sexual politics

by Kate Millett · Language: EN

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Overview

Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics" is a foundational text of second-wave feminism, published in 1970, that argues patriarchy is a political institution – a system of power relations where men dominate women. Millett asserts that this system is more fundamental than class or race, permeating all aspects of society, from the family unit to economic structures, education, and even psychology. She meticulously dissects how patriarchal power is maintained through various means, including physical force, economic control, ideological conditioning, and the internalization of gender roles.

The book's central thesis is that sexual oppression is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a deeply entrenched political one, requiring a radical "sexual revolution" to dismantle. Millett challenges traditional notions of sex and gender, arguing that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to a critical literary analysis, where Millett examines the works of prominent male authors like D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet. Through these analyses, she demonstrates how literature often reflects, reinforces, or occasionally subverts patriarchal attitudes and power dynamics, exposing the misogynistic undercurrents in celebrated works and revealing how cultural narratives contribute to the perpetuation of female subjugation. "Sexual Politics" remains a crucial work for understanding feminist theory and the historical context of the women's liberation movement.

Key Takeaways

- Recognize that patriarchy functions as a political system, not merely a social custom, exerting control through various institutional and ideological means.
- Critically examine how gender roles are socially constructed and often serve to maintain power imbalances between men and women.
- Understand that the family unit often acts as a primary agent of patriarchal control and socialization.
- Be aware of how literature and cultural narratives can both reflect and reinforce existing patriarchal structures and misogynistic attitudes.
- Challenge the notion that biological sex dictates social roles or inherent capabilities, advocating for equality regardless of gender.

• Consider the historical evolution of patriarchal power and how it has adapted and persisted across different eras.

• Advocate for a fundamental "sexual revolution" that dismantles hierarchical gender relations and promotes genuine equality.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: The Sexual Revolution

Millett introduces the concept of "sexual politics," arguing that sex is a status category with political implications, similar to race or class. She defines patriarchy as a pervasive, institutionalized system of male dominance and female subordination, maintained through various means including force, ideology, and social conditioning. The introduction sets the stage for her analysis of how male supremacy is embedded in cultural, social, and psychological structures, calling for a radical re-evaluation of gender roles and power dynamics.

Part I, Chapter 1: The Sexual Revolution, First Phase: 1830-1930

This chapter examines the initial challenges to patriarchal structures during the first wave of feminism, focusing on the suffrage movement and early feminist thinkers. Millett discusses the limited successes and the significant resistance faced by figures like John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, who advocated for women's rights. She analyzes the societal and political context that allowed for some progress in legal and educational spheres, while also highlighting the enduring power of traditional gender roles and the backlash that followed these early gains.

Part I, Chapter 2: The Sexual Revolution, Second Phase: 1930-1960

Millett explores the period following the first wave, characterized by a significant backlash against feminist advancements and a reassertion of traditional gender roles, particularly after World War II. She discusses how cultural and psychological forces, including the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis, contributed to reinforcing patriarchal norms. This chapter details the mechanisms through which female independence and ambition were often pathologized, and women were encouraged to return to domestic spheres, effectively stalling the momentum of the earlier feminist movement.

Part I, Chapter 3: The Theory of Patriarchy

This foundational chapter defines patriarchy as a political institution where men hold primary power and predominate in roles of leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. Millett details how this system is maintained through various means: physical force, economic dependence, social conditioning, education, and the internalization of gender roles. She discusses the psychological effects of patriarchy on both men and women, emphasizing how it shapes identity, behavior, and societal expectations, creating a hierarchical power dynamic based on sex.

Part I, Chapter 4: The Politics of Sex

Millett delves into how sex and gender are constructed and regulated within patriarchal society. She examines the role of sexual taboos, the double standard, and the control of female sexuality as key mechanisms of power. The chapter analyzes how institutions like marriage, family, and religion contribute to maintaining patriarchal control and reinforcing rigid gender roles. Millett argues that even seemingly personal relationships are imbued with political power dynamics, where male dominance and female subordination are continually reproduced and enforced.

