Wendy A. Fowler — Individual and Society

NAOMI WOLF'S FIRE WITH FIRE: AN ANALYSIS OF HER IDEAS AND ATTITUDES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE STRENGTH AND USE OF FEMALE POWER

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Naomi Wolf, in writing her novel *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It*, has brought many feminist issues to the public regarding the power that women have and are capable of claiming. Her perspectives and attitudes provide a refreshing change to women who could not identify themselves with society's stereotypes of the feminist movement. Wolf's experience in the women's movement, intellectual knowledge, and perception regarding changes around women's views, have all helped to build a sound epistemological foundation for her views on the direction of the movement and the necessary steps toward equality. She not only discusses the plagues of the feminist movement (lesbianism, antifamily, antimale, etc.), but she provides the cures of this plague by emphasizing the importance of women using the power that they already have (political clout, purchasing power, etc.). She starts by stressing the importance of shifting from victim feminism to power feminism.

Although feminism started as a movement to raise the public's consciousness of society's inequalities between women and men, this movement has reached complexities that resulted in a feminist split. This split is between victim feminism and power feminism. Aside from the fact that both victim feminism and power feminism are both making the public aware of women's traditional and limited roles, little comparisons can be made between the two. According to Wolf, the powerlessness accompanied with victim feminism must be stopped if real progress is to be made. In her presentation (1995), she spoke of victim feminism as "the dark side of feminism." By "the dark side," Wolf was referring to the powerlessness, antisequal, self-sacrificing, and noncompetitive ideologies accompanied with victim feminism. In Wolf's opinion it is these ideas, accompanied by the overidealized ability of rearing children, that keep women in the bondage of traditional roles and stereotypes (139).

In spite of these limited views, Wolf sheds some light on the feminism that could free women from these traditional views. Wolf describes power feminism as victim feminism's polar opposite. In her presentation (1995),
her love for power feminism was met with a smile and friendly tone, as she stated that it is "open-minded," "sexually tolerant," accepting of leadership, and welcoming of men, joy, humor, and pleasure. In her eyes, power feminism is the solution and the means for women to gain control of their lives, views, and power sources. In the beginning of the book, Wolf writes how power feminism, "means taking practical giant steps instead of ideologically pure baby steps; practicing tolerance rather than self-righteousness" (53). These baby steps are the repressive means catapulted by victim feminism.

The major differences between victim feminism and power feminism are related to the female repression and powerlessness that result from victim feminism. The first major difference centers around the victim feminist view that power, money, politics, and aggression are male traits. This creates the limited belief that it is "safer to say that power was male than to say the men had too much of it" (175). It is in this sense that the popularity of victim feminism, begun in the 1980's, has retreated rather than progressed the steps of the movement. This is why Wolf proposes the emerging importance of power feminism as a means of gaining true equality and control.

Another major discrepancy between power feminism and victim feminism centers around consensual sex. Victim feminism places consensual sex at levels equal to rape and powerlessness. The victim feminists further believe that all sexual encounters, even with equal power, are bad because, according to victim feminists, men are evil and women are not capable of having sexual desires. However, Wolf believes, "consensual sex with a married man is not the moral equivalent of a drunken car crash that leads to a death by drowning" (181). Kio Stark (1994) believes that the victim feminists' focus on rape and harassment deter the public's attention from the real issues of politics and power. Stark states that, "focusing on that struggle obscures the relationship between the private and public, between what happens inside the bedroom and what goes on outside" (138).

Finally, Wolf describes the influential results of these two traditions upon contemporary society. In the midst of her book, she describes the victim feminist view as including powerlessness, secrecy of sexual assault, lack of aggression, and belief in sex differences being innate. On the contrary, recent examples of power feminism include: EMLY's List, WAC (Women's Action Coalition), increasing number of woman-owned small businesses, and various other examples that are helping to break traditional stereotypes and roles (162).

Wolf's belief that women have the ability to be powerful and dominating results from her attitudes regarding fe/male biological differences. In
the beginning of her book, Wolf opines that the increasing biological studies of masculinity and sexual responses contribute to their loss of power and “female critique” (21). These studies include the dangers of male dominance and aggression, as well as proving that men go through male menopause. Wolf describes the results of this research with male sexuality in the following way, “once cloaked in prohibitions that kept women from making comparisons, (it) is under scrutiny, and the secrets of male virility are on display” (21). Wolf also states that women have sexual desires and drives similar to men. In the middle of the book, she stresses that she is a human organism with desires for male companionship:

I want men, male care, male sexual attention. This desire doesn't necessarily make a woman a slave or an addict;...Male sexual attention is the sun in which I bloom. The male body is ground and shelter to me, my lifelong destination (186).

