

The liberated woman and the housewife in the 1970s

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INTRODUCTION

The housewife figure was replaced by the liberated woman as the central subject of desire by Second-Wave Feminists in Norway in the 1970s. The happy housewife was, as formulated by Sara Ahmed, unveiled by the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) as a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labour under the signs of happiness. Following perspectives on social movements as emotional politics, this shift is important to examine as these dominating ideals symbolize different selves and different routes to freedom and happiness.

In 1976 the philosopher and second-wave feminist Karin Monsen encouraged women to leave the housewife position and argued that women as well as men are capable of living as active, creative, grown-up and potent individuals (Monsen 1976:18). The Norwegian sociologist Erik Grønseth described the housewives role and position in marriage as dependent and suppressed, as a result of mystifying ideology and false consciousness that keeps the situation that way (Grønseth 1976:10). To be liberated implies to be liberated from something, to get rid of in order to be free to do what you want. Making new utopians imply making identity-contrasts, in this process exploiting existing identities to make new ones. In this text I will explore how the liberated woman in the 1970s was made especially in contrast and continuation to the housewife-figure related to the 1950s. I use the concept of "the liberated woman" as a labelling of the ideals for the new woman growing out of the negotiations in the WLM in the 1970s. The idea of the new and liberated woman can be seen in relation to generational experiences, other contemporary ideals for women, in contrast to older feminist movements, in relation to men or to other counter-cultural movements. The new utopian ideals were made of the dream of that which is possible, because it was not yet or no longer impossible.

This text is part of a larger project about the The Women's Liberation Movement in Norway in the 1970ies, with a focus on how the liberated woman was constructed (See www.rokkan.1970). What were the new fantasies, utopias, norms, affects linked to the new woman? Which actions and practices did they call for? The research builds upon so far 12 qualitative interviews

with second-wave feminists, magazines connected to the movement, different archives and fictional and non-fiction books published in the 1970s. All these different sorts of sources share a focus on the role of the housewife in one way or the other, mostly following the same strand of arguments as Grønseth and Monsen. In the qualitative interviews made as part of this project the women expressed that becoming a housewife was not an acceptable life-plan, that something else and implying "more" was expected from them.

Sarah Ahmed asks "How are emotions bound up with stories of justice and injustice?" (Ahmed 2004:191). I will now analyse how the WLM used the role and institution of the housewife to show the injustice of patriarchy and as an identity-figure to identify with and against.

PERSPECTIVES

This paper and the research project as a whole is inspired by perspectives on social movements as passionate politics (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta 2001, Jasper 1997). The point of departure is that affections and actions involved in social movements are not automatic and "given" responses on discriminations and unfair treatments. Emotions are linked to moral institutions, perceptions of rights and duties, knowledge on expected effects, dreams and visions of a good life in different historic settings. The WLM altered several of emotions' cultural frames. Phenomena previously related to happiness, progress and freedom, like that of being a domestic homemaker and mother, increasingly became related to force and limitations.

This analysis is especially inspired by Sarah Ahmed's perspectives exploring the cultural politics of emotions (Ahmed 2004). She points to how "figures of speech" are crucial to the emotionality of texts. Ahmed discusses emotions not as being in the text, but "as effects of the very naming of emotions, which often works through attributions of causality" (Ahmed 2004:13). She describes feelings as performative: they both generate their objects, and repeat past associations (2004:194). Different figures get stuck together, and this sticking is dependent on past histories of association (Ahmed 2004:13). Texts name or perform

different emotions, making them move and generate effects. Emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations, but become “real” by the utterance, shaping different kinds of actions and orientations (Ahmed *ibid.* 2004:13). Ahmed considers feelings such as happiness as a promise, which directs us towards certain objects, which then circulate as social goods (Ahmed 2008:123). What happy or unhappy objects were the second-wave feminists promoting?

THE LIBERATED WOMAN DISPLACES THE HOUSEWIFE

In 1974 about 5000 women were organised in the WLM and about 50 000 women were organised in the Housewife-organisation (Haukaa 1982, Kvinnens Årbok 1974). The Housewife-organisation and their cause had had their golden years in the 1950s (Danielsen 2002,). Their members did not put as much energy and activism into this cause in the 1970s compared to the housewife-organisations in the 1950s. The WLM was like a fever, a movement with very active members producing a lot of books, new organisations, public demonstrations, attention in the media and so on. The relatively low number of members in the WLM did not reflect the impact the movement had on public debate.

