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UWS 24a Conceptions of Friendship

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### Women's Friendships and Feminism

American essayist Anaïs Nin once wrote: "Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." What she so eloquently communicates is the profound effect friendships have on our individual character. In many ways, we are the amalgamation of our closest friends, since our shared experiences with these individuals shape our values and actions. Considering the important ways in which friendships influence our development as individuals, we can extrapolate how friends are instrumental in our ability to contribute to social, political, and technological innovation within broader settings. One example of this notion is the role of female-female friendships in the success of large-scale feminist movements. From the suffragette movement to equal pay to justice against sexual misconduct and the fight for reproductive rights, camaraderie amongst communities of women has been crucial in propagating social change.

In this paper, I argue how female-female friendships equip women with the necessary support and developmental experiences needed to challenge patriarchal structures, thereby contributing to social change. I will use psychology papers, observations from feminist leaders, and historical analyses to convey the specific ways in which friendships have played fundamental roles in women's ability to participate in feminism. To evaluate the extent to which these ideas are corroborated today, I will examine the realistic depictions of female friendships and feminist thought in the British comedy written and performed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge called *Fleabag*. Through the portrayal of female friendships in *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge demonstrates how women's interpersonal relationships catalyze social reform against oppressive patriarchal structures.

Starting from a short one-woman play in London, *Fleabag* has grown to become an internationally recognized, critically acclaimed Amazon Prime hit that is widely received by audiences as a feminist narrative. The show follows the life of an unnamed woman—externally referred to as Fleabag—residing in London. Her shared experiences with a mentor figure named Belinda, her sister Claire, her best friend Boo, and her mother Margaret, lead her to grapple with issues of self-worth, friendship, and love. *Fleabag* is relevant in the discussion of female friends and feminism as it portrays the interactions of multidimensional female characters who collectively evolve in their journey as feminists. While *Fleabag* is a work of fiction, Waller-Bridge's storylines adhere to realistic accounts of women's friendships and truthfully depict both degrading and empowering experiences. Closely studying scenes in *Fleabag* will therefore substantiate the claims made by experts in psychology, sociology, and history about the nature of female friendships and their impact in the real world.

As demonstrated in *Fleabag*, one theory proposed by psychologists suggests that female-female friendships support women by acting as a site of cognitive development. In a 1990s research study conducted by Ana M. Martínez Alemán, female undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds were surveyed on their views regarding their female friendships and the role that those friendships played in their moral and academic development. After graduating, they were once again asked the same questions. Data from interviews showed that during college, women discussed issues of academic anxiety, racial and ethnic self-image, politics, future aspirations, parenthood, sexuality, and romantic partners. Women associated qualities of their female-female friendships with the words "intellectually challenging," "stimulating," and "supportive" (561). Synthesizing the group of women's thoughts, Alemán notes that "there is a constancy and reliability in the role that ... female friends continue to play in women's cognitive development." (563). By allowing women to reason through controversial issues in a low-stakes environment, female-female friendships not only push women to think critically about social and political issues, but also serve

as a means for acquiring more information about these topics from multiple perspectives. Collectively considering issues of race, gender, and sexuality contribute to more progressive feminist thought by recognizing experiences that lie at the intersection of these societal issues. Participating in such conversations with female friends serves women well in their quest to eradicate gender inequalities because it encourages them to deviate from both explicitly and implicitly unjust practices that are ingrained in society.

*Fleabag* illustrates numerous instances of female relationships that have been crucial in a character's ability to think critically and grow emotionally. One such example occurs in season two, episode three when Fleabag has an illuminating conversation with a poised, middle-aged mentor figure named Belinda. Belinda reflects on the notion of women-specific awards with Fleabag, articulating how women's awards are "ghettoizing," and a "subsection of success." By labeling these awards as "women's awards," companies are conveying that they perceive women as undeserving of comparison to their male counterparts, assuming that their abilities are too inferior to be recognized at the level of male-dominated awards. Through her conversation with Belinda, Fleabag learns how a celebration one might initially perceive as empowering to women can actually be demeaning, and she leaves the conversation with this new realization that better promotes feminist thought. Moreover, Waller-Bridge characterizes Belinda as an extremely successful, self-aware, and experienced woman, thereby increasing Belinda's legitimacy. The audience therefore senses the significance of the wisdom she imparts. By depicting how Fleabag's friendship with Belinda left Fleabag enlightened on the topic of implicit workplace inequalities, Waller-Bridge demonstrates how female-female friendships facilitate the cognitive leap required to better comprehend nuanced social issues, thereby enabling women to recognize and amend gender-based inequities.

