

THE DIVERSIFYING, POLITICISING AND  
MATURING OF ANGLOPHONE CHICK LIT  
ALONGSIDE CHANGING FEMINIST  
IDEOLOGIES AND GENRE FLUIDITY

*by*

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the evolution of the genre of chick lit, from the 1990s to 2010s, and its changing relationship with contemporary feminisms. During the 1990s and 2000s, postfeminism gained significant prominence, and the 2010s witnessed the emergence of a fourth wave of feminism. Through applying feminist concepts associated with these strands, this thesis explores the ways in which chick lit, a genre closely connected to feminism, has adapted for contemporary readers. This study offers a new perspective on contemporary literature and demonstrates how the genre of chick lit, in the 1990s and 2010s, both acknowledges and challenges discriminations based on gender, age, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The thesis is comparative, and deliberately brings together 'classic' 1990s chick lit texts and authors (Candance Bushnell, Helen Fielding, Terry McMillan and Lauren Weisberger), with more recent publications published in the 2010s, in order to explore continuities and differences within these genre works. I analyse these texts within the context of postfeminist and fourth-wave feminist perspectives, while also considering criticisms and shortcomings within the movements. Each chapter focuses on a key theme of significance for both chick lit and feminism: Chapter 1 explores single womanhood and dating, Chapter 2 concentrates on sex and sexual politics, Chapter 3 examines friendship and women's relationships with other women, and Chapter 4 considers representations of women's careers and the workplace environment.

The main finding of this thesis is that the genre of chick lit has diversified, matured and become increasingly politicised, while concurrently retaining established

chick lit themes and tropes. Publishers and critics have claimed that chick lit is a dead genre, narrowly defined by specific and static tropes, drawn from the genre's heyday in the 1990s. This thesis challenges this contention by showcasing how chick lit is alive, relevant, adaptable and versatile. By comparing older and newer works, I identify a new subgenre of contemporary literature that can be termed 'neo chick lit.' The texts suggest a diversification and maturation of a genre which is often critiqued for its centring of young, white, middle-class and heterosexual women. My comparison of chick lit also highlights the genre's fluid representations of changing feminist ideologies. Feminist concepts related to dating, sex, friendship and workplace remain similar in works of chick lit published concurrently with both postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism. However, there are distinctions too. Neo chick lit more overtly challenges the gender inequalities that works of foundational chick lit imply. The politicisation of the genre is most notable in this change in tone. Genre tropes and ideologies of 1990s chick lit thus persist in neo chick lit, but with some significant and important differences.

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# INTRODUCTION

The term 'chick lit' is controversial. Despite being recognised as a marketing category to signal a particular genre of popular fiction, 'chick' is generally seen as an informal and derogatory reference to a young woman, while 'lit' is dismissive, implying an inferiority to the larger 'literature'. Author Jennifer Weiner (2021) argues that being labelled as 'chick lit' carries advantages, such as providing 'booksellers and readers, a quick and easy shorthand with which to refer to books that feature smart, funny, struggling, relatable female protagonists.'<sup>1</sup> Along with the terminology, the chick lit texts themselves have also faced swift dismissals. The genre has been criticised as formulaic, froth and forgettable.<sup>2</sup> Lola Young, the chair of the judges for the Orange Prize award in 1999, contends that

Many of the British books about 30-something young women were incredibly insular [...] There is a cult of big advances going to photogenic young women to write about their own lives and who they had to dinner as if that is all there is to life. These people may not be writing a novel because they have got something to say but because it's fashionable to write these sorts of novels. I would encourage them to think bigger.<sup>3</sup>

My thesis refutes this derision by demonstrating the valuable insight into contemporaneous waves of feminism that reading and analysing these texts offers.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Weiner, 'Frequently Asked Questions', *Jennifer Weiner*, 2021  
<<http://www.jenniferweiner.com/faq>> [accessed 11 April 2022]

<sup>2</sup> For an outline of such critiques see Scarlett Thomas, 'The Great Chick Lit Conspiracy', *The Independent*, 2002 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-great-chick-lit-conspiracy-172223.html>> [accessed 27 September 2023]; Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing quoted in John Ezard, 'Bainbridge Tilts at "chick Lit" Cult', *The Guardian* (2001)  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/aug/24/books.generalfiction>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Lola Young quoted in Nigel Reynolds, 'Book Prize Judge Attacks British Women Writers', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1999, p. 1 <<https://www.gale.com/intl/c/the-telegraph-historical-archive>> [accessed 8 April 2023].

Likely welcomed by certain critics, the genre has been posited as having exhausted its appeal. According to Heike Mißler's (2016) extended research, publishing industries began proclaiming the death of chick lit towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, John Scognamiglio, editor-in-chief at Kensington Publishing, said, 'We've pretty much stopped publishing chick lit.'<sup>5</sup> Newer authors may distance themselves from labelling or categorising their work as 'chick lit' because of the genre's apparent death, but that does not mean that chick lit elements, themes and tropes are no longer being published. This thesis demonstrates how works of chick lit continue being published after 2012.

Despite contentions that chick lit is dismissible and dead, this thesis considers the fluidity of the genre. My main research question is: to what extent has chick lit adapted for contemporary readers? To address this, I ask these following sub-questions: How do newer works of chick lit adapt genre conventions to correspond to the arrival of a new fourth-wave of feminism? What do the texts say about chick lit and feminism's connection to discrimination? How and why is genre manipulated or experimented with? This thesis aims to identify parallels between foundational works of chick lit and new emerging writers by comparing texts chronologically across the three decades since chick lit's 1990s heyday. My main objective is to determine whether the genre has diversified, matured and become more politicised to such an extent that the newer texts warrant a subcategory within the genre.

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<sup>4</sup> Heike Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> John Scognamiglio, quoted in Jennifer Coburn, 'The Decline of Chick Lit', *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 2012 <<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/books/sdut-the-decline-of-chick-lit-2012feb11-story.html>> [accessed 4 June 2023]



Taking these research questions, aims and objectives into consideration, each chapter of the thesis compares three distinct chick lit texts. The rationale for selecting these primary sources is as follows: firstly, each chapter includes a work of 'foundational chick lit' - an older, popular and established work of chick lit. My four foundational chick lit texts are: Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996), Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1994) and Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003). These four works of chick lit have been adapted into multimedia works, a mark of popularity that suggests their prominence in the genre of chick lit and, therefore, their importance in establishing a framework of the origins of the genre. Secondly, each chapter also analyses a 'foundational author's continuation' - the most recent or contemporarily set text by the same precursory author. These 'foundational author's continuations' include Fielding's *Mad About the Boy* (2013), Bushnell's *Is There Still Sex in the City* (2019), McMillan's *It's Not all Downhill from Here* (2020) and Weisberger's *The Wives* (2018). These four texts demonstrate how the foundational authors are still producing works of fiction. Comparing these newer works with their foundational, established chick lit texts allows for a consideration of how foundational authorial voices of chick lit adapt or continue. Thirdly, each chapter also studies a work of 'post-2010 debut chick lit' - a contemporary full-length debut publication, with chick lit tropes. These texts also centre on heroines scarcely represented in foundational chick lit (minorities within mainstream Western society such as Muslim women, Black women and Queer women). These 'post-2010 debut chick lit' texts are: Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) Candice Carty-Williams' *Queenie* (2019), Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* (2020) and Meryl Wilsner's *Something to Talk About* (2019). Examining parallels between foundational chick lit authors and these

new writers allows for an exploration of the way(s) in which new authors have continued or adapted conventional chick lit tropes and themes.

Each chapter focuses on a theme significant to chick lit, postfeminism, and fourth wave feminism. The chapter titles each include a quoted term/phrase from the foundational chick lit text studied in that chapter, implying the theme's emphasis in that particular work of chick lit. Chapter 1, "Singletons': Dating, Normative Femininity and Gendered Stigmatisation in Chick Lit', explores the theme of the single woman dating in Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, her later *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* and Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*. Chapter 2, "Crazy Girls': Sex, Raunch and Rape Culture in Chick Lit', examines how sex and (hetero)sexual politics (sexually intimate relationships) are portrayed in Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, her later *Is There Still Sex in the City?* and Carty-Williams' *Queenie*. Following this is Chapter 3, "Sisters': Friendship, Supportive and Competitive Sisterhood in Chick Lit', which analyses depictions of friendship and women's relationships with each other in McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, her later *It's Not All Downhill from Here* and Reid's *Such a Fun Age*. The thesis's final Chapter 4, "Clackers': Workplace, The Queen Bee Syndrome and The Glass Ceiling Complex in Chick Lit', focuses on how women's careers and the workplace are represented in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Wives* and Wilsner's *Something to Talk About*. Concentrating on a specific theme (dating, sex, friendship or workplace) enables each chapter to include diachronic close readings of the texts, offering a full examination of the way(s) in which the theme has adapted (or not) for contemporary readers.

In this introduction to the thesis, I now turn to presenting a comprehensive literature review and overview of my research into the evolution of chick lit. I first define my understanding of the term chick lit, then I discuss the history of the genre. This is

followed by an examination of the existing body of academic literature on chick lit. I subsequently connect the genre to feminism and lastly, I outline my thesis chapters.

## Defining Chick Lit

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To form my unique definition of chick lit, I combined a variety of scholars' criticism, reviewers' interpretations and my thesis's primary texts. My definition is as follows:

Chick lit novels provide a fictional portrayal of women's experiences, transformation and/or quest for happiness in a world designed to see them as inferior to their male counterparts. Inequalities, capitalism, patriarchy are fleshed out most clearly in the protagonists' dating dynamics, sexual experiences, friendships and/or workplace.

Humour is a vital element, as is a woman's perspective, a confessional tone and/or epistolary writing style. This tone and style provide valuable insights into the emotional responses of the heroine. For my purposes, this is how I'm choosing to define chick lit.

Chick lit has been defined in many different ways and my unique definition builds on these by identifying certain prevalent features of chick lit. Scholars and reviewers pinpoint how the genre focuses on a woman's transformational journey, her 'quest for happiness' and the challenges she faces.<sup>6</sup> A humorous tone and confessional narrative

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Erin Hurt's argument that chick lit novels 'focus on the challenges women face,' in *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* (Milton: Routledge, 2018), p. 1; Chick lit 'consists of heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists' in Caroline Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 2; and 'Chick Lit deals with topics that affect a woman's life' in Cathy Yardley, *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), p. 5; 'A popular genre of contemporary fiction that focuses on the transformational journey of a woman or group of women' in Chicklit Club, 'Chick Lit 101', [n.d.] <<https://www.chicklitclub.com/chicklitintro.html>> [accessed 26 April 2023]; 'Chick lit is a subgenre of the larger classification of women's fiction, generally a coming-of-age or "coming-of-consciousness" story where a woman's life is transformed by the events of the story' in Yardley, p. 4; and Mißler, *The Cultural Politics*, p. 33.

style are essential.<sup>7</sup> The genre of chick lit is often seen as a subgenre of romance and while it does have some generic connections, including the theme of romantic relationships, it has some distinctive differences, such as more of a focus on friendships and the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Lynda Gichanda Spencer's (2019) definition affirms my conceptualisation and verifies my chapter themes. They argue that chick lit

articulates how women see themselves and their relationships with their parents, spouses and, most importantly, female friends [Chapter 3]; reflects on the challenges that modern women face in the work environment [Chapter 4]; interrogates women's realities concerning love [Chapter 1], marriage and motherhood; explores concepts of sexual desire and intimacy [Chapter 2]; and negotiates the dilemmas of a patriarchal society, while also confronting issues of class and race [All Chapters].<sup>9</sup>

I expand on Spencer's definition by positing that a confessional tone, humour and/or satirical elements are significant chick lit features.

A core aim of this project is to expand the scope of chick lit to include newer works. Inspired by Amy Spurling's use, I apply the term 'neo chick lit' to refer to a new subcategory of chick lit. In a guest blog originally published on *Novelicious.com* but later acquired by *WritingTipsOasis.com*, Spurling refers to their own work of fiction, *My Soviet*

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example: 'Often these novels are humorous, while its writers don't shy away from the serious issues' in Chicklit Club; 'humorous tone' in *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 1; and 'It has a funny tone and voice' in Yardley, p. 4-5; 'Such identification is augmented by chick lit's narrative style. Fielding's novel suggested spontaneity and candor with its use of the diary form. Others exploit the confessional style of letters and e-mails, or simply employ first-person narration to craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers.' in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: 'Romance is a common element but is not the sole focus of the book' in Chicklit Club; 'friendship dynamics' in Yardley, p. 5; 'city setting, professional job, college education,' in *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Lynda Gichanda Spencer, "'In Defence of Chick-Lit': Refashioning Feminine Subjectivities in Ugandan and South African Contemporary Women's Writing', *Feminist Theory*, 20.2 (2019), 155-69 (p. 155) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119831544>>.

*Kitchen* (2010), as a 'Neo Chick-Lit novel.' They explain their reasoning for this terminology:

Well, people kept saying that Chick-Lit was dead, so this is (dare I say it?) its slightly maturer younger sister. There's still humour, drinks and men, but with a *darker satirical edge* [emphasis added] and less handbags and dieting. The Neo Chick-Lit chick is more likely to be from the arts' world than the corporate one. And she has intellect rather than self-awareness.<sup>10</sup>

My thesis elaborates upon Spurling's definition to include more factors. I use 'neo chick lit' to refer to texts that correspond with my definition of chick lit, showing a linkage with foundational chick lit, but also maintain this 'darker satirical edge.' The works centre on marginalised women and are published concurrently with the rise of fourth-wave feminism.

## A History of the Genre of Chick Lit

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Research suggests that the first usage of the term 'chick lit' was in the 1980s by Princeton students critically responding to Elaine Showalter's 'Female Literary Tradition' course. Its first printed usage was in Don Betterton's *Alma Mater: Unusual Stories and Little-Known Facts from America's College Campuses* (1988).<sup>11</sup> Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell later applied the term 'chick lit' ironically to title their *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995), an edited collection of newly discovered women writers whose work can be described as 'quirky, droll, jocular' but which also 'carries weight and power.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Amy Spurling, 'Guest Blog - Neo Chicklit Is Here - Just Add Vodka! By Amy Spurling', *WritingTipsOasis* [n.d.] <<https://writingtipsoasis.com/guest-blog-neo-chicklit-is-here-just-add-vodka-by-amy-spurling/>> [accessed 22 September 2023].

<sup>11</sup> As confirmed by Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell, *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (Florida: Fiction Collective Two, 1995), p. 9.

However, Mazza (2006) later discovered that their ‘obviously sardonic’ usage was reappropriated by the ‘commercial book industry’ to denote ‘flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels.’<sup>13</sup>

The publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) in the year following Mazza and DeShell’s collection became a defining representation of the newly formed genre: the novel is often referred to as the ‘ur-text’ of chick lit.<sup>14</sup> The inclusion of Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in the thesis is essential since the majority of works which reference chick lit also point to this text, even when they do so just as a gesture towards the genre’s background, or to demonstrate how it has shifted since the novel’s publication.<sup>15</sup> The prominence of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is also clear in the number of academic publications that solely focus on this work of fiction.<sup>16</sup> Academic discussions have concentrated on its reworking of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, its depiction of ‘an Everywoman’, and its connection to the romance genre.<sup>17</sup> Critics have also explored

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<sup>13</sup> Cris Mazza, ‘Who’s Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre’, in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 17–28 (p. 18).

