

# On American Feminist Movement based on Why Women Kill

Pengfeng Zhang

School of the English Language and Culture, Xiamen University, Tan Kah Kee College,  
Zhangzhou, Fujian, China

zpfngordon@126.com

## Abstract

**Feminist movements have a long history in America. This article explores the women's rights movement in the United States from the TV series of Why Women Kill, the hottest American TV series and concludes that every society should emphasize the social status of women in their countries and pay much attention to the women's rights and welfare.**

## Keywords

**feminism; feminist movement; Why Women Kill.**

## 1. Introduction

There have been three waves of feminism in American history. American feminist movement, through different ways, not only touched the laws of the United States and the constitution, won the political right to vote, improved the properties of their salary, job and education opportunities, but also dramatically changed American life concept and way of life, improving the status of women. When it comes to women's rights and interests, the feminist movement is all-encompassing.

This article explores the history of women's rights movement in the United States from the perspective of *Why Women Kill*, the hottest American TV series last year. The show tells the story of three women living in different times in the United States. They were women from three different eras who lived in the same mansion: the 1960s, the 1980s and the present. They had a seemingly glamorous married life and status, but they ended up killing their husbands. The time line of this drama is just in the period of the second feminist movement and the third feminist movement in the United States. It depicts the life and choices of women in the three families at that time. That villa, in fact, is a social environment; that set of keys is the legacy of generations of feminist fighters. The social environment shapes the image of the characters, and the decisions made by people under specific environmental restrictions affect the social process to some extent. A study of the history of the American feminist movement from the play can help the public to better understand the background of the American feminist movement, and the characteristics of the protagonist are also the best reflection of the personalities of American women in different times.

For thousands of years, in many countries, women have often been neglected or even discriminated. As a fundamental problem in the development of human society, women's problems have important and profound research significance in different periods. The feminist movement is conducive to changing the inequality between men and women, promoting harmonious coexistence between people, and laying a good foundation for the stable development of society. Capitalist countries are the vanguard of the feminist movement, so it is of great significance to study the feminist movement and understand the history of women's movement in the United States. Besides, we can investigate the future development of the feminist movement in the world, aiming at helping contribute to the realization of gender equality in China.

## 2. Feminism and American Feminist Movement

Feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It's about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights. It's about leveling the playing field between genders, and ensuring that diverse women and girls have the same opportunities in life available to boys and men. Being a feminist simply means believing in equal rights for all genders. It's not about hating men. It's not about women being better than men. It's not about eschewing femininity. It isn't about creating a sliding scale of who is worse off – it's about learning and understanding the ways that inequality affect women and men, and remembering that we're all in this together. True equality leaves no one behind. Generally speaking, feminism is a political thought and movement that women strive for equal rights with men in law, politics, economy, culture, education and other fields. Like other more systematic ideas, it has its own theories and different schools, and like other movements of a considerable scale, it has carried out various forms of struggle. Under the interaction of ideas and movements, feminism keeps pushing society to take steps in a direction conducive to changing the status of women (Li, "Feminism" 13).

With the progress and development of society, feminism began to appear in western developed countries. Initially words "feminism" and "women's rights" were used to express the meaning of fighting for women's rights.

On April 27, 1895, Alice Rossi published a review on the book *Magazine*, in which she made the first etymological exploration and proposed the term "feminism". Since then, people have started to use the word, and it gradually replaced the previous expressions. By the beginning of the 20th century, "feminism" had become widely used till this day (Banner 158).

Women had begun to recognize gender inequities during the war of independence because of their exposure to the widespread ideas of freedom and equality. Intelligent women expressed themselves through group discussions and private correspondence. In July 1792, a woman wrote to the *Ladies Magazine*: "I object to the word 'conformity' in marriage... Marriage should not be seen as a contract between a superior and a subordinate, but rather as a two-way alliance of power, a self-evident partnership" (Evans 79). Judith Murray of Massachusetts and Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams, the leader of the independence movement, made systematic reflections on gender inequality.

