Amsterdam Travelling Scholarship Report: Female Liberation and Empowerment

By Olivia Aroh

Introduction

As an English student, I have always been intrigued by the notions of depth and context, in every aspect. Especially when it comes to the F-word: feminism. But I was especially intrigued about the topic after reading an Independent newspaper article, which was titled, ‘The ‘feminist’ group pushing new laws against sex work in Amsterdam has got everything wrong’ [https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/sex-workers-prostitution-amsterdam-feminism-red-light-district-a8863926.html].

In short, the article disparaged the idea of sex work, in a city where the idea of sex and female liberation is prominent. This gave me the idea to explore women’s liberation and how it has cultivated self-expression, independence and freedom for today’s modern woman, in the city of Amsterdam. Although I was able to understand the angle in which the article was coming from, I was still able to comprehend the ways in which by stopping sex work would create a domino effect on women who rely on this route for income but also the dynamic of sexual liberation.

I was lucky enough to have friends who were also intrigued in different aspects of the city and in turn we were all able to explore parts of Amsterdam that we each found interesting.

Upon my trip I was able to visit many locations, including:

- **Atria Institute** – a research institute that focuses on emancipation, women’s history and gender equality.
- **Anne Frank Monument** – a statue situated outside the Anne Frank House to remember and celebrate her life.
- **Venustempel** – sex is usually deemed as a taboo, but Amsterdam’s Sex Museum embodies the history of sex and embodies the sexual liberation of women.
- **Dam Square** – a pinnacle point in central Amsterdam; a location that holds liberating history, as the starting point for the Women’s March.
- **Homomonument** – this is a memorial, which commemorates the lives of people who identify as LGBTQ+ and have been persecuted because of their sexuality.
- **Red Light District** – the famous Red Light District is a known symbol and location that allows women within the sex industry (i.e. prostitutes) to advertise sex. It also evokes the liberal attitude that Amsterdam holds, as a location like this is not illegal.
- **Rijksmuseum** – this is the national museum of Amsterdam, it particularly focuses on art and history. This was especially interesting because there were quite a few liberating images of women and goes to show that Amsterdam have tried to minimise the constraints placed on women. Even in a time where feminism was non-existent.

I must stress that this trip not only widened my knowledge on the f-word but allowed me to recognise the way in which women are able to take control of their sexuality, within a different culture. Without the help of the University of Leicester and the £300 that the Travelling Scholarship awarded myself and the group with, I do not think I would have been able to participate in such an insightful trip/experience.
Journey

We decided to travel on Thursday 13th June 2019 – Monday 17th June 2019. These dates were the most practical as it was after the end of the academic year, and before the group had to adhere to other types of summer commitments, i.e. summer internships.

Our way of travel was through plane and was the cheapest and also the most convenient as the airport that we chose was close enough for each of the group members to reach and in terms of travel time was only an hour and thirty minutes. The company was EasyJet. Once we landed we had to sort out transport to get to our accommodation. We ended up buying two tickets – one for €24.50, which allow us to use various transport methods (i.e. tram and bus but excluding train) across the 4 days and the other ticket that was €3.70 euros, which was for the train. This also convenient as the train station was a 5 minute walk to our accommodation. Both the accommodation and flights came to a grand total of, £340.90, which was a little more than we anticipated as there was a medical convention at the hotel we stayed at which increased the price.

Atria Institute

Ever since I had heard its name, I have always wanted to visit Atria Institute on gender equality and women's history. Before hearing about the institute, I had personally never heard of a library that was dedicated to the topic of, all things woman. It was refreshing. However, it also left me with the question of whether this was the best way for female liberation to take place? I think it is necessary for there to be places like this with such motivation to make women to be heard but it also holds the idea that these places may be create because there are no spaces for women in the main libraries.

Nevertheless, the name of the institution itself perpetuates Amsterdam’s outlook on women – they are being recognised and liberated.

Whilst I was there I was able to talk to a wonderful called, Annette who worked there as a librarian. She was able to tell me about all the current events that were running during the
month of June; unfortunately due to my stay I was unable to attend but she was able to tell me the history of the institute. Atria, was actually officially founded in 1988 through the idea of merging three feminist organizations into one; with the purpose of (IAV, IIAV and IDC) collecting artefacts and documents that relate to women’s history. And not just limited to Amsterdam’s history but including documents about women from all over the world.

I was most interested in looking at the diaries and letters that were framed in the displays. The two that particularly caught my eye were actual letters, written by, Aletta Jacobs and Rosa Manus, who were both suffragette activists. Although they were in Dutch [as expected], and even though I couldn’t understand the context of the letters, it was still fascinating to physically see, these letters, written by women who changed the gender biased dynamic so that it could evolve to allow feminism to thrive for future generations.

I really enjoyed going around the library and just looking at various texts which stood for feminism.
Olivia Aroh

Venustempel

WARNING: Explicit Content [Images]

Alongside Atria, Venustempel, which can be translated to mean, Temple of Venus, otherwise known as, Sex Museum, was high on my list of places to visit. The key reasoning for visiting the museum was to see the ways in which, Amsterdam have embraced the stigma and taboo of sex. It is a known fact that sex is often seen as a taboo, especially when it is aligned with women; yet, Amsterdam have cultivated the idea of sex, allowing it to become a notion and substance of female empowerment and domination [the fact that it is based in the city centre, speaks volumes].

