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POSTFEMINISM

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> Currently, feminism seems to be a term without any clear significance. The 'anything goes' approach to the definition of the word has rendered it practically meaningless.
>
> (bell **hooks,** *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984))

'Postfeminism' is a term that is very much in vogue these days. In the context of popular culture it's the **Spice Girls, Madonna** and the *Girlie Show:* women dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitudes. Meanwhile, those who wish to maintain an allegiance to more traditional forms of feminism circle around the neologism warily, unable to decide whether it represents a con trick engineered by the media or a valid movement. In books such as Tania **Modleski**'s *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (1991) and Imelda Whelehan's *Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-feminism'* (1995) the term is barricaded between inverted commas, thus keeping both author and reader at a properly sceptical distance.

Much of this distrust is to do with the fact that, outside of its infinitely flexible **media** definition, exactly what postfeminism constitutes—even whether it exists at all as a valid phenomenon—is a matter for frequently impassioned debate. As Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter put it in *The Illusions of 'Post-feminism'* (1995), 'post-feminism has never been defined. It remains the product of assumption.' It is a characteristic postfeminism shares with its semantic relative, **postmodernism,** which has been similarly described as 'an amorphous thing'.

Indeed, even the most cursory reading of texts tagged with the 'postfeminist' label reveals that there is little agreement among those with whom it is popularly associated as to a central canon or agenda. Very generally speaking, however, postfeminist debate tends to crystallise around issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility. Because it is critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives, it is inclined to be unwilling to condemn **pornography** and to be sceptical of such phenomena as date-**rape:** because it is skewed in favour of liberal humanism, it embraces a flexible **ideology** which can be adapted to suit individual needs and desires. Finally, because it tends to be implicitly **heterosexist** in orientation, postfeminism commonly seeks to develop an agenda which can find a place for men, as lovers, husbands and fathers as well as friends.

The term 'postfeminism' itself originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated **feminist** movement. This is the view which has reached the ninth edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary,* where 'postfeminism' is defined as 'of or relating to the ideas, attitudes, etc., which ignore or

reject feminist ideas of the 1960s and subsequent decades'. However, those to whom the postfeminist label is most often attached by the media do not generally regard themselves as part of any kind of anti-feminist movement, as Justine Picardie's 1996 article for the *Independent on Sunday* on a TV show called *Pyjama Party* testifies:

> There has been much feverish talk in the press about these programmes …do they represent the snarling face of the postfeminist babe—'the new ladette'—or is this just a pre-feminist excuse for titillating the viewers with a great deal of cleavage? The girls on their way to *Pyjama Party*…couldn't care less about this debate ('postfeminist what?' says one, while her friends look equally blank: 'never heard of it!').

The source of such confusion, for postfeminism as much as for postmodernism, is at least partially due to the semantic uncertainty generated by the prefix. Turning again to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary,* 'post' is defined as 'after in time or order', but not as denoting rejection. Yet many feminists argue strongly that postfeminism constitutes precisely that—a betrayal of a history of feminist struggle, and rejection of all it has gained. Tania Modleski's dismissal of postfeminist texts as 'texts that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect delivering us back to a prefeminist world' is typical of such attacks.

The assertiveness of Modleski's rhetoric here makes the issue appear beyond dispute, but it is possible to argue that the prefix 'post' does not necessarily always direct us back the way we've come. Instead, its trajectory is bewilderingly uncertain, since while it can certainly be interpreted as suggestive of a relapse *back* to a former set of ideological beliefs, it can also be read as indicating the *continuation* of the originating term's aims and ideologies, albeit on a different level. This more positive interpretation is certainly, however, complicated in postfeminism's case, given that it lacks both an agreed-upon set of ideological assumptions and any prominent figureheads. This latter statement may seem rather odd, since postfeminism abounds in 'personalities'—glamorous Naomi **Wolf;** the swaggering self-publicist Camille **Paglia;** Rene **Denfeld,** the streetwise amateur boxer. It is telling, however, that most—if not all—of the women who are widely identified with postfeminism have not claimed the term for themselves, but had it applied to them by others; nor does a great deal of solidarity exist between them as a group.

POSTFEMINISM AND THE BACKLASH

The notion that postfeminism, to paraphrase Modleski's words quoted above, 'delivers us back' to some kind of prefeminist state is an argument frequently deployed by its critics. The most influential definition of postfeminism through reference to a rhetoric of relapse is Susan **Faludi**'s, who in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991) portrays postfeminism as a devastating reaction against the ground gained by **second wave** feminism.

> Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that 'postfeminism' was the new story—complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement.

For Faludi, postfeminism *is* the **backlash,** and its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it. In a society which largely defines itself through media-inspired images, women are easily persuaded that feminism is unfashionable, *passé,* and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. 'We're all "post-feminist" now, they assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care.'

While most critics date the inception of postfeminism from about the mid-1980s onwards, Faludi claims that 'postfeminist' sentiments appeared much earlier, 'not in the 1980s media, but in the 1920s press'. In her identification of it as merely the most recent label for a much older phenomenon—a knee-jerk reaction on the part of the mainstream in defence of the *status quo*—Faludi attempts to unmask postfeminism as a wolf in (albeit trendy) sheep's clothing.

The notion of backlash can, however, operate in the opposite direction. It's interesting to note that some of the women predominantly identified with postfeminism have themselves employed the backlash argument in attacks on second wave feminism. In *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1993) Katie **Roiphe** turns the discourse of backlash upon its originators, claiming that

> feminists are closer to their backlash than they like to think. The image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims…. This image of a delicate woman bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal my mother and the other women of her generation fought so hard to get away from. They didn't like her passivity, her wide-eyed innocence. They didn't like the fact that she was perpetually offended by sexual innuendo. They didn't like her excessive need for protection. She represented personal, social, and psychological possibilities collapsed, and they worked and marched, shouted and wrote, to make her irrelevant for their daughters. But here she is again, with her pure intentions and her wide eyes. Only this time it is feminists themselves who are breathing new life into her.

Roiphe's text focuses on the phenomenon of sexual harassment on American campuses, and argues that feminist initiatives such as Take Back the Night are self-defeating; 'intended to celebrate and bolster women's strength, it seems instead to celebrate their vulnerability'.

That second wave feminism has fostered an inappropriate image of female victimisation is also the central claim of Rene Denfeld's *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995). Although the scope of Denfeld's

argument is wider than Roiphe's, she nonetheless echoes Roiphe's claim that feminism has overrun the academy. In the process, it has become totalitarian and inflexible in its upholding of views that are reminiscent of those of an earlier age. And whereas Roiphe regards feminism as having lapsed into a view of women more appropriate to the 1950s, Denfeld looks even further back:

> In the name of feminism, these extremists have embarked on a moral and spiritual crusade that would take us back to a time worse than our mother's day—back to the nineteenth-century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness. Through a combination of influential voices and unquestioned causes, current feminism would create the very same morally pure yet helplessly martyred role that women suffered from a century ago.

For Denfeld, the term 'feminism' has come to stand for an extremist cabal which alienates a younger generation of women in its insistence on pursuing an agenda based on an unswerving belief in female victimisation at the hands of an all-powerful **patriarchal** system, open hostility to heterosexual practices, and the embracing of New Age **goddess**-worship. In this way—in particular its valorisation of the figure of the female victim—feminism is becoming a spent force, since it has lost all credibility in the eyes of those whose real social and political inequality still needs to be addressed:

> While women move ahead in their lives—with the tenets of equality entrenched firmly in their hearts—the women's movement itself has stalled. Trapped in a stagnant, alienating ideology, the only thing most of the feminist movement is heading toward is complete irrelevance.

Both Roiphe's and Denfeld's analyses, however, encapsulate many of the problems raised by the postfeminist phenomenon. Caught up in the necessity to define exactly what it is they're reacting against, both books adopt a dangerously simplistic attitude towards feminism, portraying it as a didactic and monolithic structure bent only on stifling dissent. Denfeld's argument is particularly problematic in this respect, since her claim that second wave feminism has led to a replication of Victorian notions of femininity involves her in the dismissal of an entire history of female struggle from the first wave onwards. As Deborah L.Seigel has maintained in her essay 'Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a "Postfeminist" Moment', such sweeping critiques do more harm than good, for although

> [d]issenting feminist voices participate in a much-needed intergenerational conversation at the very moment in which feminist discourses within and outside the academy have taken a self-reflexive turn…the authors' desires for mastery overwrite any attempt to keep a dialogue moving…[in] their incorporation of a rhetoric of possession, in their masterful articulation of "good" feminism, and in their righteous condemnation of "bad" feminism. (in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer

> Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997))

Implicit in Seigel's statement is the fact that neither Roiphe nor Denfeld reject feminism altogether: indeed, both are extremely careful to display their feminist credentials. Denfeld defines herself as an 'equity feminist' who believes that 'women should have the same opportunities and rights as men', while Roiphe claims that feminism for her is 'something assumed, something deep in my foundations'. However, this merely serves to complicate the issue, since it locks feminists and postfeminists in dialectical opposition, with both parties attempting to lay claim to some kind of 'pure' or 'correct' version of feminism.