The second wave of American feminism emerged in the 1960s and declined in the 1970s and 1980s. The liberalism of the 1960s did not make America stronger, but brought a series of social problems. Conservatives argued that the issues raised by feminists had corrupted America's morality and contributed to its relative decline. In order to defend the traditional values based on religion and family, the conservative forces carried out a series of social movements against feminism, which brought a heavy blow to the feminist movement (Lu 57). The conservative response focused on three main areas. First, The Equal Rights Amendment, which advocated equal rights for men and women, was not passed without the approval of three states. Second, a women's legal right to an abortion was greatly undermined by the Hyde Act. Third, because of its association with the gay rights movement, the feminist movement had also suffered from anti-gay resistance. The conservative forces' fierce response to the feminist movement involved many aspects such as economy, politics, religion and race. These different social and cultural factors were interrelated and influence each other, resulting in the decline of the feminist movement from prosperity. The second wave of feminism went into reverse in the face of a backlash from conservative forces. The achievements of the feminist movement were repeated, the organizational structure of the feminist movement was damaged, and the momentum of the movement was weakened, which also undermined the morale and enthusiasm of the movement participants. In addition, the goals of the feminist movement had been thwarted and gender

inequality remained widespread, particularly in the field of employment, which led to the impoverishment of women (Porter 344). The decline of the feminist movement was also reflected in the division within the feminist group, which constituted the deficiency and decline of the feminist movement itself. At present, the academic research on the backlash against the second wave of feminism and its decline is relatively scattered. Through the research on this issue, this paper will reveal the plight of women on the path of equal rights in a practical sense. The ups and downs of the feminist movement during this period provide us with opportunities to learn more about American women and American society.

Since the 1990s, the third wave of the feminist movement began to rise, and compared to the former two waves, the third wave of the feminist movement way was more moderate.

This article believes that there are three main reasons for the above characteristics of the third wave of American feminism. First, the purpose of the first two waves of feminism was to enable women to obtain equal rights in politics, law and social participation on the whole. They had also basically completed the transformation of the role of American women. In fact, they had laid a solid foundation for the third wave of feminism, which draws attention to the change of social thoughts. Second, since the first two waves of feminism were dominated by white middle-class women in the United States, they ignored other female groups, leaving many problems unresolved. Therefore, the third wave of feminism had to focus on the contradictions and differences between feminism and feminist movement. Third, the social, economic and cultural background of the United States had a significant impact on the third wave of feminism.

### 3. American Feminist Movement in Why Women Kill

The show tells the story of three women living in different times in the United States. They are women from three different generations who live in the same mansion: a housewife from the 1960s, a gallery lady from the 1980s and contemporary bisexual elite lawyer. Although they have a seemingly glamorous marriage life and status, they are faced with the marriage of a variety of betrayal. In the end, they kill their husbands.

Characters in story from the 1960s:

Beth Ann: housewife

Rob Stanton: Beth's husband, an engineer

April: Waitress, Home-wrecker

Sheila: Neighborhood, Beth's friend

Mary: Neighborhood, suffering from domestic violence by her husband

At the beginning, Beth knew that her husband Rob was having an affair with April, a waitress in a restaurant. She thought it was her fault. As a wife, she didn't do her housework well, so she began to change herself. Later, she concealed her identity and used her friend Sheila's name to approach April, and they became friends. Beth didn't kill Bob because of her husband's infidelity. But Bob is an egoist, cold like a cold-blooded animal. What really determined Rob's destiny was that Beth found that her husband had no feelings not only for herself but also for their children. In addition, Bob often had affair with others and indirectly killed their daughter because of it, but he didn't feel any guilt at all and instead blamed Beth for their daughter's death. He made her live in guilt for years, just like disguised mental abuse. The great thing about this storyline is that it murdered a person with a borrowed knife and escaped the law while rescuing Mary, another victim of domestic violence. So Beth killed her husband Rob because she hated him.

Characters in story from the 1980s:

