Chapter I

New "New Women" in the Postfeminist Age

In 1982, the *New York Times Magazine*'s cover story "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation" written by Susan Bolotin introduced the term "postfeminism" for the first time. As Bolotin reported, the young women interviewed in the article refused to identify themselves as feminists, whom they deemed as upset, embittered and men-hating women. Bolotin concluded that the new generation's rejection of feminist theory marked the arrival of postfeminism. Since then, myriad discussions of this emerging concept and its relationship with feminism have been thriving in the arena of both academic studies and popular culture. In spite of frequently impassioned debates over what exactly constitutes postfeminism, this fundamental question has not yet been fully answered.

As the term "postfeminism" originated from within the media and the postfeminist phenomenon maintains its cultural presence through the media, its language has become a pronounced feature of popular culture, especially for the past 15 years.[1] Indeed, postfeminist sentiment has been pervasive in the mass media throughout the late 1990s to the

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[1] See Sarah Gamble, "Postfeminism," in Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 52. Also, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture" in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, ed., *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007) 11. Diane Negra in her book *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009) reiterates the same statement. 2,5.

present, ranging from magazines, chick-lit, chick flicks to TV shows. This thesis examines the construction of postfeminism in two prime-time US television series, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) along with its film version (2008) and *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), based on postfeminist theories, especially Amanda Lotz's four characteristics of postfeminist discourse and Rosalind Gill's elements of postfeminist sensibility. Next, I will explore how these two series problematize their postfeminist discourses. My attempt is firstly to investigate whether this new theory of postfeminism indicates a triumphant success of women's movement or the decline or even "backlash" of feminist endeavors. Also, as Lotz marks, "the emergence of postfeminism unquestionably affects male roles and depictions" (331). Since most critics mainly focus on the representations of female characters, not much attention is paid to observe how men are represented on TV and how their relationships with women are presented. Hence this thesis will provide a preliminary examination on the representations of men in postfeminist TV series. Do the new images of men and masculinity on TV reflect the latest gender power relations? Or, since the target audiences of postfeminist programs are women, are these male roles created to meet female viewers' fantasy? All in all, this thesis aims to find out whether there is some common ground for postfeminist media culture or whether it is as Sarah Gamble describes, that postfeminism is merely "an amorphous thing" (43).

From Feminism to Postfeminism

Modern feminism begins with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. It is commonly recognized as the first systematic and substantial feminist treatise. The historical development of feminism is usually divided into three periods and its apparent pattern of rise and fall has led to the "wave" analogy. First-wave feminism dates from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s. The resurgence of feminist activism dating from the 1960s is marked as second-wave feminism. While the "second-wave" is still in existence now, the third-wave feminism has emerged since the early 1990s.

The principal concern of the first-wave feminism is "women's attainment of equality with men" (Pilcher and Whelehan 52). Feminists call for legislation changes, such as the right to vote, access to education and professions, legal rights of property ownership and rights in marriage and divorce. The second-wave feminists devote to the women's liberation movement, which sought to unite women through a shared patriarchal oppression. The divergent views of the second wave result in four subcategories. Liberal feminists center on "integrating women into the public sphere" and seek legal equality with men (Lotz 32). Radical feminists emphasize that "women constitute a sex-class" and argue that relations between men and women provide "the primary site of oppression in society" (Lotz 32). Having developed from radical feminism, cultural feminists appeal to "the essential sameness among women" and aim to establish all-female organizations to ease gender oppression (Lotz

32). Socialist or Marxist feminists attribute women's oppression to capitalism.

The genesis of the third-wave feminism is based on a resistance to the second wave. Although the younger generation of women acknowledges the legacy of second wave-feminism, they also perceive its limitations. It, they argue, pertains exclusively to white, middle class women and has become "a prescriptive movement which alienates women by making them feel guilty about enjoying aspects of individual self-expression such as cosmetics, fashion" and sexuality (Pilcher and Whelehan 169). Most third wavers assert that the political and historical conditions in which second-wave feminism emerged no longer exist and thus they do not correspond with the experiences of today's women. Third-wave feminism is not only prevalent in the academic sphere, but is also present in popular cultural forms such as movies and TV series. Contrary to the second-wave feminists who blame the media for its being controlled by patriarchal power structures, third-wave feminists realize their own politics through the mass media and popular culture. Since it is a fairly new movement, it is still in the process of constructing its own language. Lotz broadly categorizes the movement into three camps. The first one is reactionary third-wave feminism. Feminists of this group, such as Naomi Wolf, criticize the second-wave as "victim feminism"—where women are encouraged to see themselves helplessly oppressed by patriarchal ideology. Another branch is the women-of-color feminism, which stresses the different influences of race and ethnicity. Accentuating the diversity of women from

various backgrounds and heritages, these feminists "advance understandings of feminism in relation to the multiple axes of domination under which many suffer" (Lotz 36). The third camp is postfeminism. It focuses on "finding ways to build a unity among diverse women and expand it to understand other factors defining identity," including sexual orientation and class, as well as incorporating other theoretical perspectives such as post-structuralism and post-modernism (Lotz 39).

Theorizing Postfeminism

The theorizations and conceptualizations of postfeminism have been pluralistic due to their lack of definite ground from the outset. Consequently, the understanding of postfeminism varies from one person to another. On the whole, it is commonly perceived in three diverse ways: as a backlash against feminism, a myth, or as a historical transformation.

The definition of postfeminism in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "an ethos of a period following the feminism of 1960s and 1970s, characterized by further development of or reaction against feminism…." This view seems to adopt Susan Faludi's influential critique of postfeminism in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), in which she considers it a devastating reaction against second-wave feminism. She points out that through the incorrect messages spread by media and popular culture, women are readily persuaded to believe feminism is unfashionable, outdated and thus not worthy of serious consideration (xviii). As far as Faludi is concerned, the prefix "post" does not suggest that

"women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it;" instead, it means feminist issues are so outdated that the younger generation does not even care about them (72).

Mary Douglas Vavrus, similarly, asserts that postfeminism is "an essentialist ideology that privileges individualism" and the interests of a relatively small group of women who are elite, white and straight, "at the expense of a collective politics of diverse women's needs" (168-69). Vavrus, like Faludi, worries that postfeminist hegemony may discourage political activism around feminist issues and consequently "fails to address the needs and concerns of a majority of women" (184). In concert with Vavrus and Faludi's argument, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra believe that the emergence of postfeminism dismantles "our sense of a shared academic/ activist feminist community" (109). Yet they all seem to simplify this issue because postfeminism does not rule out feminist concerns at all; rather, it expresses its assertion in a more sophisticated, sometimes even contradictory way. It ridicules feminism while at the same time naturalizes the gains of feminist activism. For instance, a successful career woman may complain that her accomplishment at work is what hinders her to get married. On the one hand, she is too busy to have social life because she sacrifices all her leisure time for work. On the other hand, old-fashioned men cannot accept the fact that women are more successful at work than they are. In addition, due to the negative impression of ambitious career women, some men are intimidated by these women and thus not consider them potential wives.

Vicki Coppock, Deene Haydon and Ingrid Richter in *The Illusion of Post-feminism: New Women, Old Myth* (1995) maintain that postfeminism is a myth. They claim that postfeminism creates a false impression that gender equality has been achieved so that feminism is made redundant and passé while women are still suffering from continuing discontent and oppression as a result of imbalanced power relations. Though it holds true that the claims of postfeminism can be contested, I think the authors of the book negate women's ability to be active participants. They merely see women as vulnerable and manipulated victims under patriarchal systems. To find out whether women are unconsciously duped by mass media or willingly conform to the norm requires a more subtle analysis to estimate women's current situation in contemporary society.

Likewise, Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez in their essay "The Myth of Postfeminism" (2003) express the same notion. They first point out four popular postfeminist claims: (1) decreased support for feminism; (2) growing antifeminist sentiment; (3) irrelevant women's movement; (4) women's refusal to be identified as feminists. They then argue that this impression is generated by the media because there is no statistical evidence from the public to support it. Through their comprehensive research collecting a wide range of data from 1980 to 1999, they overthrow these claims and conclude that "postfeminism is currently a myth [since] women continue to support feminism and find it relevant in their lives" (899). Without a doubt, media has played a crucial role in

constructing the ideas and conceptualization of postfeminism. As a matter of fact, it is exactly the significant influence of media which makes a total denial of media intervention impossible.

Contrary to the aforementioned critics, in the late 1980s Judith Stacey presents a more positive attitude toward postfeminist phenomenon and provides a more flexible way to explain it. She does not view the emergence of postfeminism as an indication of the death of feminism; instead, it absorbs and transforms aspects of feminism as “an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second-wave feminism” (8). It depicts a postmodern moment when women need to respond to the new opportunities and difficulties of postindustrial society. That is to say, “the diffusion of postfeminist consciousness signifies both the achievements of, and challenges for, modern feminist politics” (8). Although I agree with most of Stacey’s statement, I do not think postfeminism is free from political concerns. Put it in another way, perhaps the seemingly depoliticized strategy is a trick of postfeminism to reinforce its political intent. Among all, the use of irony is one of the most distinctive features, which is widely deployed in the media. Postfeminist media sometimes expresses sexist, misogynic or homophobic sentiments in an ironised form to subtly comment on these homogenized practices.

Ann Brooks in her book *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*

(1997) believes that this new emerging theory should be understood as “a useful frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism” (1). It represents pluralism and difference, and it challenges “what has been identified as ‘hegemonic’ feminism with its roots clearly located in the Anglo-American influences so powerfully in the conceptualization of second wave feminism” (4). The concept of “post,” for Brooks, does not mean dead or over but signifies “a process of ongoing transformation and change” (1). By providing a political agenda and theoretical positions focused on difference and identity, Brooks points out:

> Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is…not a depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism’s conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and conceptual concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructualism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. In the process postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of

> feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalized, diasporic and colonized cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminism. (4)

In the same vein, Michele Barrett believes that the shift from emphasizing universal equality to difference is what replaces second-wave feminism with postfeminism. Differences of race, social class, age and even gender should be taken into consideration when dealing with questions of subjectivity and identity. She argues that the prefix “post” refers to both “beyond” and “coming from it” (50).