A magazine that aimed to unite different parts of the WLM called *Sirene. Tidssignal for kvinner og menn*, (The Siren. A call for women and men) was very occupied with the housewife during the first years from 1973 and onwards (Lindtner 2009:28). The magazine was run by an independent collective of women, trying to reach out and make more people active in the movement. In their pre-issue in 1973 they printed an advertisement for a “free job”. They asked “Who wants to apply for this position?” giving a sarcastic description of the tasks of the housewife, the conditions being no vacation, no payment, no pension, small possibilities for development, working 24 hours. “The position is suitable for a necessary indoctrinated woman who does not wish for advancement or spiritual development. Good looks and a docile spirit is a pre” (Sirene 1973 nr. 1:6). By comparing the housewife position with a paid job the bad conditions for the housewife were exposed. The magazine was accused of ridiculing the housewives by its readers after this portrait of the housewife position. As a response to that a leader article self-critically asked whether *Sirene* underestimates the housewife. They pointed to links between the housewife role and function in society and women’s subordinate position:

“The housewife institution represents the foundation of the gender role regime. Housewives are a prerequisite for the society we have today, and in this respect we agree with the principal speakers! Additionally, we will find no solution to female exploitation and injustice as a result of gender until we women cease adapting ourselves to the role

of housewife. Or to put it more clearly: not until we eliminate the thought process that we women are first and foremost meant to be housewives.” (Sirene 1, 1974, s.0)

The housewife role was portrayed as a threat to the freedom of the individual woman. The article focuses on resources, ideas and thoughts that are suppressed due to the current situation, and encourages housewives to join the movement. The housewife is portrayed as unconscious and in need of liberation. The road to liberation is portrayed as accessible by taking part in society, and the article ends by asking housewives to both to join the movement and to take on paid work. “The right to work has never been denied women. But what about the right to paid work?” (Sirene 1, 1974, s.1). When citing Aleksandra Kollontaj the lead article in *Sirene* promoted paid work as the road to money and freedom for women.

The WLM inhabited an internal struggle over which private experiences of women should be stressed and transformed into public themes. Criticism was raised against some of the traditional women’s organisations, for whom the recognition of *housewifery* as a distinct profession was a central gender issue. Characteristics of that role, such as being the primary caretaker of husband and children, were seen as a threat to women’s rights to participate in wage work and their rights to freedom. Central discussion topics included which societal changes women should work toward; recognition and acknowledgement of caretaker work or the transformation of wage-work, which feminine qualities should the movement emphasize, care or independence, motherhood or professional identities (Roseneil et al 2009). Which skills or emotions should be pursued? This struggle manifested itself in a struggle over which women should be benefitted through the public welfare system, which should not?

The issue of economic independence was a critique against the gendered model of economical support that had dominated the Norwegian economy after the second world-war. The breadwinner and housewife system, as a societal model for economic support of families, depended heavily on ideological success at an individual level (Danielsen 2005:233). The men had to give the women the money they earned, and the women had to devote themselves to their husbands and children. Some women had not had access to enough money, some had had enough. The experienced and visible vulnerability of this system led women to a decreasing trust in this as a secure way of supporting themselves and their children economically (Danielsen 2005:233). To earn one’s own money became an important demand, both practically and symbolically speaking for women. In the 1970s it was no longer good enough to be provided for. Now women wanted to earn and control the money themselves. The right to paid work was an essentially important parole in

the movement. The economic issue was important, but also the new emphasis on professional work as the primary site of self-actualisation.

HER OWN PLATFORM

The concerns regarding the housewives ambiguous status debated in *Sirene* was not a new one. In the 1950s the housewives themselves and the national housewife-organisation pointed to lack of recognition, money and leisure time for the housewives (Danielsen 2005:232). She was both the heart of the nation and only a housewife. The book *Myten om kvinnen* (The Feminine Mystique) by Betty Friedan was translated into Norwegian in 1968 (launched in the U.S. in 1963) and became a central reference for the Norwegian movement, both as an energizer for joining the cause by “naming the problem with no name” and later as ideas to protest against, distancing oneself from the liberalistic message about equality (Haukaa 1982, Irgens 2007:17, Aasen 2007:99- 100). The differences between the U.S. and Norway were great, as Norway was poorer and not so modernized so that housewives had a heavy work load (Danielsen 2002). The image of the bored and sexually frustrated housewife in the US was not as visible in Norway. However, some of the housewives’ frustrations were similar. Else, one of my interviewees, read Friedan’s book before it as translated into Norwegian, in 1965, while she was a student at the university. It made a great impression on her, and functioned to legitimize her conceptions of what was wrong with the lives of women:

Else: She named things. And what she pushes is the myths, what kind of life should we wish for, and what is the greatest good for women, and so on. The housewife trap is also hers. So that connected very well with what I had experienced myself and seen, what role my mother and many others, almost every women had, which I grew up with, the mother-generation. Someone said “yes, you are right in the conception you have of this”.