Furthermore, Fleabag's closeness with her mother illustrates how female-female relationships are conducive to tremendous emotional growth. Although Fleabag's mother Margaret has passed away and does not physically appear in the series, her presence is repeatedly alluded to

through dialogue and symbolism. One prominent symbolic representation of Fleabag's mother is a small golden statue of a woman. The statue motif appears in the last episode of season 2, where Fleabag makes an immensely difficult decision to part ways with an unnamed romantic partner, played by Andrew Scott, because of their incompatible circumstances. In the last scene, moments after Scott's character leaves, Fleabag pulls out the golden statue from her coat, clutching it close to her. This frame depicts how she draws strength from her mother in moments of loss. She then gets up and walks the opposite direction, bidding farewell to the audience with a small smile and a wave, still holding the statue. The action captures Fleabag's growth in her own self worth. In contrast, season one of the show saw her clinging to her relationships with men, seeking validation from her sexual desirability. Now at the end of the series, the audience senses that despite this profound loss of companionship from a man she loves, Fleabag will persevere and thrive on her own. Waller-Bridge uses the appearance of the golden statue as a beacon of hope and a reminder to Fleabag that she will be successful despite this loss. In redeeming Fleabag's sense of confidence, the statue shows how the empowerment derived from other women is necessary in allowing them to make challenging decisions that will ultimately serve them well, thereby corroborating the role of female friendships in emotional growth.

Another way in which female friendships strengthen a woman's ability to contribute to feminism is by promoting self-agency and assertiveness. Sara Ahmed, a distinguished scholar specializing in the intersection of race, queer, and feminist studies, addresses the power dynamics between men and women in her work. Ahmed describes the act of countering misogyny as a "feminist snap" in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, writing: "We could think of feminist history as a history of snappy women. Perhaps we would be thinking of how what comes out of our own mouths is speaking this history" (209). In other words, a crucial means of asserting a woman's belonging in male-dominated spheres is through the use of voice. Silence can be equated with passivity that allows gender-based discrimination to persist. By vocalizing dissent—performing a

“feminist snap”—women rebel against discrimination and inequality. Moreover, Ahmed’s analyses of feminist acts of rebellion in cinematic and literary media lead her to believe that accomplishing a “feminist snap” demands the support of other women, writing: “Snap is a collective impatience ... sisterhood is a snap” (212). Acts of rebellion are the foundation of major social change. Female-female friendships enable women to diverge from patriarchal norms by providing the necessary support and empathy to pursue an act of rebellion against oppression. This support may be achieved by validating one’s ideas or by opening up spaces in which a woman can assert her beliefs. Through “sisterhood” communities of women with similar morals and social agendas, women are encouraged to use their voices and carry out a “feminist snap,” thereby combatting patriarchal ideals.

*Fleabag* reflects the potency of “feminist snaps” through the characterization of the friendship between Fleabag and Claire. Fleabag recognizes that her sister is unhappy in her marriage with Martin; however, Claire refuses to leave him, convincing herself that supporting her husband’s life is more important than pursuing her own life goals. On the other hand, Fleabag speaks her mind readily and seldom subdues to the whims of others. Despite their differences, Fleabag and Claire have a loving and empathetic friendship. Over the course of the season, Claire grows tremendously and develops her own autonomy due to Fleabag’s continuous understanding of her struggles and unequivocal encouragement to pursue her career and relationship goals. At the end of season two, Claire confronts Martin, saying: “You’re an alcoholic, and you tried it on with my sister ... *Please* leave me.” In showing Claire’s determination to leave Martin, Waller-Bridge demonstrates how the empowerment derived from her friendship with Fleabag contributes to this act of rebellion. With this newfound liberation, Claire finally exercises self-agency as an independent woman by pursuing her career ambitions and choosing a different romantic partner who respects her aspirations. Her growth in self-worth reflects feminist ideals, thereby showing how female friendships are key in fortifying feminist belief systems.

Another way in which female-female friendships help women shape society into a more equal world is through the creation of exclusively female communities. Social science researcher Estelle Freedman examines the theory of separationism, or the distinction between male and female spheres of operation, and how the absence of female-only groups is detrimental to the propagation of feminism. Studying nineteenth-century American feminist movements, she argues that female-only communities contributed to the political leverage and feminist consciousness of women. In 1890, Women's Clubs began forming as the Suffragette Movement picked up momentum. By 1914, women's club membership had reached about a million and a half people. Initially, these clubs attracted women who desired to fill traditional gender roles and simply wanted to make friends. However, the clubs began shaping the political views of women, encouraging them not to perceive themselves as simply mothers and wives, but rather as citizens with a voice, ultimately leading the clubs to launch civic reform programs (Freedman 203). The prominence of women's clubs in the 1890s contributed to the expansion of domains in which women could participate, thereby promoting feminist ideology. These communities of women facilitated the abolition of gender-based hierarchies in political and industrial settings by force of number; an alliance of a million women with the sole intention of attaining female rights in society had a tremendous effect on the social climate at the time.

