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## Feminism: It's All About Me!

By Ginia Bellafante

Growing up in Washington state during the '70s, Courtney Love didn't care much for the women's-movement rallies her mother attended. "I'd wonder why nobody on these marches was wearing heels," she has said. But with its days of flat shoes and fiery protest behind it, feminism is clearly more attractive to Love now. Earlier this year, the angry rocker turned Versace model and movie star showed up at the Ms. Foundation's 25th-anniversary bash at Caroline's Comedy Club in New York City. A busy celebrity, she couldn't stay long. Springing up to leave midway through the event, she announced, "Can you believe it? Here I am with Gloria Steinem, and now I'm off to dinner with Milos Forman!"

The Ms. party was one of many in a hectic season of feminist nightlife in Manhattan. In April came Show, a living work of art by Vanessa Beecroft designed to humanize media images of female beauty and thus somehow invest women with power. The invitees gathered in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan to view 15 bikini-clad models staring into space atop their high heels. But the glitziest affair in recent months was a reading of *The Vagina Monologues*, a performance piece about female private parts by Eve Ensler that attracted Uma Thurman, Winona Ryder and Calista Flockhart, among others. The actresses had come to raise money to fight domestic violence, but the cause seemed lost amid the event's giddy theatrics. Featured were Marisa Tomei on the subject of pubic hair (sample line: "You cannot love a vagina unless you love hair"); Glenn Close offering an homage to an obscene word for female genitalia; and, finally, the playwright delivering three solid minutes of orgasmic moaning. The Village Voice called it "the most important and outrageous feminist event" of the past 30 years.

Fashion spectacle, paparazzi-jammed galas, mindless sex talk--is this what the road map to greater female empowerment has become? If feminism is, as Gloria Steinem has said for decades, "a revolution and not a public relations movement," why has it come to feel so much like spin?

Steinem isn't the person to answer that question. The doyen of second-wave feminism startled many in March when she penned an op-ed piece for the New York Times arguing that the allegations of a sexual dalliance between the President and a 21-year-old intern were nothing to get worked up about. If the stories were true (and she believed they were), then Clinton was guilty of nothing more than frat boyishness, Steinem wrote. Backlash author Susan Faludi also made excuses for the President, writing in the Nation that along with other powers, women have gained "the power to forgive men." And in the places where you would expect feminist indignation to be thriving--the elite liberal colleges of the Northeast--TIME found in numerous interviews that it isn't. On the Clinton sex scandal, Barnard College senior Rebecca Spence says, "As a self-defined feminist, I should be outraged, but I'm not."

Conservatives have an easy explanation for these forgiving attitudes toward the President's private treatment of women. They say Clinton-loving feminists, as if following the how-to-catch-a-man Rules manual, have chosen to overlook the faults of a man who has been their best provider. Ideals be

damned for the President who vetoed the ban on partial-birth abortions.

But political allegiance is only part of the story. If women's leaders seemed to ignore some of the murkier questions raised by the Clinton scandal--for example, what does consensual sex mean between two people so unequal in power?--it is in part because feminism at the very end of the century seems to be an intellectual undertaking in which the complicated, often mundane issues of modern life get little attention and the narcissistic ramblings of a few new media-anointed spokeswomen get far too much. You'll have better luck becoming a darling of feminist circles if you chronicle your adventures in cybersex than if you churn out a tome on the glass ceiling.

What a comedown for the movement. If women were able to make their case in the '60s and '70s, it was largely because, as the slogan went, they turned the personal into the political. They used their daily experience as the basis for a critique, often a scholarly one, of larger institutions and social arrangements. From Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* to Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*--a doctoral dissertation that became a national best seller--feminists made big, unambiguous demands of the world. They sought absolute equal rights and opportunities for women, a constitutional amendment to make it so, a chance to be compensated equally and to share the task of raising a family. But if feminism of the '60s and '70s was steeped in research and obsessed with social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.

It is fair to ask why anyone should be worried about this outcome. Who cares about the trivial literary and artistic pursuits of a largely Manhattan-based group of self-appointed feminists? They're talking only to one another, after all. But the women's movement, like many upheavals before it, from the French Revolution in 1789 to the civil rights movement in the U.S. and even the uprising in Tiananmen Square, would be nowhere without the upper-middle-class intellectual elite. Feminism didn't start in the factory. It started in wood-paneled salons, spread to suburban living rooms, with their consciousness-raising sessions, and eventually ended up with Norma Rae. In fact, that trajectory is its biggest problem today--it remains suspect to those who have never ventured onto a college campus. A TIME/CNN poll shows what most people already suspect--that education more than anything else determines whether a woman defines herself as a feminist. Fifty-three percent of white, college-educated women living in cities embrace the label. Fifty percent of white women with postgraduate training and no children do the same. But feminism shouldn't be punished for its pedigree. We would never have had Ginger Spice if we hadn't had Germaine Greer.

