

Book Review

***The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change** By Angela McRobbie**

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Angela McRobbie, a British scholar who has produced a series of enlightening works on feminism, cultural theories, global media, and the culture of young people, such as *Zoot Suits and Second-hand Dress* (1989), *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991), *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994), *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* (1998), and *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (1999), has recently written an inspiring book, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Focusing on the British situation of post-feminism since the early 1990s, McRobbie has tried to provide theoretical frameworks to analyze the phenomenon of post-feminism, relate them to the empirical study on British cases in terms of academic institutional and popular culture, and suggest the concept of "affirmative feminism" to cure the current situation.

Sociological theorists in the line of poststructuralism and especially feminist theories have been sources of theoretical insights for the author, and, based on these, she analyzes more concrete cases such as movies and books that show the trend of post-feminism (*Bridget Jones* in chapter 1), the UK government's "new sexual contract" to young women, popular TV makeover programmes, and the "illegible rage" underlying contemporary femininities.

This book, as the author illustrates, is an attempt to make an intervention which crosses the borders of a range of academic disciplines, gender studies, sociology, cultural, and media studies, with the aim of

¹ Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2008.

both animating further debate about the future of feminism inside and outside the academy, popular culture, and of provoking further rounds of argument.

What concerns the author for the most part, is the phenomenon or trend of post-feminism. Post-feminism, which appeared in most advanced countries after the rise of feminism, is a disappointing phenomena because it undoes what feminist movements have achieved, restrengthening improper gender politics, and deepens gender, class, and global contradictions in gender politics. The British situation as described by the author, in this sense, predicts what might happen in other countries where the first and second waves of feminism are still in progress.

To find the origins of post-feminism, the author traces a double movement in the early 1990s, both in the feminist academy and in the area of popular culture. She argues that there are certain undoing or dismantlings of feminism, but not in the form of re-traditionalization. Here new concepts to give clear ideas of how post-feminism is unfolded help readers understand the concrete picture of post-feminist scenes. Undoing, disarticulation of feminism, backlash, and modernization give the framework for the analysis of post-feminism. Particularly the idea of disarticulation of feminism enlightens anti-feminist backlash, while also showing the politics of articulation.

According to the author, post-feminism as a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined. The author proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism. Using the film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the author shows how what happens in the process saying that feminism is no longer needed, that it is now common sense, and that it is something young women can do without.

The author analyzes the idea of "feminism undone" also in the context of "modernization." Modernization functions through a remit which is apparently advantageous to women, especially young women, to the extent that it can even stand as a substitute for feminism, a kind of faux feminism. She also shows how this breaking up has accelerated especially from the mid-1990s and how young women are now targeted as having a special role to play in this dismantling and modernization process.

Here the author gives special attention to the status, world views, and especially gender-consciousness of young women, which has been a special attention for the author. She gives the current situation of some of the new technologies of young womanhood, the fashion-and-beauty complex. The author argues that there is a specific entanglement of class and gender relations underpinning these programs, the desirable outcome of which is a more glamorized and individualized feminine subjectivity. Also by giving the case of movement of women which is undertaken within the genre of make-over television programs, she delves into the question of how post-feminism affects young women in the UK.

Based on the analysis of post-feminism, the author proceeds to dissect the management of social change and the forms of gender power which operate within an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into "new-old" dependencies and anxieties. In the UK the women's movement in the later 1960s and through the 1970s, argues the author, was strongly influenced by the history of struggles. But now this kind of politics is being actively disarticulated as well, making the process of disarticulation a new kind of regime of gender power, which functions to foreclose on the possibility or likelihood of various expansive intersections and inter-generational feminist transmissions.

Here the analysis of post-feminism is situated within the broader context of social surroundings such as the type of capitalism, and the role of modern state. With respect to capitalism, the author gives an insight that the decline of feminism is offset with the rise of a style of consumer-led capitalism which now incorporates women's issues, which in fact "mainstreams" many of the concerns which previously associate with more separatist feminism. Consumers are described as informed, discerning, nowadays empowered and able to make their own choices, and this particularly applies to women. An analysis of a new sexual contract currently being made available to young women, primarily in the West, to come forward and make good use of the opportunity to work, to gain qualifications, to control fertility and to earn enough money to participate in the consumer culture which in turn will become a defining feature of contemporary modes of feminine citizenship. The rhetoric of the confident female consumer forecloses on the re-emergence of feminism in favor of apathy and de-politicization.

The role of state, argues the author, is also noteworthy in fostering the

growth of post-feminism among young women. What seems to underpin this argument is a suggestion that young women have now won the battle for equality, they have gained recognition as subjects worthy of governmental attention and this has replaced any need for the feminist critique of hegemonic masculinities. This abandonment of critique of patriarchy is a requirement of the new sexual contract, the term of which are established in key institutional sites dedicated to the production of the category of young women. This articulation is present in popular culture as well. "Our" young women are encouraged to conceive of themselves as grateful subjects of modern states and cultures which permit such freedoms unlike repressive or fundamentalist regimes.

What draws special attention and deserves special appreciation is how post-feminism leads to the problem of non-Western gender politics. The author holds that the re-colonizing mechanism in contemporary popular culture re-instates racial hierarchies within the field of femininity by invoking, across the visual field, a norm of nostalgic whiteness. Western sexual freedoms are strategically deployed so as to support notions of civilizational superiority. Then, the issue is how cross-border solidarities between black and white feminist and anti-racist struggle between single mothers and lesbians and gay men are eroded. The author stresses how the disarticulation process is a defining feature of the process of undoing.

In a post-feminist frame, indicates the author, the only logic of affiliation with women living in other, non-Western cultures, is to see them as victims. Past alliances appear to be irretrievably broken, and inter-generational connections are in the same situation.

Then, what is the remedy proposed by the author? It seems that more work needs to be done before the author advances a more perfect solution for post-feminism, which goes beyond the themes of the current volume. However, the author gives an idea of affirmative feminism. By this concept, the author tries to be affirmative and optimistic about the progress in feminism such as gender mainstreaming, third wave feminism. The hint on which she builds the forthcoming strategy of affirmative feminism seems to come from the fact of educational migration which is related to new questions about power and sexuality, gender and desire. The author proposes feminist a classroom as contact zone, and a potential site of feminist affirmation. She concludes that the possibilities opened up in the course of this feminist pedagogy are not necessarily connected with

a critique of the international division of labor and of the chances for work and employment in the large corporations or in global institutions. But the author wants to offer now some reflections on this kind of classroom, where she encounters young women from so many different countries, the great majority of whom as enthusiastic about feminism.

Biographical note: **Chaesung Chun** is an associate Professor at the Department of International Relations in Seoul National University, Korea. He is now a research director of the Korean Political Science Association and the Korean Intelligence Study Association. He belongs to the editorial board of the Korean Association of International Studies. His major fields include International Relations Theory, International History, and Security Studies. Major articles include Theoretical Approaches to Alliance: Implications on the R.O.K. & U.S. Alliance, The Cold War and Its Transition for Koreans: Their Meaning from A Constructivist Viewpoint, and Hans Morgenthau on Realist Normative theory, Cold War Structure, and some implications on inter-Korean Relations.