Part II, Chapter 5: The Counterrevolution: Freud

This chapter offers a detailed critique of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, arguing that they provided a "scientific" justification for patriarchal views of women. Millett dissects Freudian concepts such as penis envy, the Oedipus complex, and female hysteria, demonstrating how they pathologized female sexuality, agency, and ambition. She contends that Freud's theories served to reinforce traditional gender roles, effectively contributing to the counterrevolution against women's liberation by framing female independence as a psychological disorder.

Part II, Chapter 6: The Counterrevolution: The American Experience

Millett examines the specific cultural and social developments in post-World War II America that contributed to the backlash against women's rights. She discusses the intense societal pressure for women to return to domesticity, the rise of consumer culture, and the media's pervasive promotion of idealized images of housewives and mothers. This chapter critiques figures like Erik Erikson and their contributions to reinforcing gender stereotypes, illustrating how various societal forces conspired to limit women's roles and opportunities during this period.

Part III, Chapter 7: D.H. Lawrence

Millett presents a scathing critique of D.H. Lawrence's works, particularly "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and "Women in Love." She argues that Lawrence's portrayal of women is deeply misogynistic, reducing them to their biological functions and reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics. Millett analyzes his characters' relationships, showing how male dominance and female submission are glorified, and how female sexuality is often depicted in terms of male control and gratification, reflecting a profound contempt for female autonomy and intellect.

Part III, Chapter 8: Henry Miller

This chapter critiques Henry Miller's novels, including "Tropic of Cancer" and "Sexus," for their explicit misogyny and pervasive objectification of women. Millett argues that Miller's work consistently presents women as mere sexual objects, devoid of agency, interiority, or individuality, existing solely for male pleasure and conquest. She highlights the prevalent themes of violence, degradation, and contempt for women in his narratives, seeing them as a stark literary reflection of extreme patriarchal attitudes and the dehumanization of the female sex.

Part III, Chapter 9: Norman Mailer

Millett analyzes Norman Mailer's writing, including "An American Dream" and his essays, to demonstrate his perpetuation of patriarchal myths and misogynistic views. She critiques his fascination with violence, his objectification of women, and his attempts to reassert male dominance in a changing world. Millett argues that Mailer's work reflects a deep-seated anxiety about female liberation and a desire to maintain traditional gender hierarchies, often through aggressive and demeaning portrayals of women who challenge male authority.

Part III, Chapter 10: Jean Genet

This chapter stands as a notable exception in Millett's literary critique. She analyzes Jean Genet's works, such as "Our Lady of the Flowers" and "The Thief's Journal," arguing that Genet, as a homosexual male writing about marginalized figures, subverts traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures. Millett suggests that Genet's exploration of homosexuality, criminality, and transgression offers a unique critique of conventional masculinity and femininity, revealing the constructed nature of gender and power dynamics from an outsider's perspective.

Conclusion: The End of Sexual Politics

Millett summarizes the arguments presented throughout the book, reiterating the pervasive and institutionalized nature of sexual politics and the urgent need for a radical transformation of societal structures. She calls for a genuine sexual revolution that dismantles patriarchy in all its forms, leading to true equality for all genders. The conclusion reflects on the future of feminism, the ongoing struggle against oppression, and the necessity of fundamental social and cultural change to achieve human liberation beyond traditional gender roles.

Themes

- Patriarchy as political system
- Gender as social construct
- Literary misogyny
- Sexual revolution
- Power dynamics
- Feminist theory

Frequently Asked Questions

What is sexual politics about?

Sexual Politics argues that patriarchy is a political institution, not just a social custom, where men dominate women. It examines how this power system is maintained through force, ideology, and economic control, and critically analyzes how literature reflects and reinforces these patriarchal structures. The book calls for a fundamental sexual revolution to achieve gender equality.

Is sexual politics worth reading?

Yes, "Sexual Politics" is considered a seminal work in feminist theory and is highly influential. It provides a rigorous framework for understanding gender inequality as a political power dynamic and offers incisive literary criticism. It's essential reading for anyone interested in feminism, gender studies, literary theory, or social justice, though its academic style can be challenging.

How does sexual politics end?

