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FEMINIST WARS AND FEMALE IDENTITY: POSTFEMINIST AND THIRD WAVE FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES OF GENDER AND IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Both Postfeminism and Third Wave Feminism originated within 1970s feminist theory and took it a step further; developed some concepts, while problematizing others. The most contentious concept problematised by postfeminists and third wavers is that of identity. The Second wave feminists considered identity as fixed and stable and emphasized the shared experience. However other movements, more visible in the sphere of philosophy and cultural theory were questioning the notion of stable, fixed identity and subject hood. The urgency of recognizing the existence of these ideas and incorporating them into feminism increased as feminism moved farther from being only a political movement to a fully developed cultural theory, or set of theories. The Postfeminism incorporated this idea of fluid and shifting identity and contended that the emphasis upon collective action increases internal strains through its neglect of difference, first of class and colour, and ultimately of identity. Third wave feminism upholds this engagement of postfeminism with the identity however with a difference it purports that collectivism is still relevant as women are yet to achieve the complete freedom. Third Wavers argue that Postfeminism relies on competitive individualism and eschews collective action; it obscures or makes invisible the many ways in which women are often fearful, subjected to rape and other kinds of violence, and politically and economically underprivileged. The third wave, however - in texts from *Third Wave Agenda* to *Manifesta* to *Colonize This!* - grapples with women's intersectional identities and demands an end to all the forms of oppression. This paper will try to analyse these two strands of feminism their ideological premises and differences through which they construct gender and identity. The seminal works of both the strands will be scrutinized to exhibit opposition between the sources and mechanisms to construct a viable version of feminism.

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During the 1980's feminism fell out of favour with women. The fanaticism second wave feminists exhibited to carry out their plan to win equality and freedom for women made it infamous among its progeny.

Feminist theorists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter promulgated “activism” as female ethic. Friedan in *Female Mystique*(1963) argued that white middle-class women suffers from ‘the problem that has no name’ — which is responsible for wide spread unhappiness among women. Friedan states that “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home”(Friedan 1963:78). She gave a call to move beyond the domestic space and explore the professional realm for self-actualization. Germaine Greer proclaimed that women have been separated from their libido, from their faculty of desire, from their sexuality. She contended that women should get to know and come to accept their own bodies, taste their own menstrual blood, and give up celibacy and monogamy. Her slogan was ‘change through revolution not evolution’. Elaine Showalter argued that women should embark on the journey to self-discovery through the apparatus of female writing and female experience. Women were given a victim status and it was considered a collective onus to empower women and expunge male patriarchy (Showalter 1977: 95).

Second wavers considered identity as stable and unitary and accentuated femaleness as against the androgyny embraced by first wavers like Virginia Woolf. They considered gender to be a social construct, which has a repressive effect on women. Collective action became the norm, Sisterhood was emphasized and ‘personal’ was considered ‘political’. All these inspiring ideas led women to a point where they resembled the very object they were fighting against i. e ‘man’. According to popular media “Feminism came to mean denigrated motherhood, pursuing selfish goals and wearing a suit” (Rye 2003:105-109). The Second Wave Feminism came to be associated with workaholism, unshaven underarms and man like demeanor. The young women were fed up with the strenuous routine and tiring activism which being feminist demanded of them. They thought that by not being the male idea of what women should be and by being the opposite have done them no good. Though these women did acknowledge the fruits of second wave feminism, which were tangible and ubiquitous, they considered that fight was over since equality and freedom has been secured the wave has become obsolete. These women acknowledged through all these achievements they were effectively robbed of the one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests—men. These women inaugurated a new age feminism, which according to them will cater to the needs of contemporary women who are economically and sexually liberated and instead of choosing a feminist or feminine path they will set them free to choose any path, they named it postfeminism.