In my opinion, to view postfeminism as a transformation of the second-wave feminism is most convincing because it encompasses all the crucial factors and elaborates on the definition of this term to the fullest extent. In the latest monograph on this subject, *Postfeminism: Cultural Contexts and Theories* (2009), the authors of the book also draw extensively on Brook’s argument to further define this theory. Perhaps it will be difficult to put it into practice in terms of achieving political agency and engaging in social activism, yet it has been actively practiced and partly realized in the context of popular culture. It is also useful to understand the developments of contemporary American television series as they indeed reflect or resonate with this theoretical perspective in several aspects, such as flexibility of gender, articulating struggles of contemporary women and the changing relationship between the sexes.

After almost two decades since its first appearance, postfeminism still remains as a contested term. Another way to comprehend postfeminist construction is that instead of looking for a singular description which best defines postfeminism, it is better to acknowledge that there are many kinds of postfeminism as Diane Negra claims in her 2009 monograph *What a Girl Wants*(4). For example, Sarah Projansky details five categories of postfeminist discourses in the popular press. First, there is a *linear postfeminism* which suggests the contemporary era has moved from feminism to postfeminism. In other words, feminism has become a historical term, hence not in active practice any more. Second, *backlash postfeminism*, with antifeminist sentiment, rejects the previous problematic "victim" feminism. Third, *equality postfeminism* "consists of narratives about feminism's 'success' in achieving gender 'equity' and having given women 'choice'" (67). Fourth, pro-sex feminism "both rejects an antisex feminism and embraces a feminism focused on individuality and independence" (67). The fifth category is men's postfeminism, which suggests men can be better feminists than women.

Other than that, Barrett suggests that the meanings of postfeminism are better understood separately in terms of popular post-feminism and academic post-feminism. The former is about reinstating femininity which is absent in feminism, and "represents the successful combination of traditional feminine good looks with a new exercise of women's power" (48). The latter incorporates ideas of post-structuralist theories that challenge

rational modernity and Western feminism and draws on a reconceptualization of the *self*, subjectivity, identity, society, politics, history and the performativity in the text (51-55, italic original). Suzanna Danuta Walters also argues that "postfeminism has emerged both as a descriptive popular category and as a tentative theoretical movement loosely associated with the postmodern and poststructuralist challenge to 'identify politics'" (117). Although postfeminism is divided into two categories, as Walter contends, these two versions have many points of overlap (117). Namely, they are occasionally interchangeable because the typical representations of academic postfeminism sometimes can be found in popular culture as well.

In response to these scholars, rather than adopting one category to illustrate a specific text, I propose to integrate all aspects so as to better understand this postfeminist phenomena. Indeed, postfeminism is a problematic term due to its various meanings. It is precisely "the collective ambivalence [which] ensures that postfeminism is wide-ranging, versatile, and influential" (Projansky 87). Any attempt to stick to a single or narrow definition of postfeminism will fail to reflect its dynamics. Likewise, encompassing all contrasting points without further observation will not result in a valid analysis. To yield a more satisfying research, it requires a more in-depth examination to see how these seemingly contradictory themes are interrelated to construct postfeminist discourse. Hence, I will delineate the commonly recognized characteristics of postfeminism in the following section.

Admittedly, there is little consensus on the precise definition of postfeminism. As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan in *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (2004) make it clear in the first place when introducing this questionable concept: "it must be stated that there is no agreement about how post-feminism can be defined and consequently definitions essentially contradict each other in what they say about the term" (105). Yet despite the ceaseless disputes among scholars regarding this controversial theoretical thinking, postfeminism is generally associated with generational discontent, the outdatedness of feminism and its place within both popular and academic discourses. Postfeminists perceive that the goals of the second-wave feminist struggles have been achieved. We are now living in a world where equality and opportunity are given to both men and women "in all aspects of economic, social, professional domestic and political life" (Isbister 5). They oppose to see women as victims at the hands of all-powerful patriarchal system and capitalism because they believe "women's subordination and oppression has been resolved through equal opportunities initiatives and sex discrimination legislation" (Coppock, Hayton, and Richter 7). In other words, "postfeminism acknowledges, or even takes for granted, the positive gains of women's liberation in certain areas such as access to employment and education while denying the need for continued feminist action" (Dow 92).

Despite postfeminism lacks shared understandings and remains as "a product of

assumptions," there are some central ideas adhering to this term.[2] Based on Probyn's and Ouellette's notion, Isbister mentions that

> a prevailing characteristic of popular postfeminism is a trend towards women reclaiming traditional ideals of femininity, following a presumption that the ideals of feminist politics have now been met, opening up a perceived flexibility of subject positioning as a matter of individual choice rather than political necessity. (6)

Freedom of choice is one of the most prominent features in postfeminist discourse. Women not only have the freedom to dress up but also a wide variety of career options. If they wish, they can even choose to stay home and raise children. Moreover, the close association with fashion and commercialization of a new look for women also make postfeminists distinct from feminists. In an attempt to reverse the characterization of second-wave feminists as unstylish, they pay much attention to fashion and celebrate their femininity. In a sense, postfeminists aim to put "femininity" back into "feminism." They also actively quest for love and enjoy sexual liberation. To summarize it in Tasker and Negra's words, postfeminism "emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and

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[2] See Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richer's *The Illusions of Postfeminism: New Women, Old Myths* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995) 8, and Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist culture" in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, ed., *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007) 1.

particularly sexual empowerment" (2).

In addition, Isbister, and many other critics also link popular postfeminism with consumption. As Isbister notes,

> popularised postfeminism is dominating consumer cultures across the western world, projecting images of women in successful careers, as economically independent and taking control of their lives—enjoying new found freedoms and choices in personal arena…They are coupled with images of consumer success (the purchase of high fashion and beauty) as a means of achieving transformation into empowered femininity and have become the new idealized image of female subjectivity. (8)

Moreover, they value individualism and differences between women and oppose to collective action (Vavrus 82). They focus on finding ways to build unity among diverse groups of women and expand it to understand other factors defining identity, such as sexual orientation and class. In other words, postfeminist perspectives seek to understand how gender, ethnicity and other factors of subjectivity affect the way people experience identity and interact with one another. Yet the focus on differences not only has influenced the way one looks at women, but the way how men are viewed. Postfeminist theory is also applied to understand how men react to this new trend and to observe masculinity.

In the age of postfeminism, according to Salzman, Mararhia and O'Reilly, "men have

been forced to openly and publicly embrace their emotional sides" (125). Dissimilar with their counterparts in earlier days, they emphasize "sensibility and sensuality over power and bravado" (124). The trend of "metrosexuality" is growing. According to the originator of this term, Mark Simpson, and some self-described metroseuxals, a typical metrosexual is a young man who has "money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis…" (quoted in Salzman, Mararhia and O'Reilly 54). He is at ease in his own skin, whether his color or sexuality, and accepts "differences between people and the sexes" (quoted in Salzman, Mararhia and O'Reilly 58). Seeing metrosexuality as an evolution in man's adaptation to the modern world, Salzman, Mararhia and O'Reilly further note that metrosexuals "are sufficiently confident in their masculinity to be willing to embrace their feminine sides—and to do so publicly" (55-56). Metrosexuals can be emotional, indulgent, caring, appreciate beauty, and enjoy the company of friends and lovers and are not afraid to share their intimate feelings with others. In addition, "they've found greater scrutiny of their *out*sides" (125 emphasis original). To put it more clearly, they are more aware of fashion and more conscious of their looks.

In terms of the perception of masculinity in postfeminism, "warrior virtue" is no longer adequate to define masculinity. Mattia mentions that the archetypal post-feminist masculinity is "a reconfigured fantasy mixing the traditional phallic hero with the sensitive new men" (24). In some radical cases, men find new roles appearing for themselves—at the

margin of the successes of women (Salzman, Mararhia and O'Reilly, 121). For example, there are increasing male assistants working for their female executives. Opposite to the traditional work structure, more high-ranking positions are taken by women and men become subordinates.

The influence of postfeminism has changed the roles of men in contemporary society, so are the portrayals of both men and women in the media. The following section will focus on the impact of postfeminist theory on media representations, especially televisions. It will first introduce the main ideas of postfeminist TV characteristics which will be used for later textual analysis. Next, a general introduction of the target series—*Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty* will be given. Lastly, the significance of male presentations in both shows will be mentioned.

Televising Postfeminism

McRobbie argues that post-feminism is most clearly seen in so-called feminist media products, such as the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), or the TV series *Sex and the City*, and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002). Indeed, since the late 1990s many television series have presented audience "new, new women" who are in sharp contrast with their predecessors (Lotz 106). A typical postfeminist character on TV is recognized as an independent, upwardly-mobile and career-orientated woman working in a supposed men's world. For instance, in *Ally McBeal,* the title character works in a law firm and break into a professional

domain that used to be male-exclusive.

In this thesis, I select *Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty* as primary texts for analysis because they best exhibit the constantly changing nature of postfeminism. Undoubtedly, many scholars regard *Sex and the City* a conspicuous example of popular postfeminism.[3] Although *Ugly Betty* has certain postfeminist features as well, I find that its unconventional representations of the lead female protagonist and some core characters have the potential to further theorize postfeminist discourse. As Linda Beail suggests, “cultural representations are crucial because nothing exists outside of representation—reality is always already socially constructed and mediated” (99). The depiction of women in television shows gives us clues about the gender roles and norm in the current society. That explains why “popular culture matters because it becomes the public space and raw material for… negotiation of values, identities and ideals….”(Beail 99). In this sense, does the popularity of *Ugly Betty* suggest a transformation, or more radically, a “backlash” of postfeminism? In order to answer these questions, I will explore both academic essays and public forums on the Internet to see how feminist scholars and audiences react to these programs.