<sup>14</sup> Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2009), p. 88; see also: Ferriss and Young, *Chick Lit*, p. 4; Joanne Knowles, ‘The Dirty Secret: Domestic Disarray in Chick Lit’, in *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film*, ed. by Julie Chappell and Mallory Young (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 97–117 (p. 98).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, ‘chick lit has travelled a long way since *Bridget Jones’s Diary*’ in Charmaine Carvalho, ‘Chick Lit in India: Possibilities for a Feminine Aesthetic in Popular Fiction’, *Estetyka i Krytyka*, 41 (2016), 13–32 (p. 13); or ‘Originally defined as an Anglo-American phenomenon, starting with Helen Fielding’s best-selling novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), chick lit has spread rapidly across various linguistic and cultural markets’ in Sandra Folie, ‘The Ethnic Labelling of a Genre Gone Global: A Distant Comparison of African-American and African Chick Lit’, in *Literary Translation, Reception, and Transfer*, ed. by Norbert Bachleitner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), pp. 313–25 (p. 313).

<sup>16</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary: A Reader’s Guide*, Continuum Contemporaries (London: Continuum, 2002); Leah Guenther, ‘Bridget Jones’s Diary: Confessing Post-Feminism’, in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Jo Gill, Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature, 2 (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 84–99; Katarzyna Smoczyńska, *The World According to Bridget Jones: Discourses of Identity in Chicklit Fictions* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Ferriss, ‘Narrative and Cinematic Doubleness: *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*’, in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 71–86 (p. 71); Mißler, *The Cultural Politics*, p. 10; Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, p. 85.

Bridget's declaration of 1990s feminist activism as strident.<sup>18</sup> *Bridget Jones's Diary* is also intrinsically tied to postfeminist discourse.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 1 of the thesis explores the anti-feminist and postfeminist ideology of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Moreover, Catherine E. Riley and Lynne Pearce (2018) suggest that 'the novel's very success troubled the boundaries between literary and popular fiction, with some critics dismissing it as low-brow "chick lit" but others arguing that its very popularity required it to be examined as a culturally important novel.'<sup>20</sup> This emphasises the benefit of the novel to my research which considers the fluidity of genre boundaries.

The Bridget Jones franchise has grown since 1996. The sequel to the first novel, *The Edge of Reason*, was released in 1999, followed by the release of the film adaptations of the two in 2001 and 2004. The next novel of the series, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, was not published until 2013. As of 2023 though, this has not been adapted to film. In 2016, there was a concurrent development of the film and novel of *Bridget Jones's Baby*, which despite being published after *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, is set before those noted in the 2013 novel. I chose to focus on the text with the most contemporary setting, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, in the thesis because one of my aims is to explore the concept of 'Where is she now?' in the works. Bridget's oldest self provides the best model for this. All my later chick lit texts should be not only published, but also set, within the fourth-wave feminist movement, to allow for the study of how these texts

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<sup>18</sup> Whelehan, *Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary: A Reader's Guide*, p. 20; see also: Rebecca Munford, 'Writing the F-Word: Girl Power, the Third Wave, and Postfeminism', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1970-Present. Volume Ten*, ed. by Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 130–44 (p. 134).

<sup>19</sup> Catherine E. Riley, and Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and Women's Writing: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 121; see also Guenther, 'Bridget Jones's Diary: Confessing Post-Feminism'.

<sup>20</sup> Riley and Pearce, p. 121.

respond and address the ideology.<sup>21</sup> These factors, as well as the franchise's success and prevalence, solidify the inclusion of *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* in the thesis.

Another renowned work of chick lit is from the USA, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996). This work offers a different side to the origins of chick lit. Whelehan (2005) argues that *Sex and the City* has 'very little in common' with British chick lit, 'except that subtextually the women are all shown to be desperate to have a meaningful relationship.'<sup>22</sup> Christian Lenz (2016) suggests that Bushnell's heroines are 'far more cynical' than Fielding's, and that Bridget Jones is more 'sympathetic and likeable' and, as such, her text is 'more influential in depictions of global chick lit.'<sup>23</sup> Crucially, Bushnell is continually referenced (alongside *Bridget Jones's Diary*) as an originator of the genre.<sup>24</sup> Despite this, it is the series television adaptation *Sex and the City* that receives the most scholarly attention.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the romantic reunion ending the series, the book interrogates the 'general reductiveness of romantic comedies.'<sup>26</sup> Mandy Merck (2003) argues that *Sex and the City* depicts 'heterodystopia, a heterosexual hell in which men and women continually pursue and repel each other until they settle into equally hellish marriages, bachelor indifference (for men) or, worst of all female fates, move back to Iowa to live with their mothers.'<sup>27</sup> Kiernan (2006) explains that Bushnell's *Sex and the*

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<sup>21</sup> Later in this introduction, I address the speculated inception date of the fourth-wave feminist movement.

<sup>22</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 206-207.

<sup>23</sup> Christian Lenz, *Geographies of Love: The Cultural Spaces of Romance in Chick- and Ladlit* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), p. 23-4.

<sup>24</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 6; see also: Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Although titled *Reading Sex and the City* (2004), Kim Akass and Janet McCabe's edited collection includes only one chapter that solely focuses on Bushnell's book: Mandy Merck, 'Sexuality in the City', in *Reading Sex and the City*, ed. by Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (I.B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 48-62.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, p. 94; in the 2001 edition of *Sex and the City*, Bushnell revised the ending, adding two chapters in which Carrie and Mr. Big separate.

<sup>27</sup> Merck, 'Sexuality in the City', p. 49.



*City* debunks sexual myth in a way that contradicts conventional depictions of women's sexual desires.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, this is the reason for its addition in Chapter 2 which focuses on chick lit portrayals of sex and sexual politics.

After *Sex and the City*, Bushnell published other standalone novels, such as *Trading Up* (2003) and *One Fifth Avenue* (2008) and she then published a prequel to her debut: *The Carrie Diaries* (2010). Most recently, *Is There Still Sex in the City?* (2019) was released; a text which satirises the dating and sexual experiences of a narrator who is twenty years older than the classic chick lit protagonist. Since then, the television series of *Sex and the City* has been relaunched, titled as *And Just Like That* (2021-), which likewise portrays the heroines from the foundational text at a later stage of their life. *Is There Still Sex in the City?* (2019) is the 'foundational author's continuation' for Chapter 2 because of its prose format and adherence with the 'Where is she [Bushnell] now?' concept and plot focus.

A significant, though previously understudied, work of chick lit is Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992). Scholars have also cited McMillan's along with Fielding's work as a progenitor of the genre of chick lit.<sup>29</sup> Konchar-Farr (2009) critiques the 'whitening' of tradition – the way novels by women of colour are cited as 'variations' of chick lit, alternative to the white, heterosexual mainstream – arguing that, as of 2009, the consideration of McMillan as a literary foremother was only found in Ferriss and Young's collection (briefly in the introduction and an extended study in Lisa A.

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<sup>28</sup> Anna Kiernan, 'No Satisfaction: Catch Kiss, Sex and the City, Run and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit's New Heroines', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 207–18 (p. 210).

<sup>29</sup> See *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 1; see also, Cecilia Konchar-Farr, 'It Was Chick Lit All Along: The Gendering of a Genre', in *You've Come A Long Way, Baby: Women, Politics, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Lilly J. Goren (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), pp. 201–14, p. 203.

Guerrero's chapter).<sup>30</sup> Guerrero (2006) reveals that, during the 1990s, 'African-American female thirtysomethings had been embracing their own sistah lit, a group of series and authors that spoke to the modern condition of being female, independent, single, and black.'<sup>31</sup> They suggest that *Waiting to Exhale* (1994) (along with *Bridget Jones's Diary*), 'marked a major shift in the ways in which the lives of women were portrayed in popular culture.'<sup>32</sup> Erin Hurt's (2018) chapter 'The White Terry McMillan: Centering Black Women Within Chick Lit's Genealogy' has expanded on Guerrero's 2006 study of *Waiting to Exhale*, suggesting that allowing both Fielding's and McMillan's novels 'to be seen originary sites for the genre that followed' means 'we can imagine a more intersectional literary lineage, one that names a more inclusive selection of textual influences.'<sup>33</sup> The insight into the 'whitening' of literary tradition provided by this novel's history, and its reflection on the complexities and tensions of women's friendship demonstrates the value of including this in my Chapter 3.

Since this publication, McMillan has published similar books such as *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998). She then wrote a sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*, *Getting to Happy* (2010). While not directly connected to *Waiting to Exhale*, McMillan's more recent *It's Not All Downhill From Here* (2020) focuses on women who are roughly the same age that the protagonists from the first book would be in 2020: mid-to-late thirties (1992) and late sixties (2020). While *Waiting to Exhale's* protagonists – Bernadine, Gloria, Robin

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<sup>30</sup> Konchar-Farr, 'It Was Chick Lit All Along: The Gendering of a Genre', p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> Lisa A. Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves": Chick Lit in Black and White', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 87–102 (p. 89).

<sup>32</sup> Guerrero, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> Erin Hurt, 'The White Terry McMillan: Centering Black Women Within Chick Lit's Genealogy', in *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, ed. by Erin Hurt (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), pp. 150–74, p. 152.

and Savannah – do not centre the plotline, *It's Not All Downhill From Here's* Loretha, Sadie, Korynthia, Poochie, and Lucky provide similar perspectives.<sup>34</sup>

The fourth novel I treat as a foundational chick lit text is Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003). Previous research has established this book within a branch of chick lit titled 'underling lit' or 'assistant lit', referring to texts which concentrate on young women's 'uneasy entrance' into the professional workplace.<sup>35</sup> Supposedly inspired by Anna Wintour, the fictional 'devil' who centres the novel and film adaptation became a symbol of the stereotypical 'queen bee,' a woman boss who is more critical of her fellow women subordinates.<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Hale (2006) critiques these 'underling' novels, arguing that they are a move away from the 'empowering' chick lit of 1990s. Previous heroines would 'poke fun' at their life and career, whereas underling heroines wins only by leaving, rather than reforming, the workplace.<sup>37</sup> Juliette Wells (2006) suggests that these novels make 'no broader claims about the gruelling nature of apprenticeships in different fields.'<sup>38</sup> I explore the novel's representations of precarity in the workplace in Chapter 4. The sequel to *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Revenge Wears Prada*,

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<sup>34</sup> A Goodreads reviewer of the novel wrote, 'Loretha's friends made me laugh since I started thinking that this is how some of the women from "Waiting to Exhale" would have behaved when they get to this age.' Goodreads, 'It's Not All Downhill from Here', (2020) <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/49819833-it-s-not-all-downhill-from-here>> [accessed 9 May 2023]

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Hale, 'Long-Suffering Professional Females: The Case of Nanny Lit', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 103–18 (p. 7)

<sup>36</sup> Images of Meryl Streep (Miranda) and Anne Hathaway (Andy) used in newspaper articles: Jena McGregor, 'The Stereotype of the "Queen Bee" Female Executive Is Losing Its Sting', *Washington Post*, (2021)<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2015/06/09/the-idea-of-queen-bee-female-executives-is-losing-its-sting/>> [accessed 19 May 2023]; see also: Alexander Ward, 'Queen Bee Syndrome Is a Myth, According to Study', *The Independent* (2015) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/queen-bee-syndrome-is-a-myth-according-to-new-study-by-columbia-business-school-10304259.html>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>37</sup> Hale, pp. 103-4.

<sup>38</sup> Juliette Wells, 'Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 47–70 (p. 66).

was published in 2013, and since then, there has been another publication in the series – *The Wives* (or the US edition: *When Life Gives You Lululemons*). *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Wives* take a large part of the focus for Chapter 4 because of their emphasis on women in the workplace.

These four authors – Fielding, Bushnell, McMillan and Weisberger -- are significant to the chick lit genre and to my thesis. Despite there being a decline of new works categorised as chick lit, the later works introduced above by the same authors are still marketed as chick lit. This suggests that the genre category is only deemed appropriate for authors who have published in its prime era.<sup>39</sup> Whelehan (2009) considers the evolution of the chick lit genre as inevitable since its 'key authors have developed as writers, and as they age their work continues to reflect the concerns of their own generation.'<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Vnuk (2018) also posits that 'chick lit has matured.'<sup>41</sup> This is a trend I address in this thesis: the evolving and maturing of the genre.

After the publication of these foundational chick lit novels, the genre was thriving; US publishers earned more than \$71 million through their sales of chick lit novels.<sup>42</sup> Deborah Philips, in *Women's Fiction* (2006), suggests that Harlequin's 2001 formation of the imprint 'Red Dress Ink' was as a response to the phenomenon of chick lit, and the changing experience of women.<sup>43</sup> A significant development in the second

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<sup>39</sup> Goodreads has 'Chick Lit' as the 1<sup>st</sup> category for *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> for *Is There Still Sex in the City?* and *It's Not All Downhill from Here*, and 2<sup>nd</sup> for *The Wives*.

<sup>40</sup> Imelda Whelehan, 'Teening Chick Lit?', *Working Papers on the Web*, 13 (2009) <<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/index.html>> [accessed 3 October 2019] (para 1 of 23).

<sup>41</sup> Chicklit 'Chick Lit 101', *Chicklit Club* <<https://www.chicklitclub.com/chicklitintro.html>> [accessed 26 April 2023]; Rebecca Vnuk, 'Women's Fiction and Romance', in *Encyclopedia of Romance Fiction*, ed. by Kristin Ramsdell (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2018), pp. 401–4 (p. 402).

<sup>42</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Philips, Deborah, *Women's Fiction: From 1945 to Today*, 2nd edn (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 2.

half of the first decade of the twenty-first century was the development of the website 'Chicklit Club' which provides regular updates and reviews on new releases of chick lit novels to popular readers of the genre.<sup>44</sup> During the 2000s, the genre was prominent, widely recognised and commercially successful.<sup>45</sup>

As well as 'Sistah Lit' and 'Assistant or Underling Lit', the history and popularity of the genre of chick lit gave rise to subgenres and categories of chick lit.<sup>46</sup> These include: Mum Lit (Hen Lit), Young Adult Chick Lit, Labor Lit, Lad Lit, Mystery/Paranormal Chick Lit, Nanny Lit, and Tart Noir.<sup>47</sup> Though originally considered an Anglophone genre, chick lit became a global phenomenon.<sup>48</sup> There has been scholarly work published that have defined and explored chick lit set in the following countries: Australia, China, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Samoa, South Africa, Sweden and Uganda.<sup>49</sup> There is also scholarly work that categorises chick lit by

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<sup>44</sup> 'Chick Lit 101', *Chicklit Club* <<https://www.chicklitclub.com/chicklitintro.html>>

<sup>45</sup> As aforementioned, this is until its supposed 'demise', towards the latter half of the first decade.

