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# How Did TERFs Become So Powerful In Britain?



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Trans Pride, Brighton, 2018. Photo by author.

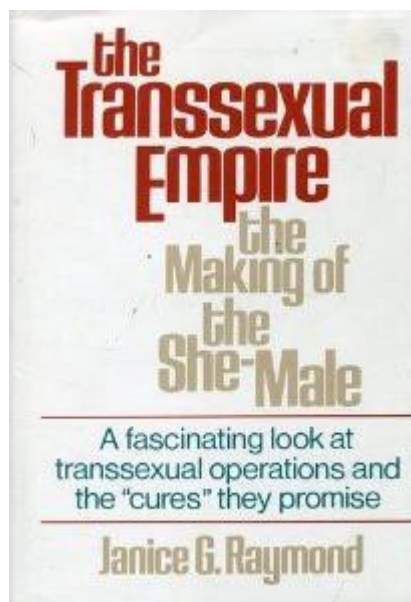
**A**fter more than fifteen years of tireless campaigning and awareness-raising, the British trans rights movement was disappointed in the summer of 2020 to hear the UK Government reject plans for a significant reform of the Gender Recognition Act (2004), which gives trans people limited rights to change their legal gender. They were even more dismayed to hear government ministers justify the decision by referencing the arguments put forward by so-called ‘Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists’.

But what is this controversial brand of feminism, and how did it become so influential in the United Kingdom?

The label ‘Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist’ (TERF) is given to feminists who are opposed to the inclusion of trans people within feminist discourse and spaces, and usually to trans rights in a broader sense. The acronym was coined by an Australian intersectional feminist blogger in 2008,<sup>1</sup> although some exclusionary feminists themselves believe the term to be a slur and prefer alternatives like ‘gender-critical feminists’.<sup>2</sup>

‘TERF’ is now applied to a wide range of trans-resistant ideologies, not all of which are necessarily ‘feminist’ or ‘radical,’ and there is a certain unfixedness to its meaning. Some forms of exclusionary feminism envision themselves at the vanguard of a poststructuralist dismantling of gender, and regard trans people as ‘reinforcing the culture and institutions of gender that are oppressing women’.<sup>3</sup> Others position themselves as guardians of a self-evident male/female sexual dimorphism, from which perspective trans people are perpetrators in the un-realing of womanhood and the loosening of its definition.<sup>4</sup> Both iterations hinge on a structuralist-versus-poststructuralist imaginary wherein trans people are on the ‘wrong’ side.

If there is such a thing as a definitive expression of ‘TERF’ ideology, American feminist Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) is a strong contender. Trans writers Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle argue that it ‘did more to justify and perpetuate [anti-trans prejudice] than perhaps any other book ever written.’ In its sheer ability to do harm, they go so far as to compare it to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic hoax that did much to fuel the Nazi conspiracy machine.<sup>5</sup>



The front cover of Janice Raymond's 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*.

Raymond's language is deliberately incendiary. She accuses trans women of being 'yet another face of patriarchy' and sees them as part of a conspiracy to infiltrate and obliterate cis women's spaces. In this sense, Raymond contends, 'he [sic] performs *total rape*,'<sup>6</sup> and the only correct response was 'morally mandating it out of existence'.<sup>7</sup> Like most exclusionary feminists, Raymond had little to say about trans men, who are typically regarded by such authors as 'poor oppressed women'<sup>8</sup> suffering from 'false consciousness,'<sup>9</sup> or as seeking an easy way out of oppression by 'joining the caste of men.'<sup>10</sup> Since they are not seen to 'invade' women's spaces, they are usually spared the attribution of malevolence reserved for trans women.

Raymond's influence in Britain is contested. On the one hand, feminist journalist Jane Fae writes that *Transsexual Empire* 'attracted little attention in the UK' and was 'little more than a footnote'.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Stephen Whittle, a founding member of the British trans activist movement, recalls a sharp change in feminist attitudes in 1979. From being 'listened to' prior to the publication of Raymond's book, he felt a sudden shift towards feminists seeing trans people as 'co-conspirators in an attempt by men to possess [women] and to remake them in a mould that suits them.'<sup>12</sup> British sociologist Carol Riddell, meanwhile, felt that *Transsexual Empire* was a 'dangerous book' that made it 'more problematic' for trans women to be visible in the women's movement.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever its broader influence, *Transsexual Empire*'s academic impact was long-lived on both sides of the Atlantic. Sandy Stone, writing in 1991, felt that it was still regarded at

that time as ‘the definitive statement on transsexualism by a genetic female academic.’<sup>14</sup>