Postfeminism has been around for more than two decades however its origin dates back to 1919 when a journal was launched by which female literary radicals stated, “we're interested in people now—not in men and women”, that “moral, social, economic, and political standards should not have anything to do with sex,” that it would “be pro-woman without being anti-man,” and that “their stance [is called] 'postfeminist'” (Cot 1987: 128). The term resurrected in 1980’s to describe a backlash against second-wave feminism. It is now a label for a wide range of theories that takes critical approaches to previous feminist discourses and includes challenges to the second wave’s ideas. (Modleski 1991: 3). Amelia Jones has written that the post-feminist texts, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s portrayed second-wave feminism as a monolithic entity and were overly generalizing in their criticism. Some contemporary feminists, such as Katha Pollitt or Nadine Strossen, consider feminism to hold simply that “women are people”. Views that separate the sexes rather than unite them are considered by these writers to be *sexist* rather than *feminist* (Cot 1987: 45).

Postfeminism puts emphasis on the individual and that individual’s achievements. McRobbie calls this the process of female individualization. The empowered and liberated individual, who is aware of the ideologies surrounding her (and including feminism), is able and expected to make decisions. As the strength of the social structures a woman is expected to fill (marriage, childbearing, etc.) decreases, the capacity for personal agency increases. Postfeminism presents collective agency as a thing of the past, once necessary as a political strategy, but now obsolete and certainly inferior to the strength of personal agency which one can exercise in the postfeminist world. (Wlodarczyk 2010:7). A celebration of the individual and individual achievements leads to the postfeminist fascination with consumption. In postfeminism consumption becomes a measure of one’s success and, simultaneously, a tool of empowerment. The successful postfeminist woman can afford to buy expensive clothing and accessories and uses this power to improve her mood and boost her

self-confidence.

Postfeminism is often branded as media's attempts to revive more traditional femininities that were not allowable through feminism. These include an unabashed return to men, a focus on consumerism, reconsideration of motherhood, and attempts at domesticity. The individualism, domesticity and consumerism is presented through powerful T.V. shows like *Bridget Jones Diary*, *Ally Mc Beal* and *Sex and the City*. The protagonists in these shows are postfeminists who are sexually liberated and sharing equality with men economically, legally and socially. These women are young protagonist in their twenties and thirties, who are usually white, heterosexual and urban.

One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is its obsessional preoccupation with the body. In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social structural or psychological one. The possession of a 'sexy body' is presented as women's key source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness. This specific strategy leads to "ironic normalization of pornography, that is a situation in which women consent to being perceived as sexual objects, all the while emphasizing the role of their freedom of choice and the power they supposedly obtain from flaunting their sexuality unlike the second wavers who considered pornography as criminal assault on female identity and viewed it as a form of oppression. McRobbie analyzes the proliferation of soft- pornographic images in contemporary visual culture from this perspective. Women consent to their presence because objecting to them would mark them as "uncool". In this way postfeminism tricks women into surrendering their subjecthood and allowing themselves to be objectified. Furthermore, the very language of feminism, with words such as liberation and empowerment is made grotesque in its strictly sexual usage (McRobbie 2004: 255-264).

Susan Faludi in her groundbreaking book *Backlash(1991)* considers Postfeminism as a movement which has been used by popular media to undermine the achievements of feminists, constructed by men media, which are in cohorts to crush the Female activism and return of traditional concept of feminine. She calls it Backlash and to counter this attack she gives call back to feminism (Faludi 1991:85). Rebecca Walker also sensed this conspiracy and stressed to take collective initiative and activism against this backlash. Her contention was that the claim: Equality of women and men has been achieved, is a misconception and the fight is far from over. She declared, "I am not the postfeminist feminist, I am third wave." She argued, "We want to be linked with our feminist foremothers and centuries of women's movement. But we also want to create space for young women to create their own different brand of revolt, and so we choose the name Third Wave" (Wlodarczyk 2010:18).

The third wave defines itself in opposition to the popular understanding of postfeminism that is through defining what it is not and why. The primary difference, not surprisingly, emerges as the need for collective action, required to secure the gains of feminism and to pursue new goals. Postfeminism claims to be a description of the existing status quo, this status quo is presented as an achievement in itself; one which should be enjoyed and not challenged in any way. Therefore, postfeminism can in no way be seen as a social movement, but only as a social theory.

