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**Feminists in the Media**

The biggest issue with feminism is people’s and society’s misunderstanding of the concept. In Roxane Gay’s essay titled *Bad Feminist*, she outlines her own conflicts with the term “feminism” and how one is meant to be portrayed, ultimately stating that the way the media sees how a ‘true’ feminist is supposed to act and look makes herself a “bad feminist” (Gay, “Bad Feminist”). In reality there is no way to know who a ‘true’ feminist is supposed to be, but the ‘wrong’ definition of feminism is being continuously perpetuated by the way the media -- old Hollywood, news outlets, and TV shows -- interprets a feminist. In television and film, feminists are different from the ‘standard’ woman. To analyze this idea there must first be an understanding of what feminism means.

Defining the term “feminism” has proven to be a daunting task for those who identify with it. What is a feminist? There is no definitive answer for that question, because nobody can agree on it. Some people think a feminist is somebody who believes men are inferior to women, some think it is a woman who does not shave and dates other women, some even think of men who have no “self respect” and let women rule their lives. However, Gay proposes that the clearest and most sensical way to think of a feminist is as a person who wants women of all shapes, sizes and colors to have the same opportunities and respect as men (Gay, xi). To be more clear, she isn’t saying every man automatically warrants that respect just by being born and that every woman does not (but should), she is saying that everybody needs to change the way society assigns roles for genders and, in return, decides to tear down the natural beauty within people. “... the idea that there is a right way to be a woman, a right way to be the most essential woman—is ongoing and pervasive,” (Gay, “Bad Feminist”). Of course, men and women are different biologically, but their individual contribution to social structures and their communities cannot be underappreciated just because one is physically stronger than the other. The definition (feminism) is equality, but the idea (a feminist) is blurred.

Gay has an entire section in her book, a collection of essays also titled *Bad Feminist*, dedicated to race and entertainment, but mentions media attention to female and male “social roles” throughout nearly all of her essays (257). Of course from this comes the perpetuation of these roles in the media that we are constantly surrounded by. She essentially says feminists in the media have been labeled as butch, lesbian, man-hating, too hairy and masculine:

Essential feminism suggests anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles,

and a prescribed set of rules for how to be a proper feminist woman, or at least a proper white, heterosexual, feminist woman—hate pornography, unilaterally decry the objectification of women, don’t cater to the male gaze, hate men, hate sex, focus on career, don’t shave. (Gay, “Bad Feminist”)

A term heard quite frequently to put down assertive women is “femi-nazi.” Here being a play on words of the terms ‘feminist’ and ‘nazi’; an obvious call out to the idea that any women with a strong opinion and confident voice who stands up against female injustices is bossy and/or a ‘bitch’ for doing so. Far right-leaning news outlets are infamous for using this term in the stories they write about controversial feminists and the criticism these feminists dish out to conservatives (Conservative, “Outrage”). Similarly, the male feminists who very rarely come to the surface and make known their feminist status, are regarded as feminine and weak for thinking that way. Why? Because it gives insecure men security - to feel like they are superior to people who are different from them.

Ever since film and television surfaced and became a major form of entertainment and news, people have been misrepresented. Besides the feminist, women (in general), black people, people of hispanic descent, all asian people and the LGBTQ+ community have all felt the effects of the stereotypical and/or critical lens that the heteronormative white man views their lifestyles through. In the cartoon TV show *The Simpon’s* Marge Simpson has two older sisters, Patty and Selma, who don’t shave, talk openly about masturbation and are continuously unhappy about the slow lives they live out. In an essay titled *Femininity and the Spinster*, the author, Jo Johnson, outlines how the sisters are defined by their inability to hold relationships with men because of boring personalities.. “Both sisters are culturally coded as stereotypical spinsters; they are dull, drab, and asexual and their ridicule of Homer bestows them with feminist attitudes,” (Johnson, “Femininity”). The characters of Patty and Selma -- lonely, middle-aged, unfeminine women -- are boiled down to manly feminists, once again.

Masculine and feminine are two more tricky words. As aforementioned, society has assigned roles for genders, so the definition of them is inconsistent everywhere. However, here masculine should essentially be defined as most people know it to be, such as having a tough attitude, muscles, desiring sex, being hairy, having a low voice, not being married, etc. “I deny myself certain trappings of femininity as if I do not have the right to such expression when my body does not follow society’s dictates for what a woman’s body should look like,” (Gay, “My Body”) Another common narrative of feminists is the exact opposite of a woman being too manly: a women who simply is not feminine enough.

The majority of films from old Hollywood tell the story of white men and are as well told from the white hetero male perspective. Gay writes, “rarely do our stories get to matter,” and even when the female narrative is told by men, they tend to make women out to be helpless and/or destructful (ix). Alfred Hitchcock, a famous filmmaker from the early and mid 1900’s, was notorious for telling the story of a woman in distress, unable to take care of herself; the femme-fatale type. One of Hitchcock’s films, *Notorious*, features a female protagonist who drinks too much, sleeps with too many people and, because of these things, is labeled a feminist, and therefore not good enough for the male protagonist to want to commit to. Then, when a circle of men talk about her the audience sees one of them get a grotesque look on his face and say “she's had me worried for some time. A woman of that sort.”A women’s confidence to be who she wants is, again, undermined and misunderstood by men as problematic. Still, logically, the only respectful representations of feminists in old cinema are reserved for female filmmakers.

There may be hope yet for representations of feminism in the media to change, but the task is slow. People like the late Maya Deren, one of the most significant American experimental filmmakers, attempted to make this change by using film as a surrogate to get across her ideas of what it is to be a human. She pioneered personal, independent filmmaking and inspired other women to express themselves just as freely as she did (Bershen, “DEREN”). Deren achieves this by investigating the inner workings of herself, not simply as a woman, but as an individual. In a film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, directed by and starring herself, Deren tells the story of a dreaming woman, stuck in a cycle of the same few images and events. She tells the story of a person wandering around in their psyche, a story that both men and women can be apart of, a look into a world where feminists are just known as people.

Feminists are more often being recognized in media as relatable and interesting, a complete turnaround from the roles mentioned above. Two comedians, Illana Glazer and Abbi Jacobsin write a show called *Broad City* where they both star in it as characters inspired by themselves. They live in New York City, are in their mid-20’s and get into ridiculous situations with one another. Neither of them are in a committed relationship (and are not caught up about it) and speak up whenever they see fit. They are exactly what they want to be and are giving women the confidence to do the same. Glazer and Jacobsin could be pioneering a new wave of sane and accepted feminists. Still, there are shows like Lena Dunham’s *Girls,* a proclaimed feminist manifesto, that make Gay “slightly nauseated and exceptionally grateful to be in my thirties,” because the narrative of privileged white women is not a triumphant model of all feminists (56).

But, whether people do or do not find a way to give feminism a fair representation in the media, feminists will likely always hold a negative meaning in some people’s views. Ever since TV and films have emerged, and news outlets have continuously developed, women, and even more intensely, women who identify as feminists, have been misrepresented to fit the stereotypes given unto them by men. When Gay talks critically of this problem, she is speaking about the definition of feminism being blurred, miscommunicated and generally looked down on by men and women alike. However, feminism is firmly about equality for all people and nothing else in exchange.

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