And that brings up another reason why the flightiness of contemporary feminism is a problem. Some would argue that if the women's movement were still useful, it would have something to say; it's dead because it has won. Some wags have coined a phrase for this: Duh Feminism. But there's nothing obvious about the movement's achievements. It's true that we now have a woman crafting America's foreign policy (Madeleine Albright), that a woman is deciding which Barbie dolls to produce (Jill Barad, CEO of Mattel) and that a woman (Catharine MacKinnon) pioneered the field of sexual-harassment law (which is turning into real dollars for real women, as Mitsubishi Motors evidenced two weeks ago with its record \$34 million payment to women on the assembly line). It's also true that women are joining together for their own, big-draw rock tours and that we now have "girl power," that sassy, don't-mess-with-me adolescent spirit that Madison Avenue carefully caters to. So yes, the women's movement changed our individual lives and expectations, and young women today acknowledge this. A hefty 50% of those from ages 18 to 34 told the pollsters in the TIME/CNN survey that they share "feminist" values, by which they generally mean they want a world in which they can choose to be anything--the President or a mother, or both.

But that doesn't mean that American society is supporting them much in their choices, and this is where the pseudo-feminists of today could be of help. The average female worker in America still earns just 76[cents] for every dollar a man earns, up 17[cents] from the '70s but still no cause for rejoicing. And

for most women, the glass ceiling is as impenetrable as ever. There are only two female CEOs at FORTUNE 500 companies, and just 10% of corporate officers are women. Day care, a top priority for both middle-class women and less fortunate mothers maneuvering through welfare reform, still seems a marginal issue to feminist leaders. Under the heading Key Issues on the website of the National Organization for Women, day care isn't even mentioned.

Instead, much of feminism has devolved into the silly. And it has powerful support for this: a popular culture insistent on offering images of grown single women as frazzled, self-absorbed girls. Ally McBeal is the most popular female character on television. The show, for the few who may have missed it, focuses on a ditsy 28-year-old Ivy League Boston litigator who never seems in need of the body-concealing clothing that Northeastern weather often requires. Ally spends much of her time fantasizing about her ex-boyfriend, who is married and in the next office, and manages to work references to her mangled love life into nearly every summation she delivers. She has fits in supermarkets because there are too few cans of Pringles. She answers the question "Why are your problems so much bigger than everyone else's?" with the earnest response "Because they're mine." When Ally gets any work done, how she keeps her job, why she thinks it's O.K. to ask her secretary why she didn't give her a birthday present--these are all mysteries. Ally probably wouldn't seem so offensive as an addition to the cast of Seinfeld, but because this is a one-hour drama filled with pseudo-Melissa Etheridge music and emotional pretense, we are meant to take her problems more seriously than George Costanza's. "Ally McBeal is a mess. She's like a little animal," notes Nancy Friday, a sex-positive feminist if ever there was one. "You want to put her on a leash." And what does Ally's creator David Kelley have to say about Ally as a feminist? "She's not a hard, strident feminist out of the '60s and '70s. She's all for women's rights, but she doesn't want to lead the charge at her own emotional expense." Ally, though, is in charge of nothing, least of all her emotional life.

As if one Ally McBeal character were not enough, America is discovering another, the heroine of an enormously hyped novel called *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by British author Helen Fielding. The book, a best seller in England for months, is a sometimes funny but ultimately monotonous chronicle of a year in the life of an unmarried thirtysomething London editor whose thoughts never veer far from dating, the cocktail hour and her invariably failed attempts at calorie cutting. A typical Bridget reflection: "Cannot face thought of going to work. Only thing that makes it tolerable is thought of seeing Daniel again, but even this is inadvisable since am fat, have spot on chin, and desire only to sit on cushion eating chocolate and watching Xmas specials." Few women alive haven't dwelled on relationships or their appearance, but most manage to concern themselves with other things too. The problem with Bridget and Ally is that they are presented as archetypes of single womanhood even though they are little more than composites of frivolous neuroses.

Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones are the product of what could be called the Camille Paglia syndrome. In her landmark 1990 book, *Sexual Personae*, author Paglia used intellect to analyze art, history and literature from classical times to the 19th century and argue that it is men who are the weaker sex because they have remained eternally powerless over their desire for the female body. It is female sexuality, she said, that is humanity's greatest force. Her tome helped catapult feminism beyond an ideology of victimhood.

In the heated atmosphere of early-'90s gender politics, in which Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment before an audience of millions, Paglia quickly began turning up all over the media voicing her controversial opinions on the sex wars. Feminism wasted time trying to persuade us that men are tameable, she proclaimed. Relish sexual power, she told women, but don't go to frat parties expecting men to be saints. The argument was powerful and full of merit, but deployed by lesser minds it quickly devolved into an excuse for media-hungry would-be feminists to share their adventures in the mall or in bed. So let us survey the full post-Paglia landscape.

Out this spring is Lisa Palac's *The Edge of the Bed*, in which the author suggests that pornography can be liberating because X-rated movies were sexually freeing for her. "Once I figured out how to look at an erotic image and use my sexual imagination to turn desire into a self-generated orgasm, my life was irrevocably and positively changed," writes Palac. The subtext of her book is that sexual self-revelation is groundbreaking in itself. But of course it isn't. It's at least as old as the '70s. That decade gave us, among other things, the erotic art of feminist group-sex advocate Betty Dodson and a NOW-sponsored sexuality conference that covered the subject of sadomasochism. And it gave us Erica Jong's titillating *Fear of Flying*, as well as Nancy Friday's 1973 best seller, *My Secret Garden*, which celebrated female sexual fantasies.

Beyond Palac, there are other young postfeminists who have launched careers by merely plucking from and personalizing Paglia's headline-making ideas. The latest addition to the women's-studies sections of bookstores, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, features on its cover a topless picture of author Elizabeth Wurtzel. Beyond it lies a seemingly unedited rant in which Wurtzel, billed on her book jacket as a Pagliaite, demands for herself and womankind the right to be rapacious, have fits and own more than one Gucci bag. "I intend to scream, shout, throw tantrums in Bloomingdale's if I feel like it and confess intimate details of my life to complete strangers," she writes. "I intend to answer only to myself."

Then there is 29-year-old Katie Roiphe, who appeared on the scene with her 1993 book, *The Morning After*, arguing that heightened date-rape awareness on college campuses was creating a culture of sexual fear and hysteria. She has gone on to write articles that excuse bad male behavior and tout her own desirability. In a piece that appeared in the January issue of *Vogue*, she told the story of an affair she had had with a teacher when she was 16. "In that first moment of thinking, maybe he likes me, there is a blossoming of feminine power," she wrote. "I remember first learning from my 36-year-old that I had the ability to attract a man." The implication is that such relationships empower young girls because this one, she feels, was good for her. (Roiphe is currently expressing her feminine power as a model for Coach leather goods.)

The most fussed-about young poet of the moment is Deborah Garrison, whose new collection, *A Working Girl Can't Win*, revolves around a quintessentially self-absorbed postfeminist. Again we get a picture of a career woman in her 20s who doesn't feel pretty enough and who fantasizes about life as a sexpot. "I'm never going to sleep/ with Martin Amis/ or anyone famous./ At twenty-one I scotched/my chance to be/one of the seductresses/of the century,/ a vamp on the rise through the ranks/ of literary Gods and military men,/ who wouldn't stop at the President:/ she'd take the Pentagon by storm/ in halter dress and rhinestone extras," Garrison writes in "An Idle Thought." (It could be retitled "Oh, How I Would Have Put You to Shame, Monica Lewinsky.") Garrison's efforts won her a book blurb from feminist columnist Katha Pollitt, who described the poems as "brave, elegant, edgy."

Even those feminists who don't necessarily embrace Paglia's world view seem to have inherited the postfeminist tic of offering up autobiography as theory. A 1995 anthology of young feminist thought, *To Be Real*, compiled by Rebecca Walker, is a collection of airy--sometimes even ludicrous--mini-memoirs meant to expand our understanding of female experience. She introduces the material by explaining that she first felt guilty about putting together such an introspective, apolitical book. But, Walker says, she resisted the pressure "to make a book I really wasn't all that desperate to read." An essay by Veena Cabrerros-Sud tells us how empowering it can be to have random fistfights with strangers. And there's the interview with model Veronica Webb titled "How Does a Supermodel Do Feminism?," in which she explains that while the fashion industry may make women feel inadequate, there is a physically deformed little girl she knows "who actually has more self-confidence than I do."