The museum consisted of erotic statues, pictures and paintings; consisting of the evolution of pornography, sensual love, explicit pornographic genres and even comical images. However, I thought it was interesting that the museum focused more on the female perspective and allowing women to take control of the man. The idea that women can and do like sex is prevalent here – thus there being a multitude of images where the woman is in a more dominant position. This does make sense, as Venus, the goddess of love, sex and beauty was a woman. I was quite pleased that I was able to see so much for only €5.

The museum also consisted of famous figures who used their sexual prowess to their advantage for domination. These women consisted of: Marilyn Monroe, Mata Hari and Josephine Baker.

Marilyn was there as a display as an obvious sex symbol, one no one can seem to forget. Hari and Baker on the other hand, were both spies who used their sexual prowess as a way to disguise their profession but also to be free of sexual stereotypes and constraints.

Being an iconic woman for the roaring 20’s, the museum placed a spinning figurine of Josephine, which resembles her infamous dancing performance where she is topless and wears a girdle of 16 bananas. But, not only was Baker a dancer, she was also known for being the first African-American to star in an onscreen motion picture. Furthermore, she was an informant for the French Resistance, and would often dance and flirt with Nazi officials to gain information about oppositional locations, without being caught as she was known as a famous celebrity. Although this is clearly the use of sexual manipulation, it suggests that women are capable of using their sexual presence as means of more than sex. For this Baker was rewarded with the Medal of Resistance.
Mata Hari in Parijs

In 1902 Mata Hari left her husband and went to Paris where, in 1903, she made her debut with the Oriental dance. Her enormous success was for the greater part based on the fact that she danced in the nude. During her performances she wore a garment consisting of several veils which during the dances were drawn off, one by one.

Actually Mata Hari was the first woman who performed a strip-tease in public. The name of Mata Hari became a symbol certainly for the men who made their way with her, the money affairs with prominent persons and officers, her taste for men in uniform and the fact that just before the outbreak of the First World War

Espionage

On the 16th of February 1917 Mata Hari was arrested "under suspicion of espionage for attempting to collaborate with, and supplying information to the enemy". Her weakness for men in uniform had become her downfall. The petition for mercy was handed in by the Dutch Government but rejected. In the early morning of the 15th of October 1917, Mata Hari was executed by firing squad. She refused to be blindfolded.
Red Light District

Amsterdam is known for the liberal decision on making prostitution legal, hence the Red Light District. It was interesting visiting the Red Light District as it often depicted as something bad or to be looked down upon but upon seeing it myself, I saw it as an industry where women are able to profit off the male gaze and take control of who can and cannot see their bodies. I think that is empowering – we live in a patriarchal and egocentric society, so often the narrative is that men are to take control of a woman and her sexual identity but here the woman is able to choose. I think this is also why the rule of ‘no photos’ is heavily controlled, to avoid the predatorial male gaze and respect the workers privacy. Moreover, it was fascinating to see how many men were so infatuated by the red lights and blue lights [which identify transgender women].

RIJKSmuseum

The RIJKSmuseum was actually not one of my main places to visit when embarking on this trip [especially when I found out it was €20], but it intrigued other members of my group. However, I am glad that we went, as not only did I learn so much about the art and history of Amsterdam, but I also shocked due to the amount of female based paintings and figures that were in the museum. The Renaissance section was particularly interesting because it consisted of many matriarchal figures which seemed to be very empowering. I also found that there were a few pictures of women dressed in regal wear but were more androgynous than feminine which hadn’t seen before.
**Dam Square, Homomonument and Anne Frank Monument**

Although Dam Square is not exactly a landmark, it is filled with a multitude of historical monuments and tourist attractions; considering it is in the centre of Amsterdam. But I particularly wanted to go there as is known for also being the centre for radical change. When I say this I’m particularly referring to the Women’s March, which was held in Amsterdam on May 23rd. Unfortunately, this was a couple of weeks before our trip, but within the city centre there were still reminders of the event, with posters still posted on shop windows. Although the Women’s March is a worldwide event and celebrated in major cities, in Amsterdam the community really came together to zone in on the idea that female empowerment, inclusivity and equality should be on everyone’s minds. With the powerful slogan – “We did not come to play”.

Furthermore we stumbled up on the Homomonument. I had actually never heard of the monument before but once we were in the town centre there was a free tour guide who allowed us to listen in on his talk about the famous landmark. It is a three point pink triangle which represents the lives of all the LGBTQ+ people who have been persecuted for their sexuality by Nazis.

Unfortunately, due to the volumes of people, we were unable to enter the Anne Frank House but we were able to see her monument, which was a few steps away from the Homomonument. Although Anne was not a woman, she was a girl who has been inspirational to many. Demonstrating courage, determination and immense intelligence at such a young age, thus embodying female empowerment by showing strength and positivity.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, my stay in Amsterdam allowed me to comprehend the ways in which female empowerment and liberation has been sustained and cultivated in Amsterdam. I would like to think Amsterdam really stands for the f-word and I am glad I have been able to see and
explore this first hand. I think the knowledge I have gained can be transferable on my course in many gender theme modules and is ultimately priceless. I would definitely push people to go and explore the wonderful city of Amsterdam as it is truly beautiful and is a city which takes feminism into consideration.

I especially want to thank the University of Leicester for enabling me to have this experience!