

THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE - CONTINUING CONTROVERSY

FRIEDAN'S FOLLY

Lillian Joyce

"For years American women have been assured they had all they needed to be perfectly happy and fulfilled -- hard working husbands, lovely houses, and wonderful babies, babies, babies.

Then why all the tranquilizers? The liquor? The adulteries? The problem children? The suicides in the suburbs? And the terrible gnawing inner malaise?

Today American women are awakening to the fact that they have been sold into virtual slavery by a lie invented and marketed by men. One book has named that lie and told women what to do about it..."The Feminine Mystique."

-The Feminine Mystique, Publisher's Comment

In this book Betty Friedan urges women to recognize and use their potential. To reach self-fulfillment American women must realize that they have their own identity and are not merely an appendage of husbands and children.

In order for this to be accomplished, the author, herself a housewife and mother, advises women to seek new goals in life and become participating members of society.

This book was written in 1963 and acted as a catalyst for the Women's Liberation Movement. The Movement was to be the answer to the supposed unhappiness of American women.

Fourteen years have passed and what has really changed? Many noisy demonstrations were staged, bras were burned, and multitudes of articles were written, but what has happened to the woman who agreed with this in theory and tried to put it into practice?

In order for women to live up to their expectations, they have to be unique and of strong character. Otherwise, the end result could be more devastating than the previous "Feminine Mystique". Liberation might result in alienation; alienation from husbands, children and community unable to recognize what women need to do.

Unless women can carry their financial part, going back to school adds an extra financial burden. Even without these burdens women still cannot assert themselves because of their gratitude to their husbands from whom all blessings flow.

The ideal situation would be to have compassionate and understanding families capable of adapting to the new role of women.

Realistically, human nature being what it is, how often will this happen?

Demands on women do not change. They are still responsible for the complete functioning of the household. Going to school and holding down a job only adds to the list of women's responsibilities. It is inevitable that these responsibilities will claim priority.

Theoretically, if women are to gain fulfillment their newly established life will take precedent over the role of homemaker. But can a mother and wife really do this without being willing to accept the consequences?

Let's fact it. . .I am not knocking the concept of the liberated woman, but it is not as simple as it sounds. After being part of the entire scene, I sometimes yearn for the good old days, but not enough to stop me from plunging forward.

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FRIEDAN'S FORMULA

Judie Anderson

The Feminine Mystique was the controversial best seller in 1963, in which Betty Friedan articulated the growing despair of women who naively sacrificed their own ambitions and individuality to husbands and children, in the belief that this was the only truly acceptable road to feminine fulfillment, did indeed act as a catalyst for the Women's Liberation Movement. . .but that was not its intention. Through historical research and personal interviews, Betty Friedan sought to understand what turned the "American Dream" into a nightmare. The book was not addressed to all women; but those who were victims of what she called the "feminine mystique." This mystique closely paralleled the Nazi philosophy of "Kinder, Kirche, Kuche"; children, church, and kitchen. On the surface this seems to be not only a practical arrangement, but it also reflected the Freudian concept of "anatomy is destiny."

According to Ms. Friedan, women have been manipulated and propagandized into believing their role was auxiliary, and the quest for individual self-fulfillment was "unfeminine." In a dramatic statement, Ms. Friedan declares, "like a primitive culture which sacrificed its young girls to the tribal gods, we sacrifice our girls

to the feminine mystique."¹

The results proved devastating. She continues, "...with all of her time, energy, and intelligence directed on husband, children, and house, the young American wife easily, inevitably, disasterously, began to dominate the family completely."²

This imbalance within the family led to a loss of both femininity and masculinity in wives and husbands, and the unceasing attention to every detail of the children's lives led to an apathetic and hedonistic generation of youngsters destined to immaturity by the immature example of their parents.

Her indictment: "American business and their client industries, media and advertising, while not the creators of the feminine mystique, are its most powerful perpetrators. It is their millions which blanket the land with persuasive images, flattering the American housewife, diverting her guilt, and disguising her growing sense of emptiness."³

This was the situation as Betty Friedan saw it in the 1960's. Her research was thorough, her analysis logical and her suggestions temperate. Then what was all the fuss about? Betty Friedan did not advocate an overthrow of the system. She did not put down the role of homemaker and mother, nor was she, and other advocates for women's rights, men haters. This is stated most definitively.

The decade was a strange period in American history. How ironic it is that when superficial tranquility prevails, forces are at work which erupt in violent and focusless rage. During this period, revolution was in the air. Blacks, students, workers in factories, all clamored for immediate changes; moral, legal, and economic. As in every other revolutionary period in history, the women played their part. The sane and equitable petitions of women were distorted and exploited to meet the demands of vociferous and radical fringe groups whose ultimate purpose was not equality for all women, but to gain publicity and advantage for their individual gains.

What was Betty Friedan advocating? She sees work as the key to the problems of the feminine mystique. "...work which will use women's full capacities."⁴ Full capacities can only be utilized when American women take advantage of educational opportunities on a par with men. The feminine mystique made education suspect; unnecessary and even dangerous. Only education has saved and can continue to save American women from the greater dangers of the feminine mystique.⁵

As we reflect on the fourteen years that have elapsed since this book triggered a new and continuous women's movement, what has really changed? Everything! Ms. Friedan says, "Even against enormous obstacles, more and more women, with virtually no help

from society and with belated and begrudging encouragement from educators themselves, are going back to school to get the education they need. Their determination betrays women's underestimated human strengths and the urgent need to use it."⁶

There is not an area of American life today that has not evidenced positive and progressive change as a result of the impact of Betty Friedan's book. Through expanded educational opportunities and effective legislation, women have taken their rightful place along side of men and an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect for individual contributions is being created. Of course it has not been easy; but it is possible and becomes easier as each little success encourages one to move ahead.

We have seen and have been a part of an historic happening. All of us must recognize and appreciate the contributions of Ms. Friedan. The fact that we are students today, the fact that we are welcomed and encouraged in our pursuits, and the fact that a variety of options are readily available to us is proof indeed that the book, with its lucid evaluation and practical suggestions is as valid today as it was fourteen years ago.

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Footnotes

¹Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique Dell Publishing Company; New York, 1970.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid