

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Jane M. Pederson History Dept. _____

Course Number and Name WMNS 301 Semester completed
Fall 2004

Title of Nominated Work : Tying it All Together

CATEGORY:	Sampson:		
	Undergraduate Research Paper	<u>X</u>	See _____
	Undergraduate Project	_____	Olson _____
	Graduate _____		Kessler _____
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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

In this paper by Ashley Borman "Tying it all Together," she really does just that. A consistent goal in education is application. To what extent can students take ideas, concepts and information to which they have been introduced and apply it. Ashley deploys ideas encountered in WMNS 301 to analyze two dramatically different films written by women; one is from Hollywood in the 1930s and the other a recent film from India.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

Tying it all Together

Final Paper

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HNRS 301

17 December 2004

Dr. Pederson

Tying it all Together

Registering for this course, I had minimal knowledge as to what feminism entailed and how feminism changed throughout history. Now, at the end of this course, the complexities of feminism are apparent to me and the evolution of the movement is clearer as well. Through the readings and the discussions, the backbone of feminism was constructed and explained. But the actions of feminists were most clearly embodied by the characters in the films watched in class. "The Women" and "Fire" each portrayed feminism and the issues that confront feminists. These two films encapsulated two unique waves of the feminist movement and incorporated an encouraging theme promoting change in society to benefit women.

The film, "The Women," summarized the transition of feminism from the first wave into the second wave. Second wave feminists struggled to find an appropriate place for women in an evolving society. With the rise of urbanization and industrialization, the strict spheres set up for male and female genders started to break down. More women began to demand education, equal rights, and other social freedoms.

The demands were represented in this film by the female characters holding jobs outside of their homes, indicating that the domestic housewife stereotype of women changed. However, these working women were secretaries, writers, and domestic workers, which could be categorized as "pink-collar" jobs reserved for women. Estelle Freedman explains that women in the 1900s were allotted jobs however, women "continued to be viewed as women first, workers second... Many of the jobs created in the past century could be viewed as an extension of women's familial work", thereby forming the pink-collar sector (149). The women in the film were not businesswomen,

attorneys, or doctors. The female characters were wealthy due to their husbands and the widow, who entered later in the film, was wealthy thanks to her former husbands.

Second wave, during the time of this film, was not yet when women were necessarily self-sustaining. Women still entered marriages to share in the man's wealth and title, not entirely for love.

The characters in the film were considered upper class solely based on their husbands' last names. One of the characters decided to divorce her husband though. This decision was countered with advice not to go through with it, since it would be a harsher punishment on the woman than on the man. The character's mother, most likely more inline with first wave views, explained to her daughter that it is a wife's duty to love her husband even if he strays and has an affair. This woman did not accept this because she wanted her marriage to be an equal exchange of love, and staying married to a cheater was not worth it to her. This rising mentality encouraged more women to search for a relationship that valued both the husband and wife as partners, not as a master and his slave. This idea suggests that women were becoming more independent and less self-sacrificing.

With this independence, marketers also began to find value in female consumerism. Thus, places such as department stores, fashion shows, and day spas were all developed to attract women spenders. The women in the film can be found using each of these establishments; much of the dialogue that does not take place in the parlour is exchanged in one of these three arenas. As opposed to previous decades, women were no longer restricted to the home and were beginning to become accepted into the public sphere.

In addition to consumerism, a woman's power of virtue shifted during the second wave. "The Women" portrays female characters indulging in such things as alcohol, cigarettes, horse back riding, and other activities that were once considered masculine or "unlady-like" by first wavers. Yet, the characters all seemed to be liberated by such simple pleasures as being able to share a drink. Not only was it a "rebellious" act in the face of first wavers, but also become a bonding experience for this group of friends; the women were able to meet and gossip, smoke, and drink.

