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REVISITING *FLEABAG*, BAD FEMINISTS, AND MISCARRIAGES

When I first watched Phoebe Waller-Bridge's critically acclaimed show, *Fleabag* (2016), I knew there was something special about it, but its nuance was lost on me. I recognized that the titular character was deeply flawed, and I liked that. Yet it wasn't until years later, when I rewatched it, that it truly dawned on me: how refreshing it is to see such a flawed character while still glimpsing the human underneath—the woman.

I spent four years in film school watching countless movies where female characters were mostly either saints or femmes fatales. I appreciate those portrayals, too, because understanding the past helps us see how far we've come—and how much further we still need to go.

In this article, I want to focus on the idea of the imperfect female. By no means am I implying that Waller-Bridge is the first to introduce such a character, but she has done an exceptional job of portraying the conflicts and contradictions that come with being a woman in the 21st century. *Fleabag* beautifully pushes the boundaries by creating a character who is neither a saint nor a femme fatale; she is something in between—she is a woman. She is a *bad feminist*.

The term *bad feminist*, first coined by Roxane Gay, is directly referenced in *Fleabag*. In the first episode, both Fleabag and Claire call themselves *bad feminists* after raising their hands in response to the question: *Would you trade five years of your life for the perfect body?* Wrong answer. It's easy to roll your eyes at something like that, but the reality is that we live in a society where women undergo painful surgeries, Botox, and fillers to achieve the so-called *perfect body*—one deemed desirable by men.

Through *Fleabag*, we see the contradictions of being a woman. Of course, we want to be perceived as beautiful—after all, beauty is a currency, and in a patriarchal society, certain kinds of beauty grant privilege. But don't say it out loud. You can want it, but not too much. You can tweak your features, but not *too* obviously.

Fleabag's family sees her as inferior—she is self-destructive, a compulsive liar, and possibly a sex addict. She doesn't conform to societal expectations of womanhood (marriage, children, stability). She is often compared to her sister Claire, the successful businesswoman—everything Fleabag is not.

As the eldest, Claire embodies traditionally *masculine* qualities—career-driven, unsmiling, pragmatic. These are traits more often attributed to men. However, in the first episode of Season 2, the audience catches a glimpse of a different Claire, one who fully reveals herself by the end of the season. In this episode, we discover that Claire and her husband, Martin, are trying to conceive, but when she goes to the washroom, Fleabag finds her having a miscarriage. This is a

pivotal moment. Miscarriages remain one of the last taboos in our culture, and Claire's internal turmoil—grieving while trying not to make a scene—reflects this.

"Get your hands off my miscarriage."

While Fleabag has a nihilistic approach to life, Claire clings to repression and rules. In her male-dominated corporate world, this strategy has served her well—until it starts to crack. After refusing to acknowledge what has happened, Fleabag takes it upon herself to tell the table that Claire had a miscarriage. The reaction of Claire's husband is chilling:

"It's like a goldfish out of the bowl—if it didn't want to be in there, something wasn't right."

A horrifying statement made even more so by the fact that he doesn't know he's speaking about his own wife. Yet this kind of reaction is common. Ali Wong, in her comedy special *Baby Cobra* (2016), talks about her miscarriage and reveals the anxiety she felt about telling people—for fear they would blame her womb and, by extension, *her* for her inability to carry a pregnancy. Women are raised to see their worth in their ability to create life. From childhood, we are handed dolls, taught to play house, and reminded that motherhood is our ultimate role. If we miscarry or cannot conceive, we are made to feel like lesser women. And let's not even start on the stigma against women who choose not to have children at all.

Unsurprisingly, it isn't just men who reinforce these ideas—women do, too. We are both victims and perpetrators of patriarchal conditioning. In *Fleabag*, it is the Godmother—played by the incomparable Olivia Colman—who begins the scolding, paving the way for Martin to follow suit. After Fleabag's false confession, Godmother asks, *Whose was it?* Her curiosity is almost gleeful. *Was it the tooth man?* she prods, dismissing the gravity of the situation while urging Dad to *calm down*—because, of course, they can't possibly go to the hospital now. *They're still having dinner.*

This episode remains one of my favourites because it perfectly illustrates the inherited patriarchal systems that keep women in their place—and against each other. Claire, standing in the washroom, allows herself only a fleeting moment to grieve before she shouts, *This is my miscarriage*, then composes herself and returns to the table. Her emotions are on a leash—because God forbid she ruin dinner.

This episode also exposes the subliminal messages women receive every day. Both Godmother and Martin dismiss the miscarriage as insignificant—because if it were to happen to anyone, surely it should be *Fleabag*, the *bad* one, not Claire.

There is a lot of generalized anxiety over what it means to be a feminist. *Does it mean I have to stop shaving? Am I supposed to hate men?* What does it truly mean to be a feminist, and by extension, what makes someone a *bad feminist*? In times like these, when even the personal is political, we can't afford to get lost in debates over trivialities like shaving. Feminism isn't about following a set of rigid rules—just as being human is flawed and messy, so is being a feminist. It looks different for all of us, but at its core, it must be rooted in compassion, camaraderie, and self-awareness. After all, the experience of a white woman is different from that of a Black woman or a Latina woman. Yet we must unite under one mission: *equality*.

And we can't fight that battle if we're too busy pulling each other down.