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ABSTRACT

A REAPPRAISAL OF POSTFEMINISM IN CHICK LIT
NOVELS

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Keywords: chick lit, culture, culture industry, commodity, ideology, popular culture, feminism, postfeminism, postmodernism, patriarchy, romance, consumerism, hedonism, materialism, empowerment, career, identity, marketing, advertising, target audience, entertainment, sales.

The current dissertation examines what has been institutionalized under an apparently disrespectful name (“chick lit”) at the intersection of postfeminist arguments and popular cultural forms. In their turn, both postfeminism and popular culture are “disrespectful” terms in a certain way, in that they do not take things for granted, being critical of previous cultural practices and ideas, showing “no respect” for authoritative, canonical texts and figures. Chick lit has been seen by those who do not like the subgenre as another form of conventional romance in new contemporary circumstances, another form of popular culture which encourages women to be superficial. Nevertheless, both chick lit and postfeminism, whose intersections constitute the focus of this thesis, appear to stimulate social change through their critical attitudes toward situations which are considered unacceptable today, although tolerated in the past.

One of the things to be considered is how chick lit amounts to a literary genre, how it explores certain women’s coming to grips with a twenty-first century socio-economic and cultural situation in a consumer-oriented culture. What is also of great significance in the current undertaking is the investigation of aspects of representational politics and issues of identity in contemporary Western societies as they appear in the complex patterns of communication. These elements are to be considered in dealing with the heterogeneity of feminism and postfeminism in their engagement with cultural theory and their interaction with other “posts” and “isms”: poststructuralism and postmodernism. This study will consider postfeminism’s redefinition and re-evaluation of popular culture, an area of political and emblematic contestation, in relation to

the impact of chick lit on a certain demographic section: a section of the middle class female urban population who, in addition to reading this kind of fiction, have been watching “chick flicks.”

This study investigates specific forms of the relationship between chick lit and postfeminism, discussing ways in which chick lit is designed to appeal to young, modern, career-minded women interested in certain types of chick lit narratives, perceived as significant representations of their lives. It is taken for granted that, since it is so popular, chick lit may be offering some white, urban, middle class women representations of meaningful practices and interactions, the prospect of identifying with characters with the same experiences. The style and language registers of the books make it easier to accommodate the idea that “chick lit women” are irresistibly influenced by the glamour of popular, urban, cosmopolitan culture. The questions this research addresses are linked to the important issue of the relationship between chick lit and current aspects of postfeminism within the larger context of mass culture, popular culture, and the mechanisms and institutions by means of which their symbolic meanings are constructed, as well as disseminated and consumed by their specific audiences.

What follows examines specific representations of the anxieties that the contemporary genre of young women’s fiction known as chick lit promotes about female sexuality, women and work, and the relationship between female identity and the global consumer marketplace. As a product of the Anglo-American culture industry, chick lit reveals certain ambivalence about constructions of gender and sexuality, incorporating a distinct style and humor, forms of irony and self-irony, themes and narrative structures. In its narratives there are illustrations of idealized heterosexual love plots, a prevailing devotion to shopping and designer labels, and a conflicted relationship to consumer culture which appear to engage in complex ways with the requirements of an apparently omnipotent culture industry. One of the questions to be investigated in connection with this culture industry is the kind of relationship and power structure configuration between it and the kind of messages that chick lit promotes.

Taking into account the production, consumption, and reception of chick lit as a global feminine genre, this thesis also deals with the main characteristics of chick lit fiction and its differences and similarities with other genres, such as with the more comprehensive realm of romance. Additionally, it emphasizes the problems and limitations of the genre in relation to mainstream literary values and cultural standards, in an age which witnesses serious debates

about what culture is all about, about populist and elitist positions and attitudes, although the latter appear to become less influential in an increasingly, culturally populist world.

When trying to understand the workings of popular fiction, a surprising connection can be made between the superficial and materialistic characters and audiences associated with a contemporary genre praising the shining aspects of triumphant capitalism with theorists and ideas criticizing it. That would go from Karl Marx to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to other important Marxist and post-marxist critics of the modern capitalist system. By coining the term “culture industry” in their famous book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the theorists of the Frankfurt School, claimed that popular culture is similar to a factory producing standardized cultural goods that are used to manipulate mass society into passivity. Consequently, when people consume popular culture objects, made accessible by the mass communications media, they become submissive and satisfied, no matter how hard they struggle to acquire these material products (107). This thesis will examine whether the relationship established by the mediation of the culture industry, as formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer, between a certain ideology and a certain readership can easily be defined in terms of manipulation and submission.