Wolf not only openly states her own desires, but writes of females' desires for sex and power. The female retaliation against victimization can be seen in many films including The Burning Bed, Extremities, and Fatal Attraction. Wolf explains that these films became popular because women have power to exert their influence upon Hollywood and desired men to see these various films (223). Because women have increasing power, women are possessing the opportunity to harass and objectify men. She is not exactly saying that women in power should harass men, but rather she is emphasizing the capabilities that women have of being able to be “bad girls.” Wolf describes this bad girl as a sexual avenger. In the section titled “Integrating the Bad Girl, Wolf declares, “I am good and evil, nurturer and aggressor, creator and destroyer, I am no victim, no saint, but a potential human being: loving to friends, dangerous to those who danger me” (228). Wolf further asserts that this desire to be bad is innate to women and men. It is in using this innate desire for power, that women are able to run for office and compete in a traditionally male society. Furthermore, she writes how it is much easier to claim victimization, because in claiming power, women have new responsibilities and choices. But these responsibilities are the power feminism's means for gaining control and respect of one's self (232). These new responsibilities extend beyond the traditional female roles that involve acting as nurturer and caregiver to others.

Towards the end of the book, she writes about her own child-rearing. Like many families today, she grew up with dual-career parents. Her father and her mother worked and cared for her. This upbringing has helped to guide her beliefs in the importance of shared responsibilities between both parents. She desires for women to, “share housework 50-50,
keep their maiden names, and vote for choice" (127). Wolf uses Gautama Buddha, Jesus, Martin Luther King, and other historical figures to illustrate that men have the capability to be just as nurturant as women. It is unfortunate that past stereotypes, regarding male strength and female nurturance, have dominated over "nonsensical" historical figures. Wolf amplifies this fact by stating that there are, "innumerable fathers, healers, advocates, and caretakers whose names are lost to history because it is indeed the male generals, rather than the male nurturers and sustainers of life, who garner most of the accolades" (148).

Wolf also addresses the influence of testosterone upon nurturing roles. It is in this section that she states how older men’s decreasing levels of testosterone lead to more nurturant roles while women’s increasing testosterone levels lead to more aggression. In a recent class, Dr. Bruce Friesen (1995) displayed a chart on the effects of testosterone and socioeconomic status upon crime. The fact that socioeconomic status, more than testosterone levels, effected criminal acts could lead to the idea that society has more of an impact than biology upon these behaviors. This would support Wolf’s view that women are just as capable as men in engaging in aggressive behavior. Thus, according to Wolf, women are capable of sexual desires and drives, claiming power, and engaging in sadistic fantasies. Additionally, men are capable of being nurturant and caring towards others.

The changing stereotypes between men and women contribute to the split between two male views. In the chapter entitled “The Decline of the Masculine Empire,” Wolf writes of how men are beginning to see their patriarchal world die. Of course, this is not easy, nor desirable, for men to see a world representative of power crumbling before their very eyes. She states that, “we are at a point where men have lost their authority before they have lost their power. This falling empire has created a split between two different male groups. Wolf calls these two groups the “egalitarians” and the “patriarchalists” (12). Other feminist writers acknowledge two groups as well. Similar to Wolf’s view, Clatterbaugh (1990) calls these two groups the “promasculinist” group, who emphasize men as victims and the “profeminist” group, who support feminists in their scorn for patriarchy (73). According to Wolf “egalitarians,” who share the same view of the “profeminists,” are trying to transcend traditional stereotypes and help support women in gaining respect and equality. Wolf writes that these are the “men who are trying to learn the language and customs of the newly emerging world” (23). This group is more open to change and the hope of peace and respect between the sexes. In contrast, the “patriarchalists,” shared by women and men, are not open to this change and are desperately trying to repress advancements of the movement. This group only sees loss in traditional societal roles, rather than a gain in equality. Although men “waiver between being egalitarians and patriarchalists,” they are capable of
being feminists (23). After all, men play an important role in the progression of the movement. Their changing attitudes and roles effect their future generations in a chain that either accepts, or rejects equality. According to Wolf, the issue is not if men can become feminists, but when women accept that they can. She acknowledges this point by stating that, “the patriarchalists are withdrawing because they realize before women do that women have already begun to ‘win’” (24). This reveals women’s own disbelief about their own ability to use their power and force to accomplish the goal of equality.