<sup>46</sup> Different subgenres of chick lit can be read as problematic. As Hurt (2019) explores: a 'variation of ethnicity and race as secondary happens when scholars refer to certain ethnic categories of chick lit as subgenres or, perhaps more powerfully, treat these subgenres as "ethnic" versions of white chick lit.' in *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 11. I do still think it is important to list some of subgenres of chick lit that have formed (and the scholarship that focuses on them).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example: Heather Hewett, 'You Are Not Alone: The Personal, the Political, and the "New" Mommy Lit', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 119–39; Rebecca Fasselt, 'Crossing Genre Boundaries: H. J. Golakai's Afropolitan Chick-Lit Mysteries', *Feminist Theory*, 20.2 (2019), 185–200; Clare Horrocks, 'Tart Noir: Chicklit with Criminal Balls', *Diegesis: Journal of the Association for Research in Popular Fictions*, 8 (2004), 59–64.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example: Folie, 'The Ethnic Labelling of a Genre Gone Global', p. 315.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example: Imogen Mathew, 'Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss's Chick Lit', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 10.3 (2016), 334–53; Sonia Vashista Oberoi, 'Indian Chick Lit: A Genre for Desi Girls', *International Journal of English and Literature*, 7.2 (2017), 127–32; Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, 'The Spatial Politics of Chick Lit in Africa and Asia: Sidestepping Tradition and Fem-Washing Global Capitalism?', *Feminist Theory*, 21.1 (2020), 111–29.

religion: Christian Chick Lit, and Muslim Chick Lit and by heroines of mixed heritage: African-American, Asian-American, and Latina.<sup>50</sup>

As highlighted through the comprehensive list of scholarly work exploring chick lit around the world, there are a number of chick lit novels with heroines from diverse ethnic backgrounds and settings. These texts have controversially been termed ‘ethnic’ chick lit.<sup>51</sup> In 2006, Rachel Donadio wrote ‘The Chick Lit Pandemic’ and offered the notion that ‘regional varieties of chick lit have been sprouting.’<sup>52</sup> Wende Ommundsen (2011) argues that texts which model their narrative on ‘classic’ chick lit only develop the genre further: *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea, for example, ‘offers a mix of critique and conformity which, while not uncommon in the chick lit genre, speaks with considerable force of cultural dilemmas Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw never had to face.’<sup>53</sup> Amy Burge and Sandra Folie (2021) also explore *Girls of Riyadh* in their chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*. Similarly to Ommundsen, they argue that

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example: Lucinda Newns, ‘Renegotiating Romantic Genres: Textual Resistance and Muslim Chick Lit’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 53.2 (2018), 284–300; Pamela Thoma, ‘Romancing the Self and Negotiating Consumer Citizenship in Asian American Labor Lit’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 8.1 (2014), 17–35; Amanda Maria Morrison, ‘Chicanas and “Chick Lit”: Contested Latinidad in the Novels of Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43.2 (2010), 309–29.

<sup>51</sup> Though problematic for reasons listed by Sandra Folie in ‘The Ethnic Labelling of a Genre Gone Global’: “‘ethnic’ chick lit is widely used to refer to, ‘in the broadest sense[...] all chick lit whose authors or protagonists have non-Western sociocultural backgrounds’ (p. 316). Though, as Folie explains, the term reproduces ‘the *West vs the rest* binary’: ‘First, it suggests that white Anglo-American chick lit is not ethnic. Second, it indicates a hierarchy between the prototypical, or even original, chick-lit genre and the adapted subgenres or varieties subsumed under the term “‘ethnic’ chick lit.” Third, this subsumption homogenizes the wide field of contemporary women’s fiction around the globe.’ (‘The Ethnic Labelling of a Genre Gone Global’, p. 316) So, like Heike Mißler, I will use quotation marks around the term ‘ethnic’ to show that I find the term problematic, for the same reasons as Sandra Folie. See: Mißler, ‘A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams’s *Queenie* (2019): Challenging Discourses of Race and Gender in the Chick-Lit Genre’, *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 12.1 (2023), 1–14 (p. 12).

<sup>52</sup> Rachel Donadio, ‘The Chick-Lit Pandemic’, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2006 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/books/review/the-chicklit-pandemic.html>> [accessed 24 April 2023], para 1.

<sup>53</sup> Wende Ommundsen, ‘Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 5.2 (2011), 107–24 (p. 115) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpq014>>

Muslim chick lit novels, including Alsanea's, repurpose Western chick lit genre tropes to offer a 'conscious challenge to the primacy of Western literary culture, suggesting a more global way to think about romantic love and its representations.'<sup>54</sup> Other popular texts academically explored as 'ethnic' chick lit include Angela Makholwa's *Black Widow Society* (2013) and *The Blessed Girl* (2017), Anita Heiss' *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007) and *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010), Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai* (2011), Annie Wang's *The People's Republic of Desire* (2006), Rajaa al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), Cynthia Jele's *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* (2010), Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and Candice Carty-Williams' *Queenie* (2019).<sup>55</sup>

My thesis also provides insights into the diversification of chick lit with my selected works of 'post-2010 debut chick lit.' As Mißler (2016) summarises, more recent chick lit publications have 'made the genre more diverse and more inclusive of identities marginalised and stereotyped in the white, western, heterosexual, middle-class universe of Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw and Co.'<sup>56</sup> Reid's *Such a Fun Age* focuses on Black protagonist, Emira, and her experiences with the white saviour complex and racist discrimination. Wilsner's *Something to Talk About* highlights homophobic prejudice in the workplace. Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and Carty-Williams' *Queenie* (2019) have been directly marketed in connection with Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

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<sup>54</sup> Amy Burge and Sandra Folie, 'Girls of Riyadh and Desperate in Dubai : Reading and Writing Romance in the Middle East', in *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. by Ann Brooks (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 323–33 (p. 331).

<sup>55</sup> See, for example: Ommundsen, 'Sex and the Global City'; Burge and Folie, 'Girls of Riyadh and Desperate in Dubai'; Rebecca Fasselt, 'Chick Lit Politics in a Post-Truth Era: Tricksters, Blessees and Postfeminist Girlpower in Angela Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl*', *Safundi*, 19.4 (2018), 375–97; Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, 'The Spatial Politics of Chick Lit in Africa and Asia'; Imogen Mathew, "'The Pretty and the Political Didn't Seem to Blend Well': Anita Heiss's Chick Lit and the Destabilisation of a Genre', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 15.3 (2016), 1–11

<sup>56</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 4.

Malik purposefully went into writing her own book with the intention to craft a ‘Muslim Bridget Jones.’<sup>57</sup> The concept of actively ‘rewriting’ a novel which is so well-established as a progenitor of chick lit verifies Malik’s novel’s inclusion in my thesis. The second, Carty-Williams’ *Queenie* (2019), has been dubbed the ‘Black Bridget Jones.’<sup>58</sup> The rights of the book have also been bought by Channel 4, and in May 2023, the cast list of the television adaptation was released.<sup>59</sup> *Queenie*’s connection to Bridget Jones, its popularity, presence in scholarly work and alignment with my chick lit definition make Carty-Williams’ text a suitable addition to the thesis.

Despite these publications, rumours and studies have circulated which argue the genre has reached the end of its relevance. Around the time of the 2008 recession, sale numbers did decrease and presence in mainstream culture diminished.<sup>60</sup> However, as Mißler (2016) explains, this does not mean ‘readers have fallen out of love with the genre’ but rather signifies an ‘evolution’ of chick lit formula.<sup>61</sup> Though arguably quite cursory, Vnuk’s (2018) work supports this, stating that ‘chick lit’ now refers to ‘any light, romantic contemporary women’s fiction novel.’<sup>62</sup> Folie (2020) expands on this: ‘the disputed label “chick lit” has now largely been replaced by “contemporary romance” or “women’s fiction”, the genre-defining humorous negotiation of the neoliberal promise

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<sup>57</sup> Muslim Institute, ‘In Conversation with Ayisha Malik Author of Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated | Musliminstitute.Org’ <<https://musliminstitute.org/freethinking/culture/conversation-ayisha-malik-author-sofia-khan-not-obliged>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>58</sup> Lisa Allardice, ‘Candice Carty-Williams: “It’s Time to Write a Book Just about Black People”’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/23/candice-carty-williams-its-time-to-write-a-book-just-about-black-people>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>59</sup> Kayleigh Dray and Amy Beecham, ‘Queenie Is \*finally\* Getting the TV Adaptation of Our Dreams – Here’s What You Need to Know’, *Stylist*, 15 May 2023 <<https://www.stylist.co.uk/entertainment/tv/queenie-channel-4/558909>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>60</sup> See Mißler’s research in *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, pp. 41-45.

<sup>61</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 41, 45.

<sup>62</sup> Vnuk, ‘Women’s Fiction and Romance’, p. 402.



that a woman can “have it all” has by no means become obsolete, but has rather evolved and diversified.’<sup>63</sup> This thesis considers the potential fluidity of chick lit, asking to what extent publications of neo chick lit mark an evolved, matured strand of the chick lit genre, one which takes elements from foundational chick lit novels (tropes, themes, form), aligns with a fourth-wave of feminism, and as such, politicises its content, and diversifies its readership.

## The Development of Chick Lit Scholarship

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Despite the genre category forming in the 1990s, little was academically published interrogating the genre and its features until 2000. That year saw publications by three significant scholars of women’s popular fiction: Deborah Philips, Joanne Hollows and Imelda Whelehan.<sup>64</sup> Whelehan’s *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary: A Reader’s Guide* (2002) is the first monograph that solely focuses on analysing Fielding’s genre-defining novel.<sup>65</sup> Following these publications, researchers showed an increased interest in the genre. The TV adaptation (1998-2004) of Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996), for example, received scholarly attention, most notably Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s

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<sup>63</sup> Folie, Sandra, ‘Review: Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre’, *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 9 (2020), 1-7 (p. 1) <<https://www.jprstudies.org/2020/03/review-theorizing-ethnicity-and-nationality-in-the-chick-lit-genre-edited-by-erin-hurt/>> [accessed 7 December 2021]

<sup>64</sup> While not directly referring to the genre as ‘chick lit’, but rather ‘the single woman novel’, Deborah Philips, ‘Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 11.3 (2000), 238–51 is also an early scholarly study of chick lit. Also published in 2000 was Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), which studies ‘women’s film’ and ‘romantic fiction.’ In Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: Women’s Press, 2000), they explore aspects of popular culture, including a chapter entitled ‘The Bridget Jones Effect.’

<sup>65</sup> Whelehan, *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary*.

edited collection *Reading Sex and the City* (2004).<sup>66</sup> *Bridget Jones's Diary* was also considered valuable for inclusion in The English Association's *Contemporary British Women Writers* (2004), edited by Emma Parker, where Clare Hanson and Imelda Whelehan evaluate 'fiction by women, about women and for women' as 'provid[ing] insights into the lives of a certain group of women.'<sup>67</sup> In 2003, the Association for Research in Popular Fictions (ARPF) hosted a colloquium on chick lit.<sup>68</sup> The ARPF journal, *Diegesis: Journal of the Association for Research in Popular Fictions*, then dedicated its No. 8 Winter 2004 issue to its proceedings.<sup>69</sup> As Joanne Knowles (2004) explains in the editorial introduction, chick lit sales were flourishing and its 'threat to society' makes it a 'worthy object of cultural study.'<sup>70</sup> This issue was one of the first pieces of scholarly work that defended the value of studying the genre of chick lit.

By 2006, the academic field of chick lit was formally established by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's edited collection, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*.<sup>71</sup> In their introduction, Ferriss and Young argue that chick lit 'is rife with possibilities and potential', and raises 'issues and questions about subjectivity, sexuality, race and class in

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<sup>66</sup> Akass and McCabe, *Reading Sex and the City*. Other publications which focus on the television series of *Sex and the City*, published before 2006, also include: Jane Arthurs, 'Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama' *Feminist Media Studies*, 3.1 (2003), 83–98; Jane Gerhard, 'Sex and the City: Carrie Bradshaw's Queer Postfeminism', *Feminist Media Studies*, 5.1 (2005), 37–49; and L. S. Kim, "'Sex and the Single Girl' in Postfeminism: The F Word on Television', *Television & New Media*, 2.4 (2001), 319–34.

<sup>67</sup> *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), p. 8, p. 9. See also: Clare Hanson, 'Fiction, Feminism and Femininity from the Eighties to the Noughties', in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 16–27; and Imelda Whelehan, 'Sex and the Single Girl: Helen Fielding, Erica Jong and Helen Gurley Brown', in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 28–40.

<sup>68</sup> According to Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, p. 197.

<sup>69</sup> *Diegesis: Journal of the Association for Research in Popular Fictions*, 8 (2004), 1–64.

<sup>70</sup> Joanne Knowles, 'Editorial', *Diegesis: Journal of the Association for Research in Popular Fictions*, 8 (2004), 3–4, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young.

women's texts' and their work certainly proves this.<sup>72</sup> Many critics cite Ferriss and Young in their reflections of the genre.<sup>73</sup> Not only is their introduction significant to the field of study, but the fourteen individual essays by renowned scholars also provide valuable contributions. Amongst these is Stephanie Harzewski who considers chick lit's literary value and place in history in a comparison to Jane Austen and Edith Wharton.<sup>74</sup> The genre's adaption from traditional romances is explored by Anna Kiernan and Rochelle Mabry. They both illuminate the way chick culture gives contemporary women a fresh voice to express their experiences and desires.<sup>75</sup> Shari Benstock then concludes the collection with the optimistic claim that 'the genre still has room to grow, to enhance its cultural relevance and acknowledge the complexities of women's changing lives and experiences.'<sup>76</sup> This thesis demonstrates that, since Benstock's conclusion to the edited collection, the genre has grown and enhanced.

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<sup>72</sup> Their work is split into three equally valuable parts: 'Part I: The Hatching of a Genre: Origins and Influences', where they discuss the genre's connection to older works, such as Jane Austen and Edith Wharton; 'Part II: Free Range: Varieties and Variations', which explores the subgenres and diverse publications of chick lit; 'Part III: Sex and the Single Chick: Feminism and Postfeminism, Sexuality and Self-Fashioning', which connects the genre with feminist theories and considers gender stereotypes and body insecurities in chick lit.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example: *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, p. 1 and pp. 7-8; or Jodi McAlister, *New Adult Fiction*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 39-40; Balducci, Federica, 'When Chick Lit Meets Romanzo Rosa: Intertextual Narratives in Stefania Bertola's Romantic Fiction', *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 2.1 (2011) <<https://www.jprstudies.org/2011/12/when-chick-lit-meets-romanzo-rosa-intertextual-narratives-in-stefania-bertola%e2%80%99s-romantic-fiction-by-federica-balducci/>> [accessed 26 April 2023] (para 11 of 26).

<sup>74</sup> Harzewski argues 'Chick lit has adapted several major literary traditions, including traditional prose romance, popular romance, and the novel of manners. Considering its connections to each of these traditions will help clarify both its place in literary history and the reactions it provokes' in 'Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 29-46 (p. 31).

<sup>75</sup> Kiernan, 'No Satisfaction: Catch Kiss, Sex and the City, Run and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit's New Heroines'; and Rochelle Mabry, 'About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary "Chick" Culture', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 191-206.

<sup>76</sup> Benstock, Shari, 'Afterword: The New Woman's Fiction', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 253-56 (p. 256). This is a limited

After Ferriss and Young's important chick lit scholarly work, further significant academic publications began emerging, including research considering the value of studying chick lit. In 'Chick Lit 101', Brenda Bethman (2006) argues that teaching chick lit is a 'fruitful way' to engage students, pointing out that 'While we may not agree on what Bridget Jones means for contemporary womanhood, she has proven to be an excellent place to start talking about that meaning.'<sup>77</sup> The novels' literary status is an important aspect of this. In their work, Stephanie Davis-Kahl (2008) deduced that the reluctance to study chick lit was due to 'a distaste for the term itself; a belief in the conventional wisdom that all chick lit is about stiletto heels, pink drinks, and men; or an assumption that very popular, highly marketed and lucrative literature must be too "low culture" to warrant scholarly consideration.'<sup>78</sup> In 2009, Sheffield Hallam University dedicated a collection of their issue 'Working Papers on the Web' to the study, properties and impact of chick lit.<sup>79</sup> Taking this further, Cheryl Wilson's (2012) interdisciplinary work demonstrates how they apply the different waves of feminism to chick lit novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2001) to encourage their students to be both critically engaged with contemporary culture as well

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list of the many important chapters included in Ferriss and Young's edited collection, most of which will be referred to elsewhere in the introduction and thesis.

<sup>77</sup>Brenda Bethman, 'Chick Lit 101', *NWSAction*, 18.1 (2006), 12.