As in the case of first and second wave feminisms, third wave feminism is not a uniform perspective. Multivocality has been identified as an informing trope of the third wave narrative (Siegel 1997:46-75), which includes "a number of diverse and analytically distinct approaches to feminism" focusing on difference, deconstruction, and decentring (Mann 2005:57). Third wavers have also been constructed as 'a political generation', or, as Nancy Whittier explains:

A group of people (not necessarily of the same age) that experiences shared formative social conditions at approximately the same point in their lives, and that holds a common interpretive framework shaped by historical circumstances. (Alfonso 1997: 7-16)

Third wave feminists are inclusive and present an anti-essentialist view of gender and identity as against Second wave feminism and post feminist whose definition of gender is essentialist. Both Second wave

and postfeminism focus on white heterosexual women belonging to middle class. These movements pay no attention to the fact that women are of many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds. Third wavers claim to be the representatives of all these tropes. Third-wave incorporates elements of queer theory, anti-racism and women-of-color consciousness; womanism, girl power, post-colonial theory, postmodernism, transnationalism, cyberfeminism, ecofeminism, individualist feminism, new feminist theory, transgender politics, and a rejection of the gender binary. Also considered part of the third wave is sex-positivity, a celebration of sexuality as a positive aspect of life, with broader definitions of what sex means and what oppression and empowerment may imply in the context of sex. For example, many third-wave feminists have reconsidered the opposition to pornography and sex work of the second wave, and challenge existing beliefs that participants in pornography and sex work are always being exploited.

Third Wavers argue that Postfeminism relies on competitive individualism and eschews collective action; it obscures or makes invisible the many ways in which women are often fearful, subjected to rape and other kinds of violence, and politically and economically underprivileged. The third wave, however - in texts from *Third Wave Agenda* to *Manifesta* to *Colonize This!* - grapples with women's intersectional identities and demands an end to all the forms of oppression.

According to Amber Kinser third wave feminism "represents a complex effort to negotiate a space between second-wave and postfeminism thought" (Kinser 2004:135). Deborah Siegel (1997) analysis it as a stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists, while the editors of *Third Wave Agenda: Doing Feminism, Being Feminist* argue that the third wave is "a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while also acknowledging and making sense of the pleasure, danger and defining power of those structures" (Kinser 2004:140). Postfeminism presents collective agency as a thing of the past, once necessary as a political strategy, but now obsolete and certainly inferior to the strength of personal agency which one can exercise in the postfeminist world. While the third wave, right from its inception, heralds the need for collective action and rekindles the second wave concept of sisterhood, though emphasizing community based on the appreciation of difference rather than on the assumption of sameness,

The most contentious concept problematised by postfeminists and third wavers is that of identity. The second wavers considered identity as fixed and stable. They emphasized the shared experience this was important for raising a consciousness of women's identity as women for achieving a political change. These second wavers were also influence by the ideas promulgated by French Theorist Simone de Beauvoir in her epoch making book *The Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir considers gender as constructed socially this formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. She debunks Freud's declaration that 'Anatomy is destiny'. Sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation. With the distinction intact, it is no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity, and neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behavior: all gender is, by definition, unnatural. (Butler 1986:35-49) Beauvoir believes that gender is an act of choice but it is a kind of choice which we make and later realize we have made it she assumes that women never experience their bodies but it is the gender through which we assume to have lived our bodies, to exist one's body in culturally concrete terms means, at least to partially become ones gender. We never experience or know ourselves as a body pure and simple.

Beauvoir contends that the gender woman acquires is male formulation and that in committing this pre-reflective choice woman becomes the 'other' of male. Since Beauvoir's project presents a limited choice for women to either play a man which will be frustrating or to play a woman which will be a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be a subject. The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek self-fulfillment in transcendence. The language of "transcendence" suggests, on the one hand, that Simone de Beauvoir accepts a gender-free model of freedom as the normative ideal for women's aspirations. It seems that Beauvoir prescribes the overcoming of gender altogether, especially for women, for whom becoming one's gender implies the sacrifice of autonomy and the capacity for transcendence. On the other

