

"FANTASIES OF POWER"

EXCERPT FROM SUSAN J. DOUGLAS'S

ENLIGHTENED SEXISM:

The Seductive Message
that

Feminism's Work is Done

This book is about the rise and evolution of these media-created fantasies, from the early 1990s to the present: their origins, their manifestations, their contradictory mixed messages, and their consequences. While these fantasies have been driven in part by girls' and women's desires, and have often provided a great deal of vicarious pleasure, they have also been driven by marketing—especially niche, target marketing—and the use of that heady mix of flattery and denigration to sell us everything from skin

cream to running shoes. So it's time to take these fantasies to the interrogation room and shine a little light on them. Because what the media giveth with one hand (which is why we love them), they taketh away with the other hand (which is why they endlessly piss us off). So we need to understand, and unravel, the various forces that have given us, say, the fearless computer geek Chloe on 24, without whom Jack Bauer would have been toast twenty-five times over, versus Jessica Simpson on *Newlyweds*, who didn't know how to turn on a stove (ha! ha! get it?).

One force is embedded feminism: the way in which women's achievements, or their desire for achievement, are simply part of the cultural landscape. Feminism is no longer "outside" of the media as it was in 1970, when women staged a sit-in at the stereotype-perpetuating *Ladies' Home Journal* or gave awards for the most sexist, offensive ads like those of National Airlines, which featured stewardesses purring, "I'm Cheryl. Fly Me" (and required flight attendants to wear "Fly Me" buttons). Today, feminist gains, attitudes, and achievements are woven into our cultural fabric.⁵ So the female characters created by Shonda Rhimes for *Grey's Anatomy*, to choose just one example, reflect a genuine desire to show women as skilled professionals in jobs previously reserved for men. Joss Whedon created *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because he embraced feminism and was tired of seeing all the girls in horror films as victims, instead of possible heroes. But women whose kung fu skills are more awesome than Jackie Chan's? Or who tell a male coworker (or boss) to his face that he's less evolved than a junior in high school? This is a level of command-and-control barely enjoyed by four-star generals, let alone the nation's actual female population.

But the media's fantasies of power are also the product of another force that has gained considerable momentum since the early and mid-1990s: enlightened sexism.⁶ Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.⁷ After all, these images (think *Pussycat Dolls*, *The Bachelor*, *Are You Hot?*, the hour-and-a-half catfight in *Bride Wars*) can't possibly undermine women's equality at this late date, right? More to the point, enlightened sexism sells the line

that it is precisely through women's calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace. True power here has nothing to do with economic independence or professional achievement (that's a given): it has to do with getting men to lust after you and other women to envy you. Enlightened sexism is especially targeted to girls and young women and emphasizes that now that they “have it all,” they should focus the bulk of their time and energy on their appearance, pleasing men, being hot, competing with other women, and shopping.

Enlightened sexism is a manufacturing process that is produced, week in and week out, by the media. Its components—anxiety about female achievement; a renewed and amplified objectification of young women's bodies and faces; the dual exploitation and punishment of female sexuality; the dividing of women against each other by age, race, and class; rampant branding and consumerism—began to swirl around in the early 1990s, consolidating as the dark star it has become in the early twenty-first century. Some, myself included, have referred to this state of affairs and this kind of media mix as “postfeminist.”⁸ But I am rejecting this term. It has gotten gummed up by too many conflicting definitions. And besides, this term suggests that somehow feminism is at the root of this when it isn't—it's good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy. It's just much better disguised, in seductive Manolo Blahniks and an Ipex bra.

Enlightened sexism is feminist in its outward appearance (of course you can be or do anything you want) but sexist in its intent (hold on, girls, only up to a certain point, and not in any way that discomfits men or pushes feminist goals one more centimeter forward). While enlightened sexism seems to support women's equality, it is dedicated to the undoing of feminism.⁹ In fact, because this equality might lead to “sameness”—way too scary—girls and women need to be reminded that they are still fundamentally female, and so must be emphatically feminine. Thus enlightened sexism takes the gains of the women's movement as a given, and then uses them as permission to resurrect retrograde images of girls and women as sex objects, bimbos, and hootchie mamas still defined by their appearance and their biological destiny. So in the

age of enlightened sexism there has been an explosion in makeover, matchmaking, and modeling shows, a renewed emphasis on women's breasts (and a massive surge in the promotion of breast augmentation), an obsession with babies and motherhood in celebrity journalism (the rise of the creepy “bump patrol”), and a celebration of stay-at-home moms and “opting out” of the workforce.