<sup>78</sup> Stephanie Davis-Kahl, 'The Case for Chick Lit in Academic Libraries', *Collection Building*, 27.1 (2008), 1-12, p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Sarah Gormley and Sara Mills (eds.), *Working Papers on the Web*, Chick Lit, 13 (2009) <<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/index.html>>. For example: Sarah Gamble, 'When Romantic Heroines Turn Bad: The Rise of the "Anti-Chicklit" Novel', ed. by Sarah Gormley and Sarah Mills, *Working Papers on the Web*, Chick Lit, 13 (2009) <<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/index.html>> [accessed 3 October 2019]; Georgina C. Isbister, 'Chick Lit: A Postfeminist Fairy Tale', ed. by Sarah Gormley and Sarah Mills, *Working Papers on the Web*, Chick Lit, 13 (2009) <<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/index.html>> [accessed 3 October 2019].

as learn about different feminisms.<sup>80</sup> My thesis contributes to this argument of the value of studying chick lit to elucidate feminist ideologies.

Three key monographs on chick lit have provided significant context for my study. Caroline Smith's *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* (2008) focuses on how chick lit is connected to women's magazines, self-help books and domestic-advice publications, satirises the consumer industry that it depicts, and challenges gender expectations and stereotypes.<sup>81</sup> Smith's analysis of Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996) is one of few scholarly works focusing on the book, rather than the television series, making it key for this thesis. Their argument that the *Sex and the City* book undermines the romantic 'happily ever after' is spotlighted in my second chapter. Three years later, Stephanie Harzewski's *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011) uses the genre as a case study to 'understand the social conditions' that give rise to the novels' themes and tropes, including what chick lit authors 'call the "singleton" lifestyle.'<sup>82</sup> Harzewski's claim that a central stock feature of chick lit is the 'urban family' of single friends is a focus for Chapter 3. More recently, Heike Mißler's *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation* (2016) dissects chick lit formula and analyses a number of both well-known and less canonical chick lit texts; its novelty lies in its in-depth qualitative examination of online culture connected to chick lit.<sup>83</sup> My thesis explores Mißler's theory that chick lit 'comments critically on normative discourses of femininity and satirizes increasingly commercialised lifestyles, but in a manner which

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<sup>80</sup> Cheryl A. Wilson, 'Chick Lit in the Undergraduate Classroom', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 33.1 (2012), 83–100.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*.

allows readers to choose whether they want to see that criticism or not.’<sup>84</sup> Through my analysis of the satire, critique and humour used by my primary authors, my work builds on Mißler’s work, asking in what ways the darker satirical elements of newer chick lit align with newer fourth-wave feminist ideologies.

More recent scholarship has focused on the emergence of ‘ethnic’ chick lit. In their study of South Asian American chick lit, Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai (2008) critique the white-centric scholarship published on the genre, arguing that previous studies see ‘chick lit to be a homogeneously white normative genre to be read primarily for its relationship to feminism and femininity, to the exclusion of other forms of social difference.’<sup>85</sup> Thenceforth, ‘ethnic’ chick lit has received considerable critical attention. 2011 saw the publication of Wenche Ommundsen’s ‘Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference.’<sup>86</sup> There seems to be a consensus that conclusions and arguments made about Western chick lit, for example *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, cannot easily be mapped onto “ethnic” chick lit.<sup>87</sup> As Eva Chen (2012) summarises, ‘ethnic’ chick lit ‘has something new to offer and helps shed light on its Anglo-American model.’<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 199.

<sup>85</sup> Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai, ‘Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism’, *Meridians*, 8.2 (2008), 1–31 (p. 2).

<sup>86</sup> Ommundsen, ‘Sex and the Global City’. For works before this, see: Nora Sellei, ‘Bridget Jones and Hungarian Chick Lit’, in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 173–88, which explores how *Bridget Jones’s Diary* had a direct impact on Hungarian chick lit. Marilyn Booth, ‘Translator v. author (2007): Girls of Riyadh go to New York.’ *Translation Studies* 1.2 (2008), 197–211, which explores chick lit novel *Girls of Riyadh*. Also, Wenche Ommundsen, ‘From China with Love: Chick Lit and the New Crossover Fiction’, in *China Fictions, English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, ed. by A. Robert Lee, (Amsterdam: Rodopi., 2008), pp. 327–45, evaluates Chinese chick lit.

<sup>87</sup> Carvalho, ‘Chick Lit in India’; Burge and Folie, ‘Girls of Riyadh and Desperate in Dubai: Reading and Writing Romance in the Middle East’; Ommundsen, ‘Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference’; Folie, ‘The Ethnic Labelling of a Genre Gone Global’.

<sup>88</sup> Eva Chen, ‘Shanghai(Ed) Babies’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 12.2 (2012), 214–28 (p. 223).

Erin Hurt's edited collection *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* (2019) is the first edited collection which solely focuses on exploring 'ethnic' chick lit. This text seeks to rectify the 'conspicuous focus on white women and thus whiteness', and the conflation of 'women's experiences' with 'white women's experiences' by 'model[ing] new perspectives.'<sup>89</sup> Similar to studies explored above, Hurt's work clearly shows that there has been an evolution of chick lit, and chick lit scholarship. Hurt points out that having a collection solely focused on chick lit representations of women outside of white, Anglophone contexts gives scholars a more intersectional understanding of the genre as a whole.<sup>90</sup> For example, their collection starts with Lauren O'Mahony's exploration of Australian chick lit, in particular Anita Heiss's Aboriginal chick lit, which she terms 'Koori lit', and their discovery that the novels 'challenge stereotypes associated with Aboriginal Australians and ultimately redefine popular representations of Indigenous women and Indigenous culture.'<sup>91</sup> In the following chapter, Jenny Heijun Wills critiques Asian/American chick lit, arguing that Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) heroines do not question white and Western supremacist frameworks or challenge Orientalist misrepresentations, but rather reiterate colonial beliefs and underline reductive ideologies.<sup>92</sup> This thesis considers these two opposing arguments, exploring whether the 'post-2010 debut chick lit' texts, which all feature BIPOC protagonists, challenge or reiterate discriminatory stereotypes.

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<sup>89</sup> *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 7.

<sup>91</sup> Lauren O'Mahony, "'More Than Sex, Shopping, and Shoes' Cosmopolitan Indigeneity and Cultural Politics in Anita Heiss's Koori Lit', in *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, ed. by Erin Hurt (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), pp. 41–68 (p. 44).

<sup>92</sup> Jenny Heijun Wills, 'Against Asianness: On Being Cool, Feminist, and American in Asian/American Chick Lit', in *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, ed. by Erin Hurt (Milton: Routledge, 2018), pp. 69–84 (p. 71).

Gender and sexuality have also been explored in ‘ethnic’ chick lit. Lucinda Newns’s ‘Renegotiating Romantic Genres: Textual Resistance and Muslim Chick Lit’ (2018) argues that by ‘framing their social commentary within the familiar romantic forms of the domestic novel and chick lit genres’, Muslim chick lit, in particular Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999) and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s *Love in a Headscarf* (2009), ‘negotiate a path for a discourse on gender in Islam that is able to cut through the limiting frameworks currently on offer,’ for example, those of the “oppressed Muslim woman.”<sup>93</sup> Claire Chambers et al. (2019) explore Janmohamed’s *Love in a Headscarf* too, but argue that it may ‘be responsible for feeding patriarchal discourses’ and heteronormativity.<sup>94</sup> This thesis questions the argument that ‘much of this women’s writing is market-driven and, as such, seeks to present a commercial ‘Muslim Bridget Jones’ that at times recycles gender and sexual norms and stereotypes.’<sup>95</sup> Instead, I consider to what extent these portrayals of gender stereotypes are for satirical or intersectional purposes.

Scholars in the early 2020s solely focus on specific works of ‘post-2010 debut chick lit.’ For example, Heike Mißler in ‘A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams’s *Queenie* (2019): Challenging Discourses of Race and Gender in the Chick-Lit Genre’ (2023) argues that *Queenie* uses ‘chick-lit aesthetics and conventions like a shell.’<sup>96</sup> My thesis expands this argument in the Chapter 2 analysis of *Queenie*, as well as more contemporary publications in the three other chapters. Similarly, Lopamudra Basu

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<sup>93</sup> Newns, ‘Renegotiating Romantic Genres’, p. 297.

<sup>94</sup> Claire Chambers, Richard Phillips, Nafhesa Ali, Peter Hopkins, and Raksha Pande, “‘Sexual Misery’ or “Happy British Muslims”?: Contemporary Depictions of Muslim Sexuality’, *Ethnicities*, 19.1 (2019), 66–94 (p. 81).

<sup>95</sup> Chambers et al, “‘Sexual Misery’”, p. 84

<sup>96</sup> Mißler, ‘A Black Bridget Jones?’, p. 5.



(2022) centres their study on a singular chick lit novel, Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* (2015), which is also covered in this thesis. They argue that popular chick lit authors, like Malik, unite with Muslim writers of literary fiction in the constraints of representing Islam in fiction.<sup>97</sup> While these significant works allude to genre fluidity of chick lit – the authors' use of chick lit conventions 'like a shell' and their connection to literary fiction – there has been little expansive consideration of it. This is something that my thesis seeks to amend.

By genre fluidity, I refer to the observation that the genre is not rigid or fixed in its characteristics; it exhibits flexibility and evolves. Lenz (2016) argues that genres' 'boundaries have become more fluid.'<sup>98</sup> Newns (2018) work expands on this when it considers what effect adapting or renegotiating genre expectations can have on the reader: 'these expectations can be harnessed in order to push the boundaries of the genre and its place within broader societal structures.'<sup>99</sup> ChickLit Club also points out how the genre is 'constantly transforming.'<sup>100</sup> By adapting the genre, the authors can divert the contentious expectations of chick lit illustrating a white, straight, young, middle-class protagonist and allow for a more diverse and political publication. *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* and *Queenie, Such a Fun Age* (2020) and *Something to Talk About* (2019) are the texts that am I considering most with this concept of genre fluidity.

While Reid's novel is often deemed 'literary', my thesis demonstrates how core features of the popular genre of chick lit are also present in this text. *Goodreads*

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<sup>97</sup>Lopamudra Basu, 'Romance and Reception: Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* and the Limits of Self-Representation of British Muslim Women', *Women's Studies*, 51.2 (2022), 148–61.

<sup>98</sup> Lenz, p. 326.

<sup>99</sup> Newns, 'Renegotiating Romantic Genres', p. 287.

<sup>100</sup> Chick Lit 101', *Chicklit Club* <<https://www.chicklitclub.com/chicklitintro.html>> [accessed 26 April 2023]

categorises *Such a Fun Age* first as 'Fiction', then as 'Contemporary', and also as 'Race' and 'Literary Fiction', it was also a nominee for *Goodreads* Best Fiction (2020), the winner of the Best Debut Novel (2020) and was longlisted for the prestigious *Booker Prize*.<sup>101</sup> This text is also a work of chick lit because of, for example, the words that form these reviews: 'makes for such an intimate read'; 'the author successfully manages to hide barbed, little truths in her otherwise lightweight yarn, while still conveying a very powerful and clear-headed message'; '*Such a Fun Age* is about two women'; 'it's about race, yes, but it's also about social class, success, parenting, friendship, and the relationship between a nanny and the family she works for.'<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, one *Goodreads* reader deems the novel 'high grade chick lit', and another 'woke chick lit.'<sup>103</sup> A search of academic literature revealed no studies published (as of May 2023) that explore this novel's connection to chick lit. This thesis will amend this by providing an analysis of Reid's work's chick lit tropes and its engagement with feminist discourses.

Wilsner's *Something to Talk About* is also a text that highlights the genre fluidity of chick lit. Its categorisation on *Goodreads* as 'Romance' and its nomination for Best Romance 2020 on this website makes sense since a romantic relationship is at the forefront.<sup>104</sup> However, this thesis considers the text chick lit because of the narrative perspective, challenges to gender inequalities and light-hearted tone. While the *Goodreads* members employ the term in a problematic manner, they have also concluded

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<sup>101</sup> Goodreads, 'Such a Fun Age'

<<<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43923951-such-a-fun-age>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>102</sup> All taken from Goodreads, 'Such a Fun Age' <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43923951-such-a-fun-age>> [accessed 19 May 2023].

<sup>103</sup> Goodreads, 'Such a Fun Age' <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43923951-such-a-fun-age>> [accessed 19 May 2023].

<sup>104</sup> Goodreads, 'Something to Talk About', *Goodreads*

<<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/52915426-something-to-talk-about>> [accessed 18 May 2023]

that the novel is reminiscent of chick lit.<sup>105</sup> Like with most of the newer chick lit texts, little scholarly work has been produced which focuses on this novel, and this is something this thesis will address.

## Chick lit and Feminism

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One of the main objectives of the thesis is to explore to what extent chick lit reflects changing feminisms. Analysing women's writing in relation to feminism is a valuable, established practice in academia.<sup>106</sup> A development of second-wave feminism was the integration of female-orientated approaches to texts (originally to male-authored works, identifying stereotypes, oppression and objectification), and inclusion of more women writers on university courses (rediscovering 'undervalued women's writing from history', and 'developing aesthetic criteria to women's texts being produced in the present').<sup>107</sup> Quoting Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as evidence, Emma Parker (2004) argues for the value of studying women's writing: to see a reflection of women's experiences in fiction, and not just the 'universal' interests and concerns published by men.<sup>108</sup> Riley and Pearce's (2018) work shows how feminist critics and scholars' articulation of the concept of gender has evolved, and consequently changed

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<sup>105</sup> One user wrote: 'It ultimately reads more like "chick lit" (I know, I'm sorry about the term) as far as structure and feel.' Another argued: 'This book may be passed off as fluffy chick-lit, but it is subtly and profoundly breaking many important barriers in the literary world.' Both taken from Goodreads, 'Something to Talk About' <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/52915426-something-to-talk-about>> [accessed 18 May 2023]

<sup>106</sup> Shari Benstock, Suzanne Ferriss, and Susanne Woods, *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 153; see also: Jill Lebihan, 'Chapter 11: Feminism and Literature', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble, Routledge Companions (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 103–10 (p. 103).

<sup>107</sup> Lebihan, p. 103–4.

<sup>108</sup> *Contemporary British Women Writers*, p. 1.

both the way women write and what they write about. They argue that ‘defining and describing gender, and understanding its effects on all aspects of culture, including literary culture, is one of feminism’s most powerful and lasting legacies.’<sup>109</sup>

Applying feminist criticism to *popular* fiction is a more contentious practice. As Whelehan (2004) writes,

The assumptions that underpin the notion that literary = serious and/or political, and popular = sensationalist and/or exploitive have unfortunately dogged feminism in the past and resulted in a rather muted reception of those works of popular fiction, such as *Fear of Flying*, which do speak in a feminist register.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, popular fiction ‘is able to be playfully subversive’, despite the misguided assumption that it is less capable of the political than the ‘literary.’<sup>111</sup> Also, as Natalie McCall (2018) explains about the popular genre of romance and feminism,

In the past, feminism in Romance has been inspired by developments in the evolving politics and beliefs in the real-world feminist movement. Some critics deride Romance fiction as a disposable genre because the books are written and published so quickly. However, this gives writers the opportunity to be topical and on track with (and sometimes even ahead of) the zeitgeist. At best, romance novels can take feminist ideas that are discussed in academia and politics and share them with their readers. In the end, love (with happy endings) and feminism (in the form of female empowerment) form a couple that is made for each other.<sup>112</sup>

What others may deem “disposable” is the genre’s adaptability to changing social environments and being representative of the zeitgeist. That is, popular fiction – be that romance or chick lit – is worthy of study not despite of, but because of, its fast publication and widespread readership.

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<sup>109</sup> Riley and Pearce, p. 51.

<sup>110</sup> Whelehan, ‘Sex and the Single Girl’, p. 39.

<sup>111</sup> Whelehan, ‘Sex and the Single Girl’, p. 38.

<sup>112</sup> Natalie McCall, ‘Feminism and Popular Romance Fiction’, in *Encyclopedia of Romance Fiction*, ed. by Kristin Ramsdell (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2018), pp. 92–100 (p. 100).

