The Representation of Women in Postfeminist Discourse and its Link to Empowerment

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‘Postfeminism’, which developed in the late twentieth century, is a concept which is celebrated by some and disliked by others (Genz and Brabon 2009: 1). It is a term used to refer to the cultural climate as well as young women since 1982 (Showden 2009: 168). In the 1980s, the media started labeling teenage girls and women in their twenties as the ‘postfeminist’ generation (Aronson 2003: 904). Postfeminism emerged in a number of academic, political and cultural contexts, from feminist analysis to media and popular journalism, neo-liberal discourse and postmodern theories (Genz and Brabon 2009: 1). The term postfeminism is sometimes used synonymously with terms and phrases such as backlash, new feminism, Girl Power, do-me feminism and third wave feminism (ibid). Postfeminist discourse views women as autonomous, empowered agents but such claims have been challenged by various scholars. According to Kumar and Varghese, empowerment implies the transition from a state of enforced powerlessness to that of power (Kumar and Varghese, 2005: 55). This chapter explores the representation of women within the postfeminism context and its link to empowerment.

Similar to the definition of feminism, which is categorized into different forms, it is not easy to provide a specific definition of postfeminism. Based on content analysis, Hall and Rodriguez in their analysis of postfeminism, identified that there has been a drastic reduction in the support for women’s movement because some women are becoming increasingly antifeminist; believe the movement to be irrelevant; have adopted a “no, but...” version of feminism (2003: 878). The “no, but...” version of feminism is described by Ouellette as women being “reluctant to define themselves with the feminist label, but they approve of and indeed demand equal pay, economic independence, sexual freedom, and reproductive choice” (Cited in Hall and Rodriguez 2003: 879).

Further, postfeminists can be understood as a group of libertarian or individualistic feminists who strive towards the removal of state control from the personal sphere (Showden 2009: 169). Prominent postfeminists include Camille Paglia, Cathy Young and Rene Denfeld. On the cultural level, they act towards reviving traditional femininity and denounce the “victim feminism” of second wave feminism. According to the postfeminists, feminism has overemphasized on the victimization of women. They are of the opinion that women as a unit possess significant social power. The concept of “victim feminism” and “power feminism” was developed by Naomi Wolf in her book Fire with Fire (ibid 169- 172). According to her, victim feminism “Urges women to identify with powerlessness even at the expense of taking responsibility for the power they do possess” (Wolf 1993: 148). Power feminism is depicted as a
pro-sex, individualistic version of feminism which asserts that women have the capacity for self-definition which they need to exploit (Genz and Brabon 2009:64). Second wave feminism’s emphasis on women’s victimization as a unifying political feature is viewed as outdated and disempowering. The postfeminists argue that it should be replaced with the empowering power feminism (ibid). The question remains, does women living a postfeminist life actually empowered?

In the early 1990s, the creation of postfeminism as a social category is highlighted by three stories published in the *Time: Onward Woman!, The Road to Equality and The War against Feminism* (Hall and Rodriguez 2003: 879). The cover story of *The War against Feminism* stated that “in popular culture, in politics- and among ordinary women- a backlash has hit the women’s movement.” (Cited in Hall and Rodriguez 2003: 879). Postfeminism is equated with a media-driven and anti-feminist backlash which involves the disapproval of feminist goals (Genz and Brabon 2009: 51). The concept of backlash had been dealt extensively by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Backlash is seen to be propagated by the media which regards feminism responsible for a number of female troubles and illnesses, from depression to infertility and depicts feminism as “women’s worst enemy” Critics argued that the media-driven anti-feminist backlash strived to reverse the achievements of the feminist movement (ibid 51-53). According to Faludi, the backlash is a “preemptive strike” for stopping women in reaching full equality (Faludi 1991: XX). The backlash argument consists of the assertion that every time feminism accelerated, a whole set of repressive social, political, ideological and economic forces worked together to constrain it (Copock et al. 1995: 6). According to Faludi, ‘Just when record number of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s...and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that “post-feminism” was the new story- complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women’s movement’ (Cited in Genz and Brabon 2009: 55). She believes that “post-feminism is the backlash. Any movement or philosophy which defines itself as post whatever came before is bound to be reactive. In most cases it is also reactionary” (Cited in ibid 16).

When it comes to the definition of postfeminism, Rosalind Gill also observes that there is little consensus regarding its definition, ranging from it representing a epistemological de-linking with second wave feminism to a shift to third wave feminism and depicting backlash (Gill 2007: 147). According to her, postfeminism can be comprehended as a distinct sensibility consisting of certain themes which are interrelated. These are: “femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sex difference” (ibid).