Lurking in this media fare is the *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* principle that women are fundamentally different from men and can never be equal to them. (In the first two seasons of *The Apprentice*, for example, it was a given that young career women would compete with men for The Donald's top prize—to be mentored by him, oy!—yet it was made clear that no woman could win because they're too backstabbing and emotional.) And enlightened sexism rests crucially on ageism, on severing young women from their elders. Because of its insistence that women now “have it all” (whatever “it” is), enlightened sexism ignores girls and women who are not middle class, upper middle class, or rich and, for the most part, not white. It is emphatically heterosexist. Enlightened sexism thus seeks to become the updated, hip, prevailing common sense about what girls and women can be and do in today's world.

In this way enlightened sexism is more nuanced and much more insidious than out-and-out backlash.¹⁰ As Susan Faludi amply demonstrated, backlash involves a direct, explicit refutation of feminism as misguided and bad for women. Enlightened sexism is subtler. Male pundits couldn't very well call Hillary Clinton a bitch on TV (although the knuckle-dragger Glenn Beck did on his radio show), but they could say that when men hear her voice, they hear, “Take out the garbage,” and everyone knows what *that* means.

Feminism thus must remain a dirty word, with feminists (particularly older ones) stereotyped as man-hating, child-loathing, hairy, shrill, humorless, deliberately unattractive Ninjas from Hades.¹¹ (So we get books like Kate O'Beirne's screed *Women Who Make the World Worse: And How Their Radical Feminist Assault Is Ruining Our Schools, Families, Military, and Sports*, in which Eleanor Smeal, the former president of the National Organization for Women, is suddenly more powerful than the secretary of defense, Halliburton, or the entire doping industry in baseball and the Tour de France.) More to the point, feminism must

be emphatically rejected because it supposedly prohibits women from having any fun, listening to the Rolling Stones or Shaggy, and condemns spending the equivalent of a car payment at Sephora, buying high heels, or wearing spandex hip-huggers. As this logic goes, feminism is so 1970s—grim, dowdy, aggrieved, and passé—that it is now an impediment to female happiness and fulfillment.¹² Thus, an amnesia about the women's movement, and the rampant, now illegal discrimination that produced it, is essential, so we'll forget that politics matters.

Because women are now "equal" and the battle is over and won, we are now free to embrace things we used to see as sexist, including hyper-girliness. In fact, this is supposed to be a relief. Thank God girls and women can turn their backs on stick-in-the-mud, curdled feminism and now act dumb in string bikinis to attract guys. In fact, now that women allegedly have the same sexual freedom as men, they actually prefer to be sex objects because it's liberating.¹³ According to enlightened sexism, women today have a choice between feminism and antifeminism, and they just naturally and happily choose the latter because, well, antifeminism has become cool, even hip. Rejecting feminism and buying into enlightened sexism allows young women in particular to be "one of the guys."¹⁴ Indeed, enlightened sexism is meant to make patriarchy pleasurable for women.¹⁵

Enlightened sexism emerged, in part, from the fact that young women were coming of age in an era of expanding opportunities. It came into full bloom under the Bush administration, and especially after 9/11. Coincidence? I think not. Before he and his ilk trashed the economy, Bush presided over the perfect enlightened sexism presidency. And talk about the illusion of power! There were the poster women of female achievement: Condoleezza Rice, Karen Hughes, Christine Todd Whitman. But they were beards for the silverbacks Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, who chest-thumped their way through one of the most macho-posturing administrations in recent history while working behind the scenes to curtail women's rights. The real female role model was supposed to be retro-mom Laura Bush. This was a political environment that positively suckled enlightened sexism, Bush's frat boy persona resonating well with the guys-will-be-guys ethos of *Maxim*. And as Susan Faludi reminds us in her book

The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America, feminism came in for a sound thrashing after 9/11 because it had supposedly made the country all girly and weak, unable to protect itself, and thus it provided a double dog dare to al-Qaeda to show America what happens when women are not kept in their place.¹⁶ The 9/11 attacks were, as Faludi recounts, cast as "a blow to feminism" that had "met its Waterloo." Now it was time, as the conservative columnist Mona Charen put it, to simply yell, "Hooray for Men."¹⁷

So enlightened sexism also includes in-your-face sexism, in which the attitudes about women that infuriated feminists in the 1960s and '70s are pushed to new, even more degrading levels, except that it's all done with a wink—or, even better, for the girls' own good. *The Man Show*, in which barely clad young women jumped on trampolines so men could watch their boobs bounce, would, in 1972, have prompted the studio that produced it to be torched to the ground. Not today.

