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ലക്കം: 40

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## Julia Eileen Gillard and “*The Curious Question of Gender*”<sup>1</sup> in Australian Politics

T Amiya

While women’s equitable participation in public politics and ascension to leadership roles are globally acknowledged as necessary for achieving sustainable development goals, their representation remains disproportionately low. In contemporary Australia, despite women actively generating discourses advocating for their increased political presence, men continue to dominate the nation’s political public. This critical gap elicits several concerns: To what extent does gender influence political participation and leadership in Australia? What socio-political challenges entail this entrenched bias? What kind of gender preconceptions and stereotypes prevail? How far do they deter women from pursuing active politics? This study seeks to address these questions by investigating the complex relationship existing between political leadership and gender in contemporary Australia vis-à-vis the specific case of Julia Eileen Gillard, Australia’s first and only woman Prime Minister to date. To this end, the study critically analyses various narratives by and on Gillard, highlighting the nuanced interplay of gender and politics. It also examines Gillard’s responses to misogyny in Australian politics, her performance of feminist leadership, and its impact on her political career.

**Keywords:** gender, feminism, performance, stereotype, leadership

### Introduction

Julia Eileen Gillard was first elected to the Australian Parliament’s House of Representatives in 1998. Later, in 2006, she was chosen as Deputy Leader of the Opposition under the premiership

of Kevin Rudd. When the Labor Party won the general election in December 2007, Gillard emerged as Australia's first female Deputy Prime Minister. However, by mid-2010, Rudd's reputation declined in opinion polls, and growing discontent with him among the party ranks and files culminated in his resignation. Subsequently, Gillard was elected as Labor Party leader in an internal poll among Labor Party parliamentarians. Opinion polls at the time revealed huge backing for Gillard, notably among female voters. In order to further legitimise and bolster her claim, Gillard called for a general election in August 2010. However, despite her initial popularity, internal attacks from her own party and media hate campaigns effectively reduced her support base. As a result, the Labor and Liberal parties received the same number of seats in the 2010 election, neither receiving enough to form a government in their own capacity. Nonetheless, Gillard successfully negotiated a deal for support from the Greens and Independents and became the Prime Minister of a minority government and Australia's first woman Prime Minister.

Over the years, Gillard faced significant opposition from several distinct sources, including a hostile Abbott-led Liberal Party, the media crusade of sexism, and a coterie of resentful Rudd loyalists from within her party. As an inevitable consequence, her poll numbers fell, and anticipating electoral downfall in the impending election, the Labor Party sought a change in leadership again. In June 2013, Gillard was defeated in the internal ballot, and Kevin Rudd was re-elected as the party leader. Subsequently, Gillard resigned as the Prime Minister and announced her retirement from party politics. In September 2013, Kevin Rudd's Labor Party lost the general election, and Tony Abbott, as leader of the Liberal Party, was elected as Australia's 28<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister.

Several critical inquiries analysing Julia Gillard's accession to leadership, the power dynamics involved, and her resignation from public politics exist. The aim of this study is to acknowledge existing scholarship while contributing to it through a relatively novel reading of Gillard's performance of feminist leadership. To this end, the study comprehends the gendered nature of Australian politics by identifying factors that influence women's position in public politics. Secondly, it

analyses select media narratives on Julia Gillard to reanimate the discussion on gendered stereotypes and double binds deployed by the mainstream media to discredit her. Thirdly, the study theorises Gillard's performance of feminist leadership and submits it as an ineluctable outcome of long-standing sexism and misogyny in Australian politics.

### **Discourses of Exclusion: Women and Political Leadership in Australia**

Critical scholarship on gender and politics shows that politics worldwide is a male-dominated domain. "Male dominance has been legitimized in law and custom. Politics or the public life of the polity has been presumed to be a natural sphere for men while for women, to the extent they had a space or turf to call their own, the 'natural' sphere was presumed to be private" (Richter, 1990, p. 525). Although, in recent years, there has been a shift in the trend as more women stepped to the fore, increasingly inducing subtle advancements in the traditionally patriarchal political power system, the comparatively low proportion of female heads of government, coupled with the everyday challenges they face, underscore the enduring gender bias in the sector. The persistence of such biases, even in the highest realm of political power structure, highlights the complexity and tenacity of gender-based discrimination in politics.