In her essay Seigel singles out one other writer for criticism on this score: Naomi Wolf. Wolf has become one of the most identifiable faces of postfeminism, and for many of its detractors represents the embodiment of a bias within postfeminism towards the young, white, liberal and media-attractive. Although she first came to public attention with *The Beauty Myth* (1990), which was basically a reiteration of the standard feminist argument that women were coerced by society into pursuing an unattainable aesthetic ideal of 'femininity', it was *Fire With Fire* (1993) which confirmed her identification with the postfeminist phenomenon.

In *Fire With Fire,* Wolf argues that feminism has for the most part failed to recognise, much less capitalise on, its gains. In portraying the late 1980s as a period in which fewer and fewer women were willing to identify themselves as 'feminist', and in her attribution of much of this failure to the backlash phenomenon, Wolf recalls the arguments of Faludi, Roiphe and Denfeld. But whereas Roiphe and Denfeld, to some extent at least, use backlash discourse in their own attacks on the feminist movement, thus defining it as an issue which sets women against women, Wolf can be aligned with Faludi in her viewing of the backlash as primarily a defensive manoeuvre on the part of the male-dominated establishment. If it can be seen as 'an eminently rational, if intolerable reaction to a massive and real threat', the backlash becomes a signifier of just how far the feminist movement has come.

Although not as openly hostile as either Denfeld or Roiphe, Wolf is certainly critical of feminism in this book. Rather than engaging in personal attacks on individuals, she lays much of the responsibility for feminism's image problem at the door of the popular media, who have mounted a campaign of 'lies, distortion and caricature' against the movement. Nevertheless, she doesn't absolve feminism of all responsibility, claiming that it is also 'bad habits in the movement itself' which have hindered its capability to counteract the damaging media stereo-types which many women are finding so alienating. The development of an 'ideological hardline' amongst some sections of feminism means, says Wolf, that

> the *definition of feminism* has become ideologically overloaded. Instead of offering a mighty Yes to all women's individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined *in the popular imagination* as a massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements [my italics],

The above quotation is a telling summary of Wolf's agenda, for in its drawing of a distinction between feminism as an actual phenomenon and a 'definition' of feminism as it exists 'in the popular imagination', she exhibits a rather more subtle and self-conscious approach than that adopted by some of her postfeminist peers. It is one that enables her to at least partially evade the stark opposition between 'good' and 'bad' feminism, as according to her version of the argument, 'bad' feminism does not really exist in the sense that it is not an ideology being promoted by any particular individual or group. Instead, it is a media-orchestrated misunderstanding which women must surmount in order to embrace 'power feminism', the aims of which are equality, economic empowerment, and the confidence to act both collectively and individually to achieve such goals.

One of the most immediately attractive, yet also deeply problematic, aspects of *Fire With Fire* is how Wolf makes the attainment of such an objective appear a relatively simple matter. Her entire argument rests on the assumption that power is there for the taking—but is it, can it ever be, as easy as that? If one is a white, middle-class, educated and solvent American, perhaps; but what if you are black, or poor, or subject to an oppressive political, military or religious regime? These are things that Wolf tends not to consider, an omission which highlights the problems encountered when attempting to define postfeminism. While writers such as Roiphe and Denfeld mull over the mistakes of the past, Wolf represents an alternative approach, imagining a future which, though appealing, is also impossibly **utopian**. We have, therefore, arrived back at the tautology at the heart of postfeminism identified at the beginning of this chapter; namely that it is a phenomenon held in suspension between the opposing definitions indicative in its use of the prefix. Unsure as to whether to go forward or back, it remains a paper-bound ideology, more theoretical than actual.

POSTFEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM

In fact, to accept the inherently theoretical nature of the postfeminist project perhaps offers the most convincing way in which the term can be used. In this context, postfeminism becomes a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalising patterns of thought, and thus capable of being aligned with **postmodernism, poststructuralism** and **postcolonialism**.