Keeping in mind the foregoing discussion, the culture industry obviously promotes the development of chick lit books for profit, thus setting up “the chick lit reality.” As any popular genre, chick lit is severely criticized for both its content and form, being unworthy to read and analyze because it is just about sex, shopping, branded clothes, bags, and shoes. Most likely this criticism was triggered by the assumption that novels by women are inferior to men, as a woman had been considered “the other” according to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous book *The Second Sex*. Due to its specific place within the framework of popular romances and young women’s fiction, chick lit has been kept out from the literary canon.

Editors Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young dispute the value of reading chick lit due to its sociological effects for women and its relationship in literary history to novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*. According to their book *Chick lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (2006), chick lit fiction involves powerful, self-confident, strong, independent and clever women who are trying hard to cope with the temptations, frustrations, and vicissitudes of living in a materialistic world.

Gradually, with the rise of successive waves of feminism and accompanying women’s movements, the female figure came to assume a more prominent position, challenging the idea of

the “feminine mystique,” as expressed in Betty Friedan’s 1963 eponymous volume, criticizing the idea that women could only find fulfillment through childrearing and home-making, being constrained to find identity and meaning in their lives mainly through their husbands and children. They fear to address the problems which bother them: wish to find fulfillment outside the home or cravings for intellectual meetings and engagement in the public sphere. Even though years passed since then, new conditions arose affecting the way some urban women defined themselves in new circumstances. Writers have a way of keeping up with the times and writers like Helen Fielding and Sophie Kinsella are no exception.

After the discussion of the major critical landmarks of the theoretical framework informing this dissertation, there will follow the investigation of the three chosen chick lit books addressing a configuration of thematic issues present from the very beginning in a subgenre initiated by the British novel that earned its label: Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996), followed by other successful chick lit texts: *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000) by Sophie Kinsella and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) by Lauren Weisberger. These are significant illustrations of books achieving bestseller status largely as a result of their reliance on the pairing of women and consumerism for character formation and plot development.

The above-mentioned books by Fielding, Kinsella and Weisberger will also be discussed in terms of the five postfeminist characteristics that Susan Faludi evokes in her *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991): a negative, conservative reaction to second wave feminism and its political achievements, the attention given to the individual rather than to a collective sisterhood, a desire for more traditional femininity, consumerism, romance, and motherhood, the female identity crises which are the main factors causing fears of a man shortage, a loudly ticking biological clock, and career tension, feelings of anxiety over the ability to make the correct future decisions by heroines of the genre.

One of the claims to be investigated in this thesis will be whether in postfeminist popular culture, female sexuality represents female power through which women can achieve social ambitions and equality in gender relations, or whether this is just one of the instances of mass deceptions that late enlightenment promotes, to refer back to Adorno and Horkheimer. For the purposes of this research, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) will be analyzed from postfeminist positions, while being aware of their diversity and sometimes contradictory nature. These representative novels

of chick literature picture the struggles of certain young women while trying to exploit the beauty myth and sexual objectivization of women, while a professional interest in a significant career is sometimes at odds with the scenario of the traditional romance.

Comparing chick lit texts to romance novels, the latter almost always end with the couple together, while the former offers an apparently more realistic look at romance and the single woman. In addition to this, chick lit comes with new insights: the protagonist's ability to laugh at herself and the genre's typical first-person narrator or confessional formula add a strong dose of irony and self-irony. The wider range of endings, more or less in the "and they lived happily ever after" romance tradition has acknowledged a new world in which stories not necessarily have less happy endings, but one in which female individuals are no longer bent on fulfilling themselves by marrying Mr. Right. They have become, or are trying hard to become, career minded individuals, with marriage as only one of their options. However, in this new world in which more opportunities appear to be open to more women, especially educated, sophisticated women in urban settings, heroines also have a sense of humor, sometimes indulging in self-irony, thus rendering their fate more open to the sympathy of their female readership.