Multiple, deep-seated factors contribute to shaping Australian politics as a domain largely controlled by men. Primarily, Australian society has been historically moulded by inherently masculine narratives. Among the most influential cultural myths that inform the national identity is the concept of mateship. Mateship, emerging in the nineteenth century, has been a central theme in the political and cultural discourses that promoted a positive image of organised, typically male working-class labour. Similarly, there are other character archetypes, such as Larrikin, a mischievous yet benevolent young man, and Ocker, embodying a rough uncultivated Australian with no regard for social norms. While the male Larrikin is a common archetype in the narratives of late-colonial Australia, his female counterpart is notably rarer. Moreover, despite their marginal presence, these female figures did not receive due emphasis in national discourses. "Rather than

presenting us with images of female larrikins, many commentators tell us that the closest equivalent to the male larrikin was the prostitute, or that adolescent girls only participated in the larrikin subculture as ‘donahs’ (meaning ‘moll’ or ‘girlfriend’)” (Bellanta, 2010, p. 499). Another archetype is that of the Australian Bushman—the man of the nation—who is ferociously competent, self-sufficient, yet likeable. Akin to the concept of mateship that produces, reproduces, and lauds working-class masculine traits, popular and nationalist discourses surrounding Larrikin, Ocker, and Bushman also exclude women.

These images shaped and structured Australian social and economic interactions and influenced the nation’s political culture. Additionally, the constant repetition of such narratives in political and popular discourses has contributed to an essentially masculine portrayal of Australian identity. “The concept of Australia as a nation has been built upon a series of exclusions, the maintenance of which are necessary prerequisites for the preservation of national identity in lieu of a national conversation on the role of women within the state” (Holland & Wright, 2017, p. 601). The ascendancy of a woman politician—already positioned as an enigmatic entity—thus troubles these entrenched discourses, which in turn render her as the ‘other’ within this framework.

Another factor impacting women’s political leadership positions in Australia is the nature of its national government. Australia follows the Westminster Parliamentary system, dominated by men for centuries and “characterized by long irregular working hours and a highly combative debating style” (Appleby, 2015, p. 286). Talbot (2010) observes that such practices have evolved “naturalised” for masculinist communities as “simply professional practices” (p. 196). It is not then surprising that “Australia had the longest gap of any country (41 years) between women’s right to stand for the national parliament and the first election of women” (Sawer, 2013, p. 106).

Any discussion of the premiership of Julia Gillard must be contextualised within this framework of cultural and political exclusions. Since the female political leader in Australia, owing to the factors delineated above, is often unintelligible, her presence in high political

office is unusual and her performance of leadership is abnormal. In an interview on BBC Radio, Gillard says, “There were some people in the media who would not refer to me as Prime Minister.... They were deeply uncomfortable at dealing with a woman in a leadership position” (*Woman’s Hour*, 2014, 3:38). Furthermore, Gillard (2019) writes,

I did deal with male journalists who seemed unable to refer to me as Prime Minister. I did have a male journalist yell at me while I was conducting a press conference in the Blue Room and looking down the barrel of the camera which was above the seated heads of journalists, ‘What are you looking there for, we are down here!’ (p. 101)

As Holland and Wright (2017) argue, “The difficulty of being a woman leader, we suggest, is particularly acute in Australia, due to the interweaving of gender expectations with foundational and exclusionary national identity narratives” (p. 594). The complex dynamics of Gillard’s political engagements and her perceived unintelligibility in the domain thus could not be limited solely to exclusionary narratives. The paper now proceeds to briefly elaborate on Gillard’s predicament by teasing out the paradoxes she navigated, elucidating the underlying causes of the misogynistic media attacks and the gendered stereotypes that marked her period in office.

### **Navigating the Paradox: Julia Gillard, Media and the Double Bind**

To be a woman leader is to navigate through disparate and conflicting gender norms. The phrase ‘gender double bind in politics’ encapsulates this process, where women are compelled to meet contradictory gender expectations to garner public political acceptance. She must strike a balance between several oxymoronic combinations, including ambition and timidity, and authority and subservience. An inability to maintain this delicate equilibrium often culminates in adverse electoral and political consequences. Hall and Donaghue (2012) argue that women in politics face a double bind “in which women’s exhibition of characteristics traditionally understood as required for successful political leadership, such as assertiveness, authority, and ambition, can

come at substantial cost to their likeability and thus their popularity and electoral success” (p. 633).