As the British feminist scholar Angela McRobbie has brilliantly argued, it is essential that feminism be repudiated as something young women should shun as old-fashioned, withered, humorless, repulsive. To do this, the media must explicitly acknowledge feminism, point to it, and "take it into account" in order to argue that it is no longer needed, a "spent force."¹⁸ On *The Man Show*, for example, it was understood that it is sexist and ridiculous to have bikini-clad women jumping on trampolines and, furthermore, that the guys who wanted them to do this were morons. This is the knowing wink: guys are so dumb, such helpless slaves to big breasts, and the female display is, in the end, so harmless, that a feminist critique is not necessary. Therefore, the objectification of women is now fine; why, it's actually a joke on the guys. It's silly to be sexist; therefore, it's funny to be sexist.¹⁹ This is the same strategy used by *Maxim*, the *Cosmo* for guys. *Maxim's* objectification of women is so over the top, and constantly wedded to suggestions that most guys are so totally under women's thumbs, that its sexism is meant to be seen as pathetic. Indeed, as the feminist scholar Rosalind Gill puts it, "The extremeness of the sexism is evidence that there's no sexism!"²⁰ If there is no more sexism, then there is no longer a need for sexual politics, and sexual politics can be mocked and attacked.

Enlightened sexism has cranked out media fare geared to girls and young women in which they compete over men, many of them knuckleheads (*Next*, *The Bachelor*, *Joe Millionaire*, *The Flavor of Love*); compete with each other (*America's Next Top Model*); obsess about relationships and status (*Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*) or about pleasing men sexually (*Cosmo*, most music videos); and are fixated by conspicuous consumption (*Rich Girls*, *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, *Laguna Beach*, *The O.C.*, and that wonderful little serpent of a show *Gossip Girl*). Yet I can assure you that my female students at the University of Michigan—academically accomplished, smart, and ambitious—have flocked to these shows. Why?

This is the final key component to enlightened sexism: irony, the cultivation of the ironic, knowing viewer and the deployment of ironic sexism.²¹ Irony offers the following fantasy of power: the people on the screen may be rich, spoiled, or beautiful, but you, O superior viewer, get to judge and mock them, and thus are above them. With a show like MTV's *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, in which, typically, a spoiled-brat rich girl has her parents buy her everything from a new Mercedes to multiple evening gowns to a Vegas-style floor show to make sure her Sweet Sixteen party is like the most totally awesome ever, viewers are not merely (or primarily) meant to envy the girl. Animated stars superimposed on the scenes accompanied by a tinkling sound effect signal that we are also meant to see the whole exercise as over-the-top, ridiculous, exaggerated, the girl way too shallow and narcissistic. The show—indeed many MTV shows—elbow the viewer in the ribs, saying, “We know that you know that we know that you know that this is excessive and kitschy, that you’re too smart to read this straight and not laugh at it.”

For media-savvy youth, bombarded their entire lives by almost every marketing ploy in the book, irony means that you can look as if you are absolutely not seduced by the mass media, while then being seduced by the media, while wearing a knowing smirk. Viewers are flattered that they are sophisticated, can see through the craven self-absorption, wouldn't be so vacuous and featherbrained as to get so completely caught up in something so trivial. MTV offers this irony as a shield; you can convince yourself that you are seeing a parody of girls as party-obsessed airheads only capable of thinking about popularity and conspicuous consumption while, of course, *My Super Sweet Sixteen* repeatedly shows

girls as party-obsessed airheads only capable of thinking about popularity and conspicuous consumption. This kind of irony allows for the representation of something sexist—most girls, and especially rich girls, are self-centered bimbos—while being able to claim that that's not really what you meant at all, it's just for fun.²²