For a better understanding of this genre, this thesis presents the main characteristics of chick lit fiction as well as to reflect on its links with other formulaic genres paying special attention to the narrative's affinities with, or inclusion in the more comprehensive popular romance fiction genre. By investigating representative novels of the chick lit genre or subgenre, the beauty myth and postfeminism, this thesis argues that chick lit does not only cover serious issues such as beauty and relationships through the use of humor and happy ending to its readers, but it provides the tools to offer women an effective way of dealing, quite ambivalently, with both serious issues they constantly struggle and with less serious issues in a far less serious manner, involving irony and self-irony, as forms of therapy against some of the frustrations of modern urban life.

In order to classify a specific novel as chick lit, a number of features are likely to be considered. The chick lit novel usually shows a young female heroine (usually post-graduate, mid-20s through early 30s), having the profession primarily based in the communications industry (for example publishing, advertising, public relations, journalism, fashion). Many times, the heroine encounters difficulties in the working place, which frequently builds the plot of the story, shifting from awful coworkers (typically other women), a passion with either the boss or a

male coworker, or being stuck in a job without any future perspectives. There are common the romantic entanglements, even though the protagonist remains single throughout much of the text (and mournfully laments such a position) until the finish. The pressure of finding a husband comes not only from the patriarchal society, but also from their bizarre mothers who frustrate their independent daughters. All chick lit novels present extreme compulsive behaviors as examples spending money or strict dieting. This is likely due to the metropolitan setting, most frequently Manhattan, New York City, London, Los Angeles or Philadelphia, places which encourage and promote consumerism, whose glittering surfaces closely resemble the glossy covers of the perfect cosmopolitan lady's magazine (the magazines which are in vogue with a large section of the urban, middle class female population).

In order to examine how the “chick lit discourse” works, there will be an engagement with the novels’ structural similarities and differences in terms of plot, character, style, point of view, but also thematic framework associated with a certain prevailing ideology. These three chick lit novels display numerous similarities in regard to theme, first-person narrative point-of-view, and use of a style of humorous and confessional reflections. The narratives present both implied and explicit commentaries while following the lives of women who are not perfect or ideal, with the main focus on providing a “happy ending,” sometimes not the conventional one expected by the readers. Considering that protagonists of conventional literary fiction are many times imperfect, chick lit heroines’ authenticity can be established in contrast to the flawless heroines of Harlequin romance fiction. In her famous book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (1991), Janice Radway highlights the prototype of the idealized heroine in popular romance fiction, possessing “unusual intelligence” and “an extraordinarily fiery disposition” (123); she also possesses “superiority in manipulating language” (124). Ideal heroines have “an especially alluring appearance,” but importantly these heroines are “unaware of their beauty and its effect on others” (126). Without a doubt, protagonists like Bridget Jones and Andrea Sachs are peculiar, although the authors made them appealing and self-confident in spite of their naturally human flaws.

This thesis examines the cultural mechanisms involved in the outstanding success of 20th-21st century popular women’s fiction, the subgenre known as chick lit, and examines this genre as an illustration of the commodification involved in cultural globalization. It considers problems of consumerism, the global circulation of popular literature and culture as displayed in chick lit.

All the way through this analysis of global Anglophone texts, chick lit texts will be seen in relation to literary traditions, but also in relation to such processes as consumerism and materialism, deception, enslavement or empowerment.

In the first chapter *Illusion of Females' Empowerment and The Pursuit of a Meaningful Relationship in Bridget Jones's Diary*, a number of key issues are explored, such as commodity worship in literary and popular fiction. They will feature female protagonists in Anglo and American chick lit, and the commodification of Jane Austen, the “grandmother” and fictional muse of chick lit, through the influence of her well-known novels. Other important voices will provide the substance for the analysis and interpretation of some of the most important chick lit texts. *Pride and Prejudice* deeply influenced many books and films, one of those being the novel and the film version of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Its complex intertextual framework can be tracked through the use of the main themes that chick lit explores nowadays: female introspection, self-discovery, self-development, but also the uncertainties, vulnerabilities and fears of young women still living in a male-dominated society.