Another major issue for the second wave feminists revolved around the perceptions of the body. Joan Brumberg's book, "The Body Project," thoroughly explained the evolution of the female body and the changing source of identity for women. During the first wave women defined their identity by their virtue and chastity. In Brumberg's introduction, she states that before World War I, "becoming a better person meant paying *less* attention to the self [and] giving more assistance to others" (xxi). Then, during the second wave women searched for their identity on the exterior of their bodies. Brumberg announces, "[G]irls are concerned with the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of their individual identities" (xxi). This transition marks a time when "slimming" or dieting starts to be practiced in order to improve their identity and to strengthen female self-confidence.

In the film, "The Women," there is a scene where two of the characters are at a spa. While there, an instructor is yelling at them to do an exercise, stand up and do the next exercise. Neither one of the characters is very interested in doing any exercise at all, but for some reason, they find it necessary that they force themselves to do them. The stress of beauty and attractiveness is also revealed by each of the women making

appointments to get their nails done at a popular salon. The peer pressure that some of the women placed on their friends to get their nails done and do their hair properly may have been exchanged jokingly yet can show why the perpetuation of “slimming” continues into the third wave.

In addition to the fancy clothes, nice make-up, and work-out routines, the women of this period, and in this film, started permitting sex to be enjoyed. For the first wave, sex was bonded to marriage and was reserved for the purpose of reproduction. During the second wave, with the rise of available contraceptives and the weakening of the stigma associated with premarital sex, the second wave women were able to find pleasure and excitement in sex. There was one character that portrayed this transition the best; the lady that seduced and had an affair with a married man was able to find enjoyment and reward through sex. This character had no desire to be a mother or use sex to reproduce; it was only a mechanism to gain happiness and power. This sex tactic has been used throughout history, but in “The Women” this character helps the viewer visualize the changes that occurred in this sphere during the second wave.

This attitude towards sex and sexuality carried over into the third wave and was a noticeable theme in the film “Fire”. This film has three main female characters, the old Biji, who serves as a foil to the two younger women, Sita and Radha. The film takes place in India, which helps illustrate that feminism is a universal movement that is trying to gain rights and freedoms for women everywhere. Again, one of the main issues of the third wave revolves around women’s sexuality.

During this time, a language to describe same sex attraction evolved. A person’s sexual identity as either being heterosexual or homosexual began to play a role in society.

However, society did not yet welcome homosexuals into every aspect of life. Therefore, “lesbians created within North American and European women’s movements a positive, even celebratory, alternative space in which they met, organized, and explored sexual desires” (Freedman 265). Although this film is set in India, “Fire” is of the heat and passion between the two younger women, Sita and Radha, which formulates into a lesbian love affair. These two women create something very similar to what other lesbians formed. They built their own positive, joyous experience and allowed themselves to discover their sexual desires. Since each woman is denied the physical contact and emotional bondage that sex offers, they turn towards each other to fill this void.

Sita longs for sex to be connected to love, but finds no love from her new husband. This desire for the presence of love in sex is a feminist issue; it is especially strong in a place like India where arranged marriages continue today. Even though Sita’s marriage was not predetermined, there is still a lack of affection. Her husband maintains an open love affair with a Chinese woman. This interracial romance displays the possibility that some women may not find it necessary to be in love in order to find pleasure in sex (a theme carried over from “The Women”). The third wave tries to promote women’s choice. If a woman is happy being promiscuous and dressing very provocatively, then that is her choice, and she has the right to be who she chooses to be. On the other hand, if a woman would rather wait until love to have sex, she should be respected for this choice.

Although Sita has a husband that is willing to have sex with her and she refuses, Radha’s circumstance is more complicated. Intimacy and pleasurable feelings that sex

brings were beginning to be experienced before marriage, especially in the second and third waves. The necessity of sex simply for reproduction was becoming historic.

However, in the film “Fire,” Rahda could not bear children, so her husband decided that he would not have sex with her. The mentality that because she could not have children, therefore she should not have sex is faulty and left Rahda longing for affection. Being rejected by her husband, Rahda is vulnerable to Sita’s gentle touch. Thus, as Sita began showing her affection, Rahda allowed herself to feel love from this woman.