Adapted from Candice Bushnell’s chick-lit novel of the same title, the various episodes from *Sex and the City* the TV series explore differences among women through diversified

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[3] See Amanda Lotz, “Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes.” *Feminist Media Studies* 1.1 (2001): 105-21. Also, Geogina Isbister’s “Sex and the City: A Postfeminist Fairy Tale” at http://www.unisa.edu.au/com/minisites/csaa/files/Isbister_edited_version.pdf.

viewpoints of four female characters, who are all white, single, straight, and professional in their thirties or forties. In most cases, each episode raises an issue and then delineates how these four women respond to or negotiate differently with the situation. As its name suggests, issues of sex and dating in New York City construct the main plots in this series. It examines the lives of professional women living in a cosmopolitan city in the late 1990s and how changing roles and expectations of women affect the lives of the characters. The show was broadcast from 1998 until 2004, with a total of six seasons. Over its course of the six seasons, *Sex and the City* has won seven Emmy Awards as well as eight Global Golden Awards, including one for the Best TV series. The film version of the same title was released in 2008 with its sequel coming in 2010.

Two years after the final season of *Sex and the City*, *Ugly Betty* was premiered on ABC in September, 2006. While white and upper-middle-class women remain dominant in many TV series, the title character in *Ugly Betty* is a Latino young girl from an unprivileged family. This series is an adaptation of the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (*I'm Betty, the Ugly One*).[4] It depicts both a homely and good-natured Mexican American girl's family life in Queens and her incongruous job at a fashion magazine in New York City. It also explores issues of class, gender, and race. Since its debut, it has won two Global Golden Awards and three Primetime Emmy Awards. In 2007, the title star America Ferrera was listed as one of

[4] See David Gauntlett's Media, *Gender and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2008) 68-69 and Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty_la_fea

the 100 most influential people in *Time* magazine for her successful defiance against stereotypes with the show. Gay awareness groups also approve the show's positive reception and representation of homosexuality. This show has been distributed to over 130 countries and similar versions have been produced globally.

Despite the fact that most postfeminist sitcoms place women on the central stage, the portrayal of men in *Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty* is significant as well because it has an enormous influence on how men are perceived. Unlike a majority of popular TV shows of earlier times such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), which aim to defend men's leadership within the family, the "Real Man" in today's culture is "expected to be flawed, or at least to show some kind of vulnerability"(Salzman, Mararhia and O'reilly 61). Therefore, other than examining the changing representations of women in postfeminist era, this thesis will also delve into the shifting roles of men in contemporary society as presented in these two series.

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter has provided a literature review of the diverse theories of postfeminism and their influences on media representation, especially in American context, followed by general description of the visual texts analyzed—*Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty*. Next chapter is a textual analysis of both programs to highlight two postfeminist characteristics identified by Lotz. Although a considerable number of scholars have touched upon the issue of postfeminism, they mainly

talk about popular culture as a whole. Lotz is one of the very few critics who focuses specifically on contemporary American TV series and provides insightful theoretical tools for further assessment. She proposes four widespread and salient attributes. One of them is an attempt to deconstruct the binaries of gender and sexuality and view "these categories as flexible and indistinct" (12). Another attribute is an illustration of contemporary struggles posed and examined within these series. This chapter analyzes these two target series based on the above characteristics to examine their postfeminist discourses. In addition, I argue that contradiction is the underlying motif in all postfeminist characteristics. As a result of this examination, it was shown that both shows always strengthen and criticize the social norms at the same time. However, as these two series proceed, they gradually shift from this ambiguous stand to favor traditional values. No matter how promising they look in terms of realizing postfeminist ideals in the beginning, these original ideas are inevitably twisted over time.

The third chapter discusses how postfeminist perspectives affect representations of men and women and their relationships in these two series. In the final chapter of her book *Gender and the Media* (2007), Gill suggests that postfeminism is best understood as a specific kind of sensibility, which is made up of a number of interrelated features. Several themes related to the postfeminist relationship between the sexes, such as women's changing role from sex object to desiring sexual subject and femininity as a bodily property, are

selected to analyze some of the main characters in both shows. The concluding chapter reiterates and highlights the critical postfeminist characteristics of these American TV series derived from the analyses of the previous chapters. Further application of this thesis is suggested in the end of this chapter.

Twenty years after its inception, numerous books and essays have adopted postfeminism as a basic theoretical ground to develop critical arguments or conduct academic researches. It indicates that postfeminist phenomenon can no longer be seen as a short-time vogue. On the contrary, it has become an influential issue that deserves more in-depth studies. Since nowadays many people understand feminism through popular culture, it is important to know how women and feminism are depicted on television.[5] Television series therefore become the products of the negotiation between the expectations of modern women and social intervention. They do not simply reflect everyday life but participate in creating it (Beail 99). As Adorno points out, mass media is a multilayered structure which consists of "various layers of meanings superimposed on one another…" It aims to enthrall the spectators on various psychological levels simultaneously (164). What need to heed is that the hidden message of the television series may be more significant than the overt, "since this

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[5] See Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, "Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism," in Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley ed., *Feminism in Popular Culture* (New York: Berg, 2006) 2. And Linda Beail's "The City, the Suburbs, and Stars Hallow: The Return of the Evening Soap Opera," in Goren, Lilly J. ed. *You've Come a Long Way, Baby: Women, Politics, and Popular Culture* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2009) 93-114.

hidden message will escape the controls of consciousness, will not be 'looked through'…but is likely to sink into the spectator's mind" (Adorno 165). That is to say, the seemingly promising postfeminist media may in fact contain rather traditional values which aim to consolidate patriarchal ideology. Through the examination and analysis of media representations in these two contemporary popular American TV series, this thesis hopes to contribute, however modestly, to the fields of cultural studies and feminism.

Chapter II

Postfeminist Representations of Women:

Deconstructing Gender Binarism and Representing Contemporary Struggles for Women in *Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty*

This chapter will mainly draw on Amanda D. Lotz's postfeminist attributes of American television series to elucidate postfeminist discourse in *Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty.* In her dissertation, "Postfeminist Television Criticicism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes," Lotz proposes four characteristics of postfeminism as theoretical tools to explore contemporary TV series: narratives exploring women's various relationships to power; depictions of different feminist solutions; attempts to deconstruct gender and sexual binarism; and illustrations of contemporary women's struggles. With regards to the first two attributes, in *Sex and the City* the four characters' diverse perspectives on the same issue offer viewers various points for identification. That the show denies a monolithic viewpoint but tolerates different perspectives highlights the significance of pluralism, difference and individualism. However, as the foursome appears similar in age, race, and class, the absence of representing other ethnicity and classes makes the first two characteristics proposed by Lotz somehow less applicable. On the contrary, *Ugly Betty* further develops these two attributes and extends it beyond the scope of white and upper-middle class. It successfully portrays how Betty, a Latina, Wilhelmina, an African

American, and Amanda, a Caucasian working girl face different kinds of difficulty because of their backgrounds and how they strive to overcome these difficulties.

Since the first two characteristics are less significant in *Sex and the City,* this chapter aims to examine both series based on the last two characteristics, which are presented recurrently within the shows. It ought to be noted that, as Lotz contends, no series or a particular episode should be labeled as exclusively “postfeminist,” nor do they have to contain all the features. The significance of exploring these postfeminist perspectives is to provide a theoretical lens to look into “the complexity of recent female representations and their resonance with contemporary audiences” (Lotz 115). To make the postfeminist discourse of both programs more well-defined, I will supplement the analysis with arguments of other theorists such as Judith Bulter, Bonnie Dow, Stephen Gennaro, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra to strengthen my argument that these series exhibit postfeminist construction.

Before going into detailed textual analysis, I want to point out that what Angela McRobbie calls “double entanglement” or what Stephen Gennaro calls “dualism” is the underlying motif in all the aforementioned postfeminist characteristics. It is this ambivalence that “stands as a critique of social norms” as well as “reinforcement for those same norms” it is criticizing (Gennaro 248). Lotz’s positive comments and other scholars’ suspicious attitudes toward the postfeminist media culture, in fact, reflect its “having-it-both-ways fashion” (Gill 248). Therefore, it is more constructive to take both

sides of the argument into account. As a matter of fact, a trademark of postfeminism is the vagueness of its real intent. It does not wish to offer a unitary perspective, but allows viewers to have their own interpretations on the basis of different cultural backgrounds. However, once it is presented through mass media and popular culture, it is impossible to keep its original perspective completely intact. It is true that both shows have taken a big step forward from the conventional ideology. Yet, with closer examination, it becomes clear that they gradually shift towards the traditional side no matter how slyly they try to stand in a neutral position. This chapter will first illustrate how these two postfeminist attributes are adopted in both series. Then it will point out some critical aspects to show the limits of these programs in terms of fully realizing the spirit of postfeminism.

Deconstructing Gender and Sexual Binarism

Resonant with Judith Butler's theoretical concept of gender performativity, both shows tend to regard categories of sex and gender as indistinctive and flexible. Issues of gender constructions and the "mutable nature of gender and sexuality" are frequently addressed in both programs (Lotz 116). One episode of *Sex and the City*, "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl," (3:4) best exemplifies the fluid nature of gender identity. It begins with an exhibition of drag queen photographs in Charlotte's (played by Kristin Davis) art gallery. When asked what inspired him to take these shots, the photographer replies, "I feel we have dual powers within each of us. Men can be very female, and female can be very male. Gender's an illusion."

Indeed, later in this episode we learn that Miranda (played by Cynthia Nixon) is having trouble finding her femininity whereas the photographer is helping Charlotte invoke her inner masculinity. Donning a man's suit, the prudish Charlotte takes the first move to kiss the photographer, an act which she would never have done as a "woman." Butler's concluding remark in *Gender Trouble* (1990) provides a reasonable explanation for Charlotte's behavior: "Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity…; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 191, italics original). In this sense, Charlotte is made to be aware of the fact that she is not born naturally as a woman despite all her extremely feminine attributes. Rather, she "performs" a woman's role in order to meet the socially constructed expectations.

