

**A POSTFEMINIST PORTRAYAL
OF WOMEN IN CHICK LITERATURE**

by

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 1996 gave rise to the chick lit genre and transformed the world of contemporary women's fiction. This study examines the portrayal of women in chick lit, and the portrayal of Becky Bloomwood in Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series; whether women are typecast into particular roles and functions; and whether they are subjected to gender stereotypes, sexism and objectification. A literary analysis of the five books in the series is conducted using the postfeminist theoretical framework. This study revealed that Becky Bloomwood is depicted as a postfeminist heroine, evidenced by her dependence on men, repression of her identity as a result of marriage, and perception of weddings and married life. Women in chick lit are expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers, and are frequently depicted as victims of gender stereotypes, sexism and objectification. Findings of this study will add to existing knowledge of the message being conveyed to readers of chick lit, as well as the influence of gender in popular culture, literature and media.

ABSTRAK

Penerbitan buku Helen Fielding Bridget Jones's Diary pada 1996 telah melahirkan genre chick lit dan mengubah cereka wanita kontemporari. Kajian ini memeriksa paparan wanita dalam chick lit dan bagaimana Becky Bloomwood digambarkan dalam siri Shopaholic rekaan Sophie Kinsella; sama ada wanita diasak untuk memenuhi peranan-peranan dan fungsi-fungsi tertentu; dan sama ada hidup mereka dipengaruhi oleh stereotaip, seksisme dan objektifikasi. Analisis ke atas lima buku dalam siri ini dikendalikan menggunakan kerangka teori postfeminist. Kajian ini telah menunjukkan bahawa Becky Bloomwood digambarkan sebagai seorang wirawati postfeminist, terbukti menerusi pergantungannya terhadap lelaki, penindasan identitinya hasil dari perkahwinannya, dan tanggapannya terhadap konsep perkahwinan dan kehidupan berumahtangga. Wanita dalam chick lit dijangka memenuhi tanggungjawab mereka seperti isteri dan ibu, dan kerap digambarkan sebagai mangsa stereotaip, seksisme dan objektifikasi. Hasil kajian ini akan memperluaskan pengetahuan yang sedia ada mengenai mesej yang disampaikan kepada pembaca-pembaca chick lit, serta pengaruh jantina dalam budaya, kesusasteraan dan media popular.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter will provide a brief explanation of the background of the chick literature (also popularly known as ‘chick lit’) genre, as well as a statement of the problem this study intends to examine and solve. This chapter will also look at the aims, objectives and scope of this study, as well as the importance and potential contributions the findings from this study will make to the field of literature and gender studies. An operational definition of the variables of this study is also included to explain the various terms referred to throughout the length of this study.

1.1 Background of the Study

The term ‘chick lit’ is a relatively new concept, with the chick lit genre only coming into existence a decade ago with the emergence of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996. Almost overnight, it swept the literary world by storm, and the chick lit genre was born. Today, bookstores have entire sections made up of books that fall into this category. The term itself has spawned numerous debates, with claims that it is derived from “the slang term Chick that replaced Broad and Babe in the evolving spectrum of demeaning endearments” and that it is essentially “lit by chicks” (Goodman par. 2-3). As a whole, chick lit is used as a term referring to “a genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women” (Montgomery par. 5).

Despite the various ways the term can be defined, all mention of the term chick lit throughout the duration of this study will be taken to refer to the genre of fiction written by women for a female audience, with a plot line that specifically revolves around the life of the heroine. In short, chick lit is fiction by women, for women, about women.