Applying feminist criticism to the genre of chick lit has revealed varied perspectives. While Deborah Philips (2000) argues that chick lit depicts heroines who simply conform to gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures, Imelda Whelehan (2005) suggests that chick lit is 'reminiscent of the substance of early feminist criticism' which advocated for 'authentic images of women to counter the perniciousness' of stereotypical women 'blazoned across billboards and magazines.'<sup>113</sup> It has also been argued that chick lit novels offer a form of 'lipstick feminism' which promotes femininity, not feminism, as a source of empowerment.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, as Genz and Brabon (2009) highlight, 'chick lit is taken to task for not advancing the cause of feminism in a straightforward and politically evident manner and for rehearsing the narratives of romance and femininity that second wave feminists rejected.'<sup>115</sup> Yet, Ferriss and Young (2006) summarise a common point in many chapters in their collection thus:

contemporary literature and films deemphasize a central romance and highlight the female protagonist's nonromantic relationship with her close community of mostly female friends, thus suggesting that contemporary women can express their desires outside the frame of patriarchally defined heterosexual monogamy.<sup>116</sup>

Similar to the contradictions and complexities of feminism, chick lit's contentious relationship with feminism is a reason why it is such a valuable area of study.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Philips, 'Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative', p. 250; see also: Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller*, pp. 200-1.

<sup>114</sup> Hanson, p. 17; see also, Genz and Brabon, p. 90.

<sup>115</sup> Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, p. 87.

<sup>116</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> Genz and Brabon (2009) write 'ambiguity lies at the genre's core.' (p. 87); see also: Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff, who explain 'what is fascinating in chick lit is the way in which contradictory postfeminist discourses coexist. In relation to sexual relationships a discourse of freedom, liberation and pleasure-seeking sits alongside the equally powerful suggestion that married heterosexual monogamy more truly captures women's real desires.' In 'Rewriting The Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?', *Feminist Media Studies*, 6.4 (2006), 487-504 (p. 500) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770600989947>>.

Many critics suggest that the novels' focus and content imply they embody feminist themes. Mabry (2006) concludes that 'chick novels, films and television provide spaces for the expression of women's experiences and desires, suggesting possibilities for women outside the role of girlfriend, wife, or mother. In doing so, these "women's texts" truly are for women, presenting affirmative notions of female identity, sexuality, and community.<sup>118</sup> Likewise, Mißler (2016) argues that while chick lit includes issues that are not directly 'feminist', they portray themes such as 'body images, financial and emotional independence from men, workplace equality, combining career and motherhood', which are central to feminist politics.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, as Ferriss and Young (2006) encapsulate,

Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women's struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life.<sup>120</sup>

This thesis's analysis of newer works of chick lit, which have been published alongside the arrival of a fourth-wave feminism, contributes to this field of research by exploring the way(s) the novels have adapted now that feminism, as a term, has become more popular. For example, instead of 'portray[ing] the reality of young women grappling with modern life', do works of chick lit now potentially 'advanc[e] the political activism of feminism' and if so, are they still chick lit? Arguably, chick lit is not only feminist in its women-focus and women-content, but also in the novels' underlying political messages.

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<sup>118</sup> Mabry, p. 205.

<sup>119</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 9.

One of the earliest and most fruitful discussions of chick lit considers its connection to postfeminism. As a term, 'postfeminism' has been unevenly accepted and is laden with contradictions.<sup>121</sup> However, in 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility' (2007), Rosalind Gill explains that while there is no secure definition and/or meaning for the term, there are a number of interrelated themes and features that reveal postfeminism as a sensibility, a cultural phenomenon and a critical object.<sup>122</sup> Postfeminist discourse includes portrayals of 'femininity as a bodily property', 'the sexualisation of culture', 'from sex object to desiring sex subject', notions of 'individualism, choice and empowerment', 'self-surveillance and discipline', 'the makeover paradigm', 'the reassertion of sexual difference', 'irony and knowingness' and 'feminism and anti-feminism.'<sup>123</sup> Amanda Rossie (2013) expands on Gill's notion of postfeminist sensibility by identifying the key 'tenets of postfeminism': 'women's empowerment through consumption and hypersexualization [...] a heightened focus on having a slender, sexy body [... and] women's problems are personal and never structural.'<sup>124</sup> To summarise, postfeminist discourses convey empowerment, girl power, women's success, conventional femininity and beauty expectations. The term 'feminism' appears restrictive, serious, and severe, despite the core beliefs of feminism (gender equality, fairness, better social standards for women) remaining important to the movement. Postfeminism is arguably a strand of sex-positive (heteronormative)

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<sup>121</sup> Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (2007), 147–66 (pp. 147–8) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>>

<sup>123</sup> Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', p. 149, 150, 151, 153, 155, 156, 158, 159, 161.

<sup>124</sup> Amanda Rossie, 'Being Mary Jane and Postfeminism's Problem with Race', in *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture*, ed. by Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 25–41 (p. 27–28).

feminism: a desire for sexual difference, an affirmation of female power through radical heterosexuality, the sexiness of submission.<sup>125</sup> For this study, I analyse instances and critiques of these features in the primary texts.

Postfeminism has been considered a critical assessment of the first and second wave of feminism due to, most explicitly, the prefix ‘post-’ implying a move beyond feminism.<sup>126</sup> Tania Modleski (1991) credits Elizabeth Kolbert’s (1987) article discussing Elaine Showalter’s 1987 lecture at Princeton University as indicative of the turning point from second-wave feminism to postfeminism.<sup>127</sup> Kolbert’s (1987) article critiques feminist literary criticism (an area Showalter promotes) and attempts to validate this with a Peter Brooks quote suggesting the profession of literary criticism is becoming ‘feminized.’<sup>128</sup> Modleski (1991) argues that Kolbert’s article exemplifies ‘texts that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world.’<sup>129</sup> As Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991) notes, during the mid-1980s, ‘the media declared the advent of a younger “postfeminist generation” that supposedly reviled the women’s movement;’ Faludi

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<sup>125</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 69-70; see also: Katie Roiphe, *The Morning after: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), p. 14-15.

<sup>126</sup> Sarah Gamble, ‘Postfeminism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble, Routledge Companions (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 36-45 (p. 36); see also, Rossie, p. 26; and Riley and Pearce, p. 10.

<sup>127</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 3. See also: Elizabeth Kolbert, ‘Literary Feminism Comes of Age’, *The New York Times*, 6 December 1987, section Magazine <<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/06/magazine/literary-feminism-comes-of-age.html>> [accessed 3 May 2023].

<sup>128</sup> Kolbert, ‘Literary Feminism Comes of Age’, para 6.

<sup>129</sup> Modleski, p. 3.



summarises this as an anti-feminist backlash.<sup>130</sup> Faludi and Modleski emphasise the hostility 'postfeminism' has received. As well as in the media, certain 'postfeminist' authors' works amplify this sense of postfeminist critiquing of the first and second wave; such writers include Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, Rene Denfield, and Katie Roiphe.<sup>131</sup> For example, Roiphe, in her *The Morning After* (1994), critiques second-wave feminist *Take Back the Night* marches against rape, deeming them dramatic.<sup>132</sup>

In addition to critiques of the first and second waves of feminism, postfeminism engages in a debated relationship with third-wave feminism. The connection is nuanced, marked by inconsistent definitions and continuous dialogues. Both postfeminism and third-wave feminism represent strands of 1990s and 2000s feminism that 'emerged and persist[ed] because of a perceptible need for conceptual frameworks that assist in theorising and analysing the complicated post-second wave feminist milieu in which some feminist gains have been achieved, while, for the most part, the patriarchy remains hegemonic.'<sup>133</sup> In this milieu, some feminist gains have been achieved, yet the patriarchy remains largely hegemonic. A generational divide exists between second-wave feminists and the 1990s/2000s generation of feminists, encompassing both postfeminism and third-wave feminism. Research suggests a significant difference in the way each strand considers the second wave of feminism in its politics. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake

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<sup>130</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, 15th anniversary ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>131</sup> The quotation marks are because, as Sarah Gamble in 'Postfeminism' explains, these writers have been widely identified with postfeminism but they have not claimed the term themselves, nor is there a sense of 'solidarity' within the group. (p. 36).

<sup>132</sup> Roiphe, p. 11.

<sup>133</sup> Amanda D. Lotz, 'Theorising the Intermezzo: The Contributions of Postfeminism and Third Wave Feminism', in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), pp. 71–85 (p. 73).

(1997) argue that “‘postfeminist” characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave.’<sup>134</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders (2007) suggests that ‘[t]hird wave feminists, by contrast, see their work as founded on second wave principles, yet distinguished by certain cultural and political differences.’<sup>135</sup>

Third-wave feminism is commonly traced back to popular books such as Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995) and Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’s *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000).<sup>136</sup> However, Patricia Lewis (2014) points out that early third-wave feminists’ use of the autobiographical form, identity politics and populist nature raised scholarly concerns about the approach being too individual-centric, neglectful of systemic issues and prone to oversimplification.<sup>137</sup> This led to efforts within academic circles to guide the movement towards a more theoretically informed understanding of third-wave feminism, shaped by postmodern theory, as well as postcolonialism and poststructuralism. In their later publication, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (2007) argue that third-wave feminism is distinct from postfeminism in how the former’s perspectives are ‘shaped by the material conditions created by economic globalisation and technoculture, and by bodies of thought such as postmodernism and

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<sup>134</sup> Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders, “‘Feminists Love a Utopia’: Collaboration, Conflict and the Futures of Feminism’, in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), pp. 3–15 (p. 5).

<sup>136</sup> Rebecca Walker, eds., *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). Both referenced as early third-wave feminist texts in Patricia Lewis’s ‘Postfeminism, Femininities and Organization Studies: Exploring a New Agenda’, *Organization Studies*, 35.12 (2014), 1845–66 (p. 1848).

<sup>137</sup> Lewis, ‘Postfeminism, Femininities and Organization Studies: Exploring a New Agenda’, p. 1848.

postcolonialism.’<sup>138</sup> Third-wave feminism places greater emphasis on intersectionality and the influence of technology compared to postfeminism, aligning it more with the characteristics of fourth-wave feminism. Moreover, third-wave feminism is more directly engaged in activism, whereas postfeminism is more focused on cultural critique.

Despite distinctions between these two strands of feminism, previous scholars have often aligned ideologies of third-wave feminism with postfeminism. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) explain that postfeminism is often used synonymously with third-wave to denote a time after the height of second-wave feminism.<sup>139</sup> Ann Braithwaite (2002) affirms that ‘definitions of and assumptions about both third-wave and post-feminism in fact often overlap in a variety of ways.’<sup>140</sup> In an interview with Rebecca Munford and Stacy Gills, Elaine Showalter (2007) comments on how ‘[t]hird wave feminism is just another way of talking about the contemporary moment rather than calling it post-feminism.’<sup>141</sup> Third-wave feminists were keen to distinguish themselves as ‘an explicitly feminist alternative to the use of postfeminism in the popular press.’<sup>142</sup> Walker (1992), when focusing on Anita Hill’s testimony in the Senate hearings against sexual harassment endured from Clarence Thomas, summarises her stance: ‘I am

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<sup>138</sup> Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, “‘It’s All About the Benjamins’: Economic Determinants of Third Wave Feminism in the United States’, in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), pp. 114–24 (p. 115). See also: Patricia Lewis (2014), who points out that the ‘boundary between the two terms is established’ because ‘third wave feminism (not postfeminism)’ is ‘a poststructuralist version of feminism, which examines gender and its intersectional connections with other systems of inequality’ (p. 1850).

<sup>139</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>140</sup> Ann Braithwaite, ‘The Personal, the Political, Third-Wave and Postfeminisms’, *Feminist Theory*, 3.3 (2002), 335–44 (p. 337).

<sup>141</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Interview with Elaine Showalter’, in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), pp. 292–97 (p. 292).

<sup>142</sup> Lotz, ‘Theorising the Intermezzo’, p. 73.

not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.’<sup>143</sup> However, with the repetition of the first-person pronoun (‘I’), as Munford (2015) points out, Walker ‘privileges the individual over collective experience.’<sup>144</sup> Individualisation is a core theme of postfeminism, as is contradiction, irony and duality. Concepts of girlhood, reclaiming femininity back, choice, sexual agency and empowerment remain significant in both strands of feminism. Thus, while different feminist waves and strands are somewhat distinctive, they share similar objectives: eradicating gender inequality and advocating for fairness for all women. This explains the rationale behind employing the wave metaphor. As the thesis argues and demonstrates, intersections occur between the waves and strands of feminism, and there is also a lack of unanimity in defining and summarising the concepts. The complexity and convergence of the feminist strands inspire deeper exploration and study.

While exploring theories of interconnected yet distinct feminist waves could provide valuable insights for further investigation, this study intentionally directs its focus more toward postfeminism than third-wave feminism within the context of the 1990s and 2000s. There are multiple reasons for this choice. Firstly, postfeminism is predominantly referenced alongside chick lit, providing a strong scholarly, contextual framework for my thesis. Secondly, the limited space and scope of the thesis means that concentrating on only two strands of feminism (postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism) allows for more detailed didactic analysis. Postfeminism is also commonly associated with media and popular culture, as is chick lit; the genre is even considered a

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<sup>143</sup> Rebecca Walker, ‘Becoming the Third Wave’, *Ms. Magazine*, 1992, 39–41, p. 39, 41.

<sup>144</sup> Munford, ‘Writing the F-Word’, p. 130.

product of postfeminism. As Angela McRobbie (2009) argues, ‘the infectious girlishness of Bridget Jones [the heroine of chick lit ur-text, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*] produces a generational logic which is distinctly post-feminist.’<sup>145</sup> Thus, considering the influence and impact of postfeminism on works of chick lit provides the most suitable foregrounding for the exploration of how the genre then adapts to correspond with the arrival of fourth-wave feminism.

The existing body of research on chick lit posits that postfeminism is at the heart of an understanding of the genre. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (2006), Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff (2006), Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (2009), Stephanie Harzewski (2011), Anthea Taylor (2012), and Heike Mißler (2016) all highlight how postfeminism provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the genre.<sup>146</sup> Leah Guenther’s (2006) chapter on ‘*Bridget Jones’s Diary*: Confessing Post-feminism’ argues against dismissive views of Fielding’s work to offer ‘a new reading of the text as feminist confessional.’<sup>147</sup> Yet, in their renowned work *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), McRobbie considers *Bridget Jones’s Diary* a portrayal of a backlash against feminism suggesting there is a ‘ghost of feminism’ which lurks in the background of her romantic trials and tribulations.<sup>148</sup> Chapter 1 of the thesis, in particular, considers both these arguments regarding *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and

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<sup>145</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>146</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, ‘Rewriting The Romance’; Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*; Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*; Anthea Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*.

<sup>147</sup> Guenther, p. 84.

<sup>148</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009), p. 22

evaluates how the novel can be considered both a feminist confessional and a backlash against feminism, owing to its postfeminist characteristics.

Postfeminism and chick lit are also explored in Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon's *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2009), where they look at different elements and meanings of postfeminism. Their third chapter discusses the connection between salutations of girl power and the chick lit genre. Genz and Brabon, as well as Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), argue that while there are contradictory postfeminist discourses in chick lit which are interesting, what is most significant is how these are then difficult to critique.<sup>149</sup> They highlight the apparent paradoxes of postfeminist ideology which, for example, would advocate for both sexual freedom and heterosexual marriage, or criticise the labour of beauty expectations while conforming to them. This perspective challenges dismissive arguments about chick lit's one-dimensional forgettability, by highlighting how studying these texts provides insight into popular views of women towards their gender and feminism. Similarly, in *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2009), Diane Negra argues that postfeminist paradigms in chick lit, chick flicks (the multimedia equivalent), as well as other forms of popular culture, 'frame the search for self with an attendant assumption that feminism has disturbed contemporary female subjectivity.'<sup>150</sup> Reading chick lit as a postfeminist endorsement of women's pleasure through embracing traditional femininity, and of happiness through 'coming home' has received considerable critical

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<sup>149</sup> Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, p. 88; see also: Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 'Rewriting The Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?', p. 500.