Another main plot in this episode underscores the instability of sexuality. In the ice skating scene Carrie (played by Sarah Jessica Parker) is shocked to know that her date's previous major relationships include one with a man. Sean is obviously quite masculine when in heterosexual relationships and yet in homosexual affairs he shifts to perform the feminine role. Much to Carrie's surprise, Sean is not bothered by his sexual orientation at all. At a birthday party, Carrie realizes that not only the bisexual Sean is flexible with his gender identity, so is his gay ex-boyfriend who is currently involved in another homosexual relationship. Shortly, Carrie also discovers that a female friend at the party was married to a man before she got married again to a woman. In her voice-over she comments, "This party

is a platter of sexual orientation." As Carrie claims repeatedly throughout the series that everything can happen in New York, this kind of flexible sexual orientation is not a big deal. However, after participating in a game of blurred gender boundary for a little while-- two people either with same or opposite sex have to kiss each other when a spinning bottle stops and aims at both parties-- she flees away from this "Alice-confused-sexual-orientation land." Instead of interpreting Carrie's hasty leave after kissing a girl during the game "underlines the series' abjection of female homoeroticism" (54) as Mandy Merak contends, I believe that the protagonist's rather conservative reaction is a clever strategy used to satisfy all viewers with different backgrounds. The primary goal of this episode is to demonstrate the fluidity of sexuality. Perhaps this notion is accepted and even welcomed by some urban habitants who have "seen it all" and considered nothing strange as Carrie states in the beginning of this episode. Suburban residents and, in fact, the majority of urban people find their way for identification with Carrie's suspicious attitude and her retreat from the multisexual world in the end of the show.

Ugly Betty further deconstructs the binary systems of gender and sexuality. The unstable nature of gender identity is vividly described in "Grin and Bear It" (2:4). Despite his rather feminine disposition, Betty's nephew, Justin (played by Mark Indelicato) is capable of "playing" a macho guy after his father's death. In memory of the dead father, Justin discards all his former interests in fashion design and turns to embrace his father's hobbies,

such as playing basketball, car driving and dating girls. He also changes his outfit from an artistic look to rock'n roll style. His sudden change proves that "gender is [...] a norm that can never be fully internalized" because it is only "a constituted social temporality" (Butler 191-92). In the end of this episode, Justin swings back to his original taste after a heart-to-heart mother-son talk. It is clear to see that Justin's story exemplifies Butler's theory of performativity. While his father's death makes Justin copy the former's lifestyle as a way to remember him, later his mother's consolation encourages him to embrace his earlier and perhaps natural disposition. Justin's story proves that gender is not a fixed category. On the contrary, it is shaped and highly affected by social influences, especially by family members.

Perhaps the most interesting character in this regard is Alexis (played by Rebecca Romijn). Tired of being confined to his biological sex, he undergoes a surgical operation to transform his body into a woman's. Her words to her brother Daniel (played by Eric Mabius) reveal that anatomical sex and gender identity are not always well integrated: "I felt like I've been dropped in the wrong skin. This [transsexual surgery] is about correcting a mistake" ("Brothers" 1:15). Nonetheless, Alexis' gender identity is not completely fixed after she physically becomes a woman. When his/her ex-girlfriend shows up in the office, Alexis kisses her as her ex-boyfriend to wrap up their relationship ("A Tree Grows in Guadalajara" 1: 22). Another example is that, opposite to her former experience of being a

woman inside a man's body, he (as Alex) feels so confused with his female body when he loses the memory of being Alexis after a car accident. Consequently, he is unable to behave like a woman naturally but has to learn how to "act" like one ("Grin and Bear It" 2:4). These incidents reinforce Butler's argument of the mutability of gender construction.

As illustrated above, I agree with Lotz that a growing trend in primetime TV series is to play upon realizing the concept of gender performativity, although there is no direct evidence proving that screen writers have adopted Butler's theoretical approach to produce these programs. This is a good example of showing how academic theories of postfeminism are fulfilled in postfeminist popular culture, whether it is a mere coincidence or profound influence. By highlighting the diversity and choices available in the lives of these characters with regards to all types of relationships, these episodes suggest that identities are not fixed and sexuality is more complex than the divisions of "men" and "women" or "straight" and "gay."

Since both programs accept people with flexible gender identities and sexual orientation, they acknowledge the existence of non-heterosexual groups and consider them normal. In *Ugly Betty*, not being upset with his apparent lack of manhood, the Suarez family is very comfortable with Justin's feminine disposition. Straight characters like Charlotte have no difficulties hanging out with a bunch of lesbian friends and Samantha even once has a relationship with one. As for queer characters, they seem to fit perfectly in heterosexual

society. They have no problems living and working with straight people. What's more, homosexuals have an edge in some fields such as fashion industry. An episode, "Petra-Gate" (1:20), depicts that a clothing designer has to feign homosexuality in order to get attention for his designs.

However, in *Sex and the City*, queer representations are merely marginal. Their only role is to be women's best companions, such as Stanley (played by Willie Garson) for Carrie and Anthony (played by Mario Cantone) for Charlotte. The devoid of their individual personalities makes them look as a homogeneous group without much dynamics. *Ugly Betty* does a better job in this regard because the gay character Marc (played by Michael Urie) appears as a round character. Unlike a decoration whose function is simply to add some flavor to the show, Marc is vividly portrayed as a person who has his own distinctive ambition and personality. Besides, this show is sensitive enough to not over-romanticize the supposedly gay-friendly position. One episode "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (1:18) narrates Marc's assiduous efforts to hide his real sexual orientation from his mother. It ends up with her strong disapproval ("I have no interest in knowing the real you") when Marc finally tells her the truth. In effect, Marc's depressing story is shared by some non-heterosexual people who have experienced similar heart-breaking scenarios. There are also some scenes depicting how Alexis, as a transsexual, is humiliated by people around her. In season four, one of the main plots is dealing with how Justin adjusts himself in high school. He becomes

a target to be made fun of at school because he is not "man" enough. These incidences reveal that even in the 21st century when most people are open-minded, there are still conservative persons defying homosexuality and people who do not fall into the stereotypical roles of men and women.

Moreover, although queerness has been an essential part in both sitcoms, they mainly focus on gay representations. The regular homosexual characters in the shows are all male. So far there is no episode dealing with lesbians in *Ugly Betty.* In *Sex and the City*, the presence of lesbians is rather sporadic and ephemeral. The want of lesbian appearances on TV indicates that women are not as tolerated as men when it comes to questions of gender identity. In other words, Tasker and Negra's charge that "postfeminism absolutely rejects lesbianism in all but its most guy-friendly forms…" is proven accurate. Although both series acknowledge the normality of flexible gender identities, the imbalanced representation on men and women shows that there is still room to fight for equal right between the sexes.

Illustrating Contemporary Struggles

Another postfeminist attribute proposed by Lotz is "the way situations illustrating the contemporary struggles faced by women and feminists are raised and examined within series" (116). As Lotz notes, these series deal with feminist issues "both in the construction of problems and proposal of solutions that indicates a specifically postfeminist depiction" (116). I agree with Tasker and Negra that postfeminism signals an "evolutionary process whereby

aspects of feminism have been incorporated into popular culture," but I do not think it "simultaneously involves an 'othering' of feminism" as they comment (4). In the first season of *Ugly Betty*, there are several episodes depicting a feminist in the show. In earlier episodes, it seems that this program tries to present her as a bad woman due to her obnoxious behaviors. But just when the plot reaches to its climax--she publicly dumps Daniel in a talk show for her own good--the show reveals the challenges that the feminist has encountered and what makes her become the way she is today in order to survive and succeed in a man-privileged society ("1:12"). In this sense, *Ugly Betty* suddenly switches from the position of anti-feminism, or at least, mocking it, to sympathizing with it. As far as I am concerned, I agree with Bonnie Dow's comment that postfeminist series function simultaneously "as an affirmation of woman's progress and as a reminder of the problems such progress has created" (139). Indeed, postfeminist texts present the negotiation between "the connected questions of how to define feminism and its goals in the contemporary era" (Lotz 117).

The issue of marriage has been widely discussed in postfeminist series. Throughout its six seasons, *Sex and the City* explores all kinds of possibilities such as lesbian affairs, fabulousness of being single, single-parent childrearing and female friendship to resist heterosexual relationships or marriage. In this light, these situations validates "the life choices of the single girl who [chooses]" alternative lifestyles rather than "settling down to

marry and start a family" (Gennaro 273). The emphasis of friendship among the four main characters is significant. As Gennaro points out, this same-sex intimacy implicitly undermines heterosexual relationships. This show constantly reiterates the importance of girls' committed comradeship and depicts it as more trustworthy. When confronting difficulties, rather than turning to men, they seek for help from other girls. For example, when learning that Miranda decides to keep her baby, Charlotte responds with tears, "We are having a baby" ("Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" 4:11). At that moment, instead of being with the baby's father, Miranda is surrounded by Carrie, Charlotte and Samantha. It is like a happy family without a father. Even when the father, Steve, is in presence when Miranda is delivering her baby, Carrie is the one who stands by her side and holds her hand. Another occasion is that when Carrie is in a financial crisis, instead of seeking Mr. Big for help, she accepts assistance offered by Charlotte ("Ring a Ding Ding" 4:16). These instances all suggest that women companionship can replace the function of heterosexual relationships. Without a doubt, all of them keep dating and looking for the "right guy," but whenever one is hurt by a man, she is healed by her girlfriends' devoting care. Men come and go, but the four of them always stick to one and another. They find shelter in this supportive group before stepping out for next romance.

Nonetheless, this is not the sole message that audiences receive from the show. As Gennaro points out, on the one hand it seems that this series aims to challenge social norms,

whereas on the other hand, it works as a space "where the dominant ideology of a heteronormative family [...] was portrayed as the overarching goal of each of the characters and the resolution point of the entire series as Season Six came to a close" (273). The drastic shift in the last season which moves from a story of four single girls relying on one another to a desire for all the characters to finally settle down with a partner of the opposite sex ridicules the belief of being "single and fabulous!" The movie version as a subsequent finale after season six further glorifies the value of heterosexual partnership and marriage. As two single female viewers respond, in the beginning, they believe that this program marks the success of women's movement because it seems that women no longer consider marriage their ultimate goal in life. However, they are displeased at both endings of the series and movie because it turns out that the four female leads are all paired off. Much to their disappointment, these shows have not progressed as much as the audiences had thought in the first place. To them, the implication of this result is that women are not independent enough and still need men to complete their lives. We can perhaps see this as a cunning trick played by the show to attract as many viewers as possible. It successfully "hooks" female viewers of both sides—those who look forward to this traditional ending and those with feminist consciousness who are attracted to the show's earlier representation of single women.