One of the biggest questions regarding this genre is the reasons behind its wild popularity. Many critics have pointed out that chick lit books all seem to conform to a certain stereotype, and are almost formulaic in nature. These books are easily spotted in a crowded bookstore; all chick lit books seem to follow “stereotypical cover conventions”, such as sporting bright covers, curvy fonts, feminine colours like pink and purple, objects like shopping bags and high heels, and fragmented images of the female body, i.e. showing just the legs or obscured face of a woman (Rende 21). The contents of these books also seem to form a familiar pattern. The uknetguide website pointed out that:

These novels, almost always written by women in their early 30s, for women in their early 30s are about... women in their early 30s. They tend towards a breezy, chatty, self-deprecating style where the heroine’s self doubt about career progression, success in love, looks and money is a crucial, and in some cases, endearing quality. It is the does-my-bum-look-big-in-this, why-is-my-boyfriend-horrid, let’s-go-for-cocktails-and-forget-our-woes style of fiction. (“What is Chick Lit” par. 2)

Chick lit is not seen as the highest form of literature; more often than not, these books are simply “dismissed as a marketing ploy, Western cultural imperialism or a throwback to pre-feminism” (Donadio par. 2), and are viewed as “fluffy, mind-numbing trash” and “formulaic vapid prose” (Montgomery par. 2). As Osterkamp argued, “any sort of entertainment that is created specifically by

women for women has a stigma attached to it”, and it is this sentiment that causes chick lit to be “disregarded as superficial fluff” (par. 1). In short, chick lit is often seen as improper reading.

With these two arguments against chick lit – first that all the books follow a particular formula, second that these books are not ‘real’ literature – why then are these books still flying off bookshelves worldwide? Instead of being a fad that eventually fades, more chick lit books are being written yearly, with no signs of slowing down. In fact, this genre has crossed over to a whole new world; many of these books have been made into popular television shows and movies.

Women have always had, and probably always will have, an affinity for romantic fiction. Similarly, chick lit holds a special place in the hearts of women everywhere, and part of its appeal lies in its highly relatable themes and characters. Women of any age, background and lifestyle are able to identify with the issues found in chick lit, and the production of chick lit has reached such a high that there is no shortage of books for any whim and fancy. Almost every woman has read a chick lit novel, whether or not they recognize it as such. If in days of old these books were categorized under the umbrella term of romance fiction (classics like Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* could fit into the chick lit genre), chick lit now has a more specific focus, with new branches of this genre appearing daily. Today, we have such role-specific branches, called sub-genres, like “mommy lit”, “mystery lit”, and “lad lit” (Montgomery par. 9). It can thus be said that there is a chick lit novel available for every woman.

We thus arrive at the crux of the problem: are chick lit books, with all its popularity and influence, propagating particular myths about women and the roles they play in society? Are its readers brainwashed into thinking there is a certain stereotype that comes with being a woman in today’s society?

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Chick lit is considered a new-born baby in the long-established world of literary works; chick lit only emerged as a bona fide literary genre in the past decade. However, its short establishment as a genre is by no means an indication of its popularity and marketability. Chick lit books are almost always a constant on bestseller lists across the world, and this trend shows no signs of slowing down or fading. In fact, chick lit books are more popular than ever, with everything from clothes to television series and movies being marketed around the entire genre. This study is concerned with the possible messages that are being written in these books, and whether they are being subconsciously conveyed to its multitude of readers worldwide. Also, this study is apprehensive about the examples being set by the characters in these books, especially the heroines. What sort of role model is the heroine setting for the large numbers of relatively young and impressionable female readers? The findings of this study will hopefully be able to answer these questions once and for all.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study will attempt to examine the way women are portrayed in a chick lit novel. The protagonists (or heroines) of chick lit novels are almost always depicted to possess certain stereotypical traits, and this study will take a look at how these depictions conform to the expectations of a modern, postfeminist society.

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- (i) to examine the portrayal of the main female character in Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series using the postfeminist theoretical framework;
- (ii) to examine whether the female characters in the *Shopaholic* series are typecast into particular roles and functions; and

- (iii) to investigate if women in the *Shopaholic* series are portrayed in a sexist manner or objectified.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Most studies related to postfeminism and chick literature are focused on other popular chick lit novels and the entire genre as a whole, but so far there have not been any specifically aimed at analyzing the books in the *Shopaholic* series. The findings from this study will thus be helpful in adding to the canon of existing studies of how women are portrayed in chick lit novels.