Spoiler: "Sexual Politics" concludes by reiterating the pervasive nature of patriarchal control and the urgent need for a radical sexual revolution. Millett emphasizes that true liberation requires dismantling the entire system of male dominance, not just superficial reforms. She calls for a fundamental reordering of society to achieve genuine equality between the sexes.

Who should read sexual politics?

This book is highly recommended for students and scholars of feminist theory, gender studies, sociology, and literary criticism. Anyone interested in the history of the women's liberation movement, the political dimensions of gender, or critical analyses of classic literature will find it invaluable. It is a challenging but rewarding read for those seeking a deeper understanding of patriarchal systems.

How long does it take to read sexual politics?

Given its length and academic density, reading "Sexual Politics" typically takes between 8 to 12 hours for an average reader. It's a substantial work that often requires careful reading and reflection, so setting aside ample time is advisable.

Best Quotes

“Patriarchy, reformed or unreformed, is a social constant, as is the sexual politics which is its expression.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

This line encapsulates Millett's central thesis: patriarchy is a pervasive, enduring social system, and 'sexual politics' describes the power dynamics inherent in gender relations that maintain it. It appears early in the book, setting the stage for her comprehensive critique.

“Sex is a status category with political implications.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

Millett argues that sex is not merely a biological distinction but a fundamental social and political one, determining an individual's status and power within patriarchal structures. This statement is foundational to her argument that gender relations are inherently political.

“The personal is political.”

While a widely adopted feminist slogan, Millett's work extensively demonstrates how seemingly private, personal experiences—like relationships, family life, and sexuality—are deeply shaped by and reflect broader political power structures. This quote highlights the interconnectedness of individual lives and systemic oppression.

“The primary political unit is the family.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

Millett asserts that the family, often considered a private sphere, is in fact the foundational institution where patriarchal power relations are first established and reinforced. It serves as a microcosm of the larger political system, teaching and perpetuating gender roles.

“Sexual politics obtains in every area of our lives.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

This statement emphasizes the pervasive nature of sexual politics, arguing that gender-based power dynamics are not confined to specific domains but permeate all aspects of human existence, from personal relationships to public institutions and cultural expressions.

“The male has greater sexual freedom, the female is more restricted.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

Millett observes a fundamental double standard in sexual norms under patriarchy, where men are afforded greater liberty and agency in their sexual lives, while women face significant constraints, judgment, and control over their sexuality. This disparity is a key component of sexual politics.

“Patriarchy's chief institution is the family.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

Reinforcing her earlier point, Millett identifies the family as the primary mechanism through which patriarchal ideology is transmitted and maintained across generations. It is where gender roles are learned and enforced, ensuring the continuation of male dominance.

“The sexual revolution has been a revolution in name only.”

The Sexual Revolution, 1945-1960

Millett critiques the notion that the mid-20th century 'sexual revolution' truly liberated women. She argues that while some norms shifted, underlying patriarchal power structures remained

largely intact, often merely adapting to new forms of control or exploitation.

“The relationship between the sexes is a political relationship.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

This is a concise restatement of Millett's core argument. She posits that interactions between men and women are not simply personal or biological, but are fundamentally structured by power, dominance, and subordination, making them inherently political.

“What is meant by 'sexual politics' is the power-structured relationship, where one group is sovereign, and another group is subordinate.”

Theory of Sexual Politics

This definition clarifies Millett's concept of sexual politics as a system of power where one sex (men) holds dominance and authority over the other (women). It frames gender relations as a form of political hierarchy.

“The most fundamental form of oppression is sexual oppression.”

Millett suggests that sexual oppression, rooted in patriarchal control over women's bodies and lives, underpins and informs other forms of social and political oppression. It is a primary site of power struggle and inequality.

“The literary act is a political act.”

Millett's extensive literary analysis demonstrates how literature, often seen as apolitical, actively participates in and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Authors, through their portrayals of gender, contribute to the political landscape of sexual relations.

“Patriarchy has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.”

This highlights the self-perpetuating nature of patriarchy. Those who benefit from the existing power structure (men) have a strong incentive to resist changes that would challenge their dominance, ensuring the system's longevity.

“The very word 'woman' is a political definition.”