Simone Grove: Socialite

Karl Grove: Simone's third husband, conceal he is a bisexual from others

Tommy Harte: Naomi's Son, an 18-year-old boy, love Simone very much

Naomi Harte: Simone's friend, Tommy's mother

Simone, a socialite in 1984, divorced twice before settling down with her current husband, Carl. It seemed that she was living a happy and glamorous life. Simone had more freedom than Beth Ann. She ran a gallery with her husband, but she didn't show up at the gallery often, trusting her husband Carl to manage it. From an outsider's point of view, they were an enviable couple: They enjoyed wealth and high social status, the wife was popular among her social group, and the husband was caring and loving with his wife. But it all began to fall apart when Simone found that Carl was a gay. It can be said that they were in the fraud marriage, where Carl cheated on Simone. Indeed, Simone loved Carl more than any other husband, and it was only in Carl that she found love and happiness. Therefore, Simone's anger was more from her husband's cheating on her and the inequality of her own pain and gain in love, and even, Simone was not ashamed of Carl being a homosexual. Simone was more assertive than Beth Ann, who had never known what to do or thought of divorce. As soon as she heard the news, she announced that she was going to divorce Carl. After this, she began to accept the courtship of Tommy, the son of her best friend, who was about 20 years younger than her. Simone wanted to live a free and easy life, which was also the liberation of women's rights and minds after Beth Ann's generation fought for equality between men and women. A seemingly perfect marriage turned out to be the brutal fact that the husband was gay. And Simone was married to a gay for ten years, according to the normal development of the story, which should have been the motivation for killing her husband.

But after confirming Karl's relationship with Hector, she began to respect her husband, even refused Tommy's offer to travel to Europe when she learned about Karl's AIDS and chose to stay and take care of her ailing husband. She spent all her savings, closed the gallery and sold his favorite paintings to pay for Carl's medical bills. She "killed" Carl purely out of love for him. In a way, that wasn't killing, but helping Carl complete the final step of euthanasia, allowing him to die with dignity, and then establishing the AIDS foundation in his name.

Characters in the story from 2019:

Taylor Harding: Lawyer, a bisexual

Eli Cohen: Taylor' husband, a writer

Jade: Taylor's girlfriend

In 2019, Taylor, a lawyer, played an important role in society and she was a core member of the family. She was a strong supporter of feminism. She not only participated in street rallies and talked about the abolition of patriarchy, but also maintained an open relationship with her husband Eli. They made a pact with each other: both sides can get laid outside, but the dates home. However, Taylor brought Jade to their house, a beautiful woman who was abused by her boyfriend. Eli began to fall in love with Jade. With Jade's intervention, the family was finally in a mess. Taylor could not return to the house she had bought, and Jade's trick contributed to her breakup with Eli.

After World War II, a typical American middle-class family in the 1950s had a husband who worked outside the home to earn money and a wife who stayed at home. They often lived in villas built in quick batches in the suburbs.

During this period, structuralism dominated American social studies.

Talcott Parsons is the founder of modern structural functionalism, whose cored proposition is that the traditional division of labor between the sexes is conducive to the stability of industrial society. He also defines the field of work in the activities of men and women and the maternal duties of women, and regarded women's duties as related to their biological structure. "If a grown man can't 'earn his living' in a decent profession, it's almost impossible for him to have self-respect and be respected... As for the role of women, it's a different story... A woman's primary identity is that of her husband's wife and the mother of her children"(He 234). Beth

asked her husband who she was. His reply included "my wife", even after death, "my widow". If the American media created heroines like "Rough-master Rosie" during World War II, then women in the 1950s were "happy housewives". 1950s was an era marked by high birth rates, the promotion of stay-at-home husbands and children, the opposition to women working, and the hyping of motherhood. Traditionally binding forces, which were primarily a manifestation of male preference, often impeded women's participation in the labour market and limited their activities to defined roles. For example, Rob made Beth give up her dream of playing the piano after marriage and concentrate on being a housewife.

These housewives were told by the media that they were the envy of the world's women, that they did not have to work and that they were living a carefree and decent life. America's suburban villas are like "comfortable concentration camps" in which many middle-class, college-educated housewives were trapped. Their social and family status depended on their husbands and they were unable to use their talents. The lack of social values led to mental distress, and by the 1960s, they began to question this kind of life (He 58).

Beth was totally docile at the beginning, and gradually began to raise questions and rebel, until the outbreak of her fight, which reflected the feminist movement of that era. There are some examples:

1. Beth talked April out of her choice where she was about to have an illegal abortion, because abortions were illegal then. April didn't have enough money to raise a child, and she couldn't go to a fully equipped illegal clinic. Instead, she had to go to an illegal clinic that performed operations in the kitchen without any protection. The death rate from illegal abortions was extremely high during this period, when women who got pregnant out of wedlock had to take full responsibility and men had the option of walking away.

2. Beth found that her neighbor Mary had been abused many times. She wondered why she didn't choose to leave. But what weapon should she use to protect herself? In society, after all, the words of her apparently "successful" husband were more reliable than those of the stay-at-home housewives. What's more, the duplicity of "successful people" and serious violence, life threats left her unable to leave.