The findings of this study will also expose readers to the risk of gender stereotypes present in chick lit books, as well as help them to be more aware of the messages being conveyed to them through the books they read, whether they fall into the chick lit genre or not.

This study will be especially useful in the field of gender studies. As this study intends to find out how women are portrayed in chick lit, other researchers interested in the role of gender in the mass media and popular culture will be able to use this study as a reference and guide. This study could also serve as the foundation for more detailed studies into the portrayal of women in chick literature.

1.5 Operational Definition of Terms

1.5.1 Definition of Chick Literature

Arguably the most important term used in this study is the term ‘chick lit’ itself. The actual coining of the term ‘chick lit’ is in itself a hotly debated controversy. Rende stated that the term is a combination of two words with negative connotations, “chick (the slang reference of a woman) and lit (the

shortening of “literature” to “lit” typically denotes frivolity or insignificance)” (3). Cooke agreed with this view, claiming that chick lit is a “potentially derogatory nickname of a genre written for women, about women” (11). When it comes to the actual meaning of the term itself, Montgomery defined it as:

A genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women. The books range from having main characters in their early 20’s to their late 60’s. There is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books. Sometimes they are written in first-person narrative; other times they are written from multiple viewpoints. The plots usually consist of women experiencing usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more. (par. 5)

Similarly, the uknetguide website pointed out that:

These novels, almost always written by women in their early 30s, for women in their early 30s are about... women in their early 30s. They tend towards a breezy, chatty, self-deprecating style where the heroine’s self doubt about career progression, success in love, looks and money is a crucial, and in some cases, endearing quality. It is the does-my-bum-look-big-in-this, why-is-my-boyfriend-horrid, let’s-go-for-cocktails-and-forget-our-woes style of fiction. (“What is Chick Lit” par. 2)

However, for purposes of this study, I have merged the various definitions given to explain the term ‘chick lit’ to refer to any works of fiction written by women, for women, and about women (Rende 2; Lynn par. 2).

1.5.2 Definition of Postfeminist

‘Postfeminism’ first came to be used as an actual term in the 1980s, and it refers to the reactions and backlash that emerged against the ideas of second-wave feminism, which largely revolved around issues of equality (“Feminism” par. 7, 12). The prefix ‘post-’ in the term ‘postfeminism’ implies that postfeminism came after the feminist movement, but in reality postfeminism has no genealogical relationship to feminism (Sheffield 3). Rather, McRobbie defined postfeminism as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s came to be undermined” (1). This essentially pointed to the birth of postfeminism as having caused the death of the original ideas surrounding early feminist movements.

Postfeminism is thus generally considered a backlash against second-wave feminism (“Feminism” par. 12), which was the feminist movement most closely linked to the 1970s and 1980s. Yaszek argued that for postfeminism to have come into existence, important goals and issues in the original feminist movements had to have been already achieved and resolved (par. 5). It is because of this that the original ideas of feminism are now considered outdated and irrelevant to the generations of young women today (McRobbie 1).

According to Rende, today’s postfeminist era has given women the chance to take sole control of their lives in a way that the previous generations of women have not been able to. It is thus ironic that the modern-day woman seems to have forgotten all about the struggles and oppression cast on women since the early days (25). Instead, women today are content and even desire to revert to “older, seemingly simpler and more natural roles as homemakers” (Probyn qtd. in Yaszek par. 5), roles which their feminist ancestors fought so hard against. It is truly puzzling that the feminist movement fought for so long and hard, only to come full circle in producing a postfeminist society, in which the very values they fought so hard to break free of are now an attractive concept. It is this

explanation by Rende and Probyn that will be considered the meaning of the term 'postfeminism' in all future references within this study.