Other than the issue of marriage, one episode of *Sex and the City*, "All or Nothing" (3:10), reexamines two postfeminist claims which have been constantly questioned by

feminists: woman nowadays can "have it all" and have freedom of choice. "Ladies, we have it all—great apartments, great jobs, great friends and great sex," Samantha (played by Kim Cattrall) exclaims with excitement. She further mentions that her mother had to raise three children and put up with her drunken husband whereas she can "choose" to have three drunken friends. She is rather satisfied with her independent state and totally disagrees with Charlotte's opinion; that is, "Having it all really means having someone special to share it with." Nevertheless, after coming down with flu and realizing that there is no one to take care of her, she says desperately to Carrie, "It doesn't matter how much you have. If you don't have a guy who cares about you, it all means shit." That she has it all is precisely what makes her helplessly alone. It strengthens the idea that no matter how successful a woman is, her life is never complete without a man. That is to say, the optimal condition of having it all should include a thoughtful boyfriend or a husband. Furthermore, in another scene when Carrie is alone in her room, she contemplates the problems of having it all and freedom of choice. She wonders if having too many choices is what gets women into troubles. Subsequently, she raises a question in her column, "can we have it all?" At this point, the show's position seems to be more in line with the feminist concern which is neither unspeakable nor silenced within postfeminist culture as Tasker and Negra believe (3). That is, postfeminist production tends to over-eulogize the elevated status of women without heeding the fact that it is not fully realized. Yet the show does not end here. As soon as

Samantha recovers from her sickness, she retracts her earlier words and says, "I was delirious." At this moment the program seemingly reaffirms two core ideas of postfeminism: women have various choices and can have it all. As far as I am concerned, the show's purpose to reclaim the gains of women after presenting problems such as the one Samantha encounters has two functions. On the one hand, it convinces the audience that the show has addressed the issues regarding women's right. On the other hand, it reassures those optimistic viewers the success of feminism.

In *Ugly Betty*, the issue of "having it all" has also been brought up from time to time. More specifically, it is the dilemmas of work and family that constantly baffles Betty (played by America Ferrera) and Wilhelmina (played by Vanessa Williams). Intriguingly, the show neither approves nor disapproves of this buzz slogan. In Betty's case, although she frequently faces conflicts between domesticity and work, in the end, she is always able to find a way to weld the two together. Conversely, Wilhelmina is forced to sacrifice one over the other. Her ambition at work results in neglecting her family. Putting all the efforts in her career, she has no time to take care of her daughter and thus has a terrible relationship with her. So far this strenuous mother-daughter relationship has been highlighted in season one as well as season four and remains for a while as one of an important subplots. In both cases, a successful career woman as Wilhelmina is, she is a disqualified mother who fails to mend her relation with her daughter despite how much she loves her. In season three, just

when her romance with Connor (played by Grant Bowler) and the new born baby prove that it is possible to have a happy household and a great job at the same time, Connor unexpectedly asks her to make a choice between the two ("Things Fall Apart" 3:16). Wilhelmina once again fails to strike a balance between personal and professional lives. Throughout the entire seasons, Wilhelmina has lost her job several times but she is always able to get it back. Contrary to the success of her career recovery, her relations with her daughter and lovers have never ended on a good note. It can be seen as the producers of the show intend to counteract the posfeminist slogan of "having it all."

Perhaps the way that *Ugly Betty* deals with the "having it all" issue, exemplified by Betty's success and Wilhelmina's failure, can be seen as the contradictory nature of postfeminism. Yet the show's intention to have this arrangement seems to be more complicated as it suggests on the surface. Indeed, with its feature of presenting a Latina as the protagonist, this series refutes the criticism that postfeminist programs merely focus on privileged white women. In effect, it brings multiethnicity to postfeminism by portraying characters of different races. However, despite the fact that there are always reasons explaining Wilhelmina's vicious behaviors to make viewers feel sympathy for her, having an African American to play the perpetual devil reveals that the show still conforms to the tradition of disparaging black people as wicked and malicious.

Another repeated theme in *Ugly Betty* is the question of true beauty. To judge whether

one is beautiful or not in fact depends on whether one meets the unreasonable standards set up by fashion magazines and celebrities. As the show presents, almost everyone in *Mode* barely eats in order to stay in size zero. They also put on all kinds of designer brands to make themselves fashionable. What's worse, not only do people working in this industry have twisted values, but young school girls are deeply affected. In hopes of being incredibly thin, they are willing to sacrifice their health. Among all the episodes, "Zero Worship" (2:11) best negotiates with the traditional view of beauty. Realizing that it is impossible to overthrow the accepted norm of presenting skinny models at Fashion Week overnight, Daniel comes up with the idea of having an alternative fashion show featuring women of regular sizes afterwards. The result is surprisingly good as it is warmly received by the press. Though, unfortunately, this show does not change the young girls' idea of beauty, it at least proves that feminist concerns about standard of physical beauty are not completely silenced but remain negotiable.

The idea of being satisfied with one's own taste instead of blindly following guidelines set up by others is accentuated again in "When Betty Met YETI" (3:9). In her presentation on her magazine, Betty tells the judges (one elderly woman, one white man and the other African American male) at YETI (Young Editor Training Institute) that "the goal of a [traditional] fashion magazine is to create and sell an image that women will want to become," but the aim of her magazine is to "celebrate what women already are." It is a

"magazine for young women looking to be inspired beyond celebrities and clothing." It encourages them to have their own thoughts and be confident in being themselves. During her presentation, the camera takes a close-up shot of each judge and the female assistant. It shows that both female judge and assistant smile at Betty's words while the two male judges appear detached. After her presentation, the female assistant gives Betty a thumb-up and the female judge gives her a positive comment "Nice" whereas the other two men remain silence. It can be interpreted as women's effort to define a new meaning of beauty in the patriarchal society embodied by the male judges.

Nevertheless, the construction of *Ugly Betty* is far more complex than most audiences observe. At first glance this series seems to fight against the commonly perceived stereotypes of postfeminism. Rather than presenting protagonists as white and fabulous as those in *Sex and the City*, it features a not so pretty Latino girl. She is far from being rich, slim, and fashionable. The show's intent to have an "ugly" girl of color be the leading character seems to challenge the conventions of postfeminist TV series. Contrary to other programs highlighting the empowered femininity linked with consumption, *Ugly Betty* mocks artificial beauty and keeps reiterating the values of inner beauty and being true to oneself. The role "ugly Betty" has promoted a new kind of "girl power" and inspired many girls worldwide who watch the show to be "strong, smart and bold".[6] Even feminist activist

[6] Source from www.girlsinc.org

Olivia Ortiz wrote an open letter to America Ferrera, who plays Betty, in appreciation of her contribution. However, a second thought is required before we label it a pro-feminist program. Intriguingly, as David Gauntlett points out, this show both leads audiences to condemn, and indulges them in, the world of high fashion at the same time.

> It satirizes the superficial, glossy world of fashion, full of stick-thin models who are supposedly gorgeous, and at the same time it is able to fill the screen with the glamorous fixtures and fittings of this world, including the stick-thin models who are supposedly gorgeous. Even "ugly" Betty is actually a conventionally attractive woman with added eyebrows and braces; the producers would not dare to actually have a really rough-looking heroine…. (70)

Again, ambivalence lies in the text. The program's attitude toward appearance is never clear. The whole show generally spreads the message that inner beauty is much more important than "face" value. The most salient evidence is that although the female protagonist Betty is always cloaked in a tedious outfit with her conspicuous braces, unfashionable glasses, and unstylish long hair, there are still many good-looking men falling for her because of her good heart.

However, Betty has been improving her dressing style in each season little by little. In the latest season, she has gone through an obvious makeover and therefore becomes more physically attractive. The first episode of season four uses the metamorphosis of a

caterpillar to a butterfly as a metaphor of Betty's transformation. When asked about the meaning of this change, Ferrera replies that she sees it as Betty's growth. After working in a fashion magazine for three years, it is reasonable that Betty has picked up some fashion sense.[7] If her earlier quirky outfits are ironies to mock superficial beauty, then her "growth" counteracts with the show's central argument. That is, Betty finally surrenders to the traditional standards of beauty by dressing herself fashionably and hanging up her cloak which she wears to *Mode* on the first day.

As a matter of fact, the comparison of the two Fashion Shows in season three and four is a good example to illustrate this series' changing position from valuing individual choice to mainstream preference. In season three, Betty finally gives fashion a positive comment when the show is over: "Fashion has a lot more substance than I thought" ("There's No Place Like Mode" 3:15). Yet it will be too soon to blame Betty for changing her mind and elevating fashion to a higher level than inner beauty. A few lines later, when Daniel suggests to her that if she wants to have a career in fashion business, she will have to change the way she dresses herself. Betty replies, "If I decide to have a career in fashion, then I get to decide what looks good." Her response reconfirms the idea that instead of blindly following unreasonable social requirements, she has a say to what she thinks is beautiful and valuable.

[7] For complete interview, see "America Ferrera Talks About Her 'Ugly Betty" Makeover" on http://www.aol.co.nz/tv/story/America-Ferrera-Talks-About-Her-Ugly-Betty-Makeover/2389977/index.html.

