is, when the meetings have been going on for some time, with a similar group of

⁵ *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin: A Provisional Manifesto*, 2017, p. 47.

⁶ Crockett, *Safe spaces, explained*.

participants who also trust each other more and more with each reading session. The judgement of whether the co-attendees are “worthy” of hearing other people’s stories is established precisely through previous discussions about the texts they have read. By sharing similar feelings, thoughts, and opinions on the texts or by accepting others’ different opinions in a respectful way, mutual trust is built and a feeling is created that participants will also show understanding for personal stories that are in one way or another related to the texts read. This is also one of the ways in which the club is implicitly established as a safe space where participants feel at ease to share their fears, worries, desires and frustrations with other attendees.

The Dolphines do not reveal personal stories in order to process them within the reading circle, i.e. as a “therapeutic treatment.” In most cases, before sharing their stories with others, the participants themselves have already processed the potentially traumatic elements of their experiences, and often some time has passed since these took place, so they can look at them from a distance. Talking about one’s own experiences is not intended to seek sympathy, but rather to give a “material” meaning or a “material base” to the topics being read about. It is also a way for the participants to identify the common origins of the experience of oppression based on the female gender, and to build on them a sense of connection and solidarity. “Once a problem is recognised as a common one, it can no longer be reduced to the level of a personal pathology. Thus, in meetings, the bummed participants together become angry feminists.”⁷

The importance of expressing the “wrong” thoughts. Respectful communication and a relaxed way of discussing feminist works have created an atmosphere where the participants feel that they can share their opinions about texts, even if they disagree with what they have read or if they think about some things in a so-called politically incorrect way. When the discussion about texts became open to criticism and “unpopular” opinions, and the participants did not respond by silencing the person who made them, but tried to consider the differing opinion or to respectfully respond with their counter-opinion, this was an important step in creating a safe space for sharing personal experiences and thoughts. The possibility to express thoughts that might provoke resistance or harsh criticism in other settings or in the wider (feminist) public is an important element of the *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin*, which also helps the participants to confront patriarchal society outside the book club. Of course, this does not imply that these thoughts are necessarily “bad” or “wrong.” The fact is that even within feminist circles themselves there is considerable disagreement when it comes to attitudes towards certain “big feminist issues,” while at the same time the divergence between feminist theory and practice gives rise to a lot of uneasiness, doubts and concerns for the individual about which approach is really “the best” and who is “really right.” It is therefore important for the development of the individual feminist, and for the development of feminism as such, that there is a space in which these thoughts can be expressed without fear of backlash from the wider community.

This is why the presence of experienced feminists in the book club is crucial, i.e. those with feminist mileage who are willing to be the first within the group to express such a “wrong” thought. In doing so, they take the risk that the rest of the attendees may not respond positively or that no one in the group will show understanding or share a similar thought, while at the same time encouraging others to express a “wrong” thought themselves. It is a kind of “willing scapegoat” role. In principle, such a position can be taken by those members who, due to their feminist mileage, have enough knowledge and self-trust to be able to confidently defend a more “provocative” opinion and are not afraid of

⁷ *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin: A Provisional Manifesto*, 2017, p. 47.

criticism from the group or dissuaded from continuing to speak or participate in the reading circle. At the same time, it is important for them to have a space and a group where they can express their doubts, fears and discomforts that stem from the gap between feminist theory and practice and living in a patriarchal society.