Julia Gillard, as she became the Prime Minister of Australia, was an exception to almost all prevailing cultural expectations. Her non-normative lifestyle choices marked her deviance from the cultural norms that characterised leadership in Australia’s hegemonic society. When Gillard came to power in June 2010, she did not appear to conform to the usual expectations for an Australian Prime Minister: she is a woman, unmarried, childless, and a redhead (Hall & Donaghue, 2012). It was an aberration that rendered her unintelligible as she deviated from “normative acts of gender...in contemporary culture” (Butler, 1989, p. 17). Gillard’s unintelligibility as a leader, owing primarily to her non-conformist styles and her foray into the patriarchal domain of public politics, culminated in her assuming the nation’s highest authority by toppling a man, the incumbent Kevin Rudd—an unconventional way to become a leader and an explicit deviation from political stereotypes. Gillard’s problematic position in opposition to the culturally established gender norms thus rendered her presence as disrupting the social paradigms of stability of the political system in distinct ways. This was augmented by the media portrayal of her as delegitimised, casting her further into the mould of an unlikable figure.

The media is critical to exercising power in Australia as anywhere else in the contemporary world. The daily news material they broadcast influences policy debates, discussions, and even the political fortunes of governments. “Moreover, the news media are, for the great majority of Australians who neither belong to political parties nor actively engage in political activity, the principal window to the world of politics” (Ward, 2013, p. 401).

Australian media has been central in bolstering the double bind that Julia Gillard confronted. They unceasingly assessed and gauged her leadership performance, propagated discourses that reinforced gendered frameworks, and held her liable not just for her role as the leader but also for her gender. For instance, the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s reporting on the 2011 flood and cyclone in Queensland slammed her for not being emotional enough at the press



conference. The report that appeared with the title “Bligh a white light beside the cool, coiffed Gillard” focused not on her intervention in the crisis as the nation’s head, but on her departure from the culturally coded character of her gender:

Yesterday as the floodwaters threatened her state capital, Bligh fronted the media in a utilitarian white shirt, hair looking like she had been working all night. ... Beside her, Ms. Gillard stood perfectly coiffed in a dark suit, nodding. For women politicians, it is always a fine balance between showing emotion and being perceived as too emotional. Gillard has perhaps erred towards being too cool. (Davies, 2011)

The intersection of gender double bind and othering engenders the perpetuation of distorted and negative gender stereotypes. Walter Lippmann (1998), in his famous *Public Opinion*, writes, “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (p. 81). Thus, stereotypes are the culturally constructed and established trite representations that reduce individuals and situations to their most basic generalisations. Within the context of Australian politics, the rise of such stereotypes could be an attempt to render the enigmatic entity—the female politician—comprehensible. Nonetheless, these stereotypes are gender-specific and carry an intrinsic risk of marginalizing her. According to Gillard (2019), “As a woman wielding power, with all the complexities of modern politics, I was never going to be portrayed as a good woman. So I must be the bad woman, a scheming shrew, a heartless harridan or a lying bitch” (p. 107). She adds how Christopher Pyne, a liberal party politician, compared her to female villains, thereby deliberately relegating her to the bad woman stereotypes. Gillard (2019) quotes Pyne thus:

What we are seeing at the moment in Australia is a Prime Minister who has gone from being the hunter to the hunted. She started as Lady Macbeth three years ago, and this week we see her in the role of Madame Defarge, who thought she was going to an execution and it turned out to be her own. (p. 106)

Instances like the public display of ‘ditch the witch’ placards in the 2011 rally against the imposition of the carbon tax and Larry Pickering’s offensive portrayal of Julia Gillard as a naked woman with a dildo around her waist troubling the ‘hapless’ men around her expose the sexism inherent in Australia’s hegemonic political landscape. Associating phallus with Gillard has in it a negative implication that casts her as an ambitious woman transgressing gender norms and, hence, simultaneously an outcast and a societal irritant. These bad-woman imageries and pornographic cartoons strategically weaved around her within the Parliament and in the media with the deliberate intention to demean her have not just put Gillard under the sexualised and misogynist gaze but also accelerated her political downfall. The study progresses to critically examine Julia Gillard’s performance of feminist leadership in politics, using Sara Ahmed’s concept of feminist snapping as the theoretical framework.