hand, insofar as transcendence appears a particularly masculine project, her prescription seems to urge women to assume the model of freedom currently embodied by the masculine gender. In other words, because women have been identified with their anatomy, and this identification has served the purposes of their oppression, they ought now to identify with 'consciousness', that transcending activity unrestrained by the body (Butler 1986:35-49). Since the male way of transcendence is the only way available the second wavers realized this through participation in male space by leaving the domesticity and partaking in professional and business realms. This view also grouped women as having unitary identity as the other of man. While the second wavers were hard at work on making women aware of the commonalities they shared, other movements, more visible in the sphere of philosophy and cultural theory than in politics, were questioning the notion of stable, fixed identity the urgency of recognizing the existence of these ideas and incorporating them into feminism increased as feminism moved farther from being only a political movement to a fully developed cultural theory, or set of theories. This move was from discourse of equality to Difference. The onslaught of post-modernism and post-structuralism debunked any notion of a fixed and stable identity. The binaries like man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine and subject/object were put under erasure. The immediate influence on new-feminist trends was that of French difference theorists like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous who contended that there is an essential difference between male and female bodies and considering female as a negative image of man is a phallogocentric construction. In the work of Luce Irigaray we find a sustained critique of both philosophy and psychoanalysis, for their masculinism. She points out that in these bodies of work man is presented as the universal norm, and sexual difference is not recognised, or it is recognised in such a way that woman is conceptualised as the 'maternal-feminine,' which has been left behind in the move to abstract thought. Such a critique insists on the recognition of sexual difference and the difference that female corporeality can make to the shape which thought can take. She makes here what may seem like a rather startling claim; namely that the morphology of the body is reflected in the morphology of certain thought processes. Irigaray assumes that there exists a female 'self identical being' in need of a representation. So, for example, western rationality is marked by principles of identity, non-contradiction, binarism, atomism and determinate individuation. She sees this as "the one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sex organ." In contrast "the contact of at least two (lips) keeps woman in touch with herself," (Porter 1997:79) and suggests an ambiguity of individuation, a fluidity and mobility, a rejection of stable forms. Irigaray argues that feminine is inevitably formulated through male standards, as there exists only one universal subject, which happens to be man. She gives a call for 'double universal', which asserts the full positive affirmation of two sexes.

Helene Cixous *Ecriture Feminine* is again the affirmation of difference of female identity from that of male. She gives a call for writing ones body to invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes. It gives call for sweeping away the syntax that is the famous thread that acts for men as an umbilical cord. 'Write yourself your body must be heard only than will the immense resource of the unconscious spring forth' (Barry 2004:158). Cixous believes that the phallogocentric tradition has, for the most part, succeeded in suppressing woman's voice. Woman must uncensor herself, recover her goods her immense bodily territories, which have been kept under seal: she must throw away her guilt (Seldon 2007:145). She rejects the masculine/feminine binary opposition and embraces Derrida's principal of 'differance'. She opposes the sort of neutral bisexuality espoused by Virginia Woolf, and instead advocates what she calls "the other bisexuality" which refuses to annul difference but stirs them up. 'A woman's body', writes Cixous, 'with its thousand and one thresh hold of ardor...will make the old mother tongue reverberate with more than one language' (Sellers 1996:68). Third wave feminists engage themselves with this view of identity and gender. They embrace bisexual women into their realm and do not make any difference between women on the basis of colour or race. This opinion of identity is one of the tropes of the all-inclusive third wave, which addresses the needs of marginalised and colonized women as well. It recognizes the intersections within the female realm and acknowledges all of them.

postfeminist view of identity and Gender is informed by Julia Kristeva's use of the semiotic level and symbolic level to differentiate between the unbridled level of female and repressive male level and castigation

of homosexuality/lesbianism as psychological frustration. Kristeva builds her argument on that of Jacques Lacan who divides the pre-language level as 'Imaginary' and the realm of language as 'Symbolic'. In response to the work of Jacques Lacan that posited a paternal Symbolic order and a repression of the 'feminine' required for language and culture, Julia Kristeva added women back into the narrative by claiming that poetic language—the 'semiotic'—was a surfacing of the maternal body in writing, uncontrolled by the paternal logos. This semiotic state is also evident in male poets, whose identity is also viewed as the outcome of the repression of symbolic order, as poetry is attuned to tapping its resonance may therefore undergo a radical dispersal of "identity" and loss of coherence. The 'drives' experienced by the child in the pre-oedipal phase are like a language but not ordered into one. For this 'semiotic' material to become 'symbolic' it must be stabilized and this involves repression of the flowing and rhythmic drives. While the symbolic is linked with the law of the father which censors and represses in order that discourse may come into being. Woman is the silence or incoherence of the pre-discursive, the free-floating sea of the womb. She is the "Other", which stands outside and threatens to disrupt the conscious (rational) order of speech. Kristeva suggests that women should reclaim the womb that semiotic chora which disrupts the oppression. For Kristeva, poetic writing and maternity are the sole culturally permissible ways for women to return to the maternal body that bore them, and female homosexuality is the impossibility, a near psychosis (Seldan 2004:143). Postfeminist identity also proclaims to return to the feminine and heterosexuality to reinvent the lost maternal identity. However this return is individual journey to be that psychosomatic flow of difference that refuses the 'violent hierarchy' of binary oppositions and resuscitate the death of meaning.

Third wave feminism sees this heteronormative stance, return to femininity and essentialism of postfeminism as regression to the 'phallogocentrism'. The heterosexuality as advocated by postfeminists has been dubbed as repressive of other gender possibilities. It has been charged with privileging of one gender category and white female concern over all others. Assuming such type of identity eschews collective action it obscures or makes invisible the many ways in which women are often fearful, subjected to rape and other kinds of violence, and politically and economically underprivileged. Judith Butler argues that no identity exists outside the act that supposedly expresses the illusion of the stable gender identity and to assume that there exists a semiotics level to which belongs the womb and the maternal is to suggest that there exists a self a priori. For Butler body is a mere facticity devoid of value prior to signification. All gender is in fact scripted, rehearsed and performed (Butler 1990: 63).

Third wave feminists consider female identity as a broader term, which consists of not only the white women but the women of colour, race and other ethnicities as well. Gender fixity is debunked and multiple gender categories are considered to be the norm. Third wavers consider sex, gender and sexuality, as fluid continuum in which identities based on stable/fixed categories is a meaningless concept. Building the discourse from Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault third wavers consider Gender and identity in constant flux like historical and social power structures which change constantly through resistance and negotiation and hence can't be demarcated with clear boundaries and cannot set in binary opposition to each other. The third wave, in texts from Third Wave Agenda to Manifesta to Colonize This!—grapples with women's intersectional identities and demands an end to all the forms of oppression that keep women from achieving their full humanity.(Wlodarczyk 2010:8).

By trying to establish itself as the representative of all the diverse women identities across class, race, gender and ethnicities third wave feminism falls in the trap of essentialism: which presumably it resolved to pilfer. As such confirmation asserts the existence of some universal ontological being a priori to the different identities that are taken up culturally or by the repeated stylization of body and can be identified as 'woman'.

Third wave feminism fails to recognize the idiosyncrasies that exist between the women belonging to different race, colour, gender and ethnicities. They do not take into account the contradictory interests of these different groups, which it claims to represent and which may be in constant clash with each other. Such issues destabilize the third wave as a movement and challenge its viability.

Both postfeminists and third wavers consider pornography as an expression of the power of female body as against the earlier depiction of supine exhibition of the body for male pleasure in European nude

paintings and early pornographic movies. New age porno portray women as active as man in sexual engagement and encounters and at times more aggressive and dominant than male counterpart. This according to feminists has become a major game changer where women have now become the subject and not the object. This argument was further strengthened by the discovery of strong and inspirational women in porn industry. However such an assertion goes against both these feminist trope's opinion of female identity complex. Such a view confirms women identity as monolithic, which can be either identified as an object or a subject. This advocacy of pornography is dashed to the ground by the complex working of self as consisting of contradictions: being at once the subject and the object, surveyor and the surveyed. To be the subject one has to survey herself as an object and make sure that she doesn't resemble the object and by doing that woman becomes the captive of her own making.

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