Feminist author Naomi Wolf's most recent book, 1997's *Promiscuities*, draws on what she and her

friends experienced growing up to make the point that female longing is dangerously suppressed in our culture. She argues that the world would be a better place if we celebrated women's sexuality the way so many ancient peoples did. "Confucius, in his Book of Rites," she writes, "held that it was a husband's duty to take care of his wife or concubine sexually as well as financially and emotionally." It seems to have eluded Wolf that ancient Chinese women might have aspired to something better than life as a concubine.

Then there is the matter of *Bust*, the hip magazine of the moment. Created by Debbie Stoller, a 35-year-old who holds a doctorate in women's studies from Yale, and Marcelle Karp, a 34-year-old TV producer, *Bust* is a magazine intentionally written in teenspeak but meant for female readers in their late 20s and early 30s. It was developed as an antidote to magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, which present female sexuality so cartoonishly. However noble the intent, the message is often lost in the magazine's adolescent tone: read about an adult woman's first-time vibrator discoveries or a scintillating account of lust for delivery men in an article titled "Sex with the UPS Guy." Of the magazine's purposely immature tone, Stoller says, "Women have been forced into roles as women and now they're rebelling." But in the end, *Bust* offers a peekaboo view of the world of sex that leaves one feeling not like an empowered adult but more like a 12-year-old sneaking in some sexy reading behind her parents' back.

*Bust*, which began as a photocopied 'zine, is essentially a product of alternative culture's Riot Grrrl movement, an effort by new female bands in the early '90s to reclaim the brash, bratty sense of self-control that psychologists claim girls lose just before puberty. And in many ways, the movement succeeded, as any fan of Sleater-Kinney and even the Spice Girls will tell you. But even in the world of pop music, with the spirit of girl power behind it, the concept of feminism is often misapplied. Look how the label is tossed about: female singers like Meredith Brooks and Alanis Morissette are installed as icons of woman power (alongside real artist-activists like Tori Amos) simply because they sing about bad moods or boyfriends who have dumped them. In the late '60s, when the label was applied more sparingly, no one thought to call Nancy Sinatra a feminist, and yet if she recorded *These Boots Are Made for Walkin'* in 1998, she'd probably find herself headlining the Lilith Fair.

Part of the reason for Riot Grrrl's impact is that it often focused on the issue of childhood sexual abuse. Not only did the songs relate harrowing personal experiences but the band members started 'zines and websites through which teenagers who had been molested could communicate with one another. Riot Grrrl's concerns paralleled those of feminists in the grownup world who, around the same time, also became preoccupied with sexual abuse and self-help (even Steinem got in on the act with her 1992 book, *Revolution from Within*). But many of those grownups, who called themselves feminist therapists, ended up attaching themselves to the bizarre fringes of the sexual-recovery movement. "Women weren't looking at their lives and saying, 'I'm stressed because I'm getting no help at home,' they were saying, 'I'm stressed out because my family molested me in the crib,'" explains social psychologist Carol Tavris. "The feelings of powerlessness many women continued to have in the early '90s got attached to sex-abuse-survivor syndrome." When Tavris debunked self-help books on incest-survivor syndrome in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1993, she received a flood of letters from feminist therapists calling her a betrayer.

If feminism has come to seem divorced from matters of public purpose, it is thanks in part to shifts in the academy. "Women's studies, a big chunk of it at least, has focused increasingly on the symbols of the body and less on social action and social change," explains Leslie Calman, a political-science professor and director of the Center for Research on Women at Barnard College. Moreover, gender studies, the theoretical analysis of how gender identities are constructed, have become increasingly incorporated into women's studies or turned into rival departments of their own. In April, Yale University renamed its Women's Studies Department the Women and Gender Studies Department.

It's not surprising that Old Guard feminists, surveying their legacy, are dismayed by what they see. "All

the sex stuff is stupid," said Betty Friedan. "The real problems have to do with women's lives and how you put together work and family." Says Susan Brownmiller, author of *Against Our Will*, which pioneered the idea that rape is a crime of power: "These are not movement people. I don't know whom they're speaking for. They seem to be making individual bids for stardom." It's easy to dismiss the voices of Old Guard feminists as the typical complaints of leaders nostalgic for their days at center stage. But is *Ally McBeal* really progress? Maybe if she lost her job and wound up a single mom, we could begin a movement again.

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