

Unraveling of cultural meaning of sex and the city

[Health & Medicine](#), [Sex](#)



In 1998, TIME Magazine ran a front-cover story questioning the relevancy of feminism today. It asked: "Is feminism dead?"¹ (Bellafante 29/06/98). The breeding pit of Naomi Wolf, Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer and the rest of the radical clan had allegedly been buried. Instead, fictitious feminist icons like Ally McBeal, Bridget Jones, the Spice Girls, Charlie's Angels, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or Carrie Bradshaw, have taken part of the flightiness of contemporary feminism.

The newfangled feminist motto, as the Spice Girls proclaimed, is Girl Power - and that's as far as it goes - muting the traditional voices of the civil rights movement which once declared the 'personal to be the political'. The shift from a radical movement to a rather disinterested feminist condition is particularly evident in the TV hit-series, Sex and the City. The widely-acclaimed show has popularly blended upbeat feminist maxims with the everyday-life of four single women in their 30s, engaging in their self-contained universe, New York City.

Often defined as the prototype of feminism stepping into the boundaries of mainstream popular culture, the series has never lacked an explicit exploration of the single woman and implicit reinforcement of female sexuality. But does the embracement of intellectual, financial, and sexual freedom automatically spell a valid feminist message? Although the depiction of sexually explicit images has rendered the series progressive and controversial, its critical standing should be instead attributed to the feminist archetypes it attempts to embody.

The progressive portrayals of women in the mainstream media have led to the suggestion that the breakdown of traditional gender-specific stereotypes could potentially render any cultural text feminist (Berger 1995, p. 29).

Particularly the advent of a multiplicity in feminisms, from radical and Marxist to liberal and postmodernist, has translated feminist thought into an increasingly blurred and unfixed discourse.

Given this hypothetical assumption of a cultural crisis in feminist practice and theory, this essay is concerned with the deconstruction and unraveling of cultural meaning and sociological dimensions of *Sex and the City* by means of an ideological analysis. Accordingly, the following essay attempts to look at how cultural context shapes feminist strategies and concerns. At this point, it should be noted that the Third-wave agenda of *Sex and the City* does not necessarily suggest a forging of an entire movement, but rather what a feminist movement might look like for a generation which has largely been affected by the Mothers of Feminism.

SEXHAUSTED FEMINISM In every episode of *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw, the lead character and protagonist of the show, types a question on her laptop raising issues of sex, men, and relationships. In the very first episode, she wondered: " Can women have sex like men? ". The frankness of this question promptly sets the controversial, yet revolutionary tone of the show. As elaborated in subsequent episodes, the answer to Carrie's question is a clear yes - without apologies. On this level, the show deliberately enters into the territory of feminism with its gender play, attempting to breakaway from traditional sex-role definitions.

This in itself resembles the radical forms of the feminist movement in the 1970s which embraced consciousness-raising as a tactic. If consciousness-raising is the "systematic attempt to break through ideological assumptions" (Brown 1990, p. 14), then *Sex and the City* does indeed successfully elude prevalent constructed installations of male/ female functions in sexual intercourse. However, the use of sexually explicit images to override traditional sexual imbalances adds fuel to both, feminist applause and criticism.

Given the precedence of sexual depictions over other forms of pivotal feminist inquiries, *Sex and the City* becomes highly vulnerable to the male gaze. This sets out two significant contradictory aspects of the series - one which arises from feminist discourse and the other developed through the dominant ideology of patriarchy. While sexual freedom is undoubtedly a bold proponent of feminist theory, the female characters in *Sex and the City* also adhere to a traditional exhibitionist role of being looked at and displayed (Mulvey 1989, p. 19).

The four characters as sexual objects have fused male voyeurism and desire with that of feminist narrative, taking the postmodern voyeur into new, but also familiar ideological regions. The struggle in determining the ideological position of *Sex and the City* does not end here. Feminist author, Camille Paglia, argued that the series was a victory for the "huge wing of us pro-sex feminists" over the "1980s anti-porn, anti-sex wing of feminists" (cited in Maddox 09/02/04). Paglia's comments underscore the feminist refusal of a fixed and static ideological premise.