Intriguingly, however, the episode dealing with this identical issue in season four reverses its arguing pattern ("Smoking Hot" 4:14). It starts with a scene of Betty and Amanda getting dressed for work in the morning. The lyric of background song is "Mirror mirror on the wall, don't care who's fairest of them all, queen of your world…." This opening seems to encourage women to respect and have confidence in themselves. Later at a meeting, Betty is not assigned any project for Fashion Week due to her "bad taste." Yet, at a low-rank fashion show, Betty discovers a talented designer and recommends her to Wilhelmina. At the end of this episode, Wilhelmina tells Betty her own experience: "For twenty years she [Fay Sommers, who was in Wilhelmina's position earlier] belittled every fashion choice I ever made…. But I have never doubted myself. Taste is, having the courage of your own convictions." Her words echo back to the opening song. Upon hearing this, Betty replies, "I get it. Taste is subjective. It is what I say it is." This statement sounds similar with the one she makes in season three. However, while this final line works as a conclusion in season three, Betty's response in season four is rejected by Wilhelmina. "No. It [Taste] is what I [Wilhelmina, the leading icon of the fashion world] say it is." Subsequently, she gives Betty a positive comment, "You don't always get it wrong" and approves the latter's choice of her shoes. At this moment, a shot of Betty's shoes slowly pans to that of Wilhelmina's. The fact that their shoes look alike indicates that Betty has lost her own voice and started to embrace mainstream taste. Her big smile after

Wilhelmina's praise signifies that the denouement of this episode is actually against the spirit of the opening song. Instead of being a queen of her world, Betty has begun to learn what is beautiful is to identify with others, especially those who are powerful and influential in the field of fashion.

Suffice it to say, Gennaro's comment on *Sex and the City* is perfectly applicable to *Ugly Betty* as well. These two programs offer "a dualism that both stand as a critique of social norms at the same time as reinforcement for those same norms it is critiquing" (248). Admittedly, as Bonnie Dow considers, postfeminist sitcoms are sites both for resistance and reinforcement of social norms. Both shows are clever enough to stand in an ambivalent position in the first place but the scale loses its balance in the long run. This is the main factor why once postfeminism is presented through mass media, its original ideas are inevitably undermined. Nevertheless, although it is impossible to change the dominant ideology overnight, they still deserve a positive comment for their original intent to challenge, reflect and negotiate with it.

Chapter III

Independence or Fantasy? :

Gender Relation in the Postfeminist Era

In her monograph, *Gender and the Media*, Rosalind Gill explores extensively on the influences of postfeminism in major media forms such as magazines, newspaper, fictions and television programs. She concludes in the final chapter that the best way to understand contemporary postfeminist media culture is to see it as a distinctive sensibility, which is made up of several interrelated themes. Similar with Amanda Lotz, her attempt to indentify these themes is to provide concrete features that constitute postfeminist discourse. Based on some features such as women having shifted from sexual objects to desiring subjects, femininity as a bodily property and the reassertion of sexual difference, this chapter will analyze the relationship between the sexes in both target series. It aims to point out that the ways how the main characters are presented on TV have explicitly or implicitly signaled that gender equality is not reached yet. Through the analysis of media representations, I hope to further unveil the postfeminist myth embedded in these two shows that other critics have yet discovered or discussed.

Is it true that women have elevated from the status of objects to that of subjects? In fact, the paradoxical relationship between women's subjectivity and objectivity is presented in both series. Among other features, I find that the representations of women's gaze,

sexualization and their relation with men are the most revealing aspects.

People with the privilege to see and those who are seen construct the basics of a power structure. Laura Mulvey in her highly influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and John Berger in his much celebrated book *Ways of Seeing* both contend that for a long time, men have occupied the looking position while women have constantly been looked at in media forms. They both assert that woman function as an image and man as the bearer of the look. As Mulvey further explains:

> [P]leasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness.* (19)

Even though the target viewers of sitcoms are women, Mulvey's argument is still valid because both male and female spectators psychologically come to identify with the male gaze. As far as Mulvey is concerned, "the image of woman on the screen" works to establish "the 'masculinisaton' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex…" (29). In her later article "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun,*" drawing on Freud's theory on femininity, Mulvey further explains women spectator's identification with male protagonists. She maintains that to become a woman,

one has to suppress her innate masculinity after pre-Oedipal stage. Movies with traditional narrative structure provide the masculine identification which "reactivates for her a fantasy of 'action' that correct femininity demands should be repressed" (37).

The way that traditional media portrays men and women also accords with this stereotype. Recent critics have been investigating whether there is an active female gaze. As for these two series, although the contradictory nature of postfeminism is manifest in terms of placing women and men in the subject/object position, a closer examination reveals their tendency to be in line with Mulvey's argument. The opening sequence before every episode of *Sex and the City* best illustrates the show's ambivalent attitude. In the first part of this sequence, there are many close-ups highlighting the protagonist's observing gaze. As Brunnemer notes, "In these shots, Parker [who plays Carrie] blinks, stares, raises her eyebrow, rolls her eyes, and peers over her shoulder—all gestures which indicate to the viewer that she is avidly and actively engaged in her ability to gaze" (6). However, while the first half of this sequence informs audience that Carrie is an active looker, the second half makes her a looking object. Carrie the subject is punished symbolically—a pond of water splashes onto her when a bus bearing the objectified image of Carrie passes by. She becomes a commodifized image, which is embodied by her advertised body on a poster attached to a side of bus. The poster is an advertisement for her weekly column "Sex and the City"; and the caption on the poster read: "Carrie Bradshaw knows good sex…." Yet her highly

sexualized bus-length long figure displayed on the poster turns her from an expert on gender issues to a seducing spectacle to be looked at.

Indeed, Carrie's poster shots and her first date with Mr. Big firmly confirm Mulvey's argument. There are at least two hidden messages in this poster. First, Carrie is objectified in order to promote her column. Rather than stressing the columnist's knowledge, the poster makes explicit use of her displayable body. It accords with Berger's claim that "men act, women appear" (47). She is displayed as a sexual object, an erotic sight which attempts to arouse male desire. Her poster not only renders an objectified vision for male viewers, but a site for female identification. The poster makes the consumption of information (i.e. Carrie's column) a matter of fetishizing the columnist. Later Carrie wears the same dress which she dons for the poster shots in her first date with Mr. Big. Charlotte considers that it is inappropriate for the first date because it looks like a "naked dress" ("Secret Sex" 1:6). Carries knows well enough that this dress will provoke Big's sexual appetite as she purposefully "exhibits" herself. That the effect of wearing the dress looks like "wearing nothing" satisfies Big's scopophilic pleasure, for the veil-like clothing works perfectly between the seen and the unseen. "Wearing nothing" in a sense also signifies Carrie's lack, which aims to ease men's castration anxiety.

Second, the caption implies that people who know good sex look sexy. This series not merely tells its women audiences information about gender relation, but also how to decorate

oneself in order to have a better chance of winning the game between the sexes. In effect, the four leading characters are all good-looking. It seems that the essential requirement of a fabulous life is looking fabulous. Brand shoes, clothing, bags and even plastic surgery are used to achieve this goal. Therefore, consumption and material goods are necessary for personal improvement. It encourages women to "refashion their own public identities by exercising consumer choice" (Zieger 98). As R. L. Rutsky points out, "The very act of consuming, of making choices among consumable items, is viewed as an expression of our individual identities" (70). Hence, like Carrie and her cohorts, audiences are encouraged to become consumption addicts, to require "ever-increasing doses of consumption—whether of goods or of information"—simply to preserve for them a sense of being active and autonomous subjects (Rutsky 73).

Truly, this program presents women as speaking subjects and places men in the object position in the beginning. The show starts with Carrie's narrating a story of a British woman. The very first shot of Carrie does not reveal her face but her back when she is listening to the British women complaining. As a "sex anthologist," as she claims herself, instead of constructing what Laura Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness," Carrie observes people around her, especially men. That is to say, men are her objects of study. When Carrie's face is finally presented to the audience, the character speaks to the viewers. The way in which Carrie sometimes talks directly to the camera in the first two seasons underlines the

importance of her subject position. This act along with her voiceover indicates that rather than being defined by others, she has her own voice to express her thoughts. Nevertheless, unlike in the original fiction where the columnist stands in a detached position as an observer, in the series she is soon deeply involved in almost every event. When the interviews and shots of her talking directly to the camera disappear in the later series, her role becomes from that of an objective observer to an object of observation.

As for the other main characters, in the premier episode of season one, Miranda and Charlotte first appear in a montage of interviews. They, too, like other interviewees, look at the camera and talk to the audience while responding to the questions asked by Carrie. Yet they quickly become the core characters and the interviews dwindle and eventually disappear in later seasons. It suggests that this show has shifted from providing various perspectives of women to focusing on the experiences of the four characters. Contrary to what Sarah Jessica Parker says that "all men on the show are objectified," it is the four women "who are made the objects of the camera's gaze" (Brunnemer 10). Kristin C. Brunnemer goes on to observe:

> while we *hear* their thoughts on men and men's physiques, the camera *offers* visions of their bodies in dialogue, sending the mixed message that women have aural authority if not visual autonomy…. It is the women, not the men, who are exclusively displayed as objects on-screen. Being the *watched watchers* is the

only filmic subject position the show promotes for women. (11, italics original)

Another intriguing example is Samantha and Smith's (played by Jason Lewis) relation. Unlike in the traditional relationship where men are usually the older and wealthier party, Samantha is a successful PR manager whereas the young Smith is barely known to anyone. Later she becomes his manager, helping him to be a famous artist. There is a scene that she displays a large poster of Smith's naked body on Time Square to promote a certain product. It is clear that Samantha objectifies Smith as she makes him a sexy sight to be looked at by the public. Aside from that, when Smith first appears on the screen, he immediately attracts Samantha's attention and becomes her catch. There are many shots depicting Samantha's objectifying gaze on Smith's nude figure. As a male actor who has the most attractive figure, he tends to be undressed most of the time. His excessive exhibitionism challenges the conventional notion that women are victims to male gaze. In this case, it seems that men's privilege is at risk because of women's empowerment. Nonetheless, we should not neglect the fact that although this show is capable of making men the object of gaze, women are still its main target. Even if Smith is usually undressed in his scenes with Samantha, the latter's naked body is equally revealed as well. The sole difference is that Smith only appears on season six while Samantha's exhibitionist performances have been frequently showed throughout the series. This imbalance indicates that though a female gaze may be possible in the postfeminist era, this program generally conforms to the socially expected

norm of old times with limited changes.