- Femininity as a bodily property – Postfeminist media culture is characterized by its excessive preoccupation with the female body. Femininity is understood as a bodily property instead of a psychological, structural or social one. The media equates a woman’s primary source of identity to the possession of a ‘sexy body’ while avoiding the caring and nurturing characteristics of women as the key to femininity. The body of women is portrayed not only as their source of power but also as something which
requires constant surveillance, discipline and monitoring for fitting into shallow judgments of attractiveness (ibid 149).

- From objectification to subjectification – Women are not directly objectified but presented as active sexual subjects who opt to portray themselves in an apparent objectified way as it matches their liberated interests. Gill describes it to be a deeper or higher type of exploitation as power is not forced upon from outside but acts in construction of female subjectivity. Women are called to create a certain kind of self attached with agency only on the condition that they construct themselves as a subject close to male fantasy. For Gill, this implies that “sexual objectification can be (re)presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (ibid 151-153). Recently, there have been widespread debates regarding celebrity Kim Kardashian West’s naked selfie which is posted on a social networking site. Journalist Piers Morgan’s reaction to it is the statement that “Feminism is now dead” (Harper’s BAZAAR 2016). In her interview with magazine Harper’s BAZAAR, American actress and political activist Jane Fonda said, “One of the problems that feminism is trying to address is the objectification of women as sex objects, so I think posting a nude picture of yourself doesn’t exactly help that. I think it plays into the objectification of women” (ibid).

- Discipline and self-surveillance – Postfeminist media culture is characterized by the stress upon self-monitoring, self-surveillance and self-discipline (Gill 2007: 155). Gill describes that from sending a text message to choosing a drink, not a single part of a woman’s life is detached from the need to work on oneself and self-survey. Not only the body, but also the self is required to be under constant surveillance (ibid 155-156).

- Individualism and empowerment – Postfeminist discourses consist of the notion that the practices of women are chosen freely by them, presenting them as empowered, autonomous agents, free from power imbalances and inequalities. Notions such as ‘pleasing oneself’ and ‘being oneself’ are important features of postfeminist sensibility. It avoids important questions such as how the ideals of beauty internalized by women are socially-constructed (ibid 153-154).

- Makeover paradigm – Postfeminist media culture is characterized by a makeover paradigm which requires women to believe that their life is either flawed or lacking in some form and that it is open to transformation and reinvention by listening to relationship, lifestyle or design experts and by adopting appropriate and modified consumption patterns (ibid 156).

- Resurgence of notions about sex difference – Postfeminist media culture is characterized by the resurgence of notions of natural sex difference, which is visible in all forms of media from advertisement to newspapers, popular fiction and talk shows. Gill argues that such discourses act to “(re-) eroticize power relations between men and women”. Not only it portrays such difference as sexy but also it can be utilized in strengthening existing inequalities by describing them as inevitable and pleasurable. (ibid 158-159). Butler in her study of hookup¹ culture in colleges equates the above
mentioned characteristics of postfeminism to the characteristics of hookup culture which act together in hiding existing and even new types of inequalities (2013 XII).

Postfeminism is often used synonymously with ‘new feminism’ which provides a celebratory and optimistic image of an assertive and confident lot of women who report of success and achievement in both the private and public sector (Genz and Brabon 2009: 64).

However, it has also been asserted that postfeminism cannot be called “new feminism’ as it involves the threat of backlash and not something pioneering and revolutionary while new feminism refers to a form of feminism which is distinct from and beyond the older version of feminism (ibid 65). New Feminism can be equated with other versions of individual agency found in the late twentieth-century which in Giddens words encourage subjects to involve in “reflexive project of the self” and “forge their identities beyond/outside established social categories” (Cited in ibid 66, ibid 66). Critics are of the opinion that new feminism lacks political seriousness and while emphasizing on celebrating female power, it might work to reject female vulnerability and victimization (ibid 68).

