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POSTFEMINIST FICTION IN CHICK LIT NOVELS

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***Abstract:** The intersection of postfeminist arguments with popular culture and popular cultural forms is of great significance for investigating representational politics and issues of identity. These elements are central for capturing the concept of feminist heterogeneity in its engagement with cultural theory, particularly postmodernism. This study considers postfeminism's redefinition and re-evaluation of popular culture, as an area of political and emblematic contestation.*

***Keywords:** chick lit, consumerism, hedonism, feminism, popular culture, postfeminism.*

1. Introduction

The intersection of postfeminist arguments with popular culture and popular cultural forms is of great significance for investigating representational politics and issues of identity. These elements are central for capturing the concept of feminist heterogeneity in its engagement with cultural theory, particularly postmodernism. This study will consider postfeminism's redefinition and re-evaluation of popular culture, as an area of political and emblematic contestation.

This study will investigate the relationship between chick lit and postfeminism and discuss whether chick lit has the potential to be accurately representative of modern young women's lives. Chick lit may be offering women the prospect of connecting with characters who go through the same experiences, and the light tone of the books may even make it easier to digest the idea that women, like everyone else, are unavoidably persuaded by popular culture. The question this paper sets out to answer is 'How does chick lit portray the notion of postfeminism?'

2. Postfeminism and consumer culture

To answer this question, three chick lit books were analysed in terms of five postfeminist characteristics as described in Susan Faludi's backlash theory, defined in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* as 1) negative reaction to second wave feminism; 2) attention paid to the individual rather than to a collective sisterhood; 3) desire for more traditional femininity over domesticity, consumerism, romance, and motherhood; 4) female identity crisis causing fears of a man shortage, a loudly ticking biological clock, and career tension; and 5) feelings of anxiety regarding ability to make correct decisions about the future. The last two of these characteristics are defined by a popular culture that encourages fears of a man shortage by focusing on women's biological clocks, stirring up their private anxieties and breaking their political wills.

The second-wave feminism analysed in Faludi's paper has also been discussed by Andrew Milner and Jeffrey Browitt, who point out that "the second wave feminism also came increasingly to define cultural theory itself as a matter of both particular interest and peculiar political relevance" (2002:129). The oppression of women was perceived as having "cultural,

rather than biological, roots”, all the more so because of an awareness of “women’s cultural production as central to ‘consciousness raising’, and hence to social change” (129).

In order to understand postfeminism better, Ann Brooks analyses three characteristics of this concept. Postfeminism is seen firstly as a ‘political position’ in the light of the feminist confrontation with difference, secondly as a historical shift within feminism, and finally as a backlash against feminism in which a celebration of neo-conservative, traditional values becomes prominent (Brooks 1997:210). Postfeminism has no fixed meaning; it is a contradictory, pluralistic discourse that is mainly located in the academic context of television and cultural studies, in the media context of popular culture, and within consumer culture. Since “postfeminism is not against feminism, it’s about feminism today” (Brooks 66), it needs to be situated in the contemporary context of present-day neo-liberal, late-capitalist society characterised by consumer culture, individualism, postmodernism and a diminished interest in institutional politics and activism.

Postfeminism is a new form of empowerment, and independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, hedonism, fashion, hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental for this contemporary feminism. It is a new, critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, popular culture and femininity.

A major debate has raged around the new postfeminist woman, portrayed as an antifeminist backlasher. The postfeminist background generates complex and ambiguous portrayals of femaleness, femininity, and feminism, exploring the liminal and insoluble tension between these subject

positions. The postfeminist woman owns a non-dualistic space that holds together conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective accomplishment, and between professional career and personal relationship, and she therefore provides multiple opportunities for female identification. The postfeminist woman is independent, since she refuses to subdivide herself or to choose between her public and private, feminist and feminine identities.

Regarding the relationship between postmodernism and postfeminism, many consider that postfeminism is the result of the intersection between feminism and postmodernism. Postfeminism is presented by the media as a modern alternative to out-of-date feminism, which makes it closely related to the consumer society and, what is more, it can be assumed that postfeminist rules and models are dictated by consumer culture. As McRobbie emphasises, feminine consumer culture has three main pillars: career achievement, glamour, and sexuality (2009:28). All three are based on the main characteristics of postmodernism: individualism and the construction of the self.

Other authors too have supported the idea that postfeminism is a creation of multinational corporations that treat women as their territory and educate them to become Barbie dolls that can have it all: career, family, beauty, youth, sexual satisfaction – and all just by engaging in the consumption of the entire gamut of services and goods that provide such an image.

The media is preoccupied with the image of beautiful bodies, popculture celebrities, and models who exemplify the good life and who besides looking flawless are also surrounded by the latest consumer goods – images of a carefree life, of bodily pleasures and excesses (Faludi

1991:197). The relationship between beauty, media and the backlash against feminism is given by the political function of the beauty code. Having a negative self-perception and being anxious and frustrated, women accept subordinate jobs and lower wages than those paid to men. In this way women are made to be more concerned with their looks than with public affairs.

The fact that the media (magazines in particular) have constantly tried to undermine the message and goals of feminism is abundantly illustrated by Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. As she notes, backlashes appeared once feminism started to expand, the two movements often being found in the same period. The backlash against feminism increased after World War II: women were sent back to their homes as their help was no longer essential to support the economy. This tendency was also correlated with the expansion of the advertising industry, which “did not transform women into full-time happy housewives, it just demoted them to poorly paid secretaries” (Faludi 1991: 69). The '80s backlash focused on the condition of single women: the media, with the aid of pop psychologists, started to hold '70s feminism accountable for the unhappiness and despair of single women. In this same period, as Faludi demonstrates, when the backlash press “wasn't labeling single women mental misfits, it was busy counting the bodies” (112). This trend was then accentuated once the fashion industry started having difficulty selling its products, and the backlash focused on the sexuality women should display at work. The fashion industry joined forces with the beauty industry and together they sent their advertising teams into battle. From this point onwards, consumption, youth and beauty were to entail new obligations for women.

The literature on postfeminist reaction theory is well illustrated in chick lit novels. Popular culture seems to be sending out the message that women are free: free from the constraints of feminism, tradition, objectivity, and stereotypes. They are free to choose anything and everything they want and are happy about this

Postfeminism tells us that women, instead of having to experience the pressure of choosing a feminist or feminine path in life, have the ultimate responsibility to choose any path they want. Women face the pressures of finding a partner, determining their careers, achieving financial independence, and creating their living situations, social lives, and life direction, not to mention looking good and being thin.

In postfeminist popular culture, female sexuality represents the female power through which women can achieve social ambitions and equality in gender relations. In the novels analysed, it would seem that some of the aims of feminism are realised: women's control of their sexuality, so long dominated by men, and the enjoyment of financial autonomy and of supremacy and control over men.

For the purposes of this paper, three chick lit novels will be analysed from a postfeminist standpoint: *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Loosely defined, chick lit, which arguably began with Fielding's book, consists of heroine-centred narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their protagonists. From the outset, the genre was narrowly defined in that the protagonists depicted in these texts were young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas.

If we compare chick lit with romance novels, romance novels almost always end with the couple together, while chick lit offers a more realistic look at romance and the single woman. In addition to this, chick lit offers some new elements – the protagonist’s ability to laugh at herself and the genre’s typical first-person narrator or confessional formula, both of which make it hard not to relate to these women.

This paper examines three popular British and American novels considered forerunners of the postfeminist literature phenomenon: Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Sophie Kinsella’s *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, and Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada*. The first two of these present heroines who are obsessed with women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*, while the third portrays the life of upper-class women who work in fashion. All the authors satirise consumer behaviour by creating protagonists who could conceivably be women’s magazines’ “ideal” readers; Bridget and Becky blindly follow the advice of these publications and in doing so often find themselves conflicted. By contrast, Andrea Sachs, hired as the assistant to Miranda Priestly, the successful editor of *Runway* magazine, whose office shouts famous brands such as *Prada! Armani! Versace!*, comes into an unexpected charmed existence, has luxury at her fingertips, and is looking forward to a bright future.

Women’s fiction has been with us for centuries, and we can trace chick lit back to Jane Austen in the early 1800s (Wells 2006). Helen Fielding’s inspiration can easily be identified as *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen’s masterpiece. This, her most widely read novel, provided the template for Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, which references the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* that starred Colin Firth as Darcy.

Bridget Jones's Diary and *Pride and Prejudice* both centre around the idea of the accomplished woman; more specifically, they show how their heroines do not live up to the expectations imposed upon women of their time and yet still manage to overcome these personal and situational flaws and find rich and handsome men. In 1813, the accomplished woman, according to Darcy, needed to “have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages [and] possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions [and] must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (Austen 2003:25).

Contrastingly, Bridget's long list of New Year's resolutions offers us a hint of what is expected of an accomplished woman in the 20th century: go to the gym, eat healthy, be thin, be clever, have a successful career, possess “inner poise,” and, of course, maintain a “functional relationship with [a] responsible adult” (Fielding 1996:7).