One example of this approach is provided by Ann Brooks in *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (1997). She argues that second wave feminism bases its claims on an appeal to 'the liberal humanism of enlightened modernity': for example, it assumes that a simple reversal of the hierarchical dualism of 'man/woman' will effect the liberation of the female half of the equation. A feminist approach indebted to postmodernist thought, however, will tend to question the ideological process by which 'man' and 'woman' are placed in separate, oppositional, categories, and may, indeed, seek to destabilise the notion of the autonomous subject (gendered or otherwise) altogether, thus rendering the development of any kind of overarching metatheory impossible.

According to Brooks, therefore, postfeminism replaces dualism with diversity, consensus with variety, and thus 'establish[es] a dynamic and vigorous area of

intellectual debate, shaping the issues and intellectual climate that has characterised the move from modernity to postmodernity in the contemporary world'. Brooks's analysis does not mention Wolf, Roiphe, or any of the other women popularly defined as postfeminists within the media. Instead, she appropriates theorists such as Julia **Kristeva,** Hélène **Cixous,** Laura **Mulvey** and Judith **Butler** for postfeminism, claiming that such writers 'have assisted feminist debates by providing a conceptual repertoire centred on "deconstruction", **"difference"** and **"identity"**.'

Interesting though Brooks's argument is, however, certain aspects of it are problematic, since in transforming postfeminism into another theoretical movement, she runs the risk of removing it from the 'real' world of political agency and social activism. Although she may maintain that postfeminism 'facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms', it remains difficult to see how these theoretical debates can be translated into concrete action. For some, indeed, her approach may bear out the claims of some of the popular postfeminists that the development of feminism as an academic discipline has limited its appeal outside the universities. Rene Denfeld, for example, accuses academic feminists of having 'climbed out on a limb of academic theory that is all but inaccessible to the uninitiated', while Naomi Wolf complains that it has adopted 'an exclusive and elaborate professional jargon' which amounts to no more than 'pig-Latin'.

POSTFEMINISM OR THIRD WAVE?

In 1970 Germaine **Greer** published *The Female Eunuch,* which become one of the founding texts of second wave feminism: 1999 has seen the publication of its sequel, *The Whole Woman,* a book which places Greer once again at centre stage in the feminist debate. In her introduction, Greer makes it quite clear she has written this book as a reaction against postfeminist ideology: 'The future is female, we are told. Feminism has served its purpose and should now eff off. Feminism was long hair, dungarees and dangling earrings; postfeminism was business suits, big hair and lipstick; post-postfeminism was ostentatious sluttishness and disorderly behaviour.' As Greer defines it, postfeminism is little more than a market-led phenomenon, for 'the most powerful entities on earth are not governments, but the multi-national corporations that see women as their territory'. Its assurance to women that they can 'have it all'—a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life—actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, **cosmetic surgery, fashion,** and convenience foods. Greer also argues that the adoption of a postfeminist stance is a luxury in which the affluent western world can indulge only by ignoring the possibility that the exercising of one person's freedom may be directly linked to another's **oppression**. In such a situation, she asks, how can a woman believe that she has passed beyond feminism?

> If you believe, as I do, that to be a feminist is to understand that before you are of any race, nationality, religion, party or family, you are a woman, then the collapse in the prestige and economic power of the

> majority of women in the world as a direct consequence of western hegemony must concern you.

Whether one agrees with Greer or not—and her love of inflammatory rhetoric should not be forgotten—the publication of this book makes clear that the debate concering the future of feminism is not over. Second wave feminism isn't dead, and a triumphant postfeminist world is still far from being imaginable, let alone a reality. While it is certainly true that feminism, like all other ideologies, must adapt to respond to the exigencies of a changing world—and any failure to address younger women must certainly be addressed—the postfeminist phenomenon, which was always primarily a media-led movement anyway, has reached an impasse out of which a coherent solution cannot be developed.

But perhaps there is another way for feminism to accommodate itself to changing times. Increasingly, feminists in their twenties and thirties are distancing themselves from the problematic politics of postfeminism by describing themselves as participating in a 'third wave'; a term in which the twin imperatives of continuity and change are neatly entwined. A number of third wave women's groups have sprung up in the US, including the Women's Action Coalition and Third Wave (founded by Rebecca Walker, daughter of the novelist Alice **Walker**). The editors of *Third Wave Agenda,* Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, maintain that the primary difference between third wave and second wave feminism is that third wave feminists feel at ease with contradiction. Because they have been brought up within competing feminist structures, they accept pluralism as a given.