Postfeminism is also equated with the concept of ‘Girl Power’ which was promoted by a group of female singers named Spice Girls in the 1990s (Genz and Brabon 2009: 76). It involves a combination of female individualism and independence with an open display of sexuality/femininity (ibid 77). To become ‘Girlie’ is to assert that traditional systems of heterosexual power relations are pleasurable rather than degrading and women should celebrate feminine sexuality (Showden 2009: 176). Girlies are of the opinion that they can compete alongside men and gain equality without giving up feminine attributes and that their assertiveness and empowerment are linked to feminine identities (Genz and Brabon 2009: 77). In Girlie discourse, agency and emancipation are often linked to the ability to purchase and to consumer culture and women’s agentive powers are linked to consumption of goods and services associated with sexuality/femininity. Although Girlies believe that they are free to create their identities and appearances, critics argue that their choices are narrow as “the Girlie look is similar to…patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty”. According to Gill, ‘sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active…female subjects” It is argued that the popularity of Girl Power can be attributed to its absence of threat to the existing social structure and its commoditizing and individualizing effects that undermine feminist politics (ibid 79-80).

‘Do-me feminism’ is also often used synonymously with postfeminism. It views sexual freedom as essential for female emancipation and independence (Genz and Brabon 2009: 91). It initially appeared in men’s magazine in the 1990s. The do-me feminists make use of their sexuality and physical appearance in order to attain professional and personal goals and to obtain control over their lives. They want to dissociate themselves from anti-sex feminist positions by celebrating sexuality and feminine adornment. “The increasing sexualization of female representations in popular culture” has been criticized by Ariel Levy by using terms such as ‘raunch culture’ and ‘female chauvinistic pigs’. Raunch culture refers to a highly sexualized culture which propagates discourses about sexuality and representations of sex across a wide range of mass media (ibid 91-101). It involves reemploying of old gender norms (Burkett and Hamilton 2012: 816). Levy describes female chauvinistic pigs as “women who make sex objects
of other women” and of themselves (Levy 2005:4). Helford criticized the notion of feminine/sexual empowerment as being a “new arrangement of an old song” that acts in mobilizing women’s femininity and sexuality in the service of the status quo and patriarchal agenda (Cited in Genz and Brabon 2009:97). According to Janet Lee, this empowered sexy/feminine woman can be comprehended as a media persona which is created for being together with patriarchy (ibid). Many feminist scholars hold the view that contemporary sexual relations continue to be defined by ideals which are male-privileging and are limited by hidden pressures in such a way that make young women’s sexual freedom very difficult to enact (Burkett and Hamilton 2012: 816). According to Burkett and Hamilton, despite the depictions of assertive and sexually free women, statistics in Australia revealed that women in the age group 16-25 are most prone to sexual violence. It has also been found that coerced and unwanted sexual activities are quite commonly faced by women and are often normalized within heterosexual relations (ibid).

‘Third-wave feminism’, a phrase coined by Rebecca Walker is discernibly informed by postfeminism, especially in its power feminism optimism and girlie aesthetic (Showden 2009: 178-179). However, the third-wave feminists believe postfeminism to be a patriarchal/conservative discourse while third-wave feminism is defined as an emerging political movement which has strong affiliations to the theory and activism of second-wave feminism (Genz and Brabon 2009: 156). At the same time, third-wave feminism and postfeminism share the similarity of challenging the anti-feminine stance of second-wave feminism (ibid 161).

Postfeminist discourse celebrates femininity/sexuality and represents women as autonomous and empowered in a postfeminist era. Even though women’s progress in the current era cannot be denied, such an understanding should be taken with a grain of salt. Scholars argue that patriarchal forces operate implicitly to preserve gender inequality, sometimes employing newer forms of mechanisms to ensure its persistence and to promote women’s disempowerment. Postfeminism has been understood by many as such a mechanism. According to Elizabeth Douvan, “the privilege associated with male gender will not disappear any time soon” (Cited in Benkert 1996: 214). In both the developed and the developing countries, the influence of the patriarchal forces remains quite discernable. In most cases, women within a postfeminist culture cannot be equated to empowered individuals because of the continuing influence of patriarchal forces and ideals over their lives. In the beginning of the chapter, empowerment was linked to the transition from a state of enforced powerlessness to that of power. In most situations, women continue to remain powerless both within and outside a postfeminist context, with patriarchal forces monitoring their lives and hence cannot be understood as fully empowered individuals. This chapter explored the postfeminist discourse and the representation on women within the postfeminist context along with the discussion of terms and phrases used synonymously with postfeminism.
Note

1 Hookup – Sexual experience with a friend, an acquaintance or a stranger. (Grello et al. 2006:255; Paul et al. 2000:76; Lovejoy 2012:1) It is a sexual relationship devoid of romance, in which the partners do not refer to each other as girlfriend or boyfriend. (Grello et al. 2006:255)

Bibliography

Books


Articles and Online Periodicals


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