However, after women's voting rights were obtained, women's clubs lost their influence. Women no longer felt the compulsion to participate and instead assimilated into formerly male-dominated spaces, taking on traditionally deferential roles in the workplace (Freedman 204). Freedman credits the sudden lack of radical feminist change after the women's club movements to the relative absence of exclusively female communities. Without the backing of these communities, women struggled to challenge patriarchal obstacles that occluded their ambitions. By evaluating the temporary demise of feminism after the women's club movement, one can deduce the importance of female-only communities in preserving feminist ideology. Although it is crucial for men and

women to interact and hold power within the same industries and disciplines, it is equally important for female-only institutions to exist in order to empower women.

*Fleabag* reflects the power of exclusively female relationships in a woman's empowerment through the portrayal of Fleabag's friendship with Boo. The use of flashbacks throughout the series depicts shared experiences Fleabag has with Boo and the evolution of their friendship. In season one, the audience learns that they used to run a quirky café together before Boo tragically passed away. Throughout the first season, the café is portrayed as a failing business through the use of colder-tone-filtered camera shots of barren tables and increasingly pressing bill notices by the counter. Despite the difficulties Fleabag faces in her attempt to run the café alone, and discouragement from her family about not selling the space, she remembers the determination Boo had about preserving it. In one particular memory in Episode 1, Boo and Fleabag drunkenly sing "we're happy, so happy, to be modern women" before Boo has a moment of sobering determination, telling Fleabag: "Let's not ask anyone for anything. They don't get it." The café is a work of love and labor that they established together. By singing about being modern women, the two rejoice at their business prowess in keeping the café afloat, diverging from the stereotype about women not being business-minded or being inferior to male-run businesses. In recognition of this, the characters wish to maintain their autonomy as proof that women-run businesses can succeed. Reminded of this moment, Fleabag resolves to revive the café. Thus, in season two, the café is always shot in warmer tones and bustling with satisfied customers. The determination Boo instills in Fleabag about running the café is testament to the effect that female-only communities have in establishing women-led achievements. By promoting self-efficacy in women, Boo and Fleabag's friendship reflects the potency of exclusively female-communities.

While there are numerous ways in which female same-sex friendships are valuable to women, toxic female friendships also exist, and could be argued to deter women from feminist ideals. One prominent avenue of bullying amongst adolescents is insulting the physical appearances

of their peers through various forms of social media. According to a 2010 study of middle schoolers in U.S. public schools, 25.8% of girls reported experiencing such cyberbullying in comparison to 12.8% of boys, and 21.1% of girls reported actively cyberbullying others, while only 10.3% of boys report doing the same (Hinduja et. al. 2010). Both at the level of the perpetrator and the victim of online harassment directed at body image, females appear to be at the forefront of toxicity amongst their same-sex friends. However, the pressure to strive for a particular body shape and weight has been instilled by patriarchal beliefs. In fact, evolutionary psychology studies have shown that men have historically placed a higher premium on a woman's physical attractiveness than other qualities (Lewis et. al.). Therefore, interpersonal tensions and competitiveness amongst heterosexual women can be attributed to seeking adoration from the opposite sex and asserting dominance over same-sex peers. By illustrating how animosity within female-female friendships can be derived from degrading patriarchal ideals, one can sense the power of instilling feminist belief systems that support all women in overcoming unrealistic and misogynistic pressures on women.

All in all, female-female friendships hold immense significance in the lives of the participating women. Not only do women find comfort in their female friendships, but they also receive the necessary validation, empowerment, and educative experiences to contribute meaningfully to the cause of feminism. Oppressive patriarchal structures are not a new occurrence. In fact, women have been burdened with an inherent system of inequality across the world for centuries. But through the shared experience of frustration and anger, women are able to harness larger-scale social change. As a woman who believes deeply in the equality of all genders, I see tremendous potential in my shared experiences with my female friends in shaping my future contributions to social change. Armed with the knowledge of the profound effect friendships have on our world view and ability to contribute to our respective surroundings, I strongly believe that female friendships from a grassroots, interpersonal level, can develop into larger scale feminist movements, paving the way for an impartial future.

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