In 1985, for example, two anti-porn feminist activists, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (cited in Califia 1994, p. 123), argued that pornography should be eliminated as a matter of public policy because the "bigotry and contempt it promotes... diminish opportunities for equality of [women's] rights". The competing sub-ideological codes underpinning the overall ideology of feminism is further appropriated by the show itself. Ultimate pro-sex feminism is best embodied by the character of Samantha Jones, a PR executive, who orders sex a la carte, with no emotional commitments attached.

In stark contrast, an idealist view of romantic relationships is upheld by the character of Charlotte York, a conservative art dealer, who is reluctant to solely attribute sex with female lust. But the puzzling and contradictory ideological signals of the lead characters of *Sex and the City* are indeed part of the show's postmodern feminist agenda. In order to negotiate how the politics of feminism has been negotiated in *Sex and the City* it is important to recognize the essence of postmodern- or third-wave feminism.

As opposed to other traditional feminist forms, postmodern feminism is much more open to new considerations of gender. Instead of affixing a precondition for feminist thought, postmodern feminists stress the way men and women interact with one another, discarding traditionalist notions of gender naturalness and normality (Bessant and Watts 2002: 48). Rather, feminists with postmodern sympathies argue that we need to acknowledge human diversity, asking "What is the natural woman anyway?". This gives

primacy to the postmodern acceptance that gender cannot be separated from culture.

WIMMIN OR WOMEN ? Singlehood and the breakdown of the family unit are the acclaimed elements in labelling the series feminist. All main characters of Sex and the City fulfil meaningful functions that engender economic, intellectual, and sexual liberation, stimulating the formation of an alternative ideology - a crucial component for building a social movement in the 21st Century (Ryan 2001, p. 305). However, despite the storyline of Sex and the City invoking an alternative ideology, it does not essentially disagree with dominant ideologies.

Although the strong bond and friendship between the four leading characters incites a theme of sisterhood throughout the series, the uniting of four basically diverse individuals into a group with common interests in matters of sex, men, and relationships lacks a counterbalancing framework that opposes and attempts to revamp the political and economic structures of society. As Green (1998, p. 1) importantly affirms, "... in the contemporary post-feminist era, patriarchal traditions in visual culture are seemingly challenged, yet ultimately produced".

Patriarchal and capitalist codes are therefore not only naturalized in Sex and the City, but merged into feminist discourse. Perhaps the most revealing statement Sex and the City makes about its feminist outlook lies in Carrie's first effective ideological statement: " New York is all about sex and hence not about marriage". At first glance, this appraisal of singlehood through the romance genre might seem to present a paradox. Despite the glorification of

female bonding and alternative family forms, the seemingly counter-ideological premise of *Sex and the City* only ascends in the show's first few seasons.

Its post-feminist sentiments are subsequently watered down, negotiated, and limited by the dominance of the romance genre to the extent that by the end of the entire series, two of the main characters are married and the other two in a faithful monogamous relationship. This happily-ever-after formulaic conclusion is of strict adherence to the clichéd literary styles of the Hollywood romance genre, as opposed to a groundbreaking counter-cultural narrative.

In an interview with Candace Bushnell, the author who created *Sex and the City*, renowned feminist and author of *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf, asked her if she believed the characters of the show to be feminist (Wolf 2003, p. 17). "They're obviously feminist," she responded. "You can be a feminist but that doesn't contradict the human desire for love." But such 'human desire for love' is particularly safeguarded by Hollywood and the producers of *Sex and the City* as well.

Here, love is portrayed as a prescribed condition for marriage as if romantic love through "emotional dramas are virtually the only acceptable means of moving towards marriage" (Weisser 2001, p. 257). Indeed, disgruntled feminists of the second-wave have unconditionally asserted that the prevalence of love "justifies our exploitation by men and simultaneously ensnares us into oppressive relationships with them". To advance the flourishing of romance in a seemingly natural and neutral manner, *Sex and*

the City is brought to a close with an absence of scenes of what succeeds the ever-after ending.