### **Performing Feminist Leadership: Julia Gillard as a Killjoy**

Despite her personal alignment with feminist principles all her life—as revealed in her autobiography—for most of her tenure, Gillard treated gender as inconsequential to her leadership performance. Jasmin Sorrentino and Martha Augoustinos (2016) highlight this by positing how Gillard strategically downplayed gender as insignificant to her position as the Prime Minister. For the first two years of her leadership, Gillard did not focus explicitly on gender issues, “perhaps in fear of being cast as a victim and therefore too weak to govern” (Appleby, 2015, p. 160).

Her attempts at neutralising gender identity in her leadership performance, however, soon reached a breaking point. In October 2012, she addressed the Australian Parliament with a speech—popularly known as “the misogyny speech”—that has since gained notoriety for its candid uncovering and naming of the systemic patriarchy within Australian politics. Through the speech, Gillard’s articulation of entrenched sexism in governance transcended the limits of her political position as the Prime Minister, relocating herself as a gendered political subject—a *woman politician*—who battles sexism

daily. This, the study posits, marks a radical departure from her earlier identification as *a politician who is a woman*.

The misogyny speech not only rendered Gillard a feminist but also redefined her subject position as a killjoy who *snaps*. When viewed through a feminist lens, snapping is a political act whereby the subject, unable to endure the sexism, breaks. It is “a moment when the pressure has built up and tipped over, can be the basis of feminist revolt, a revolt against what women are asked to put up with” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 210). Gillard, in her speech, lambasts,

I was also very offended on behalf of the women of Australia when in the course of this carbon pricing campaign, the Leader of the Opposition said ‘What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing...’ Thank you for that painting of women’s roles in modern Australia...And then, of course, I was offended too by the sexism, by the misogyny of the Leader of the Opposition catcalling across this table at me as I sit here as Prime Minister, ‘If the Prime Minister wants to, politically speaking, make an honest woman of herself...’, something that would never have been said to any man sitting in this chair. I was offended when the Leader of the Opposition went outside in front of Parliament and stood next to a sign that said “Ditch the witch.” (Guardian News, 2020, 2:59- 3:55)

The moment of saturation marks a rupture, instigating a shift in discourse. Ahmed (2017) characterises it as a critical juncture when a woman “can’t take it anymore; when she just can’t take it anymore. Speaking sharply, speaking with irritation. Maybe we can hear her irritation; a voice that rises, a voice that sharpens. A voice can lose its smoothness; becoming rougher, more brittle” (p. 90). The speech, pregnant with feminist hopes, questioned the culturally embedded misogyny and articulated the feminist rage that unapologetically refused all kinds of gendered subordination. Here, it is also imperative to note that Gillard’s performance of feminist leadership coincided with the emergence of a new wave of gender-sensitive campaigns in Australia. Appleby (2015) observes that the “murderous rage” articulated by Gillard in the face of sexism and misogyny “served as a

form of strategic essentialism, and reverberated with the various forms of everyday discrimination experienced by many women in contemporary Australia” (p. 152).

The Australian media, however, levied severe accusations against Gillard’s speech, implying that she was ‘playing the gender card,’ which was unbecoming of her high office. Such reports arguably rendered Gillard contentious and unintelligible rather than someone raising a legitimate concern. Ahmed (2010) writes,

The killjoy could also be considered through the figure of the whistleblower: in exposing the misconduct of an organization, the one who blows the whistle is often perceived as causing a problem rather than exposing a problem. To blow the whistle is an act of institutional disloyalty: suggesting that the very demand for loyalty is a demand that subjects “agree” to cover over misconduct, for which they will get something in return. (p. 269)

