

JONATHAN CANE,
VISUAL HISTORIAN
AND SECOND-
WAVE FEMINIST

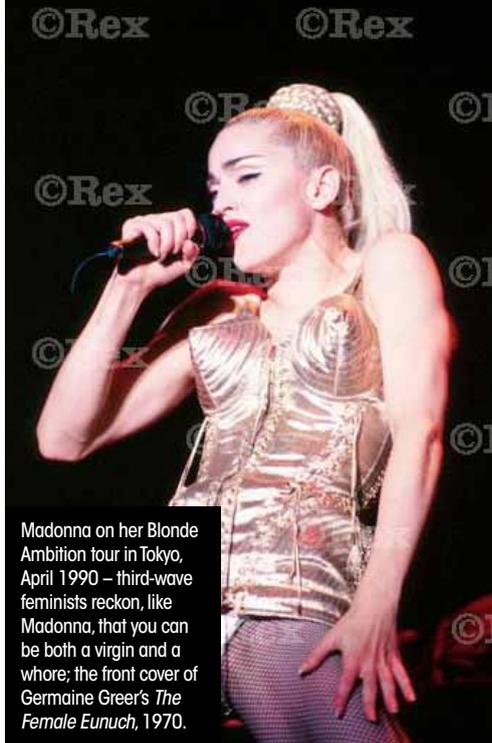


That this question would be debatable at all is evidence of a profound and dangerous misunderstanding about what feminism is and what it has or hasn't achieved.

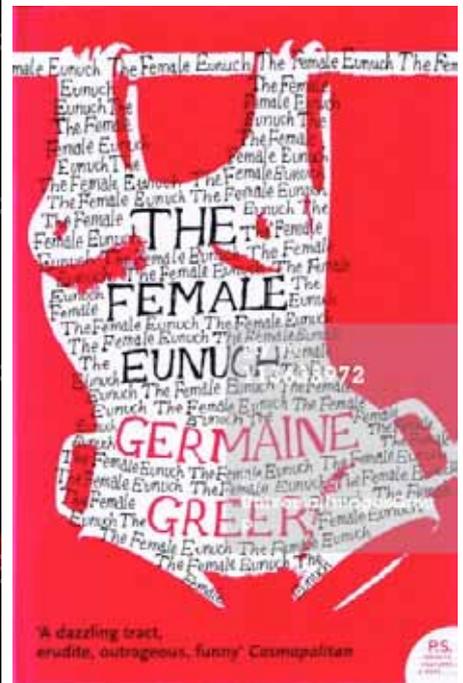
There really is no such thing as feminism per se. It would be more useful to speak about feminisms, of which there are a bunch: some made up, some total rubbish, others actually anti-feminisms clothed as feminism. But most theorists would be comfortable speaking about the 'three waves' of feminism.

First-wavers were essentially political: they were the suffragettes who fought in the 19th century for the vote, and for slacks so women could ride their bicycles. No more pesky corsets, which made it impossible to perambulate around St James Park without fainting.

For second-wavers, like Simone de Beauvoir (who was unusually stylish for this wave), the personal was political: the body of the woman was the battle ground. Her clitoris, reproductive system, body hair, beauty regimes and the like were woven into a system of male domination called patriarchy. This social system, which privileged the phallus (the active power of men), facilitated the continued success of male artists, novelists, presidents and academics over women. But it also was a system of small, daily actions where women were compelled to be beautiful for men and to stay in the domestic space. The second-wave feminists won *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which effectively disallowed many restrictions on abortion in the US, and fight for the reproductive rights of women today, especially important in Africa where many women are circumcised, raped to 'correct their homosexual tendencies' and denied access to condoms by HIV-positive partners. Second-wavers may or may not shave their armpits but are less likely to be rocking a pair of Miu Miu with a Missibaba bag: doing this is all about enslaving yourself to patriarchal domination and the gaze of men.



Madonna on her *Blonde Ambition* tour in Tokyo, April 1990 – third-wave feminists reckon, like Madonna, that you can be both a virgin and a whore; the front cover of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, 1970.



DOES THE WORLD STILL NEED FEMINISTS?

JONATHAN CANE SUGGESTS THAT AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THE F-WORD REALLY MEANS IS KEY

Third-wavers are far less grumpy and usually better dressed. Like Madonna they reckon you can be a virgin and a whore. They propose that, in essence, their mothers won the fight and they can enjoy the spoils. I'm free! So I'll do pole-dancing lessons; it doesn't make me a slut, it's a sign of my sexual liberation. The problem is that third-wavers reduce all thinking about feminism to a deeply personal level - 'I don't feel oppressed' - and ignore the *systems* of oppression, which are still at work on both a personal and social level. Susan Faludi, an American feminist, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author, as well as other

critics of third-wave feminism, insist that when these women declare their freedom - 'I dress for me, not for men' - it shows their oblivion to their and others' oppression. And it's a kind of oppression far more worrying, because at least your grandmother knew she wasn't free.

So if we need to ask whether we still need feminists, that is proof of how far we *haven't* come. As the bonkers (but brilliant) feminist Germaine Greer wrote in *The Female Eunuch*, 'If you think you're emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood - if it makes you sick, you've got a long way to go, baby.' **mc**



● Yes. Our constitution recognizes women's rights, but our society still marginalizes and discriminates against women. The next phase of feminism should be initiatives aimed at creating awareness in our communities. ●
Mthuzeli Jama



● Yes. Women are still treated like they are worth nothing in certain countries and cultures. Erica Jong said it best: "Women are the only exploited group in history to have been idealized into powerlessness." ●
Natolene Goliath



● I'm not particularly pro-feminism but rather pro-human dignity, regardless of sex, race and age. I would prefer to focus on individuals and promoting human worth in general, instead of focusing on "feminism". ●
Mienie van der Merwe

What do you think? Please e-mail your comments to marieclaire@assocmags.co.za