Both heroines are, in their eyes and in those of their mothers, failures at being so-called ‘accomplished’. Elizabeth is only “tolerably” handsome, cannot play the piano well, does not draw or speak any foreign languages, and cannot hold her tongue (Austen 2003:15). Bridget's weight escalates and crashes; she smokes and drinks excessively, and cannot hold her tongue.

Bridget Jones is a modern, urban reincarnation of Elizabeth Bennet in the late nineteen-nineties, and her definition of the accomplished woman ought to reflect the shifting expectations of women over nearly two centuries; and yet Bridget's world is not extraordinarily cosmopolitan or diverse either. As in Austen's own case, Elizabeth's class and gender limit her social circle to those very similar to her, excluding those of drastically different classes and ethnicities. On the other hand, Bridget, living in

London in 1996, should, in theory, have had a wider variety of people and versions of womanhood to draw on to help her displace the myth of the accomplished woman.

Even in 1813, Elizabeth realises what Bridget fails to see: that the ideal accomplished woman does not actually exist. In response to Darcy's long list of qualities a 19th-century woman would need in order to earn his admiration, Elizabeth says: "I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any" (15). Given that Elizabeth's early 19th century challenging of this ideal is not based on an acceptance of women of all shapes, races, professions, and sexual identities, we might consider it advanced for its time and English setting. On the other hand, Bridget seems to have made a shift away from Elizabeth's feminism, if we look at her long, self-loathing diary with its laments that she cannot conform to a stereotypical femininity that does not fit the situation of a single, thirty-something woman living in one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities in the late nineteen-nineties.

Kinsella's protagonist, Becky Bloomwood, shares many features with Fielding's protagonist – above all the way in which women's magazines profoundly influence her. Becky, a financial journalist, is a twenty-five-year-old single career girl, working in London and living in "a fabulous flat in London's trendiest neighborhood" (Kinsella 2000:5). Like Bridget Jones, Becky is somewhat disorganised; she has the best of intentions when it comes to putting her life in order, yet cannot quite seem to follow through with her plans in the way she knows she is expected to. Becky's main preoccupation, as revealed by the novel's title, is shopping, and her excessive spending habits get her into debt that she can never quite seem to get out of. The novel revolves around Becky's attempt to escape

this debt; Kinsella constructs a financial mystery involving a fraudulent investment company, and despite the fact that Becky often seems inept, she deftly unravels the mystery, thus winning the respect of her friends, family, and the man whom she admires, Luke Brandon.

Kinsella's major critique of women's magazines lies in the depiction of her main character. Like Fielding, Kinsella exaggerates her protagonist's consumption patterns; the difference is that instead of concentrating on Becky's eating habits and weight issues, she focuses on another popular consumption habit encouraged by these publications: shopping. In *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, Kinsella criticises the tendency of women's magazines to encourage women's incessant yet ever-changing shopping habits by depicting the extreme shopper. And, again like Fielding, Kinsella constantly deploys humour as a means of deconstructing the consumer ideologies of women's magazines, particularly the way in which they encourage excessive spending habits in their female readers.

In *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, Sophie Kinsella takes this different approach to critiquing consumer behaviour: she satirises her protagonist's excesses in regard to shopping. Becky Bloomwood, her heroine, makes little or no attempt to become a critical reader of the advice manuals she studies. Rather, she represents the ideal reader of women's magazines – the woman who reads and abides by the advice offered no matter what the obstacles. Though Becky spirals deeper and deeper into consumer debt, she continues to purchase the items promoted by women's magazines in the hopes of achieving the lifestyle associated with them. Yet Kinsella's narrative structure makes it clear that Becky's behaviour is not to be followed by readers.

The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic satirises the consumer behaviours encouraged by these publications by, again like Fielding, depicting the ideal – and often extreme – reader of such magazines. Repeatedly, Kinsella depicts Becky buying a particular item of clothing because it has become, for her, a way to define herself. After shopping at Benetton, she sees “The most perfect cardigan in the world” and then convinces herself to buy it by using the rationale that if she owns it “people will call me the Girl in the Grey Cardigan” (Kinsella 2000:67). Just as Becky desires to be clad in the clothing acceptable to *Just Seventeen*, here she imagines people noticing and defining her by the cardigan that she wears. Even more interesting than Becky’s tendency to identify herself solely by her clothing is Kinsella’s justification of her actions. At this point in the novel, Becky is desperately trying to reduce her spending; however, the cardigan upsets her plans. She reflects:

David E. Barton [author of *Controlling Your Cash*] says I should act as naturally as possible. So really, I *ought* to act on my natural impulses and buy it. It would be false not to. It would ruin the whole point. And it only costs forty-five quid. And I can put it on VISA. Look at it another way—what’s forty-five quid in the grand scheme of things? I mean, it’s nothing, is it? So I buy it. The most perfect little cardigan in the world. People will call me the Girl in the Grey Cardigan. I’ll be able to *live* in it. Really, it’s an investment (67).