Millett argues that the concept of 'woman' is not a neutral biological category but a social construct imbued with political meaning, defining a subordinate status within patriarchal society. This challenges essentialist views of gender.

“The sexual revolution was not a revolution at all, but a counter-revolution.”

The Sexual Revolution, 1945-1960

Millett provocatively suggests that what was termed a 'sexual revolution' in the mid-20th century actually served to further entrench patriarchal control, particularly over female sexuality, rather than liberating women. It was a reassertion of male dominance in new forms.

Questions & Answers

What is Kate Millett's central argument in 'Sexual Politics'?

Millett's central argument is that sex is a 'status category with political implications,' meaning that the relationship between the sexes is a power-structured relationship where one group (men) is dominant and the other (women) is subordinate. She defines 'sexual politics' as the system of power that maintains patriarchy, which she sees as a pervasive social constant. She argues that this system operates not just in public life but also in personal relationships, the family, and cultural expressions like literature.

How does Millett define 'patriarchy' in the book?

Millett defines patriarchy as a social and political system where males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. She emphasizes that patriarchy is not merely a historical phenomenon but a persistent, pervasive system that structures all aspects of society, from the family unit to cultural institutions. It is maintained through various forms of force, ideology, and social conditioning that reinforce male dominance and female subordination.

Which literary authors does Millett analyze to support her arguments?

Millett conducts extensive literary analysis, focusing on authors like D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet. She scrutinizes their works to demonstrate how literature often reflects, reinforces, and even glorifies patriarchal attitudes and sexual politics. She examines how these authors portray female characters, sexual encounters, and gender roles, revealing underlying misogyny and the perpetuation of male dominance through cultural narratives.

What is the significance of Millett's literary criticism in 'Sexual Politics'?

Millett's literary criticism is significant because it demonstrates how cultural products, specifically literature, are not neutral but actively participate in and perpetuate sexual politics. By dissecting the works of prominent male authors, she exposes how patriarchal ideology is embedded in narratives, characterizations, and sexual depictions, influencing societal perceptions of gender. This analysis underscores her argument that the personal and cultural spheres are inherently political, shaping and reflecting power dynamics.

How does Millett critique Sigmund Freud's theories?

Millett critiques Freud for his patriarchal biases and for constructing theories that pathologize female sexuality and reinforce traditional gender roles. She argues that Freud's concepts, such

as penis envy and the Oedipus complex, are culturally rather than biologically determined, serving to justify female subordination and male dominance. Millett contends that Freud's psychoanalysis, rather than being a neutral science, is deeply embedded in and contributes to the ideology of sexual politics, limiting women's autonomy and self-understanding.

What does Millett mean by the 'sexual revolution' and her critique of it?

Millett refers to the mid-20th century period of changing sexual mores as the 'sexual revolution.' However, she critiques it by arguing that it was largely a 'counter-revolution' for women. She contends that while it appeared to offer greater sexual freedom, it often merely shifted the forms of patriarchal control, frequently leading to increased sexual exploitation and objectification of women without fundamentally altering the power imbalance between the sexes. True liberation, she argues, requires a dismantling of patriarchal structures, not just a change in sexual practices.

How does Millett connect the family unit to broader political structures?

Millett argues that the family is the 'primary political unit' and the fundamental institution through which patriarchal power is established and maintained. She sees it as a microcosm of the larger political system, where gender roles are first learned and enforced, and where male dominance is normalized. The family, often considered a private sphere, is thus revealed as a crucial site for the perpetuation of sexual politics, shaping individuals' understanding of power, authority, and gender hierarchy from an early age.

What is the role of biology versus culture in Millett's argument?

Millett strongly emphasizes the role of culture over biology in shaping gender roles and power dynamics. She argues against biological determinism, asserting that most differences attributed to sex are actually social constructs. While acknowledging biological sex differences, she contends that these are then culturally interpreted and elaborated into a system of gender that assigns specific roles, behaviors, and statuses, thereby creating and maintaining patriarchal structures. Her focus is on the social and political construction of gender.

What impact did 'Sexual Politics' have on feminist thought?