Although the "exhibitionist scenes" are comparatively rarer in *Ugly Betty* as they are in *Sex and the City*, it seems that it is impossible to avoid such a scene completely. Stressing inner beauty and new girlness; that is, being confident with one's original self, having her own thoughts, and not blindly following the unreasonable fashion requirements, the protagonist Betty is far from the trick of revealing herself on the screen. Yet such role is taken up by the blonde and slim receptionist Amanda (played by Becky Newton) to satisfy male gaze. As for Betty, this series presents her in a frontal close-shot when she appears for the first time. In the first few episodes of season one, Betty was shot in the center of the frame in the opening scene. Nonetheless, this shooting method does not render an erotic pleasure in looking her. The effect is thwarted by her bang, glasses and braces, which protect her from being looked at "nakedly." On the contrary, she is the bearer of the look because glasses worn by a woman signify an active looking position (Doane 504). "The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses," she is transformed from a spectator into a spectacle, "the very picture of desire" (Doane 503). However, Betty has also gone through a "face-lit" later on. Although Betty still keeps her glasses on after her makeover in season four, she now wears a pair of trendy spectacles. By doing so, the function of her glasses becomes not only an instrument to see but also a fashionable accessory to be seen. Her physical makeover

influences how she is looked by others. In the first three seasons, Betty's love interests fall in love with her because of her good heart and enthusiasm for work. After her makeover, her physical charm outshines her inner beauty. One of the evidences is that her boss Daniel, who has been a good friend of hers and appreciates her talent for a long time, has no sexual feelings for her until her complete makeover (removing her braces). He even gives up his much envied job and pursues Betty to England. Daniel's behavior informs the audience that a good look is much efficient than hard work in terms of attracting men. That is to say, Daniel starts to feel for Betty because of her good looks since "ugly" Betty has turned herself into a "pretty" sight.

Certainly, in *Sex and the City* the female point of view is heard whereas men are silenced. The four women have a chance to express their ideas when talking to each other while men are devoid of any inner monologues. Men are merely described, evaluated and even categorized by Carrie and her friends. Most of them are nameless and only labeled by nicknames. Instead of being objectified by men and exposed to male gaze, these women are the desiring subjects who enjoy sex for their own sake. Put it more radically, in the series modern women seem to turn the table around in terms of gender relationship. One of Carrie and her cohorts' routines is to talk blatantly about their dates or men in general over meals in public places. Their conversations and experiences give audience a strong impression that men have become objects, which are severely judged and appraised by the four women. In

tune with the postfeminist consumption, females have become rampant shoppers who constantly seek for beautiful and desirable males. Once the latter fail to meet the former's needs or fantasy, they are abruptly dumped without much explanation. These female consumers are not hesitant to discard the unsatisfying men and look for the better ones. Resonant with what the authors of *The Future of Men* comment, "women haven't just become more empowered and choosy; they've also become downright predatory" (Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly 176). In this light, this show realizes and testifies the fact that in the postfeminist era, the relation between men and women has been reversed. It no longer can be seen as men fall into the active subject category while women belong to the passive object one. Women are those who have the upper hand and have the power to manipulate men.

However, closer examination shows an opposite situation of gender relation. It is true that these female protagonists often reject a man without a second thought because he has a minor problem. Yet this does not mean that they have truly inverted the conventional gender relation just because they are no longer situated in a passive position. As a matter of fact, the overt portrayal of sexually liberated female characters only operates as a cover for the unchanging gender relation. While Carrie and other leading characters dress up and stay fit to please themselves as a sign of women's self-conscious awakening, it happens that men enjoy the sensual looks and aggressive sexual behaviors of these women. But the empowering new women do not suspect the problem of this paradoxically sexual

subjectification /objectification. They do not think it is presented as “something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (259 Gill). As Rosalind Gill puts it, “In the last decade it has gone from being a […] deliberate representational strategy used *on women* to being widely and popularly taken up *by women* as a way of constructing the self (258-59 emphasis original).

With an attempt to strengthen the power of men, John Berger’s notion is realized in the media where women’s representations all work to construct what Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Until recently, this kind of representation is still prevalent in the media despite the gains from women’s movement. In this sense, there is not much difference between women in the age of postfeminism and those in the previous times. In the past women interiorized external male gaze because “how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated” (Berger 46). As Berger further notes, “Men look at women. Women look at themselves being looked at” (47). This determines the relation between men and women and consequently makes women turns themselves into “an object of a vision” (Berger 47). Berger’s statement of female representation still rings true today and it resonates with Gill’s argument. That is, rather than renouncing the objectified status, women internalize the judging male gaze and construct a self policing gaze. Another problem is that this female subjecthood is only confined to women who looked young and beautiful. This explains why both programs depict that older characters like Samantha and

Wilhelmina have to go through a face-lift and countless painful shots in order to defy time and rejuvenate their youth. As Gill contends, “One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is its obsessional preoccupation with the body” (255). Women’s bodies are still evaluated and scrutinized by men as well as women. The only difference is that women in the past did so because that was the only way to gain some power from men whereas modern women do so at their autonomous will.

Similarly, the subject/object paradox is exemplified by the behaviors of Wilhelmina and Sofia the feminist in *Ugly Betty.* As a strong woman with power, Wilhelmina shows her aggressiveness and dominant attitude in both business (she always bosses her subordinates around) and sex (she insists being on top during sexual intercourse). Nonetheless, no matter how smart and witty she is, Wilhelmina sometimes has to use her body as a sex object in order to get what she wants. For example, she flirts with a potential contractor to get the deal down. Later, she seduces Bradford with an attempt to grab a share of Mead publishing. Likewise, in order to promote her book, even the feminist Sofia uses herself as a bait to attract Daniel. It seems that these clever and powerful women still need to “sell themselves” to achieve certain goals. Paradoxically, Wilhelmina and Sofia make themselves objects of desire in the first place so as to become stronger subjects.

As for the relationship between men and women, the act of numerous “try-on-and-offs” is nothing different than a traditional woman’s quest for Mr. Right. Furthermore, men move

on when they realize that it does not work out with a certain woman whereas women will sacrifice everything for him once they believe they have found "the one." For instance, Charlotte gives up her Christian belief and converts to Judaism in order to marry a Jew. Abandoning promiscuous life which she enjoys a lot, Samantha practices monogamy with an actor and moves to Los Angeles with him where she is alone most of time due to his busy working schedule. As for Carrie, even though having been seriously hurt by Mr. Big many times, she keeps falling in love with him.

Carrie's choice of, and relationship with Mr. Big implies that gender relation stays the same as it was before. Although this show tends to present male characters anomalously, it is unusual to see that Mr. Big, as one of the regular cast, remains nameless throughout the series. This arrangement suggests that rather than representing a specific person, this role symbolizes Carrie's old-fashioned fantasy. Instead of choosing a "new man" of the postfeminist age, Aiden, who is sensitive and respects her on equal terms, Carrie longs for the traditional masculinity (aggression, dominance and inability to emote) embodied by Big. His nickname not only signifies his condition in wealth, status and sexual potency, but connotes phallicism. In addition, calling her "kid," Big represents a father figure and patriarchal authority. Carrie's inability to get over him or her choice to keep mingling with him in spite of those unbearably heartbreaking experiences seems to indicate that modern women are still controlled or willing to endure all the unreasonable treatment. If Carrie

represents as an icon of postfeminist women, her failure to overcome this lasting predicament reveals that the accomplishment of postfeminist ideals still have a long way to go.

Contrary to Carrie's passive position in her relationship with Mr. Big, Miranda occupies the controlling place in hers with Steve. She even takes the first move to propose to Steve. She is highly independent and in a better social-economic status than that of Steve. In their relationship, Miranda seems to fit in the traditional masculine role and Steve the feminine one. One example symbolically indicates that Steven is demasculinezed and Miranda is defeminized can be seen from an episode in which one of the former's testicles is removed and one of the latter's ovaries is in dysfunction. Yet Steve does not intend to take back the responsibility to be the sole provider for the family. What he wants is to reclaim his self-respect and a voice to be heard and thought to be considered. Nonetheless, there are many instances depicting that the dominant Miranda is eventually and inevitably protected by Steve in the end of the day. Steve exhibits the wonderful postfeminist masculinity that "combines the best of traditional manliness (strength, honor, character) with positive traits traditionally associated with females (nurturance, communicativeness, cooperation)" (Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly 213). This shows that although he is unlike the conventional hero, Steve is still the more powerful one in this heterosexual relationship. In other words, Miranda's success at work does not translate into her empowerment at home. In this sense, rather than claiming postfeminist women's self-reliance, it accentuates their

inevitable dependence on men in the family, if not at work.

In *Ugly Betty,* Betty and Daniel's relation is drastically different from that of Carrie-Mr. Big and Miranda-Steve. Unlike Big, who is stronger than Carrie in every aspect, or Steve, who is the saving man in Miranda's life, Daniel is rather vulnerable both at work and in his private life and therefore is highly and constantly dependent on Betty's assistance and support. In this case, "Men have somehow become the inferior sex, a lesser version of the species that couldn't possibly cope unless handed directly from the care of a mother to the care of a wife" (Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly 129). In reality, there is a scene that Daniel's dying father asks Betty to take care of his son. That way, Daniel will still be in protection after his father's death. In the show, he is always saved by Betty. Whenever he needs her, she will be there for him. As Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly further note, "part of the new masculinity, M-ness, is man's recognition that he needs woman—a realization that comes, ironically, during the Era of Female Independence…" (186). At first glance, this program seems to tell the audience that in the postfeminist age women should be proud of themselves because they are more capable than men. Nevertheless, beneath the surface there is something rather old school. Having Betty rescue Daniel does destroy the stereotype that men are superior to women, but it also emphasizes women's innate mothering nature at the mean time. Nowadays this responsibility simply extends from family to work. Regarding caring as central to femininity, it is women's duty to look after the opposite sex despite the

social change when women no longer depend on men economically. Utilizing the discourses of natural gender difference, this series implicitly rationalizes the existing inequalities and naturalizes men's privileged status. The message of Carrie's and Betty's stories is that no matter women are the stronger or weaker one in gender relation, they are doomed to sacrifice for men as their traditional counterparts.