Ahmed (2017) reiterates her idea in *Living a Feminist Life*: “When you name something as sexist or as racist you are making that thing more tangible so that it can be more easily communicated to others. But for those who do not have a sense of the racism or sexism you are talking about, to bring them up is to bring them into existence” (p. 36). Within a social fabric defined by exclusions, the relentless vilification campaign directed at Gillard by the media could be seen as an apparent reaction spurred by its inherent misogyny. However, acquiescence to the system by remaining silent does not constitute a sustainable solution to the issue. As Gillard (2019) writes about the speech in her autobiography,

I was accused of playing the gender card, of playing the victim... calling the sexism out is not playing the victim. I have done it and I know how it makes me feel. Strong. I am nobody’s victim. It is the only strategy that will enable change. What is the alternative? Staying silent? So the sexism is never named, never addressed, nothing ever changes? (p. 112).

Gillard’s performance of feminist leadership is conspicuous throughout her later public engagements. Her autobiography, *My Story*, is a nuanced and critical recounting of her life from a feminist

perspective, where she reiterates the necessity of “resilience” in women in politics:

Throughout my prime ministership, people would ask me when I met them, ‘How do you do it?’ They would search my face for clues, wanting to know why I wasn’t at home hiding, sobbing, screaming... but at the heart of the answer is resilience—a modern buzzword, yet a term that came to encapsulate so much about my life. (p. 2)

Ahmed (2017) talks about how resilience is a “technology of will,” something that is “well suited to governance” and that “encourage(s) bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure” (p. 189). Gillard’s idea of resilience, however, is not to be the passive receptors of misogyny; rather it is the determination not to allow any more sexism and misogyny. It is the snapping that gave way to strengthen the feminist identity that made her assert, “I was not going to let anyone conclude that a woman could not take it. I was not going to give any bastard the satisfaction. I was going to be resilient one more time” (Gillard, 2019, p. 1).

Gillard’s feminist image while in office, however, had a detrimental impact on her political career. Moreover, as a woman leader in Australia, Gillard failed to forge a political strategy or manipulate traditional stereotypes through which she could disarm her opponents. Thus, while her unconventional life choices coupled with her subversive presence in politics rendered her unintelligible, it was her outright endorsement and performance of feminism that paved her way out of politics. It is also interesting to note that *My Story* (2019) and Gillard’s other feminist narratives, including *Women and Leadership: Real Lives, Real Lessons* (2020), *Not Now, Not Ever* (2022), were published *after* her resignation from public politics.

## Conclusion

The question of gender in Australian politics is complex. Owing to the national discourses and political systems that exclude women, women politicians in Australia often find themselves in positions outside the realm of common intelligence. Julia Gillard, Australia’s first woman Prime Minister known for her unconventional life choices, bore the

brunt of the resultant unintelligibility and unlikeability. In essence, Gillard, as a woman politician, particularly as one who defies societal expectations, doubly transgressed the bounds of the socio-cultural notations in Australia.

Though Gillard's emergence as the nation's Prime Minister was initially seen as a sign and catalyst of social transformation, the subsequent public and political reactions to her leadership fell short of expectations. The optimism that her premiership would result in the redistribution of political clout was soon replaced by escalating discontentment. While several distinct factors contributed to this, gender played a major role.

Gillard faced huge public innuendo as a woman who challenged implicit socio-cultural norms. Negative images and gender stereotypes were woven to corner her from both within the Parliament and outside, with the media donning the garb of a mediator to facilitate the process. Their focus shifted from her performance as the political head to her performance as a *woman leader*, necessitating her to navigate paradoxical gender demands—an act at which she was deemed unsuccessful. Moreover, her deviation from the Australian gendered expectations, her unorthodox rise to power, and her political influence cast her as someone who never complies.

Nonetheless, it was the misogyny speech that established her as a feminist killjoy. Through the speech, Gillard redefined her subject position, establishing herself as one of the global feminist icons. However, the incident facilitated a waning of her political popularity, culminating in her resignation. Highlighting this implicit challenge of feminist political leadership are Gillard's autobiography and other feminist narratives published after her retirement, which stand as testaments to the impossibility of women pursuing political leadership and feminism at once, not just in Australia but across the globe.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> “The Curious Question of Gender” is the title of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter (p. 97) in Julia Gillard's autobiography *My Story*, where she offers a trenchant critique of the enduring sexism in contemporary Australia.

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