Girls often watch shows like this or *Laguna Beach* or *The Real World* in groups (as they did *Beverly Hills 90210* in the '90s) and part of the fun here is collectively performing your outrage at how empty-headed and materialistic the girls on the screen are while still becoming enmeshed in their stories. This public, group ridicule says, “We are not dupes”; it is an emphatic performance of media sophistication. It affirms viewers' power, both over the media and over the representation of girls as shallow and frivolous. The pleasure comes from feeling that you *are* reading against the grain, seeing through and deconstructing this media sludge. But the bacteria that comes in with this inoculation is girls policing one another and themselves, reinforcing norms about being “nice” and “hot.” And this ridicule-as-power also gives girls permission to look forward to noxious girl-on-girl violence—the catfight—and to watch shows that, in the end, are about female competition and consumerism as the ultimate privilege and delight.²³ It's not that many young women don't see through this. But it's precisely because so much media fare geared to young women incorporates their own ironic, self-reflexive critique that sorting out their effects—what creeps in through that shield of irony?—is much harder to discern.

Despite the successful onward trudge of enlightened sexism—How can *The Bachelor* have survived to a thirteenth edition? How is Hooters still in business?—there is a war in the media between it and embedded feminism. As a result, we are bombarded by overlapping and often colliding streams of progressive and regressive imagery, both of which offer us very different fantasies of female power. Yet, in the end, embedded feminism and enlightened sexism serve to reinforce each other: they both overstate women's gains and accomplishments, and they both render feminism obsolete. One click of the remote gives us tough-talking female police lieutenants, surgeons, and attorneys, or cocksure female cable news anchors and pundits; another click gives us spoiled bubbleheads in hot tubs whose only thought is their next themed party. Indeed,

the proliferation of the former is meant to excuse, even justify the latter. Thus, the success of enlightened sexism rests on representations of accomplished, sexually liberated women. After all, girls and women would hardly read and watch all this stuff if it were relentlessly sexist, which it isn't. In fact, enlightened sexism and embedded feminism often celebrate female-centered knowledge—about fashion, makeup, babies, relationships—that used to be derided as trivial, and insist that such knowledge matters. In this way, enlightened sexism is powerfully seductive, just the way the Spice Girls were: it claims you can have independence, power, and respect *and* male love and approval *and* girly, consumerist indulgences all at once, all without costs. And images of ever more empowered, confident, independent women are seamlessly accompanied by incessant harangues that we're still not thin enough, busty enough, gorgeous enough, or wearing the most enviable logo.

Because of these powerful crosscurrents—both appealing, both profitable, both tapping into our ever-contradictory cultural zeitgeist—girls and women are pulled in opposite directions, between wanting serious success and respect, and wanting acceptance, approval, and love; between wanting power and dreading power. The fantasies laid before us, in their various forms, school us in how to forge a perfect and allegedly empowering compromise between feminism and femininity. And that compromise insists that women strike a bargain. We can play sports, excel at school, go to college, aspire to—and get—jobs previously reserved for men, be working mothers, and so forth. But in exchange, we must obsess about our faces, weight, breast size, clothing brands, decorating, perfectly calibrated child-rearing, about pleasing men and being envied by other women. And we should expect no support from the government or our workplaces when it comes to juggling work and family because that's just a personal "choice" we made, and should live with. So this ersatz, "can do" feminism substitutes our own individual efforts, and our own responsibility to succeed, for what used to be a more collective sensibility about pushing for changes that would help all women.

What so much of this media (especially advertising) emphasizes is that women are defined by our bodies, our identities located *in* our bodies, and those must be sexually alluring (now, even when we're pregnant—thanks a lot, Demi Moore!) and conform to a very narrow fashion-model ideal of

beauty.²⁴ This is nothing new, of course, but it was something millions of women hoped to deep-six back in the 1970s. Indeed, it is precisely because women no longer have to exhibit traditionally "feminine" *personality* traits—like being passive, helpless, docile, overly emotional, dumb, and deferential to men—that they must exhibit hyperfeminine *physical* traits—large boobs and cleavage, short skirts, pouty lips—and the proper logos linking this femininity to upper-class ranking. The war between embedded feminism and enlightened sexism gives with one hand and takes away with the other. It's a powerful choke leash, letting women venture out, offering us fantasies of power, control, and love, and then pulling us back in. The only way women today can straddle all of this is to be superwomen.