Hilde: And what was that?

Else: There is no future in being a housewife for women. It has to do with being 50 years old, sitting there left by children and maybe the man as well, and you do not have a platform in life.

Women should make a platform of their own, not building their identity upon men or children. To be a housewife was to be trapped, eventually left alone. Where there is no future, there is no happiness. The search for an identity outside the home became a strong driving force in the movement during the 1970’s, both in Norway and the US (Rosen 2000:7). The fear of becoming just a housewife nurtured the daughters’ of the 50s ambitions to attain a life filled with something other than just men and children. The dream of getting married, having children and running a household was abandoned by the new generation that was searching for personal growth (Rosen 2000:6).

The idea of the liberated woman as liberated from patriarchy depended on the housewife formation in yet another way. When Else talks about women she is very concerned with the value of the concept sister-solidarity, to be able to view women as having worth in themselves, not connected to the male gaze. “To wake up feministically, was and is to me to respect and value women to a much more extent than I had been raised to or seen around me.”

The experience that women in themselves are valuable and worth connecting with, maybe even first, before you care for the man over there, that was so wonderful. So liberating. That means that you value yourself, as a woman.

The concept of sister-solidarity was based on the ability to see women’s common interests as more important than their class position. The post-war housewife was a class-unifying gender figure in spite of the obvious differences between the working-class and the middle-class (Wærness 1978:121). The housewife role gave women a speaking position and a political voice, which was important for their activity and a prerequisite for being able to feel a sense of community with other women (Johnson and Lloyd, 2004). The housewife identity connected to the 1950s thus can be viewed as a formation that made way for a role that made it possible to view women as having common interests that were more important than divisions caused by class.

OPPOSITE IDENTITIES? VALUING WOMEN’S CULTURE, WOMEN’S WORK

In light of the new movement, the definitions of what a housewife was can be viewed as a sharp contrast to what a liberated woman was. When feminist researchers defined the housewife role, they focused on both her tasks and her way of doing it:

“Consideration for others is the most important value in housewifery. That means that the housewife’s attention should be aimed at other’s needs in current situations. Thus the primary demand of the housewife is to put her time at the disposal of others.” (Wærness 1978:125)

The socialization to become a housewife involved both knowledge and forming of emotions. The personal ability to adjust and sacrifice for others was promoted in the housewife schools that educated young girls to become housewives (Danielsen 2002:27). It was difficult to distinguish her work from the work or duties of other persons in the household, her personal needs from the family’s needs, creating a constant blurring of borders. A liberated woman, on the other hand, took her life in her own hands and established more clear-cut borders between herself and others. The identities of housewife and liberated woman opposed each other. Second-wave feminists used the housewife-figure to make a linear narrative of women breaking out or leaving home, of

the emergence of an opposition discourse rejecting the myth of the happy housewife (Johnson and Lloyd 2004:11).

The idea of the liberated woman depended on the housewife figure as an identity contrast, but the two types of women also had a lot in common. Paid work was an ordinary element in the daily lives of the housewives, as long as they did it for the good of the family (Danielsen 2002, 2005:233). The women could identify with the housewife role even though they had full time paid work, it was their attitude that counted. For some women it was more the attitude towards their work that changed more than the actual amount of paid work. The women joining the work force were expected to care for their families. Was it possible to unite being a housewife and a liberated woman? During the 1970's many women actually lived with both these ideals in their daily life; they performed housework, cared for others, put their time as disposal for the family, did paid work and activist/organisational work. In spite of the differences set up between these two types of women, they had a lot of common struggles.

The WLM started out in the beginning of the 1970s acting aggressive towards the housewife-institution, but it seems that the movement developed more nuanced views on the housewife during the second-half of the 1970s. The concept of Women's culture, developed and discussed by feminist researchers paved the way for a more positive valuing of the role and work housewives did. In 1978 a collection of articles called "If the housewife was not here" (Hvis husmøren ikke fantes) was published, asking questions like: Does women's liberation mean the end of the housewife role? Is there a women's culture grounded on the work of the housewife? (Grenness (ed.) 1978). The concept of women's culture was first developed in Norway by Berit Ås and her colleagues, referring to a connected set of values, conceptions and causal explanations relevant for women, but hard to understand or invisible for men (Ås 1973). The sociologist Kari Wærness argued that this definition was too vague, and defined women's culture as

"The experiences, conceptions, values and norms women develop from their position as unpaid workers in home and family-life. That the housewife-role is the primary role for women, implicate that women's culture is an important element in the socialisation of all girls, no matter what other future roles they are expected to inhabit." (Wærness 1978:124)