Seven cardinal feminine fears of power prevent women from exerting their political and economic influence to shatter traditional roles. The first fear, the fear of leadership, results from girl’s socialization into intimate, sharing relationships with friends. This early socialization teaches girls to resent the leadership and capabilities of others. This fear is similar to the second fear of power, the fear of egotism, in the sense that females are taught to be part of the group and not boast over their individual gains (279). The fears of ridicule, conflict, and standing alone, make up the third, fourth, and fifth fears, and they further result from girl’s early social cliques. The sixth fear is the fear of having too much. In girls’ minds, having too much leads to social isolation caused by group jealousy. The last fear that Wolf describes is the fear of seeing other women have too much. Wolf describes this fear by stating that, “when someone has repressed her own will, she is unlikely to want to see other girls or women express their wills and get away with it” (279).

Wolf proposes attitudes and strategies that would be helpful in overcoming these fears. First of all, she states the importance of valuing one’s self-enhancement. Wolf states, “as women move into power, they must begin to separate some connections from others” (286). Another solution involves developing a psychology for women that acknowledges success. This includes accepting other’s, as well as personal, success. Wolf also states that one must accept that other people should lose. In exemplification of this solution, she states that, “it’s okay to embarrass a discriminatory employer” (288). To reclaim youthful aggression that can aid in overcoming these fears, Wolf encourages women to think back to when they were a child who desired to be president, king, or sports star (280). In reclaiming and acknowledging this desire for power, females can overcome their psychological fears of power. In this way women can work through their differences instead of working with them.

Finally, Wolf suggests forming a female power group (281). Much like its male counterparts, the female power group could prove useful in mentoring younger individuals into societal roles and power structures. This group would be open to new ideas and members. Wolf describes this
group as making feminism fun and lucrative. She further states that this group forces women to reclaim their power, expand every woman's network, create a community setting, build new friendships, and ease anxieties due to seeking power (300).

Wolf argues that media and popular culture influence women's and men's consciousness. The media promote gender stereotypes through a variety of programming, and this programming represents the social psychological theory called role theory. According to the text (Michener and DeLamater, 1994), "role theory holds that a substantial proportion of observable, day-to-day behavior is simply persons carrying out their roles" (8). Wolf discusses the relationship of the role theory to feminist issues in the media by referring to "media omission" and "intellectual polarization." She states that a "1990 study by Women, Men and Media found men reporting 85 percent of the news on the three commercial networks, and men made up 87 percent of the newsmakers" (78). Wolf further reports that, "by the year, 1992, the number of men reporting the news had increased" (78). This means that the role models for authoritative information were men. Women represented low percentages as role models in programs that dealt with interviews of politicians, leaders, critics, and policy makers.

Wolf supports the impression of this type of omission of women leaders as role models upon the developing young female. "How can we be surprised that women question their worth, or that at adolescence girls lose their voice and their sense of entitlement to an opinion? How could girls not doubt the validity of their own concerns?, "Wolf asks before she states that "the gatekeepers of the nation's consciousness certainly do" (83).

She points out that women have great power to influence the media through their role as consumers. The importance of this power cannot be underestimated in influencing the future role of women in our culture as a result of the power of role theory. She suggests that women be assertive in writing, publishing, or speaking out about their beliefs and criticisms. Towards the end of the book, Wolf writes about the importance of reclaiming the woman's press and she stresses that "a campaign to take proportionate space in the media generally is crucial to women's turning the corner into power" (311). She further proposes that women need to argue for a "reader's rights" movement to force the media to include women. Wolf further amplifies this movement's objective by suggesting that it could "erect a 'Billboard of Media Mortification' over Times Square, so that major newspapers' and magazines' 'scores' in coverage of women and inclusion of women's bylines can be broadcast to all" (311).

I agree with Naomi Wolf's argument that media's influence on women is descriptive of the role theory (80). Wolf has been influential in sensitizing the reader to the critical issues of role theory upon the perception of
women in the media. She has pointed out alternative resources and assertive methods to deal with this issue which can influence change. In one of the most powerful sections of the book, titled "What we can do now," Naomi Wolf boosts the readers' moral by stating, "by dint of sheer numbers and a handful of change, woman have already begun to win" (320). She does, however, reveal the psychological obstacles that could prevent this victory:

If we continue to distrust the power of our imaginations, our money, and our words, we hand over victory to those who want the majority to remain silent...Are we psychologically prepared..? Will we take up the responsibility to contribute to the hidden perspectives of women...to ensure the well-being of everyone, male as well as female? (320)

I believe that both men and women in the future will benefit from mutual respect and opportunity to appreciate the contribution of each gender to society, but the media must demonstrate more diversity and sensitivity in programming. With the portrayal of women and men in diverse roles, both genders will achieve better acceptance and understanding in the future as each takes responsibility for its changing roles.

Works Cited