Third wave feminists continue to strive for lesbian and gay rights in the United States. In India, because of the patriarchal lifestyle, homosexuality may be less tolerated. This patriarchy presents itself in the film through the interactions between husband and wife. In “Fire,” the strength that a husband possessed over his wife was unbearable, especially to a progressive wife like Sita. Rahda, who had been married for over a decade, became accustomed to sacrificing her wishes in the name of her husband. Tradition and men ruled the women’s lives and dictated what they did during every day. Rahda felt that she had no choice but to serve her husband until Sita revealed the absurdity of wasting one’s life for a man who is not even grateful. Sita showed Rahda what it felt like to be loved and revered. During the third wave, lesbianism and gay lifestyles have become more common, thus, films like “Fire” are essential to the feminist movement in promoting acceptance of other sexual identities.

Besides the production of these two films, other feminists have been working tirelessly addressing the same issues raised in these films. First, the job scene for women has opened up considerably since the making of “The Women”. Women now make up nearly 50% of medical students, and about one third of all lawyers and judges. However,

the glass ceiling still restricts women from climbing the corporate ladder. Also, when women decide to become mothers, their lives change along with their career paths. Feminists like Ann Crittenden, raise awareness and promote change in policy so that women do not have to be limited. One feminist tactic is also to stress the value and worth of women as women and mothers on a new standard of comparison as opposed to using the male prototype as the standard.

Second, divorce has been a feminist theme for decades. Divorce was lopsided in favor of the man for a long time, but with feminist attention, a woman can now be reassured that she has a good chance in receiving custody of her children and will receive at least some compensation for the divorce. However, many women after divorce are lacking job skills, steady income, and affordable child care. These are the issues that now confront feminists. Women have retaliated by making precedence from their divorce cases and by changing federal policy on child support.

Third, consumerism and acceptable behavior for women is still a third wave issue. Women still spend hours at the hair salon and can be found outside taking a cigarette break. These experiences have become somewhat common place; they are no longer taboo for women. Some feminists argue that consumerism and marketing objectifies women, but the third wave mentality is that women can either choose to be insulted or flattered. And women have the intellect to decide if she really *needs* her nails painted or if she just *likes* her nails done. Similar to in the film, the experiences are represented as being liberating (time out of the house) and a common experience among friends. Feminists who feel chained to the chores of shaving her legs, putting on make-up, or whatever else, will be the ones fighting consumerism.

Fourth, the issue of “slimming” is a prominent feminist issue. Dieting is starting at younger and younger ages, and the spread of eating disorders have called for feminist attention. There are many ways feminists have attempted to address the issue of dieting (and eating disorders). Promoting “Beauty’s on the Inside” and trying to revert back to first wave identity sources is one tactic. Offering good role models for young girls so they do not find the need to diet and funding sports teams for girls so that they can be active and healthy without dieting are two strong methods feminists back.

Fifth, the issue of sex and sexual identity is an evolving feminist focal point. Again, the third wave slogan is choice and self-determination. Women should have the choice to be chaste until marriage or to partake in sexual experiences without fear of judgment. Along with this, women should also be able to choose who they love, male or female, without judgment. The third wave’s work with lesbian and gay rights reveals itself through films like “Fire,” gay rights marches around the country, and the lobbying for new federal policy.

Feminist efforts come in many forms. From politics to art to literature, the ways in which feminists choose to be activists varies from person to person. The main goal of these efforts though is to make society more tolerant and accepting of women and alternate lifestyles. The films, “The Women” and “Fire” each portray ways in which women still struggle in society. But both provide a view of the possible and reveal changes that have already taken place. Feminist works should all promote these features; a picture of reality juxtaposed with a view of the future. A combination like this would recruit additional feminists to the movement, changing reality into the future that much sooner.

Works Cited

Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Freedman, Estelle. No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women. New York: Ballantine Books, 2002.