Wexman reaffirms that "Hollywood films erase contradictions by making the happy ending coincide with the monogamous marriage as culmination of romantic passion and freezing this passion in an eternal moment of unproblematic unhappiness" (cited in Evans and Delayto 1998, p. 7).

Ideologically, *Sex and the City* reinforces a "desperation theme" (Dines and Humez 2003, p. 129). The implications of such are substantiated when Charlotte cries, "I have been dating since I was 15, when is my Mr. Right going to come along? In another episode, Carrie similarly bemoans her single status during Charlotte's wedding, saying, "I would die to have a strong man catch me when I fall".

And although Miranda Hobbes, a successful lawyer and single mother, asks early-on in the series, "Why do we get stuck with old maiden and spinster and men get to be bachelors and playboys?", she later draws a surprising revelation: "I must not end up old maiden or spinster". The retreat into desperation and marriage as a strategy towards addressing cultural anxieties is at the forefront in *Sex and the City*, yet is unsuccessful in acknowledging feminist discourse.

Instead, *Sex and the City* is manufactured as a cultural product which translates romance and marriage into woman's ultimate sexual and political identity. The characters of *Sex and the City* do not entirely - if at all - escape traditional gender role expectations. By adhering to the framework of dominant ideologies, the women are confined to specific gender, sexual,

racial, ethnic and class stereotypes. All four characters are White, upper-middle class, attractive, feminine, and heterosexually appealing. This further extends to the show's predominant representation of marriage as a monogamous Judeo-Christian value.

It can therefore be argued that the effect of such representations boils down to an ideological impact of mainstream capitalist and patriarchal norms, instead of a preponderance of unorthodox feminist beliefs. I ? NEW YORK Its credit sequence flaunts famous landmarks like the Chrysler Building, World Trade Center, Brooklyn Bridge, or Fifth Avenue. New York City, the alleged capital of the world, is proactive in bestowing the four characters their freedom and is implicitly a fifth representational character in *Sex and the City*. As Richards (2003, p. 48) affirms, " More often than not it seems impossible that they could enjoy and indulge in such sexual freedom in any other American city".

Drawing on what Carrie once said - " New York is all about sex, and hence not about marriage" -renders New York a 'singles ghetto'. Fostering singlehood through the visual projection of the city is advanced by separating the singles from the marrieds. Single women walk, live and breathe at the very heart of the postmodern city, whilst married people are confined to the private spaces of suburbia - Connecticut or the Hamptons.

To survive in a metropolitan city like New York, *Sex and the City* suggests that one must be single. Samantha, for example, affirms that " this is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have had as much power and money as men". Although an abundance of exterior shots establishes a sense of postmodern reality and familiarity of the Big Apple, Samantha's

observations of Manhattan potentially exclude many women from the social boundaries of *Sex and the City* and hence, from feminist discourse. Race is a significant factor in terms of how the series sets up criteria for who becomes a feminist. Sanders (2004, p. 7) argues that the surnames of the leading characters - Bradshaw, Jones, York, Hobbes - would not look out of place in a "white-shoe investment bank".

For a city that has flourished into a global hotspot for multiculturalism and become the permanent address of many foreign immigrants, New York is depicted as distinctly White, outwardly projecting a message that only Whiteness is given access to the highest level of rewards, including that of an entire ideology. Confining feminism to women of a White and middle-class background naturalises feminism as an elitist establishment, undermining the struggle of minorities.

Women who have failed to achieve economic freedom, lesbians who have yet to achieve sexual freedom, or single women with children, are all but entirely excluded. The prevailing milieu of inequitable feminist sentiments, however, is fuelled by the narrative and visual structures of the romance genre. Green (1998, p. 30), for example, attributes the romance genre to a "white racial consciousness inseparable from our notion of love, heroism, and public life". The absence of the Other therefore "embodies the most basic material meaning of our social order in its very lack of embodiedness".