This passage deploys humour to ridicule Becky’s excessive spending habits and the psychology of a shopaholic. Though Becky knows she should not spend any more money, her desire for the grey cardigan and the promise this piece of clothing holds become too much for her to resist. Here Kinsella is criticising the impulsive shopping behaviours often encouraged by women’s magazines.

When Becky spends money it is not just with the intention that this spending will lead to an overall improvement in her quality of life; she also hopes that these purchases will give her the appearance of someone with a more affluent lifestyle. As Ellen McCracken notes, this “consumer ideology is often conveyed by women’s magazines, which capitalize upon consumers’ desire for upward mobility by encouraging them to purchase products that give them the appearance of affluence” (McCracken 1993:15). A faithful follower of women’s magazines, Becky cultivates this affluent lifestyle despite the fact that it is against her own best financial interests to live in such a way. She frequently shops at high-end stores; she drinks champagne; she reads publications like *Vogue*; and she table-hops at Terrazza, a fashionable, pricey restaurant and bar. Furthermore, she lives in a part of London that her boss Philip calls “Trendy Fulham,” a neighbourhood “Full of It-girls, all living on trust funds” (Kinsella 2000:147). To those around her, she gives the impression of being rich, though her bank account indicates otherwise. Implicit in this portrayal of Becky is Kinsella’s criticism of the consumer manuals which promise that excessive consumption will result in a more desirable, and upscale, lifestyle. Ironically, but not surprisingly, Kinsella indicates that Becky’s excessive spending habits result in her being broke as opposed to rich.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is the treatment of career in the lives of romance and chick lit protagonists. According to Pamela Regis, a typical romance heroine is perceived as ignoring any kind of opportunity to become independent by her own merits (Regis 2003:10). Some critics claim that “the romance novel extinguishes its heroine, confining her within a story that [...] denies her independent goal-oriented action outside of love and marriage” (10). This suggests that a traditional

romance heroine depends on a man as a lover and a provider. On the other hand, with regard to present-day romance novels, Janice Radway asserts that the ideal romance heroine must have three character traits: “intelligence, a sense of humor, and independence” (Radway 1991:77).

Nevertheless, Radway states that “independence and a secure individual “identity” are never compromised by the paternalistic care and protection of the male” (79). Although the female character is represented as financially independent and even determined to build herself a career, she is still in need of a male hero to care for her and protect her. This need, according to Harzewski, is so strong that at the end of most career romance stories the female protagonist quits her demanding job and chooses a simpler one instead so that she can enjoy time with the hero (Harzewski 2011:15).

Chick lit characters are different in this respect. Gill and Herdieckerhoff argue that there are two kinds of heroines: those committed to the idea of career but dissatisfied with their jobs, and those who are successful in their careers but unfeminine (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006:16). In other words, Gill and Herdieckerhoff suggest that “within this genre women are only allowed to be successful at work if this is achieved with the support of a loving man. Without that ticket, the successfully employed woman is villainised” (16).

Characters of this kind can be clearly seen in Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada*, where Miranda, although the head of a successful fashion magazine, is depicted as cold, manipulative and immoral. By contrast, her employee, Andrea, although she struggles with her job, is honest, warm and friendly and has the support of her loving boyfriend.

The novel depicts the life of a young female protagonist, Andrea Sachs, who has just graduated from college and moved to New York and is eager to start a career in the *New Yorker*. She gets a job on a fashion magazine, *Runway*, where she enters a completely new world. In addition to this, she has to work for Miranda Priestly, the worst boss ever. Miranda cannot be bothered either to remember Andrea's name or to specify her duties properly. She calls her early in the morning or late at night and demands complete obedience. Finally, Andrea realises that money and power are not what she wants in life and quits the job. At the end of the novel she is reunited with her family and gets an offer to work as a writer on a teen magazine.

Commenting on Andrea's story, Juliette Wells remarks that it is "built around the young heroine's relationship with her fashion magazine boss" (Wells 2006:54). Regarding the fact that "the love plot" and "the professional plot" are combined in most chick lit stories, she points out that "*The Devil Wears Prada* is rare among chick lit novels" (54). She claims that its distinctiveness is based on the fact that this novel focuses on the heroine's working life rather than her love life (54). Andrea is depicted as a very ambitious character. For instance, before she applies for the position of editor's assistant at *Runway* she admits: "Although I knew it was highly unlikely I'd get hired at *The New Yorker* directly out of school, I was determined to be writing for them before my fifth reunion" (Weisberger 2003:11). In this way, according to Wells, "Andrea announces her literary ambition almost immediately" (2006:58).

Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young claim that *The Devil Wears Prada* is one of those rare chick lit novels that focus on the "work world" and "portray women's working conditions as demeaning and ultimately

destructive” (Ferriss and Young 2006:7). According to Wells, Andrea is represented as a good worker who is “far more humane than her selfish employer” (52). Her misinterpretations of her employer’s instructions are usually depicted in a humorous manner, which makes Andrea’s character comical and more realistic. According to Emma Anderson, who analyses the style of the language used in chick lit: “humor is in all chick lit novels. [...] It is created through the farcical nature of the circumstances the protagonist finds herself in” (Anderson 2006:8). Many times in the novel Andrea has to cope with bizarre orders from her boss Miranda and the way she describes them and handles them is pictured in a “witty self-depreciating” manner (8).

Consumerism and hedonism are key words that describe the lives of characters in this novel in which most of the characters tend to pursue material goods to indicate social status. These goods thus come to define a classy life. Material inclination is reflected in two characteristics: consumerism and hedonism.

Consumerism is one major characteristic that reflects material inclination. Jean Baudrillard claims that consumerism is an extension of his idea of hyperrealism. Everything in our everyday world is a simulation of reality. This simulation is completed through the consumption of goods. Consumerism also creates a consumer society, a society in which most people consider material goods to be a requirement of the good life; their function is to be consumed and they are seen as a person’s exclusive property.

In addition, a new belief or conviction has come into existence in the twenty-first century. In most people’s minds nowadays, a classy life is understood as one surrounded by luxurious goods and sophisticated facilities. Louise J. Kaplan states that today’s life is a life spent in pursuit of

commodities, one in which people become greedy for material goods, purchasing more and more and hence having to work more and more hours in order to afford it all. As a result, material goods become the prime means to reach the status itself (2006:179). Moreover, Baudrillard argues:

Today, we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods. This now constitutes a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, men of wealth are no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by objects (1994:33).

In his book on consumerism, Conrad Lodziak takes issue with the assumed close relationship between identity construction and consumerism that has been popularised through the media over the last forty years. His work leads us to question the amount of real freedom there is in consumption. Consumerism, for Lodziak, is not about freedom but about powerlessness – not simply about watching television or buying more shoes and then becoming ‘cultural dupes’, but about the alienation that occurs through the relationship between consumerism and identity. We, as consumers, are forced to go out and buy, to consume. It is only a small step from this to defining ourselves through these products. Lodziak’s critique maintains that the degree to which you are a cultural dupe is in inverse proportion to the degree to which you are socially challenging capitalism; ultimately his critique is anti-capitalist. He asks: “Has style become so important to the self that individuals are becoming active (and reactive) agents in their own trivialization and self-alienation?” (Lodziak 2002:60).

The meaning of hedonism is implicitly revealed through Miranda’s lifestyle. Through the implied author, it is shown that this character lives an

extravagant and very luxurious life in which material goods and property become the yardstick of pride, pleasure, and happiness. The evidence of hedonism is clear to see in all her activities and lifestyle, for example spending out again and again on vacations all over the world, giving frequent parties and inviting many rich and famous people to them, having a private island, spending money on ordering personal plane tickets, and wearing a Hermes scarf everywhere she goes. Her lifestyle is the way she symbolises who she is in society.

3. Conclusion

The chick lit books selected present different ways of coming to terms with the idea of female empowerment and consumerism. In crafting female protagonists addicted to following the advice given in magazines and by portraying heroines who exhibit exaggerated consumer behaviours, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* and *The Devil Wears Prada* deconstruct the consumer ideologies encouraged by such publications. My paper has found that chick lit does generally reinforce the notions of postfeminism/ backlash; however, the characters display anxiety over how to incorporate feminine paths into their lives.

Although fully rooted within the consumer culture of neo-liberal societies, postfeminism also critiques its leading values. This paradox fits within postmodern/postfeminist paradigms where ambivalence and contradiction are typical and central characteristics. In popular culture, the postfeminist critique of neo-liberalism is predominantly articulated through humour, irony and overemphasising.

This paper has examined three popular British and American chick lit novels considered to be forerunners of the postfeminism literature

phenomenon, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Sophie Kinsella's *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* and Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*. Individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumerism, hedonism, fashion, hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental for this contemporary feminism.

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