1.5.3 Definition of Portrayal of Women's Roles and Functions

According to Haslanger, a woman is defined not by her intrinsic features but rather through the role she plays in society, different roles of which have different purposes and functions (212). A change in the types of roles women play is inevitable with the passing of time, and the creation and subsequent acceptance of these new roles in a society will result in new "virtues", which in turn result in new gender norms in that society (213). These gender norms dictate how a woman should behave and what traits they should possess in order to be recognized as a 'good' model of womanhood, and thus act as a basis and reference point of how proper women should act, be, speak, think and live. It is these very gender norms that force women to conform their behaviour to match those of the "ideals", and play a heavy role in shaping their personalities and belief systems (215).

1.5.4 Definition of Sexism and Objectification

Contemporary feminists like Katha Pollitt and Nadine Strossen famously argued that "women are people", and the term sexist has come to refer to any view that separates the sexes rather than unites them ("Feminism" par. 12). Sexism occurs in literature when what is written propagates ideas that differentiate men from women, especially if it implies a negative connotation. With sexism, women are also in danger of being objectified. Haslanger explained in her essay *On Being Objective and Being Objectified* that:

[I]f one objectifies something (or someone), one views it and treats it as an object for the satisfaction of one's desire; but this is not all, for objectification is assumed to be a relation of

domination where one also has the power to enforce one's view. Objectification is not just "in the head"; it is actualized, embodied, imposed upon the objects of one's desire. So if one objectifies something, one not only views it as something which would satisfy one's desire, but one also has the power to make it have the properties one desires it to have. (228)

Similarly, this explanation can be applied to the way women are in danger of being objectified in today's mainly patriarchal society, especially in the mass media. This is especially prevalent in chick lit, where women are often portrayed as objects to satisfy the desires of the male population.

1.5.5 Definition of Gender Stereotypes

Modern feminist literary theory started as a critique of images, especially of the "stereotypical images of femininity that literary texts present" (Robbins 50-51). Beauvoir claimed that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, which propagates the notion that females only become women after they have acquired "feminine traits" and learnt "feminine behaviour" (qtd. in Mikkola par. 10). This implies that there are certain traits and behaviour that are considered feminine, the reverse of which are those considered to be masculine. This study will refer to this explanation of gender stereotypes as being certain traits and behaviour attributed to a specific gender, as has been argued by Beauvoir.

1.6 Scope of the Study

A literary analysis will be conducted on the five books in Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series, and this limited sample might not be totally representative of the whole chick lit genre. This study does not touch on other chick lit novels, and any mention of other chick lit novels is merely as a reference to existing studies conducted by other researchers.

It is also important to note that this study only touches on the general genre of chick lit, i.e. the ‘mainstream’ genre, and not any of its sub-genres like “lad lit”, “mommy lit”, and “mystery lit”. As such, this study cannot be applied to how women might be portrayed in these sub-genres, with their own unique, more specific issues and conflicts. There are many other chick lit books on the market that represent different sub-cultures and sub-genres, but due to time constraints, this study will only focus on the general genre that revolves around the white, heterosexual, twenty-something year old woman.

1.7 Chapter Review

This chapter has given a brief description of the background and history of chick lit, and how the postfeminist theory has come to shape the way we read and write books. Such terms and concepts as ‘chick lit’, ‘postfeminist’, the portrayal of women’s roles and functions, sexism and objectification, and gender stereotypes have also been defined and explained, along with the aims, objectives and scope of this study. Also included is an explanation of the significance of this study and the potential contributions it will bring to existing theories on chick lit novels. This chapter has also explained reasons for narrowing the scope of the study down to just five chick lit books. The next chapter will provide a more detailed clarification of the terms and concepts briefly explained in this chapter, and will discuss how postfeminist ideas have influenced the way chick lit is written.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Preview

This chapter will provide a detailed explanation of some of the terms and concepts mentioned in the previous chapter. In particular, this chapter will discuss the historical and theoretical origins of feminism, and how it has given birth to the postfeminist era of today. An explanation of the wide range of meanings surrounding chick lit will also be included in an attempt to alleviate any confusion over what it encompasses, as well as an account of the literary conventions that surround the creation of chick lit novels and their characters. This chapter will also review existing studies that are relevant in explaining the connection between postfeminism and the chick lit genre.

