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Review: Faludi, Susan. (2010). "American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide." *Harper's Magazine*. October. pp.29-42.

"How can women ever vanquish their external enemies when they are intent on blowing up their own house?"

In "American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide," feminist author and journalist Susan Faludi poses this question to her readers. With infighting between the generations of second and third wave feminists threatening to tear the movement apart, Faludi presents us with a snapshot of the current climate within feminism as well as the historical context of the generational divide beginning with the disconnection between the first and second waves of feminist activists.

Faludi begins her analysis of the feminist movement by pointing out that the inability of feminists to pass the proverbial torch to the next generation has always been one of the movement's fundamental issues. She refers to conversations with women's studies professors who are frustrated by what they see as pandering to the younger generation by developing course titles with buzzwords like "sex" and "girl," as well as one experience of attending a meeting centered on the generation gap to which no young feminists were invited. Faludi points out that the hostility is not unidirectional; she has witnessed third-wavers extol the virtues of stripping and wearing revealing clothing as a means of sexual liberation – a means that the previous generation of feminists is too old to understand.

Faludi accurately asserts that the generation gap is not the only problem facing the feminist movement. The feminization of poverty, low numbers of women as policy makers and public leaders, and sexual assault and relationship violence are just a few of the gender-based social ills in American society, and all are obstacles that feminism works actively to overcome; however, feminist activists must find a way to effectively work together if any solution to these problems is to be found.

Faludi points to the June 2009 annual meeting of the National Organization for Women as a microcosm of the generation gap within feminism. With the retirement of fifty-five year old president Kim Gandy, many saw the elections in 2009 as an opportunity for the younger generation to move into a leadership position within the storied feminist organization. Many of the NOW constituents threw their support behind thirty-three year old candidate Latifa Lyles, including Gandy herself. Lyles' speeches focused on the importance of bridging the gap between the waves, stating that together the generations could create the "wave of the future". Lyles would be defeated in a nail-biter, with fifty-six year old candidate Terry O'Neill edging into the winning position by only eight votes after a contentious campaign that divided NOW into two camps, the second wave versus the third wave.

The mother-daughter divide comes into sharper relief as Faludi describes the bodies of work of prominent third-wave feminists, many of which proclaim that our mothers' brand of feminism is outdated and out of touch with the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – literally in fact, in the case of Rebecca

Walker, daughter of famed feminist Alice Walker, who Faludi uses as an in depth example of theoretical feminist matricide. She also refers to a vastly misguided attempt to bridge the generation gap by third-wave feminists who were protesting a presidential inauguration. The young feminists showed a serious lack of historical context and knowledge when they asked suffragette Alice Paul to walk onstage and burn her voter registration card as a form of protest. This gaffe and others like it serve to highlight Faludi's argument.

Faludi's discussion of the history of the movement shows that the chasm between generations was also evident between the first and second waves. The feminists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fought for equality so that their daughters could vote, become educated, and free themselves of the patriarchal oppression of a male dominated society. The 1920s brought about a new image of the emancipated woman, the familiar image of the carefree flapper girl. The Roaring Twenties also saw the creation of the Miss America pageant. Faludi argues that these images were a method of infantilizing women and stripping away any agency that might threaten the dominant power structure, placing the familiar feminist idea of choice in a consumerist context and that it was through this subversion of the feminist ideals that the second wave came to hold feelings of contempt for their predecessors. It is this matricidal cycle that the feminist movement finds itself trapped in still today.

As a young feminist, I have often wondered why there was a sense of hostility between our generation and our predecessors. After reading this article, I feel that I have a better understanding of the mother-daughter divide, its beginnings, and the implications of not bridging the gap. Faludi provides a well-rounded and even-handed discussion of the struggle within the movement, which I believe can be used as a tool to break the cycle that could inevitably place the feminist movement in a quagmire of internal politics. If the feminist movement is to move forward, we must end the matricidal cycle and unite under the banner of social change as one dynamic force.