It is fitting, then, that the most influential trans-exclusionary feminist in Britain is another academic — Australian-born Germaine Greer. The book that launched Greer’s fame, *The Female Eunuch* (*TFE*, 1970), positioned itself as a rallying cry for feminism’s ‘second wave’. While it ignores trans people for the most part — save a few passing references to ‘the antics of a transvestite’<sup>15</sup> — the foundations of Greer’s subsequent status as a quintessential ‘TERF’ are nonetheless visible in *TFE*. The central tenet in Greer’s worldview is that women must reclaim the entirety of the ‘female’ experience, including its bodily anatomy and the experience of female childhood — both things she would later emphasise as lacking in trans women.

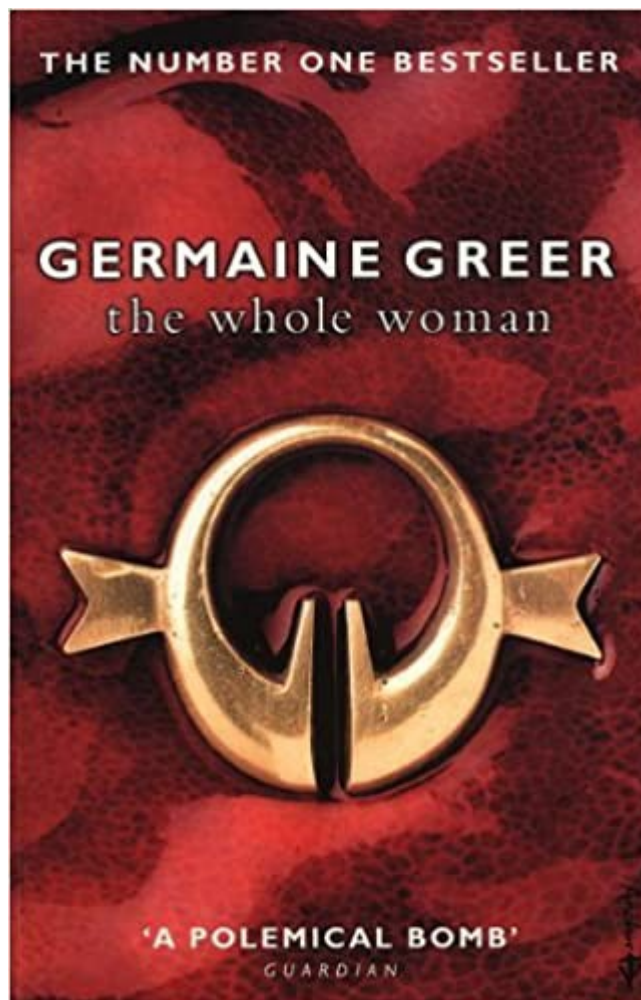
By taking back power over their own lives, Greer argues, women can break free of the ‘masquerade’ of their expected submissive performance (which she compares to the life of ‘a transvestite’).<sup>16</sup> Another telling portent of Greer’s future direction is her tendency toward conspiracy. ‘The revolutionary woman must know her enemies,’ she states, listing both high- and low-ranking medical, political, and religious practitioners as examples.<sup>17</sup> Although seeing these people as sources of patriarchy is neither unusual nor unfounded, it is the unstated assumption that they are secretly working together toward a common goal that sets Greer apart. Her sense of being under siege from shadowy and unspecified forces laid the groundwork for the later addition of trans people to her list of enemies.

Greer’s growing hostility to the trans community was showcased in a 1989 article for the *Independent*. While recalling an encounter with a trans admirer of *TFE*, she states:

*I should have said, ‘You’re a man. The Female Eunuch has done less than nothing for you. Piss off.’ The transvestite held me in a rapist’s grip ... Knee-jerk etiquette demanded that I humour this gross parody of my sex by accepting him as female, even to the point of allowing him to come to the lavatory with me.*<sup>18</sup>

Ten years later, Greer published *The Whole Woman* (*TWW*, 1999). Opening with an assault on postmodernism and its questioning of the ‘physical realities’ that make up a woman’s experience, *TWW* positions itself firmly within the late-twentieth century debate about the viability of gender categories in a poststructuralist world.<sup>19</sup> ‘Real women are being phased out,’ Greer laments; ‘the first step, persuading them to deny

their own existence, is almost complete.’<sup>20</sup> One of the key components in this attack upon the ‘real’ is, she argues, the promotion of transsexuality, to which she dedicates an entire chapter.



Front cover of the current edition of Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman*.

No longer content to render trans people a quick and airy dismissal, *TWW* assigns to the transsexual an overtly conspiratorial role as malicious infiltrator. She claims that governments are keen to ‘recognize’ transsexuals and ease their access to medical intervention because, as a ‘profoundly conservative’ expression of normativity, ‘sex change surgery’ perpetuates ‘sharply contrasting gender roles by shaping individuals to fit them.’<sup>21</sup> Greer then promotes the Freudian belief that a trans woman is simply impersonating her mother, and that, in doing so, she ‘murders her and gets away with it.’ The chapter closes on an even more provocative note:

*[The trans woman’s] intentions are no more honourable than any female impersonator’s; his achievement is to gag all those who would call his bluff. When he forces his way into the*

*few private spaces women may enjoy and shouts down their objections, and bombards the women who will not accept him with threats and hate mail, he does as rapists have always done.*<sup>22</sup>

*TWW* was published a few years after Greer tried and failed to prevent a trans woman, Dr Rachel Padman, from staying at Newnham, an all-women college at Cambridge University where Greer taught English literature.<sup>23</sup> The oddly disjointed lines in *TWW* about ‘murder’ and ‘rapists’ might reasonably be interpreted as targeted at Padman, especially when one considers that Greer’s subsequent public interventions on trans issues were also typically responses to perceived personal injuries, such as being subject to ‘no-platforming’ campaigns at several universities in the 2010s.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the case, her name has become synonymous with a combative brand of British TERF ideology.

Greer’s arguments found significant purchase in otherwise socially liberal contexts. The *Guardian* newspaper, in particular, has become so associated with TERF views that some trans people report having ‘discovered transphobic feminism’ through that paper.<sup>25</sup> In 2004, for instance, *Guardian* columnist Julie Bindel mocked ‘Kwik-Fit sex changes’ in an article titled ‘Gender Benders Beware,’ which inadvertently did much to spark the trans activist ‘New Wave’ in the mid-2000s.<sup>26</sup>

Suzanne Moore, another regular *Guardian* contributor, published an article in 2013 in the *New Statesman* in which she bemoaned the impossibility of ‘having the perfect body shape — that of a Brazilian transsexual,’ and, following online backlash, complained on Twitter that ‘people can lop their dicks off and be more feminist than me.’ That same year, Julie Burchill published an article in the *Guardian* in which she threatened: ‘shims, she-males, whatever you’re calling yourselves these days — *don’t* threaten or bully we lowly natural-born women, I warn you.’<sup>27</sup> And when, in June 2020, children’s author J. K. Rowling accused the trans rights movement of ‘offering cover to predators,’<sup>28</sup> the *Guardian*’s Catherine Bennett was among those to label trans peoples’ outraged response ‘misogynistic’.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the poststructuralist ‘gender critical’ self-positioning of some exclusionary feminists, the common thread that binds most expressions of trans-resistant feminism is the biologically essentialist definition of womanhood in relation to physical anatomy. Exclusionary feminists of a poststructuralist bent square the circle by referring to a kind of experiential essentialism, discounting from womanhood anyone who has not lived the

‘whole’ female experience from birth. In this view, womanhood is defined in terms of one’s experience of particular types of oppression, which, as society generally understands gender in terms of anatomy, currently stems from one’s possession of certain bodily signifiers. The total deconstruction of gender is therefore part of a distant idealised future. In the imperfect present, women must continue to politically organise around their biology and protect it from ‘infiltration’.

All of this is expressed in a ‘common sense’ vocabulary which, as evolutionary biologist Joan Roughgarden argues, ‘amounts to passing the buck.’<sup>30</sup> By handing the final resolution of gender questions to the type of axiomatic dimorphism found in school textbooks, exclusionary feminists abrogate any need to justify their provocative, unsubstantiated assumptions about who trans women are, what they want, or why they do as they do. They just ‘aren’t women,’ and everything else stems from that one embattled assertion.