2.1 From Feminism to Postfeminism

The term ‘postfeminism’ first came to be used in the 1980s to describe the reactions and backlash against second-wave feminism, which largely revolved around issues of equality (“Feminism” par. 7, 12). According to Yaszek, the understanding of the term has come to mean different things for different people:

After all, “postfeminism” seems to be used in even more complex and contradictory ways than “feminism” itself: to herald a new era of (at least theoretical) equality between men and women, to explain the rise of a New Traditionalism that looks much like the old traditionalism of the antifeminist 1950s, to champion the possibility of unfettered individual choice for women outside conventional political categories, to make sense of the diverse needs of women in the integrated circuit of global capitalism, and, finally, to mark theoretical and epistemological shifts in feminism itself. As such, postfeminism seems to be simultaneously elegiac and celebratory, descriptive and proscriptive, a *fait accompli* and an impossible dream. (par. 1)

In order to understand the confusion surrounding the concept of postfeminism, it is important to explain some of the fundamentals of feminism. Feminism has a lot to do with the study of gender relations. Theories surrounding the concepts related to gender and how they influence society happen in cultures where gender norms change or shift, and which in turn result in a new perception about gender roles in that society (Klages par. 2). According to Haslanger, it is these gender roles that determine what is considered a gender norm in a particular society, and these gender norms consequently serve as a basis for how women in that society should be, act, think, and so on. Women thus conform their behaviour to these ‘ideals’, which judge whether a woman is considered a ‘good’ example of womanhood (212-15).

It was these first thoughts of gender norms and differences that first sparked off the feminist movement. Klages argued that feminism is not just about studying the gender relations in a society, but also about changing them (par. 12). Historically, feminism can be divided into three stages, or waves: first-wave feminism refers to the feminist activity during the late 1700s to the early 1900s, and focused on women’s suffrage movements, such as women’s rights to vote;

second-wave feminism refers to the feminist activity that begun in the early 1960s until the late 1970s which revolved around women's liberation movements and feminist political activism, most of which fought for equality; and third-wave feminism refers to the feminist activities of the early 1990s till the present which came about as a reaction to the perceived failures of second-wave feminism ("Feminist Criticism" par. 4; "Feminism" par. 5). Theoretically speaking, feminism can also be broken down into three categories: theories with an essentialist focus like psychoanalytic and French feminism; theories attempting to establish a feminist literary canon or reinterpreting literature from a less patriarchal perspective like liberal feminism and gynocriticism; and theories focused on sexual or gender difference and politics, such as gender studies, radical feminism, and socialist feminism (Siegel par. 16). For all the variety that comes with feminism, one trait unites them all: Showalter argued that all feminisms aim at rescuing women from their "stereotypical associations with inferiority" (qtd. in Robbins 12). Feminism aims to provide women with a voice against the oppression and repression they are subject to throughout the centuries; in a way, feminists become the voice of the voiceless woman.

It is of little wonder, then, that feminist literary criticism has emerged as one of the more obvious outcomes of the feminism movement:

Feminist criticism is informed by a desire for change. The form and extent of that change may differ according to the critic's views of how society should be ordered, and feminist critics employ a diverse range of critical techniques and strategies, but feminism and feminist criticism are, by definition, committed to changing the existing power relations between women and men. (Spargo 633)

How then is postfeminism linked to feminism, and postfeminist criticism to feminist criticism? The prefix 'post-' means 'after' but actually implies no

genealogical relationship (Sheffield par. 3). Rather, postfeminism refers to “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s came to be undermined” (McRobbie 1). Postfeminism is thus regarded as a backlash against the ideas of second-wave feminism (“Feminism” par. 12). Some critics have thus argued that in today’s postfeminist era, the goals of feminism have already been reached (Yaszek par. 5), and that feminism is aged, redundant, and no longer relevant in today’s society (McRobbie 1).