Accordingly, the social order of *Sex and the City* invites lipstick lesbians to its culture, while macho femmes are completely iced out. A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO SHOES The construction of feminine identity and womanhood is a crucial

quality perpetuated in *Sex and the City*. Not only are the four main characters perceived as naturally beautiful and aesthetically appealing, but their fetishised consumption of commodity products endorses patriarchal capitalism. The second-wave of feminism in the '60s and '70s charged consumerism for penetrating the inequitable model of female identity that was "deeply conservative" (MacDonald 1995, p. 6).

Yet the series has come close to resemble a spin-off weekly PR event, boosting luxury brands from Fendi and Manolo Blahnik to Prada and Jimmy Choo. As a consequence, it may be argued that *Sex and the City* masks the socio-political nervous system of feminism, by portraying females in a narrow range of settings and activities, thus abiding to stereotypes determined as uniquely feminine (Soo Ching 2003, p. 12). The four characters are very rarely seen at work, but are financially capable to much on-screen shopping, socialising at parties, lunching on a day-to-day basis, and dating wealthy professional men.

Bailey (2003, p. 10) illustrates the embedded paradox: " *Sex and the City* lacks a larger political agenda, but is still concerned with effects of individual choices on individual lives". Derived from the Marx's analysis of capitalist societies and his term "commodity fetishism", Wolfgang Haug (1987, p. 8) determined products in a capitalist society to be designed to "stimulate in the onlooker the desire to possess and the impulse to buy". There is a bold connection here between the culture of women's magazines and *Sex and the City*.

Feminist media critics have raised concern over the monolithic compositions of a "woman's world" imbued in women's magazines (Bignell 2004, p. 216). The ideological composition of women's magazine represent feminine identity as set a set of social conventions, norms, problems and desires, passed on and appropriated by the series itself. But as McCracken (1993, p. 136) argues, "within the discursive structure, to be beautiful, one must fear being non-beautiful; to be in fashion, one must fear being out of fashion; to be self-confident, one must first feel insecure".

Underlying the production of patriarchal capitalism in *Sex and the City*, feminism therefore endangers, rather than enhances, the concept of strengthening women's civil rights. In this instance, capitalism, via feminist discourse, masks the essence of consumer goods as being produced in an inherently patriarchal system for patriarchal gain. Product placement in the series not only accomplishes commodity hegemony, but automatically weakens the show's ties with feminism. Instead, the absolute value of feminism is commodified, which Goldman (1992, p. 130) readily labels "commodity feminism".

He argues that "commodity feminism depoliticises and individualises feminism and defuses its potential political impact". From this perspective *Sex and the City* can be argued to render invisible the questions of economic status, work and social power for women. According to Bignell (2004, p. 217), the fascination with self-indulgent and pretentious activities like shopping and socialising, is a focus "relatively trivial aspects of women's lives", as opposed to raising concern over abortion, the sexual division of

labour, the representation of women in politics, or the stereotypical images pursued by the media.

CONCLUSION It has been more than 40 years since Betty Friedan attacked the role of women in marriage through her writings in the *Feminine Mystique*. Although the time-worn pages of her book might have dried out and been stacked away, feminism is indeed still alive. As evidenced by the various ideological traditions and perspectives in reading *Sex and the City*, one cannot conclusively determine whether the nature of the show is feminist or non-feminist.

Rather, it should be acknowledged that contemporary feminism bears an abundance of ideological contradictions and complexities. This is not to say that feminism is indefinable, but part of a shift from its initial historical beliefs and assumptions. It is again arguable that postmodern feminism has severely misdirected the elements of feminism to an irrational and apolitical uncertainty. Although it may be argued that the postmodern version simply defines feminism in a flexible and relaxing way, its discourse is invariably formalised by those in power.

Feminism is ideologically withheld in *Sex and the City* by reinforcing traditional gendered stereotypes and a consumerist culture based on the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism, respectively. Although embellished with postmodern feminist rhetoric, *Sex and the City* enforces a restrictive social space for women fused with the boundaries romantic love and marriage. However, despite its limitations, *Sex and the City* deserves acknowledgement for the (admittedly negotiated) challenge it poses to

feminist assumptions, as well as the return of women's rights on the social agenda.