This definition creates all women as bearers of a women's culture. The concept of women's culture was also seen as a way to essentialize and thus limit what women could be. The sociologist Runa Haukaa warned against a glorification of women's culture and argued that "Womens culture, as we know it, is the culture of

the unconscious/subordinate women. That is why it can not function in a society of free women" (Haukaa 1977:248). She meant that the qualitative new ideals the feminist movement was seeking could not build upon a frame where women's consciousness of being was to be dependant. Many activists shared the goal that women's liberation should imply something more than the ideal of equality, rejecting the thought that if women and men became similar, the problems of patriarchy would be solved. Women's liberation meant instead to work for a fundamentally new society, not built on male norms. That could mean challenging, testing and playing with gender norms and rules of femininity and masculinity (Muftuoglu 2009).

Housewives were both seen as possible allies for the WLM in the struggle against patriarchy and as tools for upholding that system. The WLM wanted to value women's work, including the work women did as housewives, but as a whole they focused on strategies asking women to leave the housewife role. The magazine *Sirene* reflected the changes during the 1970's, by focusing less on the housewife institution and more on how to combine paid work and children when the magazine entered the 1980s. While *Sirene* started out by appealing to housewives to leave their role, this institution seems to have become a less relevant threat against women's liberation. Women's combination of paid work and family-life was more taken for granted. In the finale issue of *Sirene*, from 1983, the threats against women's liberation were framed as coming from other feminists. The last leader article accuses parts of the WLM for being too separatistic and extreme, manhating, sex-negative and lesbian (1983 nr.5, s.2). By being too aggressive against men and men's sexuality they could loose their own sexuality, and make the divide between the women's movement and other women deeper.

CONVERTING FEELINGS: EMOTIONS AND JUSTICE

In her forthcoming book "The promise of happiness", and in some articles recently published, Sarah Ahmed discusses the image of the feminist joykiller and places the figure of the complaining feminist alongside the figure of the happy housewife (Ahmed 2008, 2009 forthcoming). She asks rhetorically: Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced or negated under the public signs of joy? Ahmed argues that the feminist kills joy precisely because she refuses to share an orientation towards certain things as being good, because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising (2008:127). My point is that this may well be the case, but in that process the feminists also created the housewife as a totally opposite figure from themselves. They were "othering" the housewife,

exploiting this figure to make their own identities and projects.

The housewife figure fed the identity as a liberated woman by being something to mark oneself different and more conscious from. The struggle against the housewife-figure united the women's personal uproar towards their mother's generations lives and a political protest against the implications the housewife figure had for societal rights, duties and identities women were allowed. The WLM Movement demanded a reorganisation of both rules of justice and of legitimate feelings. Ahmed points to this interconnection when she formulates the critique posed by the second-wave feminists; "How better to secure consent to unpaid or poorly paid labour than to describe such consent as the origin of good feeling?" (Ahmed 2008:121). And how better to prepare an uproar against the housewife and breadwinner system than to describe unpaid work as the origin of bad feelings? The creation of new emotions created new demands for justice and new demands for justice created new feelings. Paid work became an object connected to emotions of freedom and happiness. Unpaid work became an unhappy object, pointing to lack of status, money and a future. When Nina Karin Monsen stressed that it was possible and good for women to be active, creative and potent individuals she did this opposing what she saw as dominating ideals for women. She pointed directly to paid work as a means to make these values come real in women's lives (Monsen 1976). The WLM was a motor in converting good feelings into bad and bad feelings into good and

as Ahmed I think it is important "to attend to such points of conversion and how they involve explanations of "where" good and bad feelings reside (Ahmed 2008:126). This process has political implications and should be subject to further investigation.

Ahmed is a defender of the right to kill joy because "it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, which gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or at least happy life" (Ahmed 2008:135). One of the main contributions of the WLM is the redistribution of feelings, of making new ideas and norms for a just society, and in so doing creating new ideals and utopias for living a good life. The movement participated in creating new selves, dreams, actions, norms, borders. My point in this text has been that the figure of the housewife became a tool in the identity-construction of the feminists. The WLM depended on the housewife institution in their making of new norms and utopias in different ways: as an identity construction they could use to make themselves similar and different from, and as a premise for a societal organisation and institution of duties and rights they felt threatened by and wanted to get rid of. The housewife represented a self the second-wave feminists wanted to leave in the past, outdated and out of place. In this process they remade the housewife, making her identity more narrow compared to what it had been in the 50s. In their struggle to move forward they made the liberated woman as an independent and autonomous figure defining her own projects, her own platform.

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