Betty's father, Ignacio (played by Tony Plana), portrays another type of postfeminist men. He is the cook of Suarez family despite that he has two daughters. As a single parent, he resembles more the mother's role than the father's part. Far from being cool and calm, he is filled with emotions and is not afraid to express them. In most scenes, he is either wearing an apron or watching Mexican soap operas with tears. Rather than looking after his children, he is taken care of and protected by them. The patriarchal authority and omnipotence that Mr. Big embodies is nowhere to be found in Ignacio, who is in lack of any aggression. In the end of the series, Betty's moving to London and Hilda's moving out suggest that Ignacio is incapable of keeping her daughters with him, a power that traditional men exert on women and something that is taken for granted.

If the most distinctive feature of postfeminist men is the combination of conventional masculine and feminine disposition, then the transsexual figure Alex/Alexis in *Ugly Betty* physically incorporates the two together. Alex's decision to become a woman not only reflects his gender identity, but also reflects gender relation in contemporary society. Men

no longer belong to the privileged group whereas women are discriminated against and miserable. In effect, women may even have more edges in certain fields. As a woman, Alexis can still be the head of the company and run the fashion magazine as he did when he was a man. Her competence is not questioned because of her changed gender. Both men and women are treated equally without discrimination. Yet the arrangement of having this original male character undergo Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) to become a woman is an implicit trick. Contrasted with Alex's previous role of being the "big brother" who is superior to Daniel in every way, the "sister" Alexis is sometimes helpless and needs protection from her little brother. In addition, her change of gender role makes her descend from her father's proudest son to the much hated daughter. What the viewers see on the screen is the woman, Alexis, who is insulted because of her transsexual operation.

From the above discussion it is obvious to see that in order to appeal to both viewers with traditional ideology and those inspired by feminism, these shows ambiguously present women as controlling subjects as well as manipulated objects. It is their cunning strategy to have it (audience from both sides) all. There is no doubt that "[t]elevision (and, indeed, all the media) both reflects and influences reality. Sitcom writers cull observations from their own lives and intertwine them with those of their characters" (Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly 136). As Theodor W. Adorno puts it,

> [E]very spectator of television mystery knows with absolute certainty how it is

> going to end. Tension is but superficially maintained and is unlikely to have a serious effect any more. On the contrary, the spectator feels on safe ground all the time. This longing for "feeling on safe ground"—reflecting an infantile need for protection, rather than the desire to thrill—is catered to. The element of excitement is preserved only with tongue in cheek….Everything somehow appears "predestined." (161)

I found that Adorno's observation is still applicable to the current television series. In this light, it is understandable why both shows would present some challenging and feminism-oriented scenarios from time to time but they ultimately stick to the traditional norms.

Indeed, these series are not only mirrors of contemporary society, but also platforms to reinforce the conventional ideology. The multilayered structure of television shows are "various superimposed layers of different degrees of manifestness or hiddenness that are utilized by mass culture as a technological means of 'handling' the audience" (Adorno 166). On the one hand, they fabricate a society where the imbalanced gender relation is greatly improved. On the other hand, they vaguely assert the patriarchal orthodox. In fact, as Adorno argues,

> the hidden message frequently aims at reinforcing conventionally rigid and 'pseudo-realistic" attitude similar to the accepted ideas more rationalistically

> propagated by the surface message. Conversely, a number of repressed gratifications which play a large role on the hidden level are somehow allowed to manifest themselves on the surface in jests, off-color remarks, suggestive situations and similar devices. All this interaction of various levels, however, points in some definite direction: the tendency to channelize audience reaction" (165).

Instead of criticizing the problematic gender issues, they construct a paradoxical discourse to convince women, considering them empowered (true but still limited), to accept the long time unequal problems between the sexes. There is an analogy between this made-up discourse and the CGI (Computer Graphics Interface) effect used in both programs. Take *Ugly Betty* as an example, the first two series were shoot in Los Angeles while its setting is supposed to be in New York. The crews employ the technology of green screen compositing to create the wanted location. As the Digital Effects Supervisor Victor Scalise says, "With green screen, we can be anywhere that your *imagination* can take you" (emphasis mine). Production Designer Mark Worthington adds, "The great thing with CGI is you can tweak an exterior that wasn't perfect and make it perfect." The construction of postfeminist discourse is akin to this effect. Postfeminist discourse, like the CGI effect, forms a make-to-believe milieu where reality is blurred. That is to say, rather than living in the age of postfeminism, we are more like living in a postfeminist fantasy where gender relation does not change as much as most people think or imagine it does.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

In the beginning of my research, I was rather affirmative about the postfeminist phenomena. Despite a majority of critics' suspicion of this emerging theory, I believe that it deserves more positive credits than accusations. However, the more I study and analyze this subject matter, the more I realize its highly unstable and dubious nature. Although this characteristic can be regarded as the flexibility of postfeminism, it also reveals its lack of solid grounds. The absence of a firm definition and appeal will inevitably result in a shaky discourse rather than a meticulous theory. In reality, postfeminism is still in the process of construction and requires more insightful contributions. As postfeminism is tightly connects with popular culture, my research on the two American series, *Sex and the City* and *Ugly Betty*, exemplifies how these shows can be interpreted in the light of this conception.

Chapter Two examines two of the postfeminist attributes of American television series proposed by Amada D. Lotz: attempts to deconstruct gender and sexual binarism, and illustrations of contemporary women's struggles. In accordance with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, these two shows explore the fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation. The fixed binaries of masculinity and femininity are proved inadequate in both programs. As Butler points out, the traditional division is merely a social construct. Queerness is an alternative that crosses the stereotypical boundary. In both series,

homosexuality is deemed as a life style choice influenced by one's natural inclination. It is open-mindedly accepted in contemporary society. However, the lack of lesbian portrayal suggests that women are less tolerated than men with regard to sexuality.

The other postfeminist characteristic discussed in this chapter is how these shows deal with women's struggles in modern times. They vividly depicts several popular issues such as marriage, the possibility of "having it all," dilemma between family and work, and the question of true beauty. Yet the way they tackle these problems seem to follow the same pattern. That is, at first they challenge social conventions but in the end, they turn back to consolidate customary norms. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of postfeminism is its ambivalent attitude toward general ideology. In Stephen Gennaro's words, it is this "dualism" that simultaneously critiques and reinforces social norms. Although it can be claimed as a strategy to encompass audience of all sides, its compromise to the established regulations in the long run indicates its failure to remain impartial through media representations. Popular culture is like a double-edged blade. Postfeminism utilizes it to propagate its ideas while in the meantime it is twisted and absorbed into capitalist system and patriarchal orthodox. Nonetheless, both shows' attempt to address these issues and provide diverse solutions cannot be ignored. What need to bear in mind is to keep a critical eye when watching popular series such as these two. No matter how tempting they seem to counteract the conventions in the first place, a subtle observation is required in order to read

the canny message hid in the core of postfeminist discourse.

Chapter Three explores the paradox of women's subjectivity and objectivity as well as their relationship with men. In the age of postfeminism, women are supposed to be fully empowered and thus live as autonomous subjects. In *Sex and the City*, the gaze of the female protagonists, especially Carrie, is a good example of showing the changing structure between the sexes. Unlike the traditional dichotomy that men look and women are looked at as Laura Mulvey and John Berger would argue, Carrie breaks the convention by returning the gaze. With her ability to see, she takes men as her objects of study and analyses them. Her observing gaze is emphasized in the first half of the opening sequence of the show. Yet the second half symbolically indicates Carrie's being punished because of her active looking. This kind of alteration also appears in the series where the first two seasons featuring her as an independent observer whereas in the later seasons she becomes an object to be gazed upon. Likewise, in *Ugly Betty* the lead character Betty gradually transforms from an ugly duckling to a beautiful swan in appearance. Her makeover in a sense signifies her surrender to fashion which she deems superficial in the beginning by turning herself into a pretty sight to be looked at.

As for the relationship between men and women in the postfeminist era, my study shows that, unfortunately, there is not much progress as it seems on the surface. It is true that nowadays women have gained more power and are treated more equally than their

counterparts in the past. The four women in *Sex and the City* demonstrate their dominance in gender relations. Their capacity of shopping, whether items or men, supports the notion that women has become subjects to choose and men are objects to be perused. Nonetheless, these women's freed sexuality makes them consumption addicts. Ironically, while women display their "decorated femininity," and claim it as their new found subjectivity, it at the same time satisfies men's sexual fantasy. Similarly, *Ugly Betty* portrays its female characters in aggressive manners whereas male ones are less competent. At first glance it may be considered as a sign of reversed gender structure. Yet further analysis reveals that women either have to use themselves as sexual objects in certain circumstances or obligatorily look after vulnerable men because of their innate mother nature. In other words, women are still in a subordinate position as baits or care givers.

Several types of postfeminist men are depicted in both series. One common feature is that they combine the positive masculine traits with feminine disposition. They are not afraid to express their emotions and respect women on equal terms. Yet no matter how much they have evolved or changed, men still have more privileges than women. This thesis only provides a preliminary introduction on this subject. Further research can focus on how men's media representation influences contemporary males. Or the other way round, how postfeminist men in real world reflect on men's portrayal on TV. Although it is clever to express and publicize postfeminist ideas through popular culture, the high risk of using

media as medium cannot be ignored. As my research shows, both series unavoidably compromise with marketing concerns and thus the story lines go from challenging the conventional norms to confirming it. Therefore, another important follow-up research is whether there is a promising future for postfeminism since it seems that this theory is inevitable to be conformed to the mainstream ideology which it aims to fight against in the beginning. In the age of postfeminism, the ultimate goal is to strike a balance between women and men. Television series may be a good site of negotiating gender relation, yet audience should always be alert of its implicit counter message; that is, strengthening the traditional norms. As Adorno says, the effort to realize the complexities of television shows is to "knowingly to face psychological mechanisms operating on various levels in order not to become blind and passive victims" (176). With this caution in mind, we will be able to enjoy these popular shows with watchful eyes and critical sensibility.

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