How successful has trans-exclusionary feminism been in Britain? Not at all, if we are to judge by the sheer volume and scope of trans-positive feminist writing since the 1990s. These new feminist forms are vibrant, energetic, diverse, innovative, and relevant in ways that trans-exclusionary feminism never was. And while prominent feminist academics occasionally sign letters condemning the ‘no-platforming’ of exclusionary speakers at universities,<sup>31</sup> the discursive sway of ‘full-time’ exclusionary feminists in the academy is in steep decline.<sup>32</sup>

In broader society, however, ‘TERF’ influence is more considerable. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and forums like Mumsnet, have become crucial tools in the dissemination of TERF beliefs, while trans-exclusionary arguments are frequently deployed in a disguised, dog-whistle form by bodies like Transgender Trend, an anti-trans advocacy group that distributed well-publicised ‘advice’ packs to schools in 2018.<sup>33</sup>





Advice packs for schools produced by Transgender Trend, an anti-trans group.

On a macro scale, the goal of ‘protecting’ single-sex spaces from trans incursion is continuing to inform government policy. Despite the majority of respondents to the UK Government’s 2018 consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act (2004) advocating a significant loosening of the current rules on acquiring legal recognition, Liz Truss, Minister for Women and Equalities, ultimately rejected the idea and stressed instead the need to ‘restrict access to single sex spaces on the basis of biological sex’.<sup>34</sup> For Truss and many others, feminism and the women’s cause more generally is automatically associated with anti-trans objectives, a view that transfeminists have not, as yet, been successful in uprooting.

When viewed in this wider context, it is clear that trans-exclusionary feminism is very much alive in Britain and that it still has the power to sway the direction of national politics. One reason for its continued vitality is its integration within a broader nexus of anti-trans sentiment which has fueled an increase in hate crimes and physical attacks on trans people in recent years.<sup>35</sup> Even though many Western women distrust feminism and regard it as too ‘extreme and ideological,’<sup>36</sup> trans-exclusionary feminist ideas can draw on a nearly limitless stock of transphobia in the national *zeitgeist*. In a sense, one doesn’t even have to be a feminist to be a TERF, whereas being a transfeminist requires knowledge of esoteric concepts and terminology— a significant strategic advantage for those peddling anti-trans myths.

With so many active and passive adherents, and with so many high-profile champions — not least J. K. Rowling — to keep the flame alive, it is likely that TERF ideology will continue to exert a powerful influence in Britain for at least the next decade.

## Notes

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[<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/29/philosophers-object-journals-publication-terf-reference-some-feminists-it-really>].
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4. See discussion of Germaine Greer below.
5. Introductory commentary to Janice G. Raymond, ‘Sappho by Surgery, The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist’ in Stryker and Whittle [eds.], *The Transgender Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 131.
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7. Ibid, p. 178.
8. Stephen Whittle, ‘Where Did We Go Wrong? Feminism and Trans Theory — Two Teams on the Same Side?’ in *Transgender Studies Reader*, p. 198.
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11. Jane Fae, ‘The Press’ in Christine Burns [ed.]. *Trans Britain: Our Journey from the Shadows*, (London: Unbound, 2018), p. 197.
12. Whittle, ‘Where Did We Go Wrong?,’ pp. 195–6.

13. Carol Riddell, 'Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*' in *Transgender Studies Reader*, p. 145 and 155.
14. Sandy Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto' in *Transgender Studies Reader*, p. 223.
15. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2012 [1970]), p. 33.
16. Ibid, p. 70.
17. Ibid, p. 23.
18. Germaine Greer in *The Independent*, 'On why sex change is a lie,' 22 July 1989.
19. See Sue Morgan [ed.], *The Feminist History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2006), section II, 'Deconstructing the female subject: Feminist history and "the linguistic turn"'.  
20. Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*, (London: Doubleday, 1999), p. 3.
21. Ibid, pp. 80–2.
22. Ibid, p. 93.
23. Clare Garner in *The Independent*, 'Fellows divided over don who breached last bastion,' 25 June 1997.
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34. Elizabeth Truss, 'Government Equalities Office Update,' 22 September 2020. [<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-09-22/hcws462>].
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