'Sexual Politics' had a profound impact on second-wave feminist thought, solidifying the concept that 'the personal is political' and providing a rigorous academic framework for understanding gender as a power dynamic. It helped shift the focus of feminism from legal and political equality to a deeper analysis of cultural, psychological, and social structures that perpetuate patriarchy. The book's literary criticism also pioneered feminist literary theory, demonstrating how cultural texts contribute to and reflect gender inequality.

Does Millett propose specific solutions or a path forward in the book?

While 'Sexual Politics' is primarily a diagnostic and analytical work, exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy, Millett implicitly calls for a radical transformation of society. She doesn't offer a

detailed blueprint for change but suggests that true liberation requires dismantling the entire patriarchal system, including its ideological, social, and cultural manifestations. Her work aims to raise consciousness and provide the intellectual tools necessary for understanding and challenging the pervasive nature of sexual politics, rather than prescribing specific policy solutions.

How does Millett address the concept of 'force' in maintaining patriarchy?

Millett argues that patriarchy is maintained not just through ideology and socialization but also through the implicit and explicit use of force. She discusses how physical violence, sexual coercion, and the threat of force are fundamental to maintaining male dominance. This includes historical examples of male control over female bodies and reproduction, as well as the ongoing reality of domestic violence and sexual assault, which serve as ultimate enforcers of patriarchal power structures when other methods fail.

What is the historical context in which 'Sexual Politics' was written?

'Sexual Politics' was written during the height of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s. It emerged from a period of intense social and political upheaval, including the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war protests, which inspired women to critically examine their own oppression. The book provided a foundational text for this burgeoning movement, articulating a comprehensive theory of gender inequality that resonated with the experiences and political aspirations of many feminists at the time.

How does Millett critique the traditional understanding of 'love' and 'romance'?

Millett critiques traditional notions of 'love' and 'romance' by arguing that they are often deeply intertwined with and serve to mask patriarchal power dynamics. She suggests that what is often presented as romantic love can, in fact, be a mechanism for female subordination and control, where women are encouraged to find their identity and fulfillment through male approval and domestic roles. She exposes how these cultural ideals can obscure the political realities of gender inequality within intimate relationships.

What does Millett mean by 'ideological colonization'?

Millett uses the concept of 'ideological colonization' to describe how patriarchal ideas and values are internalized by women, leading them to accept and even perpetuate their own subordination. She argues that through socialization, education, and cultural narratives, women are taught to adopt patriarchal perspectives about their own capabilities, roles, and worth. This internal colonization makes it difficult for women to recognize and resist their oppression, as they have absorbed the very ideology that limits them.

Spoiler: What is the main takeaway from the book's conclusion?

Spoiler: The book's conclusion doesn't offer a neat resolution but rather reinforces the pervasive and deeply entrenched nature of sexual politics. Millett ends by emphasizing the need for a

radical re-evaluation of societal structures and consciousness. The main takeaway is that achieving genuine gender equality requires a fundamental dismantling of patriarchy, not just superficial reforms. She leaves the reader with a profound understanding of the systemic nature of female oppression and the immense challenge of overcoming it, urging continued critical engagement with all forms of sexual politics.

How does Millett differentiate between sex and gender?

While the explicit terminology 'sex' vs. 'gender' was still evolving when Millett wrote 'Sexual Politics,' her work fundamentally lays the groundwork for this distinction. She treats 'sex' as a biological category (male/female) but argues that 'gender' (masculine/feminine) is a social construct. Millett demonstrates how societal norms, expectations, and power structures are built upon biological sex differences, transforming them into a system of hierarchical gender roles that define and subordinate women. Her analysis focuses on the social and political implications of these constructed gender roles.

What is the role of education in Millett's analysis of sexual politics?

Millett implies that education, both formal and informal, plays a crucial role in perpetuating sexual politics. Through schooling, media, and family upbringing, individuals are socialized into specific gender roles and expectations that reinforce patriarchal norms. She suggests that traditional education often transmits and legitimizes patriarchal ideology, limiting women's intellectual and professional aspirations. Conversely, she also implies that a critical, feminist education is essential for challenging these ingrained biases and fostering liberation.