> We know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something I participate in, and that what oppresses me may be something you participate in. Even as different strands of feminism and activism sometimes directly contradict each other, they are all part of our third wave lives, our thinking, and our praxes: we are products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism, beasts of such a hybrid kind that perhaps we need a different name altogether.

Heywood and Drake make absolutely clear, however, that that 'different name' will not be postfeminism, which is something third wave feminists define as fundamentally conservative and reductive in its thought.

At the beginning of this chapter I traced postfeminism back to its origins in the eighties media, and have argued that it is through the media that it has, to a great extent, maintained its cultural presence. Intriguingly, the term 'third wave' was born at about the same time, but found its way to public notice by a rather different route. Heywood and Drake identify its moment of origin in 'critiques of the white women's movement that were initiated by women of color, as well from the many instances of coalition work undertaken by U.S. **third world** feminists'. It is this, they say, which has led to the third wave's innate acceptance of hybridity, its understanding that no account of oppression is true for all women in all situations all of the time. Moreover, its links with political activism should ensure that the third wave is more than just a theory, but an approach that

will actively work against the social injustices which still form part of the everyday experience of many women.

It's no coincidence that one of the women predominantly identified with a feminist 'third wave' is the black theorist and writer bell hooks, whose work has persistently challenged white bourgeois women's unthinking assumption of an oppressed subject position. As early as 1984, hooks was arguing against a homogenised feminism which was seen 'as a lifestyle choice rather than a political commitment'—a statement which could be seen as a rather prescient description of popular postfeminism. Instead, she proposes a position from which feminism is 'advocated' rather than assumed.

> A phrase like 'I advocate' does not imply the kind of absolutism that is suggested by 'I am'…. It implies that a choice has been made, that commitment to feminism is an act of will. It does not suggest that by committing oneself to feminism, the possibility of supporting other political movements is negated.

It is this combination of commitment with flexibility which is now being claimed by the third wave.

CONCLUSION

In *Faces of Feminism* (1998) Sheila Tobias states that 'If feminism is going to survive the coming decades it has to be different.' The question is, what form, exactly, will this difference take? I don't think it is difficult to see the attractiveness of popular postfeminism. Its rejection of theoretical language ensures that it remains widely accessible, and its repudiation of victim status seeks to endow a sense of empowerment upon its readers. Nor do I think postfeminists are wholly misguided in focusing attention upon what feminism has already gained for women. But it's also easy to be too optimistic and to take one's own privileged position as representative, which can lead to the conclusion that the time for feminism is past, and that those who still cling to activist principles are deluded and fanatical.

Of course, this—or any—attempt to differentiate between third wave feminism and postfeminism may be achieving nothing more than a little juggling with semantics. Some will undoubtedly argue that, whatever the third wavers say, they're no more than a hipper, slicker branch of postfeminism. I would claim, however, that embracing the idea of a third wave may solve at least some of these problems this chapter has raised in connection with the postfeminist phenomenon. Mimicking the nomenclature of its predecessors, third wave feminism acknowledges that it stands on the shoulders of other, earlier, feminist movements, and so avoids the defensive relationship adopted by Roiphe, Denfeld and others. In tracing its origins back to the activism of the US immigrant community, it roots itself in a process of social and political endeavour that doesn't begin and end with the white middle classes, the point at which much of Wolf's analysis founders. Moreover, the third wave is not hostile to theory: on the contrary, it is clearly informed by such arguments as Gayatri **Spivak**'s notion of **subalternity,** as well as by the critiques of **gender** identity offered by Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous and others. Its

desire to deconstruct **essentialist** assumptions concerning race and gender could therefore be considered as constituting an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

It may be, therefore, that third wave feminism is capable, as postfeminism is not, of describing a position from which past feminisms can be both celebrated and critiqued, and new strategies evolved. The state of economic, political and technological flux which characterises modernity presents opportunities and dangers for women which the feminists of the first and second wave could not have imagined. But whatever we call it, and whatever form it takes, it is essential that women continue to advance their cause into the next millennium. To refer back to the words of bell hooks quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the word 'feminism' must not become meaningless.