3. From meekness to scolding, Beth's began to feel alive. Her empathy with her situation made her worry about Mary. The only way she could help was through his husband, but her husband chose not to help. Her frustration with her husband and her inability to "solve problems" on her own may be the cause of her outburst. I think Beth began to ask herself: "what's the problem? How to solve it?"

Betty Friedan was a writer. She called their (housewives' like Beth's) problems -- "problems without names". Combined with her own experience and more than five years of research and reflection, the publication of the book *The Feminine Mystique* made a large number of middle-class housewives realize the causes of their unhappy lives. Friedan believed the best way to deal with the problem was to go into society and work. "Women should be able to ask themselves, without shame, 'who am I and what do I want out of life?' She shouldn't feel selfish or neurotic if she wants to have her own goals outside of her husband's children" (Friedan 142). The publication of the book marked the second revival of feminism in the United States.

The second wave of feminism consisted mainly of two forces. One was the women's equality movement, led by the national organization for women, which was dominated by white professional women and middle-aged women in the middle-class (Lu 215). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the two forces came together to fight for women's rights to politics, employment, promotion, education, women's health, childbirth, abortion, and many other rights that affect women's interests (such as the minimum wage, equal pay for equal work, daycare, etc.).

The wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s did indeed lead to equality between men and women, and only in the 1980s did Simone enjoy the same social status as her husband.

In feminist thinking, what is advocated is female self-respect, self-reflection, self-care and self-autonomy, and men are required to assist women to get rid of ignorance and oppression and move towards the same status. So Carl was Simone's best partner in her marriage, helping and supporting each other. Simone, on the other hand, was too embarrassed to talk about her marital infidelity and never dared to reveal her affair with Tommy. Despite this, men and women in that era gained great equality, but they were caught in the social hot debate on gender issues, and the issue of homosexuality was controversial. In fact, until today, there are most countries and regions against homosexuality (Wang, E.M. 43).

In Simone's story, love is sidelined and friendship and family come first. Some say it's because women's groups were aligned with LGBTQ groups in the pursuit of equal rights at the time. There seems to be some truth in this analysis, too, given the fact that women's groups spoke alongside black groups in the second wave. After all, respect for humanity is fundamental to being human, regardless of race or gender. She finally chose love and fulfillment and supported Carl's homosexual tendency, which was not only a change in feminism's thoughts on gay rights at that time, but also indicated that Simone was gradually breaking through the imprisonment of female sexual freedom.

Taylor flaunted the feminism of freedom and liberation, allowed the sexual infidelity in the marriage. In her opinion, this was the complete liberation for women. To get rid of the patriarchy means break the male authority completely; to pursue the freedom of marriage and body, means pursue the freedom of women about sex. Her husband Eli has no status from beginning to end, even from all aspects of the responsibility of a family. In Taylor's mind, Eli has become an accessory to the new concept of marriage. Nowadays, women have the freedom to work, to give birth, to have sex, and to marry. Taylor is bisexual, so she supports homosexuality as well as extramarital relationships in open marriages. And, in Taylor's case, it was actually a change in the way that feminism was spreading, in the way that black women were changing their minds. In the feminist movement of the last century, many black women believed that the so-called feminism was just to fight for the rights of western women. Therefore, with the feminist movement in full swing all over the world, the black women's liberation is also on the right track.

This is exactly the meaning of Taylor as a black woman in the play. She can fall in love with a female lover or marry a white husband. In addition, Taylor's radical feminism is manifested in her attempt to completely break the patriarchy.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay studies the development of feminism in the United States from the perspective of lethal women, which adds interest to the previous boring research. This thesis reveals the predicament of women in the path of equal rights in a practical sense. The ups and downs of the feminist movement during this period provide us with an opportunity to understand American women and American society at a deeper level.

The feminist movement in the United States is quite remarkable in the world. Over the course of more than two centuries, it has gone through germination, prosperity, division, integration, and ups and downs, gaining American women many important and equal rights with men. Secondly, with the rapid development of Chinese economy and the promotion of women's status, many new issues concerning women have emerged in the society. The study of the American women's movement will provide us with new inspirations to look at the domestic women's issues.

Chinese women should transcend gender politics, find their own value orientation, deepen equality of opportunity, and pursue personality and spiritual independence. Men and women should abandon gender discrimination; pursue harmony without uniformity, and work together to build a harmonious, just and stable society.

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