Reading as a form of female pleasure. It may seem obvious that attending a feminist book club and reading feminist texts is a source of pleasure for the participants. However, it is important to stress here that reading, especially reading theoretical texts, and discussing what has been read, is not a self-evident pleasure for women. This is vividly illustrated by an example from the reading season when we read literature on the topic of female pleasure. At the beginning of the season, when the group was discussing reading suggestions, one of the members expressed very clear dissatisfaction with the choice of topic, saying that “she has never been interested in the topic of female sexual and physical pleasure and she is not interested in it now,” to which another member exclaimed in response, “Yeah, I don’t know what exactly female pleasure is supposed to be either, for me reading is pleasure, pleasure in a physical sense.” A discussion followed on how we perceive female pleasure and pleasure in general, why we immediately think of sexuality or physicality when we talk about pleasure, and why not explore this topic more through reading, while – assuming that reading can also be pleasure – of course enjoy it too. The discussion also showed that several members initially perceived reading theoretical texts as a male pleasure – not because they did not believe or think that women could enjoy reading such works, but because of past experiences with “men who read.” The participants encountered these men mostly during college education, where they would, often in small groups, passionately discuss the “serious” books they had read, creating the impression that their discussions were not open to the public, but only to a select few (men). Many participants mentioned feelings of jealousy and a desire to read these “eminent” books and participate in the debates themselves, to be part of these exclusivist intellectual groups, envying the intellectual pleasure that men experienced when reading and discussing what they had read. Later on, they themselves came to enjoy this pleasure, but they could not shake the feeling that the pleasure of reading was something that belonged (more) to men than to women.

Of course, by classifying the experience of pleasure in reading as specifically “female,” we do not want to further polarise and essentialise pleasures, as society already does when it divides them into “male” and “female.” But it is precisely this (still) existing division, of which women in particular are reminded time and again, that often leads to a situation where certain pleasures are less self-evident for women, and therefore they are less daring to reach out for them, even if there seems to be no (social) barrier in between. In general, much is said about the pleasures that women are “allowed” and even more is forbidden.

To be a woman is to be constantly addressed, to be constantly scrutinized, to have our desire constantly courted. [...] Issuing forth from books and magazines, from films and television, from the radio, there are endless questions about what women desire, endless theories and opinions are offered. Desire is endlessly defined and simulated.⁸ [...] Female positions are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us. [F]emale desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege.⁹

⁸ Rosalind Coward, *Female desire*, New York: Grove Press, 1985, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The pleasures associated with intellectual work are therefore more accessible to men, who have traditionally been involved in the public and social spheres, because they are tied to their socially defined positions. They therefore reach for them without much difficulty or hesitation. For women, however, it often turns out that we first have to prove our “worth” in order to attain pleasures that traditionally “do not belong” to us. This is particularly difficult in times when public discourse wants to convince us that the gender division of pleasure has been abolished. This is why the feminist book club offers the possibility of experiencing and shaping female pleasure through reading in an environment that does not demand proof of one’s own worth, and still creates the material conditions for practising pleasures that used to be less accessible to women, although these restrictions are supposed to have been lifted for quite some time now. This first and foremost creates a circle of passionate female readers who can share their impressions of what they have read, but it also widens the scope of possibilities and diversity of female pleasure as well as its questioning – the exploration of this subject has given even sceptical members new insights, while at the same time allowing them to enjoy reading something they initially found uninteresting or even superfluous. The book club thus offers in itself the possibility of experiencing a female pleasure that is not stimulated and defined by society, and actively places reading on the list of female pleasures “which escape, slip out between the cracks and perhaps spell the ruin of existing definitions of female desire”.¹⁰

From the personal to the method – (finally) from story to lessons

The need to understand our position in a patriarchal world led us first to the book club, through the book club to the community, and through the community finally back to ourselves who are still creating this feminist story. But this story does not really need us anymore – it has long outgrown the original group of feminist friends who started meeting, reading and discussing (and occasionally cooking) about six years ago. Since then, the members have changed, the locations have changed, the books have changed, and to some extent the form has changed. But the *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin* continues to persist. Today we could say that it is already living its new story – as a fully-fledged feminist method; as a possibility for reparation, an opportunity for resistance and a way of (female) enjoyment. And on this occasion, we are happy to pass on our knowledge to anyone who wants and needs it.

What about us? “We had been meeting, we are meeting now, we will be meeting again.”¹¹

CV: Klara Otorepec (1989) is a journalist, radio technician and publicist. Her theoretical interests cover a wide range of feminist topics, which she explores in the radio show “Triggered” on Radio Študent, in the *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin* book club and in occasional articles for various magazines and online media.

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Prevod Višnja Jerman

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Sisterhood of the Proud Dolphin: A Provisional Manifesto*, 2017, p. 47.