The implications of the postfeminist literary theory have been influential on the way women’s fiction is written. Second wave feminism fought hard to give women the freedom to choose what they wanted to do with their lives, and reiterated that women were strong enough to succeed without men, and even be able to compete with men on an equal footing. Rende claimed that women living in today’s postfeminist society are given the opportunity to regain possession of their lives, a benefit of second-wave feminism which eluded women of previous generations. However, what with all these new choices and the capability to live a life equal to that of a man’s, today’s woman has also seemed to have forgotten about the unresolved issues still left behind in the wake of second-wave feminism (25). The freedom they now possess has brought a new meaning to the lives of women everywhere: women now have the freedom to choose to return to more traditional roles, ironically akin to the very roles that their second wave feminist foremothers fought so hard against. Postfeminism now meant that a woman could choose to take herself out of the rat race to slip back to working behind a hot stove. Although this seems paradoxical, Probyn argued that postfeminism has made it acceptable (and even admirable) for women to revert to “older, seemingly simpler and more natural roles as homemakers” (qtd. in Yaszek par. 5). In short, postfeminism provided women with the best of both worlds: they had finally won the right to equality, and yet could give these very rights up without fear of criticism.

2.2 Chick Literature and Conventions

There have been many misconceptions about what chick lit is, the most common of which states that it is “fluffy, mind-numbing trash” and “formulaic vapid prose” (Montgomery par. 2). Perhaps Osterkamp summed it up best when she said that “any sort of entertainment that is created specifically by women for women has a stigma attached to it, and is often disregarded as superficial fluff” (par. 1). Chick lit, however, is definitely more than that. Goodman described chick lit as being “hip, stylish, confident, and sharp – it’s also honest and very brave” (par. 13).

There have been many discussions about what the true definition and scope of chick lit is, but the generally accepted definition of chick lit is that it is a genre of books written by women, for women, and about women (Lynn par. 3; Vnuk par. 3). Chick lit books are usually aimed at single, urban-based white women in their twenties and thirties, and have distinctive titles, covers, protagonists, and narrative styles (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 3). The main character and reader of the chick lit book more often than not share the same demographic features: both are women between the ages of 20 to 30 with full-time careers, a hunger for independence and glamour, and the search for the perfect man (Donadio par. 1).

What distinguishes chick lit from other romance fiction genres is perhaps the particular literary conventions, or formulas, that all chick lit books seem to adhere to. In her study *The Great Escape: Modern Women and the Chick Lit Genre*, Cooke examined several chick lit novels using a blend of cultural studies and formalist reading approaches (8-10), and looked at the characteristics that qualified a book as chick lit. Her study found that:

[T]he “traditional” chick lit heroine [...] is a white, urban professional in her late twenties or early thirties. Her family lives

somewhere in the suburbs, popping in and out of the novel as an annoyance in the heroine's life and sometimes as an obstacle between her and the hero. Life in the city consists of working in an uninspiring office job, going to happy hour with co-workers, shopping, and drinking with her friends on a Saturday night (or any other night of the week for that matter). (Cooke 11)

In a similar study, Rende also supported the idea that all chick lit novels follow a similar 'recipe', devising a list of criteria that a piece of writing has to have in order for it to be recognized as chick lit:

A 'young' female protagonist (typically post-graduate, mid-20s through early 30s) [...] a posh urban setting, most frequently Manhattan, New York City or London – a Los Angeles or Philadelphia thrown in here and there [...] an occupation based primarily in the communications industry i.e. publishing, advertising, public relations, journalism, fashion ... problems in the workplace, which typically occupy a significant portion of the text, ranging from insufferable coworkers (usually other women), and infatuation with either the boss or a male coworker, or being stuck in a 'dead end' job [...] frequent romantic entanglements, but remains single throughout much of the text (and woefully laments such a status) until the ending [...] excessive compulsive behaviors i.e. obsessively spending money, strict dieting [...] eccentric mothers who represent foils to their 'independent' daughters. (4-5)

Montgomery claimed that the chick lit genre is also different from other women's fiction because of the tone and humour it employs throughout the entire novel: