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Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd: Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife

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Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd. *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*.

New York: Berg Publishers, 2004. 256pp. ISBN: 184520032-2. (paper)

Reviewed by Patricia Hawkrigde, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts, Salve Regina University and by Helen Lopes, Mother and Homemaker.

This in-depth study, funded first by the Australian Research Council and then by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), focuses on the uneasy relationship between second wave feminism and the constructed image of the housewife. Johnson and Lloyd dug through the archives of 1940's and 1950's Australia to unearth books, magazines, films, radio transcripts, articles, and advertisements to produce this collaborative account that is research at its best.

Influenced by their own familial connections, the authors intend for their work to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and debate on the question of what the realms of home and work offer us as women. Their own argument is that women have been encouraged, if not overtly challenged, by second wave feminism to leave the seemingly repetitive work and eternal servitude of the home in order to discover their own place and purpose within the world. They point out that destroying what Betty Friedan called the happy housewife myth was one of the major objectives of early second wave feminism. While society did have a profound impact on how the housewife was viewed, the responsive actions of the housewife also had a profound effect on society, particularly in matters of raising and educating children and social welfare practices. (13)

One fascinating aspect of Johnson and Lloyd's work is their ability to ask important questions. What are the conditions that led to the image of the housewife being synonymous with drudgery? Why does feminism often assume that a woman must find self-actualization outside of the home? Why is it embarrassing for some women to refer to themselves as housewives? The authors provide their readers with analytical research from a variety of sources to support their ultimate conclusions on what the answers may be. For example, in Chapter 3, *Dream Stuff*, the authors rely heavily on advertisements and magazines from 1940's/50's Australia to reveal how the housewife was considered an architect of the home, while in Chapter 4, *The Three Faces of Eve*, they discuss at length three films made in 1945, 1952, and 1957 (*Mildred Pierce*, *Come Back Little Sheba*, and *The Three Faces of Eve*, respectively) to "examine different stages in the constructions of the figure of the housewife in Hollywood cinema from the 1940's and 1950's." (89) It is not until Chapter 6 that Johnson and Lloyd begin to synthesize their findings and thereby reveal their surprising and somewhat controversial conclusions.

"...far from being something which the feminist subject had to reject in order to achieve a proper subjecthood, we are suggesting then that the figure of the housewife made the feminist subject possible. She made it possible, in the first instance, to think about all women as having something in common. She gave women a means of being present to themselves as a social group, even though the basis of that sense of commonality would rapidly change.... these factors made her critical to the conclusions surrounding the emergence of second wave feminism." (152)

It is their contention that second wave feminism “has both been shaped by and contributed to” the theory that women must reject the home in favor of work outside of the home in order to truly define who they are. (153) They state that “the problem lies in the failure of contemporary feminism to insist that the separation of home and work and the way the home remains a gendered space must always be central to its concerns and critique.” (154)

Although Johnson and Lloyd shatter traditional beliefs about feminism and the housewife by providing their readers with a provocative theory about their interdependence on one another, they leave us with little in the way of suggestions or predictions about the future. A reader is, however, left with a warning, viz. the caution to contemporary feminism not to remain tied to the notion that work is the only path to self-actualization and not to ignore the growing number of women who feel that remaining in the home raising their children is their path to self-actualization. Moreover they challenge feminism to recognize the housewife as being “central to the history of the feminist subject and a useful reminder of how the project of feminism has been built on this tradition of domesticity as a source of critique of the contemporary social world.” (160)

Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and The Housewife would make a fine addition to any library of women’s studies, cultural studies; sociology; social theory, and feminist thought. It is a well-crafted and comprehensive work.