Chick lit novels focus on the idea of the “accomplished woman,” having different interpretations in each case. As a text that came to be seen as the prototype of a new subgenre, chick lit fiction, *Bridget Jones's Diary* promotes a heroine who has two important problems in her life: her singleton status and her inability to follow the existing standards of female physical beauty. Connected to this, are issues and problems which might be considered as completely trivial, but which acquire existential importance. One of them is controlling one's weight, an essential part of the process of belonging and conforming to standards of beauty as imposed, sometimes in indirect ways, by the patriarchal discourse. Largely due to the frequent use of the rhetoric of female empowerment and sociopolitical concern, not to forget mentioning the pursuit of a significant heterosexual relationship as a crucial goal, *Bridget Jones's Diary* can be considered postfeminist, but the specific aspects of it and how they strike sensitive chords is part of the investigation to be carried out.

The second chapter, *Shopaholism and Compulsive Consumption in The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, examines the way in which taste, style, social competition, and the emotional pleasures of purchasing commodities serve to challenge the assumption that an individual's social status is imperative in a consumerist society. In the discussion of the female protagonist, there will be an investigation of the means through which Sophie Kinsella wants to

highlight the negative effects of consumerism, many times generating bankruptcy and substitution of real human relationships. Other topics which will be discussed are, in turn: how advertisements influence consumers to buy in order to reflect their personalities, how one's taste is shaped by one's habit and it is a mark of one's status, people's relationship to things/commodities as a "fetish" due to people's obsession over commodities for their apparent value when in reality the labor behind the thing is what counts, how hedonism is implied through the chick lit text, and the difference between men- and women-focused advertisements. Also, the analysis will have as main pillars for its critical background the following writers: Theodore Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1996), Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), Karl Marx's *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1909), Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (2002), Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* (1970).

The third chapter, *Career, Fashion and Material Inclination in The Devil Wears Prada*, discusses career prospects for romance and chick lit protagonists. Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* reflects a contemporary consumerist culture and embodies the concerns related to the beauty industry. This chapter analyzes the heroines, Andrea and Miranda, in terms of consumerism and beauty industry, mentioning them in their relation with their career, by looking at what makes them get involved in consumption or keep back from it and by looking at how they treat and maintain their appearance, how they try hard to save face and preserve their self-esteem. More interestingly, as Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young claim, Weisberger's *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 7). To put it briefly, this chapter aims to bring into light one of the challenges that modern women confront with in the workplace, specifically women's advancement at their job and the relationship between the female manager and female subordinate.

This research has led to the realization that an apparently cheap and simple fictional formula of a genre or subgenre dismissed by a number of serious critics has turned out to display a diverse and complex pattern, the fictional world of chick lit showing signs of development in directions to be even further investigated. Addressing this subgenre's relationship with postfeminism and popular culture, evidence has been found in the fictional patterns of the novels that they are more than cheap, superficial romances, containing clear examples of both dialog

with other genres, as well as parodic and self-ironic subversion of the romance formula. How chick lit is linked to romance, how it explores certain women's determination to succeed in challenging twenty-first century socio-economic and cultural situations in a consumer-oriented culture are questions which this thesis debates and describes, noting its trends and further development. The basic features and themes found in chick lit, with visible roots in the history of women's writing (the heroine's search for an ideal partner, her maturation and understanding her feelings, abilities and goals, and her concern with beauty practices), are given new twists from the very beginning, from Fielding's novel that inaugurated the genre. Most of these novels both represent and ironically deal with the constraints and challenges of women who are just as worthy as other heroines from previous forms of romance, but who are both more self-conscious and more subject to forms of contemporary culture.

It has turned out in the course of the investigation that chick lit, in addition to the representation of apparently superficial aspects of contemporary urban culture (such as exaggerated forms of consumerism) deals with complex and significant issues regarding women's condition and past, present, and future concerns. Its undeniable relevance to popular culture within the last couple of decades has to do with constant concerns with femininity, identity, sexuality and social status, making it worthy of cultural examination. In this context, a permanent dialog with aspects of postfeminism in the contemporary world has been found particularly useful, as this undertaking sheds light both on fictional and on theoretical representations of gender in the contemporary age and the accompanying developments in Western societies that they are linked with. This permanent dialog has been obvious from the very first text under investigation, Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where, as this investigation has concluded, the illusion of a postfeminist empowerment has been found to be counterbalanced by the ending of the novel and by its permanently apparent self-ironic mode. It has been found that here, as well as in subsequent chick lit fiction to various extents, the politics of postmodernism, as stated by Linda Hutcheon, and the politics of postfeminism as displayed by Fielding and the other authors under investigation, have much in common, conveying messages and simultaneously challenging them.

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