<sup>150</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

attention.<sup>151</sup> This thesis points out the postfeminist ideology, ambivalence and contradiction in the older and newer works of chick lit.

Despite the increase in publication of chick-lit novels which pay more attention to race, class, religion and sexual orientation, scholars have previously argued that their connection to the genre is questionable because they do not align with the Anglophone postfeminist ideology of chick lit.<sup>152</sup> As Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) note, these postfeminist discourses coexist with and are structured by racial, ethnic, class, age, sexuality and disability inequalities, which are perpetuated by pre-2010 scholarly work predominantly focusing on postfeminist portrayals of white, middle-to-upper class North American or European women.<sup>153</sup> As Erin Hurt (2019) explains: '[r]eading only white novels allowed postfeminism to emerge as the primary lens through which scholars understood chick lit, and in return, this theoretical approach encouraged the continual selection of white texts since it aligned most closely with their concerns.'<sup>154</sup>

It is important, then, to consider a transnational postfeminism. As Simidele Dosekun (2015) explains, this means considering 'how, as an entanglement of meanings, representations, sensibilities, practices and commodities, post-feminism may discursively and materially cross borders, including those within our feminist scholarly

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<sup>151</sup> For example, in Kerstin Fest writes that in Sophie Kinsella's *The Undomestic Goddess* (2005), 'London is destructive, whereas the countryside is presented as a healing site where the heroine's crippled femininity can be restored.' In 'Angels in the House or Girl Power: Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Novels and Contemporary Chick Lit', *Women's Studies*, 38 (2009), 43–62 (p. 50). Also, in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, McRobbie argues, 'The film [*Bridget Jones's Diary*] celebrates a kind of scatterbrain and endearing femininity, as though it is something that has been lost. Thank goodness, the film seems to be saying, that old-fashioned femininity can be retrieved.' (p. 12)

<sup>152</sup> Sandra Folie, 'Review: Theorizing Ethnicity', p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, p. 4.

<sup>154</sup> *Theorizing Ethnicity*, p. 14.

imaginaries.’<sup>155</sup> As Butler and Desai (2008) also explore, applying transnational feminist critique ‘illuminates not only the operations of chick lit and the middle-class neoliberal subjects it produces, but also interrogates the ways in which hegemonic feminisms in the U.S. (as exemplified by chick-lit criticism) continue to disregard such questions.’<sup>156</sup> Articles such as Pamila Gupta and Ronit Frenkel’s ‘Chick-Lit in a Time of African Cosmopolitanism’ (2019), published in *Feminist Theory*, promote this thinking in their focus on transnational postfeminism in chick lit from and in Africa. Likewise, Sandra Ponzanesi’s (2016) chapter highlights how, in chick lit, ‘patterns of femininity and professional life converge and diverge within a transnational framework.’<sup>157</sup>

As shown, chick lit scholarship has been continually considered alongside its feminist credentials, typically in relation to postfeminism. This thesis is going to expand on this to also examine chick lit’s relationship with fourth-wave feminism. There are many debates as to when a ‘fourth-wave’ of feminism began, and if it even warrants its own wave, since many of the ideologies it puts forward are similar to the second-wave.<sup>158</sup> Undoubtedly, though, the last 10 years have seen a shift in feminist activism. As Kira Cochrane (2013) explains, by the summer of 2013 a fourth-wave of feminism had been established: a ‘shouting back’ against misogyny and sexism.<sup>159</sup> Laura Bates’s Everyday Sexism Project (April, 2012) was underway; Kat Banyard had founded UK Feminista (2010), a feminist group, which ran campaigns such as Lose the Lad Mags

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<sup>155</sup> Simidele Dosekun, ‘For Western Girls Only? Post-Feminism as a Transnational Culture’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 15.6 (2015), 960–975, p. 965.

<sup>156</sup> Butler and Desai, p. 2.

<sup>157</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi, ‘Postcolonial Chick Lit: Postfeminism or Consumerism’, in *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 156–227 (p. 226).

<sup>158</sup> Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), p. 31; see also: Riley and Pearce, p. 4.

<sup>159</sup> Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (Guardian Books, 2013), Kindle Edition, ch. 1 (para 6)



(May, 2013); Caroline Criado-Perez set up The Women's Room (November, 2012), a website designed to provide women's opinions on mainstream news; and Lucy Ann Holmes' had begun the No More Page Three campaign (August, 2012) aiming to cease the publications of topless glamour models in *The Sun* newspaper. Ikamara Larasi had co-founded Rewind and Reframe (November, 2013) with End Violence Against Women Coalition, Object and Imkaan, to fight against the racism and sexism in music videos; Grace Brown had started the Project Unbreakable (October, 2011) online forum, where sexual survivors had a platform to 'speak up'; and transnationally, SlutWalk rallies had started taking place (from 2011). By summer 2013, identifying as a 'feminist' was more of a cause for celebration, and advocations against sexual objectification and inequalities were gaining more traction.

This is why 'recent scholarship, journalism and activism have recognised that feminism has reached a fourth-wave iteration.'<sup>160</sup> As Ealasaid Munro (2013) suggests, there has certainly been a rise in feminist activism – including a shift to online platforms – labelled a 'call-out' culture, where sexism or misogyny can be 'called out' and challenged.<sup>161</sup> Similar to postfeminism, though, there are texts which do not necessarily market themselves as 'fourth-wave' works, yet arguably promote fourth-wave ideologies: works by writers such as Laura Bates (2014), Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett (2014), Caroline Criado Perez (2019) and Jia Tolentino (2019). The primary texts I am considering as aligned with fourth-wave feminism are the 'foundational author's continuations' and 'post-2010 debut chick lit' works.

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<sup>160</sup> Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), p. 1; see also: Riley and Pearce, p. 10.

<sup>161</sup> Ealasaid Munro, 'Feminism: A Fourth Wave?', *Political Insight*, 2013, 22-25 (p. 23).

This 'fourth-wave' is not exempt from critique. Catherine Rottenberg (2014) explains that manifestos such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013) and Anne-Marie Slaughter's 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' (2012) are representative of the rise of neoliberal, corporate feminism: women who believe they are feminist (in their awareness of gender inequalities), but also enact neoliberalism (in the way that they disavow the social, cultural and economic forces that produce these inequalities, believing individuals themselves are in full control of their future, and that it is not predicated on structural, societal imbalances).<sup>162</sup> This aligns with the individualism of postfeminism, which supports Gill's (2016) theory that despite there being a shift in feminisms, postfeminism as an analytical category is still relevant.<sup>163</sup> Polly Vernon's *Hot Feminist*, though released in 2015, could also be considered postfeminist in its advocacy of women using their sexiness as their 'rocket fuel' for success.<sup>164</sup>

Donald Trump's 2016 victory in the US provided further momentum for fourth-wave feminist activism: at least 50 countries were involved in Women's Marches and the International Women's Strike.<sup>165</sup> Then, in October 2017, Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual harassment and so began the prominent #MeToo movement: a hashtag people used on social media alongside voicing their experiences of

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<sup>162</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism', *Cultural Studies*, 28.3 (2014), 418–37 (p. 420); see also: Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean in: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (London: W H Allen, 2013); and Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All', *The Atlantic*, 13 June 2012 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>> [accessed 29 September 2023].

<sup>163</sup> Rosalind Gill, 'Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16.4 (2016), 610–30 (p. 612); see also: Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides*, p. 24.

<sup>164</sup> Polly Vernon, *Hot Feminist* (London: Hachette UK, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>165</sup> Rosalind Gill and K. Toms, 'Trending Now: Feminism, Sexism, Misogyny and Postfeminism in British Journalism', in *Journalism, Gender and Power*, ed. by C. Carter, L. Steiner, and S. Allan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 97–112, (p. 101); see also: Rivers, *Postfeminism(s)*, p. 145.

rape culture, sexual harassment and abuse. It marked a significant shift in the visibility of feminist activism as it was circulated in 85 countries.<sup>166</sup> Faludi et al. (2020) explain,

women are finally being believed, in large measure because multiple women are willing to air their own experiences with an accused predator. Female solidarity has made the difference, in that more women are willing to say, literally, “me too,” when one woman speaks up against a sexual predator—which wasn’t as much the case decades earlier, when the fear and shame connected with being a victim of sexual harassment or assault kept a lot of women silent.<sup>167</sup>

A non-profit organisation, Times Up was formed as a result. It was founded by women in Hollywood to fund support services for victims of sexual harassment and organise campaigns to address gender discrimination.

The #MeToo hashtag, however, has origins with woman of colour Tarana Burke who used the hashtag 10 years prior to white woman Alyssa Milano. Yet it is Milano who is most commonly associated with initiating the hashtag. As Angela Onwuachi-Willig (2018) writes, ‘[t]he recent resurgence of the #MeToo movement reflects the longstanding marginalization and exclusion that women of color experience within the larger feminist movement in U.S. society.’<sup>168</sup> Koa Beck’s publication *White Feminism* (2021) expands on this by evidencing the centralising of white feminism: ‘the number one reality is cis, female, white or white-aspiring, middle-class, able-bodied, young, and

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<sup>166</sup> Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, ‘The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power: From the “Sexualization of Culture” to #MeToo’, *Sexualities*, 21.8 (2018), 1313–24 (p. 1317).

<sup>167</sup> Susan Faludi, Shauna Shames, Jennifer M. Piscopo, and Denise M. Walsh, ‘A Conversation with Susan Faludi on Backlash, Trumpism, and #MeToo’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45.2 (2020), 336–45 (p. 340).

<sup>168</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, ‘What About #UsToo: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement’, *Yale Law Journal Forum*, 128 (2018), 105–20 (p. 107). See also: Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020); Katherine Giscombe, ‘Sexual Harassment and Women of Color’, *Catalyst*, 2018 <<https://www.catalyst.org/2018/02/13/sexual-harassment-and-women-of-color/>> [accessed 21 October 2020]; and Jennifer M. Gómez, and Robyn L. Gobin, ‘Black Women and Girls & #MeToo: Rape, Cultural Betrayal, & Healing’, *Sex Roles*, 82.1–2 (2020), 1–12 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01040-0>>

straight', arguing that 'in a time of alleged heightened "feminism" women of color and poor women are being left behind.'<sup>169</sup> In the 2010s, Black feminist organisations and blogs were not receiving the same traction and media recognition as white feminist organisations.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, Lola Olufemi (2020) evidences the inequalities at place during the women's marches in 2018 which, she argues, 'were littered with biologically essentialist rhetoric, racist deification of black feminist figures, a lack of intersectional analysis and incoherence on the rights of sex workers.'<sup>171</sup> Olufemi describes a positive feminist vision, where 'no person has to navigate sexism, racism, disabilism or homophobia to survive', and optimistically suggests we must 'imagine this vision not as utopian, but as something well within our reach' and 'rise to the challenge with a revolutionary and collective sense of determination.'<sup>172</sup> This thesis considers to what extent the newer works of chick lit discussed here offer this revolutionary and collective sense of determination.

To summarise, fourth-wave feminism marks a 'call-out' culture: a visible challenge of misogyny, discrimination, and harassment. Being a 'feminist' is more celebrated in fourth-wave feminist discourses, and while it is 'trending', it is also questioned for its intersectionality. As Gill and Toms (2019) establish, the new and heightened visibility is cause for optimism, but it is important to think of 'any period, conjuncture or moment – including our own – as structured by complexities and contradictions, in which new ideas, moods or movements do not necessarily displace

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<sup>169</sup> Koa Beck, *White Feminism*, 1st edition (S.I.: Simon & Schuster UK, 2021), p. xvi, xx.

<sup>170</sup> Terese Jonsson, 'White Feminist Stories', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14.6 (2014), 1012–27 (pp. 1017–19)

<sup>171</sup> Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), p. 103.

<sup>172</sup> Olufemi, p. 13–14.

other trends, but may co-exist with them.’<sup>173</sup> This thesis, then, does not see pre-2013 published texts as solely ‘postfeminist’ and post-2013 texts as fully ‘fourth-wave’ but instead considers the fluidity of feminisms, and looks for trends of both, in both.

Several scholars have pointed out chick lit’s portrayals of key feminist concepts such as beauty expectations, body insecurity, domesticity, femininity, female empowerment, the glass ceiling, girl power, heteronormativity, marriage, misogyny, motherhood, neoliberalism, singlism, and sisterhood.<sup>174</sup> Other forms of discriminations such as classism, homophobia, islamophobia, racism have also been discussed in academic publications on chick lit.<sup>175</sup> These pieces of significant scholarship provide a solid contextual framework to enhance my novel analysis and comparison of chick lit. While key feminist concepts have been academically explored in relation to chick lit, my thesis will be the first to consider how fourth-wave feminist ideologies have shaped the fiction.

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<sup>173</sup> Gill and Toms, p. 97.

<sup>174</sup> See, for example: Lara Frater, ‘Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit: Gateway to Acceptance in the Mainstream?’, in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. by Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), pp. 235–40; Laurie Naranch, ‘Smart, Funny, and Romantic? Femininity and Feminist Gestures in Chick Flicks’, in *You’ve Come A Long Way, Baby: Women, Politics, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Lilly J. Goren (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), pp. 35–52; Caroline J. Smith, ‘Living the Life of a Domestic Goddess: Chick Lit’s Response to Domestic-Advice Manuals’, *Women’s Studies*, 34.8 (2005), 671–99.

<sup>175</sup> See, for example: Katie Arosteguy, ‘The Politics of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Contemporary American Mommy Lit’, *Women’s Studies*, 39.5 (2010), 409–29; Jennifer Woolston, “‘I Live a Fabulous Asian-American Life—Ask Me How!’ Kim Wong Keltner Unpacks Contemporary Asian American Female Identity in The Dim Sum of All Things and Buddha Baby 1”, in *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, ed. by Erin Hurt (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), pp. 102–14.

## Chapter Outline

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Chapter 1 compares portrayals of the single woman dating in Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, her later *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013) and Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015). This allows for an analysis of depictions of normative femininity and gendered stigmatisation in dating. The chapter draws on work by Janet K. L. McKeown (2015), Jia Tolentino (2019), and Nafhesa Ali et al. (2019) to reveal the fictional depictions of concepts such as conventional aesthetic beauty standards, traditional performative dating behaviours, singlism and pro-nuclear family ideology.<sup>176</sup> I also consider how the methods of dating have adapted since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, with the new arrival of online dating and the shift to the way workplace romances are perceived. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, but not one yet which explores its connection to *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013). The discrimination that Bridget experiences when dating as a widowed, older woman, provides a fruitful comparison with the stereotyping that Sofia contends with. I also explore how Fielding's chapter 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary' (2018) in *Feminists Don't Wear Pink* illuminates the arrival of a fourth-wave of feminism since Bridget backtracks her arguably anti-feminist proclamations from the first novel. This chapter argues that depictions of Bridget have matured since 1990s, and

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<sup>176</sup> Janet K. L. McKeown, "'I Will Not Be Wearing Heels Tonight!': A Feminist Exploration of Singlehood, Dating, and Leisure", *Journal of Leisure Research*, 47.4 (2015), 485–500; Jia Tolentino, 'Athleisure, Barre and Kale: The Tyranny of the Ideal Woman', *Guardian*, 2 August 2019, section News <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/02/athleisure-barre-kale-tyranny-ideal-woman-labour>> [accessed 31 January 2022]; Nafhesa Ali, Richard Phillips, Claire Chambers, Kasia Narkowicz, Peter Hopkins, and Raksha Pande, 'Halal Dating: Changing Relationship Attitudes and Experiences Among Young British Muslims', *Sexualities*, 2019, 1–18.

Malik's rewriting of the urtext of chick lit allows for a valuable consideration of how forms of discrimination are amplified with diverse protagonists.

While the three novels in Chapter 1 maintained a traditional romantic reunion at the end of the narrative, the texts in the second chapter of the thesis highlight the darker side to chick lit – they are devoid of a 'happily ever after.' Therefore, Chapter 2 concentrates on representations of sex and (hetero)sexual politics (sexually intimate relationships) in Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996), her later *Is There Still Sex in the City?* (2019) and Carty-Williams's *Queenie* (2019). Drawing on critical work on raunch culture and rape culture, such as works by Ariel Levy (2006), Gill and Orgad (2018), and Olufemi (2020), this chapter explores concepts such as sexual freedom, slut-shaming, objectification and gaslighting.<sup>177</sup> I argue that these texts convey fictional representations of women's emotional responses to abuse, racism and inequalities. *Is There Still Sex in the City?*'s exploration of vaginal treatments to restore elasticity and Tinder's objectification of women, and *Queenie*'s explicit discussions of sex and fetishisation make the novels ideal in the comparison of depictions of sex and sexual politics with Bushnell's celebrated *Sex and the City*.

Moving away from heterosexual romantic relationships with men, Chapter 3 takes its focus on friendships and women's relationship with one another, exploring concepts of sisterhood and solidarity. Centring my analysis in this chapter are McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *It's Not All Downhill from Here* (2020), and Reid's *Such a Fun Age* (2019). In this chapter, I apply the theories of Rosewarne (2009),

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<sup>177</sup>Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Woman and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (Riverside: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Gill and Orgad, 'The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power'; Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*.

Rottenberg (2014) and Banet-Weiser (2018) to consider to what extent portrayals of supportive and competitive sisterhood adapt in the later works of chick lit.<sup>178</sup> Familial-like bonds of friends, judgment, resentment, envy, romantic competition and racial conflict are themes explored in this chapter. The chick lit subgenre of Sistah Lit occupies a prominent position in this chapter, where all three primary texts depict a woman of colour as at least one of their protagonists. This chapter argues that while there are similarities between McMillan and Reid, the most significant difference is with *Such a Fun Age's* addition of neoliberal, corporate feminism connected with fourth-wave feminist discourses such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013).

Chapter 4 diverts the focus from interpersonal relationships to professional life. The chick lit texts I analyse in this chapter are Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2004), her *The Wives* (2018) and Wilsner's *Something to Talk About* (2019). Weisberger's debut novel is commonly associated as workplace chick lit, or 'underling lit' or 'assistant lit' as the subgenre is termed. *The Wives* centres on the relationship between a woman's career and marriage/motherhood, and *Something to Talk About* focuses on women's experiences of workplace inequalities. The study of the workplace dynamics in chick lit by Fest (2009) and Sabra (2016) complements my literary comparison, and Perez's (2020), Sørensen's (2017) and Canaday's (2023) research into workplace inequalities and theories associated with the 'queen bee syndrome' and 'glass ceiling effect' are considered in relation to these chick lit portrayals.<sup>179</sup> This chapter

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<sup>178</sup> Lauren Rosewarne, *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* (Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009; Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism'; Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*.

<sup>179</sup> Kerstin Fest, 'Angels in the House or Girl Power: Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Novels and Contemporary Chick Lit', *Women's Studies*, 38 (2009), 43–62; Nour Elhoda A. E. Sabra, 'Dare You Rocking



argues that Wilsner's text offers a fictional resemblance to #MeToo, exploring instances of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Overall, my thesis argues that chick lit has adapted for a contemporary readership, alongside changing feminist ideologies and genre fluidity. Through an exploration of the chick lit themes of dating, sex, friendship and workplace established by the foundational novels, it is clear that the newer texts adapt foundational chick lit tropes to provide a more diverse, mature and political subcategory of chick lit: neo chick lit. I will now proceed to Chapter 1, where I focus on examining the core chick lit tropes and feminist ideologies established in portrayals of singlehood and dating in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and compare this to the newer publications of *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*.

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It: Contemporary Women and the Trap of the Glass Ceiling in Chick Lit', *International Journal of English and Literature*, 7.10 (2016), 159–66; Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Vintage, 2020); Siri Øyslebø Sørensen, 'The Performativity of Choice: Postfeminist Perspectives on Work-Life Balance: The Performativity of Choice', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 24.3 (2017), 297–313; Margot Canaday, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023).

## CHAPTER 1 – ‘SINGLETONS’: DATING, NORMATIVE FEMININITY AND GENDERED STIGMATISATION IN CHICK LIT

A single woman dating is critical to the genre of chick lit. Made famous by Fielding's use in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the 'singletons' term in this chapter's title refers to a person with no romantic or sexual partner. After Bridget is stigmatised because of her single status, her friend, Sharon, argues that she should have responded saying, 'I'm not married because I'm a Singleton, [...] there's a whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don't need to wash anyone else's socks.'<sup>1</sup> Sharon's point, and Bridget's response, 'Hurrah for the Singletons!' (p. 42), cements the significance of the chapter focus. Chick lit scholars have also argued that single life and dating are core themes for the genre.<sup>2</sup> Since the publication dates of the foundational chick lit texts (1990s – 2000s), there have been significant changes to dating, including a move to online dating, and workplace romances being subjected to heightened scrutiny. Through applying feminist concepts relevant to normative femininity and gendered stigmatisation, this chapter discovers to what extent chick lit's representations of women's dating experiences have matured, diversified and politicised since the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Kindle Edition (London: Picador, 2016), p. 42. All further references will be given in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 3; Harzewski, 'Chapter 2: Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners', p. 39; O'Mahony, "'More Than Sex, Shopping, and Shoes'" *Cosmopolitan Indigeneity and Cultural Politics in Anita Heiss's Koori Lit*, p. 46.

Along with being a significant theme to the genre of chick lit, dating is a social phenomenon. This chapter examines representations of dating in terms of its social conventions: a social encounter that particularly exposes women's vulnerability in terms of bodily judgement and traditional patriarchal expectations around gender and sexuality. Janet K. L. McKeown (2015) suggests, 'dating is a useful conduit for understanding the complex ways stigmatisation and pressures work with broader ideological influences and expectations to impact experiences of single life and leisure for women.'<sup>3</sup> The first significant focus in this chapter is the representations of normative femininity when dating. I focus on representations of conventional aesthetic beauty standards, traditional dating behaviours – passivity, domesticity, non-activist, attraction to the masculine counterpart, and dating modes and methods, with the workplace and via online dating. This chapter also analyses gendered stigmatisation directed towards single women who are dating. It centres on portrayals of the heroines' experiences of singlism, pro-family ideology and ageism. Specifically dating as a Muslim has been considered by, for example, Nafhesa Ali et al. (2019) who posits that '[b]y entertaining the idea that certain forms of dating may be halal, young Muslims are finding and claiming agency to make relationship choices of their own.'<sup>4</sup> Islamophobia in dating practices and the connection of Islam and queer culture are the final key areas I explore. Overall, this chapter considers representations of dating alongside specific theoretical perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> McKeown, p. 486; see also: Whelehan, *Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Nafhesa Ali et al., 'Halal Dating', p. 4.

It stands to reason that exploring representations of a single woman's dating experiences can also have feminist implications.<sup>5</sup> Comparing postfeminist and fourth-wave feminist discourses, with regards to dating, yields similar results. For example, regarding normative femininity's connection to feminism, both postfeminism and fourth-wave discourses suggest that feminism and femininity do not need to be mutually exclusive. As Angela Smith (2015) explains, 'postfeminism strongly promotes the idea of feminism and femininity not being incompatible and thus sexualization of the female body being a viable choice [for women].'<sup>6</sup> When reviewing fourth-wave feminist discourses in Scarlett Curtis's *Feminists Don't Wear Pink (and Other Lies)*, Christina Scharff (2019) argues that while 'feminism may indeed have become more popular now that it is more firmly associated with femininity', linking feminism with femininity 'does little to challenge the heterosexual assumptions (e.g. that women/feminists should look and act feminine) that frequently underpin criticisms of feminists as unfeminine.'<sup>7</sup> The similarities between Smith's study of postfeminism and Scharff's critique of a fourth-wave feminist text suggest that expectations of normative femininity, and connections of these to feminist activism, remain in the shift from postfeminism to fourth-wave feminism. However, while both claim that feminists can be feminine (and, as such, avoid challenging gender roles), postfeminist discourses are more likely to directly critique

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Whelehan, *Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary*, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Angela Smith, *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Scharff, 'On (Not) Wearing Pink', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26.2 (2019), 111–16, p. 112.

second-wave feminism's lack of femininity in an attempt to distinguish its ideology as a new, separate stand of 'attractive' feminism.<sup>8</sup>

The most appropriate foundational chick lit novel for this chapter on singlehood and dating is Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). This text not only depicts a single woman dating at its forefront, but the novel is iconic to the genre; as Ferriss and Young (2006) explain, 'the entire chick-lit phenomenon is invariably traced back to this single novel.'<sup>9</sup> As a result of its success, Bridget Jones became a franchise: three full-length novels follow this first, three film adaptations have been made and 'Bridget Jones' itself has a definition in the MacMillan dictionary ('a single woman in her thirties who is ordinary rather than perfect and is looking for a partner').<sup>10</sup> Anthea Taylor (2015) suitably summarises that 'Bridget Jones is without a doubt the most highly visible single woman of Western postfeminist media culture to date'.<sup>11</sup> As McRobbie (2009) argues, what is 'distinctly post-feminist' about *Bridget Jones's Diary* is how Bridget appreciates second-wave feminism's advances pertaining to 'sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent' but alongside this, she 'dreams of romance, find[ing] a suitable husband, get[ting] married and hav[ing] children.'<sup>12</sup> Throughout the novel, Fielding illustrates the ambivalence prevalent within

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Roiphe (1994) argues that 'All of a sudden feminism meant being angry about men looking at you in the street' in *The Morning after: Sex, Fear, and Feminism*, p. 5. Or, as Naomi Wolf (1994) argues, 'The focus of some feminists, like Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Adrienne Rich, on female victimization at the expense of female agency, derives from conditions that once applied more than they do now', *Fire with Fire*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Macmillan Dictionary, 'BRIDGET JONES (Noun) Definition and Synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary' <<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/bridget-jones>> [accessed 21 January 2022].

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture*, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 23; see also, Wilson, 'Chick Lit in the Undergraduate Classroom', p. 87.

postfeminist discourse. This chapter focuses on Bridget's complexities and contradictions in dating and her attitudes towards singlehood.

The more recently published text by the same precursor author (Fielding) that I also analyse in this chapter is *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013). Lucinda Rasmussen (2017) argues that '[o]ne way to explore postfeminism in the contemporary moment is to ask how those subjects who flourished during the postfeminist decade identified by McRobbie are now experiencing that ideology years later.'<sup>13</sup> Aptly, I explore postfeminist ideologies relevant to singlehood and dating in *Mad About the Boy* - Fielding's most contemporarily set novel. Kelly A. Marsh (2019) considers the suspended seriality of the text (the way Fielding set the plotline many years after the precursor) and how this allows for 'continuity of character and the everyday.'<sup>14</sup> Fielding has adapted her postfeminist chick lit to suit an older protagonist and fan base. Bridget continues to comply with normative femininity, depicted as a method to prevent gendered stigmatisation, adhering to postfeminist discourse, but adapts this to correspond with Bridget's older age and the contemporary moment. Whelehan (2014) identifies how, with her husband Mark Darcy's death, Bridget is 'a born-again

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<sup>13</sup> Lucinda Rasmussen, "'She Says She's Thirty-Five but She's Really Fifty-One': Rebranding the Middle-Aged Postfeminist Protagonist in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones: Mad about The Boy*", in *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings*, ed. by Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neill, and Michaela Schrage-Früh (Cham, Switzerland: Springer., 2017), pp. 147–64 (p. 153).

<sup>14</sup> Kelly A. Marsh, 'Suspended Seriality and the Recovery of Bridget Jones', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 30.4 (2019), 265–82 (p. 269).

singleton.’<sup>15</sup> Bridget’s widowhood facilitates the plotline of Bridget dating again, highlighting the importance of the single woman dating theme to the genre of chick lit.<sup>16</sup>

My last primary novel’s heroine, Sofia Khan, has been famously dubbed the ‘Muslim Bridget Jones’.<sup>17</sup> Ayisha Malik’s *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) adapts the white, middle-class portrayals in Fielding’s works to offer an intersectional feminist perspective. Certain clear differences to *Bridget Jones’s Diary* include the protagonist’s wearing of a hijab (and her dates’ reactions to this) and perpetuations of normative white femininity. In agreement with Basu (2022), this novel offers a valuable perspective on ‘what it means to be and express oneself as a Muslim woman in a post-9/11 and post-7/7 world in Britain’ addressing their ‘lives and romantic quests under the weight’ of Islamophobic ideology.<sup>18</sup> Todd H. Green defines Islamophobia as ‘hatred, hostility, and fear of Islam and Muslims, and the discriminatory practices that result.’<sup>19</sup> ‘Hatred, hostility and fear’ towards Sofia, due to her religious beliefs, is certainly on display in this chick lit novel: it provides a political message about discrimination in, significantly, Sofia’s dating scenarios. Newns (2018) and Basu (2022) both suggest that within Muslim chick lit religion and feminism do not need to be seen as different beliefs but rather should be seen as affirming one another.<sup>20</sup> While there are moments in the

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<sup>15</sup> Imelda Whelehan, ‘Fiction or Polemic? Transcending the Ageing Body in Popular Women’s Fiction’, in *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism: Harleys and Hormones*, ed. by Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 29–46 (p. 40).

<sup>16</sup> This is also true of Loretha’s husband’s, Carl’s, death in McMillan’s *It’s Not All Downhill From Here*. Also, in the continuation sequel of the *Sex and the City* series, *And Just Like That*: Mr. Big dies so that a widowed Carrie Bradshaw can date again.

<sup>17</sup> Cathy Newman, *A Muslim Bridget Jones?*, online video recording, Channel 4, 2 July 2017, <<https://www.channel4.com/news/a-muslim-bridget-jones>> [accessed 22 August 2023].

<sup>18</sup> Basu, ‘Romance and Reception’, pp. 150–1.

<sup>19</sup> Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Lucinda Newns, ‘Renegotiating Romantic Genres’, p. 286; Basu, ‘Romance and Reception’, p. 153.

text where Malik identifies arguably anti-feminist assumptions and stereotypes associated with Islam, she also breaks these with Sofia's strong and opinionated personality. Through her depiction of dating in underrepresented groups, such as Muslim women and in queer culture, Malik adapts postfeminist depictions in chick lit, diversifying the genre, and her success is clear through the publication of two sequels. Specifically in a 'Dating' chapter in their (2021) work which explores representations of Muslim relationships in fiction, Chambers et al. discuss how *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* 'depicts the complexities of Muslim dating with insight and empathy, provoking readers to think differently about the love lives of religious women like Sofia.'<sup>21</sup> The novel's discussions of Muslim dating further highlights its benefit in this chapter.

This chapter compares these three primary texts: *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, and their portrayals of dating, normative femininity and gendered stigmatisation. While Bridget, Sofia and other characters sometimes comply with conventions, Fielding and Malik satirise and critique these conventions in their works through humour, exaggeration, contradiction and more. The newer works suggest that chick lit conventions have been updated, transformed or completely altered to correspond with the arrival of the fourth-wave of feminism, the more mature Bridget of *Mad About the Boy*, and the Muslim, hijabi, South Asian, British protagonist of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Phillips, Chambers, Nafhesa Ali, Kristina Diprose and Indrani Karmakar, *Storying Relationships: Young British Muslims Speak and Write about Sex and Love* (London: Zed Books, 2021), p. 69.



## Normative Femininity

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*Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*

portray single women protagonists enacting normative feminine behaviours in the belief that it will improve their prospects in the dating realm. Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) explain that chick lit heroines use 'their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many second wave feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity.'<sup>22</sup> The chick lit novels maintain this aspect of the heroine adhering to 'normative notions of femininity' in their dating lives in the hopes of enhancing their perceived attractiveness to their heterosexual romantic prospect. These normative notions of femininity can be split into three strands: normative beauty, normative behaviour and dating methods/modes.

### Normative Beauty and Dating: Maintaining, Optimising and Critiquing in Chick Lit

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Fielding and Malik articulate and critique normative beauty: the social construct of aesthetic beauty norms. Tolentino (2019) suggests that there is a tyranny of the 'ideal woman' who is of 'indeterminate age' but presents herself as 'resolutely youthful' with 'glossy hair', maintaining a 'clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at.'<sup>23</sup> *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* all explore this concept of the 'ideal woman' by highlighting

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<sup>22</sup> Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 'Rewriting The Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?', p. 499.

<sup>23</sup> Tolentino, 'Athleisure, Barre and Kale: The Tyranny of the Ideal Woman'.

and challenging its connection with weight expectations, consumer culture, romantic success, prejudices, consequences, popular culture and preoccupations.

While all three texts highlight how weight is connected to normative beauty expectations, Malik's text suggests that the heroine is less self-deprecatory with regards to her weight. Both Fielding's texts highlight a persistent obsession with weight-loss that is critiqued in feminist discourses too. For example, Naomi Wolf (1990) found that thirty-three thousand American women would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal.<sup>24</sup> While Fielding's works are a British franchise and published six and twenty-three years later, the similarities in the ideologies highlight the extent of weight-based perpetuations of normative femininity. In both Fielding's texts, heroine Bridget consistently records her current weight at the start of each diary entry and includes the number of calories she consumed that day. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Fielding constructs Bridget's weight as an overpowering force that fosters her critical and self-deprecating manner; after eating, she notes in her diary: 'I feel ashamed and repulsive. I can actually feel the fat splurging out from my body' (p. 18). In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Sofia also discusses her weight – but in a less obsessive way than Bridget; her weight is regarded more with humour than critique. For example, Sofia says that she wished 'the journey to work didn't involve a muffin top', then adds: 'Actually, the journey into work did include a muffin, which won't help the muffin top but does help my general happiness.'<sup>25</sup> The light-hearted tone in Malik's text contrasts Fielding's illustration of Bridget's shame and repulsion. Bridget's 'fat splurging out the body' reference to the

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<sup>24</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ayisha Malik, *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated*, Kindle Edition (London: Twenty7 Books, 2015), p. 55. All further references will be given in the main text.

visceral body shares imagery with Sofia's noting that her jeans were 'cutting off [her] blood circulation' and 'puncturing a hole in my intestine.' (p. 135). However, the 'fat splurging' contrasts with the jeans 'cutting off blood circulation' and 'puncturing a hole': the focus for Fielding is the weight gain and the shame that Bridget feels afterwards. But for Malik, it is the lengths that Sofia feels she must go to in order to adhere to beauty standards and the pain she feels as a result of this that are foregrounded. Malik more overtly critiques cultural expectations, a fourth-wave feminist trait – Sofia's consuming a 'muffin' (enjoying decadent food) makes her happy, and the 'jeans' (the expectations) then physically hurt Sofia. By contrast, Fielding accentuates a postfeminist woman's desire to 'lose ten to fifteen pounds' to avoid the 'fat splurging' (and the judgements that arise alongside this).

The awareness of a less-than-perfect body prompts these protagonists to optimise and control their appearance. As Tolentino (2019) identifies, the 'ideal woman' is always 'optimising': '[E]verything about this woman has been pre-emptively controlled.'<sup>26</sup> Optimising and controlling their bodies to normative beauty means the perpetuation is their choice and in their grasp. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget explains that,

being a woman is worse than being a farmer – there is so much harvesting and crop spraying to be done: legs to be waxed, underarms shaved [...] The whole performance is so highly tuned you only need to neglect it for a few days for the whole thing to go to seed (p. 30-31).

Bridget's extensive list echoes Tolentino's argument that the 'ideal woman' 'pre-emptively' controls her appearance. Referencing 'performance' indicates gender

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<sup>26</sup> Tolentino, 'Athleisure, Barre and Kale: The Tyranny of the Ideal Woman'

performativity: denaturalising gender roles and emphasising that this is a social expectation and not an innate attribute for women. The metaphor of women being farmers compares the labour effort of adhering to normative femininity with a full-time, manual job. Fielding implies that if you neglect your crops (if you do not conform to gendered expectations of conventional beauty), then the whole thing goes to seed (you are stigmatised by a judgmental society). Bridget's statement reveals the inequalities of normative beauty: not everyone can financially afford or reserve the time to 'wax', 'pluck', 'shave', 'pumice', 'file', 'tint', and 'massage.' Consumer culture's perpetuation of conventional beauty reinforces the patriarchal and capitalist status quo.

In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the self-optimising described above turns out to be wasted work. Despite all Bridget's date preparation, it does not happen: Daniel is too busy preparing for a work presentation. As such, Bridget writes, 'Entire waste of whole day's bloody effort and hydroelectric body-generated power. However, one must not live one's life through men but must be complete in oneself as a woman of substance' (p. 31). Fielding satirises a woman's beauty efforts with the negative outcome of the date, emphasising that women do not need to undertake these efforts, yet many still choose to do so. With this episode, Bridget epitomises postfeminist ambivalence regarding appearance: an acknowledgement that these rituals conform to normative femininity and that they should be critiqued, but a simultaneous perpetuation of them or to order to attract a future romantic partner. This also happens with the romantic hero of the novel, Mark Darcy: despite Bridget's attempts to conform to the 'ideal woman', he states that he is attracted to her because she is not 'lacquered over' (p. 237). However, Bridget still believes that conforming to normative beauty standards leads to romantic success,

even when Mark expresses appreciation for what he perceives as her departure from these standards. This suggests how deeply ingrained these expectations are.

The farmer metaphor remains in Fielding's *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, as does the postfeminist ambivalence. While counting the number of months that have passed since she has engaged in certain beauty activities, Bridget writes, 'months since did roots 2, weeks since waxed legs 5, weeks since painted toenails 6, number of months since any sexual experience whatsoever 5.'<sup>27</sup> The placing of Bridget's lack of perpetuation of aesthetic beauty norms (of having her 'roots' coloured, 'waxed legs', 'painted toenails') alongside the amount of 'months since any sexual experience' implies her connection of the two: she believes her lack of sex is as a result of her non-adherence to the conventional aesthetic beauty expectation. Bridget only 'optimises' her beauty when dating (and, as such, possibly having sex) with men. Bridget then says she is 'letting self go to seed – un-waxed, un-plucked, un-exercised, un-exfoliated un-pedicured, un-mediated, roots un-touched-up, hair un-blow-dried' (p. 439). The repetition of an 'un-' prefix suggests Bridget has 'neglected her crops' and, therefore, needs to begin tending to them again to attract a new romantic partner. Though, similar to Mark's note of how he likes how Bridget does not conform to conventional aesthetic beauty standards, *Mad About the Boy* also implies that tending to your 'crops' does not automatically render success when dating. Bridget comments on how Nicolette and Chloe look 'perfect' (p. 7, p. 23), yet both their romantic relationships end.

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<sup>27</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, Kindle Edition (London: Jonathan Cape Random House), p. 439. All further references will be given in the main text. I will also be referring to the text as *Mad About the Boy* for the remainder of the chapter.

Throughout the novel, Bridget's friend Talitha encourages her to engage in labour-intensive activity to appear more youthful, telling her, 'You probably do need to lose a bit of weight, and get some Botox and do something with your hair, but—' (p. 40). She says it is '[b]etter to die of Botox than die of loneliness because you're so wrinkly' (p. 41). Talitha also tells her to 'go to Intimissimi or La Senza and get yourself a couple of short black silk sexy slips. [...] With a slip, you can show off your arms and legs and décolletage, which are always the last to go, but keep the central area – which we might want to gloss over – glossed over' (p. 229). Talitha foregrounds consumer culture's perpetuation of conventional aesthetic beauty standards of youth, making Bridget feel natural 'wrinkly' faces are unattractive, so cosmetic procedures are there to 'optimise' women. The text, though, undermines Talitha's beliefs when she discovers her date, 'Sergei loves [her] real hair. He's completely turned on. Phew. [She] always thought he'd hate [her] if [they] were stuck on a desert island and he saw the "real [her]"' (p. 276). While Bridget does conform to conventional standards of youthful beauty perpetuated by Talitha – she gets Botox and a slip – the text itself critiques the concept because Roxster (Bridget's current and younger dating partner) says Bridget 'looked better without the slip' (p. 241). Likewise, Mr Wallaker (her future dating partner) implies she did not need to have Botox (p. 369). Thus, the men's viewpoints contradict the self-fashioning that Bridget (as a farmer to her seeds) feels she has to enact in order to attract a partner.

In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik highlights the optimisation required to conform to the ideal woman. Sofia says that her sister, Maria, 'started her beauty regime and Saturdays are cleansing mask day – a stone-coloured thing that cracks every time she opens her mouth to speak' (p. 113). Through this, Malik suggests that modelling

one's body to conform to normative feminine expectations silences women. These expectations are displaced onto Sofia's sister, not the heroine herself, emphasising it is not Sofia who is symbolic of conformity to aesthetic beauty standards but other women. Even when Sofia says, 'Woke up super early to write, which means I have circles under my eyes. Does Brammers [Sofia's boss] understand the consequences of her eagerness?' (p. 148), it is Maria who offers her a cream that 'apparently takes ten years off' (p. 148). Here Maria (like Talitha) is a symbol of consumer culture's endorsements of the 'ideal woman': she gives Sofia a cream to optimise and control her appearance (again highlighting youthfulness). The way Sofia uses the cream is interesting; she 'dabbed blobs of it around [her] mouth' (p. 148). Like Bridget, Sofia conforms to social expectations surrounding aesthetic beauty – she uses the cream. Malik, like Fielding, also implies that these notions of normative femininity that women enact are not innate (Sofia 'blobs' an undereye cream around her mouth: not her eyes). Yet, it also implies that the cream is not designed for her (and her age): Sofia is only 29 years old and is worried about looking older, indicating Malik's critique of aesthetic beauty standards being tied to youth. She not only challenges the concept that a cream could 'take ten years off' but also that women desire to look ten years younger. What differs from Fielding's novels is the lack of a simultaneous reference to men in these episodes discussing beauty expectations. Sofia and Maria do not directly discuss their compliance to aesthetic beauty norms as a way of attracting a dating partner: it is part of Maria's Saturday routine and a negative consequence of work dedication for Sofia. For Bridget, it is pre-date preparation and a lack of compliance results in no recent sexual experience.

Malik expands on the display of the optimisation and control required to adhere with the notion of the 'ideal woman' by also highlighting how Sofia contends with

prejudiced discrimination regarding her appearance. In 2008, Kathy Deliovsky shared how her Black, nine-year-old daughter wanted her hair to be 'blonde and normal like the girls on TV', inspiring Deliovsky to 'fortify [her] children from potential self-hatred that arises from living in a world that privileges whiteness and disparages blackness.'<sup>28</sup> Overall, she argues that 'the white capitalist patriarchal compulsion to adopt styles and attitudes [is] consistent with an imposed white feminine aesthetic.'<sup>29</sup> Throughout her narrative, Malik illuminates and critiques imposed white feminine aesthetic beauty standards. When exploring the online dating platform 'Shaadi.com', Sofia notes how it informs users that 'being fair or wheatish (in skin tone, one presumes) affects [...] marriage prospects' (p. 40). After telling her mother this, she 'handed [Sofia] a tube of Fair & Lovely' (p. 40). Her mother's perpetuation of normative white femininity makes Sofia critique the expectation of '*Don't marry a white person but do try to look like one. Sigh.*' (p. 41). This scene highlights racist stereotypes regarding attractiveness levels: the problematic assumption that being whiter is more likely to result in marriage. Sofia's mother's response also indicates her priority: not combating the discrimination but conforming to the website's discrimination as a means for Sofia to end her single status. This indicates postfeminism's connection to neoliberalism: focusing on individualism rather than collective action. Matchmaking her daughter is more significant than fighting racism. Moreover, the beauty product 'Fair & Lovely' implies what Deliovsky defines as the 'white capitalist patriarchal compulsion.' 'Fair and lovely' encourages a hierarchy – where 'loveliness' is only associated with white skin.

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<sup>28</sup> Kathy Deliovsky, 'Normative White Femininity: Race, Gender and the Politics of Beauty', *Atlantis*, 33.1 (2008), 49–59 (p. 49).

<sup>29</sup> Deliovsky, 'Normative White Femininity', p. 50.



As shown, all three texts highlight the heroines' feelings of pressure to 'pre-emptively control' their appearance; they also indicate how and why these normative beauty expectations are perpetuated. Deborah Lupton's (2000) work on self-tracking explains how 'the body that is unable to be contained, over which its owner seems to have little control, is an object of pity, ridicule and disgust.'<sup>30</sup> This is highlighted above with the 'pity, ridicule and disgust' that Sofia and Bridget experience because they do not correspond to Tolentino's definition of the 'ideal woman.' These chick lit texts show that communities of women (and individual women) are also sources of pressure on women for their appearance (as opposed to the pressure coming from – or perceived as coming from – the men these women want to date). In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, it is Sofia's mother and sister who present consumer products to Sofia. Likewise, it is Talitha in *Mad About the Boy* who tells Bridget she should lose weight, get Botox, do something with her hair and buy some silky slippers. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the first response to Bridget from the 'bronzed giantess' Daniel Cleaver is 'sleeping with' is 'I thought you said she was thin' (p. 181). This highlights the discord between women: she is aware Bridget is Daniel's girlfriend and unapologetically criticises her body.

In both of Fielding's novels, Bridget is aware of popular culture discourse's perpetuations of beauty ideology and even questions it, yet still enacts it. She acknowledges that,

wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices. I can't take the pressure (p. 59-60).

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<sup>30</sup> Deborah Lupton, *The Quantified Self* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2016), p. 52

Her acknowledgement of the 'supermodels' and 'quizzes' that add 'pressure' to women, and the irony of her awareness of Cosmopolitan culture's endorsement of beauty discourse, suggests the impact that perpetuations of gender norms have on women: she becomes complicit in the normative femininity that she is troubling. Bridget pinpoints that her 'body is [not] up to it, if left to its own devices', which echoes similar sentiments to Lupton's (2000) argument about self-tracking. If Bridget's body 'cannot be contained', and she cannot 'control' her appearance, she would be 'an object of pity, ridicule and disgust', so hence avoids this possibility: she is a 'child' because she feels she has little power over her choices in a Cosmopolitan-driven world. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget references a *Yahoo!* Story titled '*Biel disappoints in Less-Than-Sexy Pantsuit*' (p. 286), to which she responds, 'Pah! Are all women now judged by the Distance-From-Sexiness of their pantsuits?' (p. 286). In both her novels, Fielding demonstrates postfeminist ideology in their portrayals of a woman, Bridget, choosing to adhere (or perpetuate) aesthetic beauty standards because she believes this is a way to improve chances of gaining a heterosexual relationship: a strand of neoliberalism (as discussed above) where women prioritise individual gains over collective action.

All three texts also demonstrate and critique the notion of a woman believing, as quoted above, 'she was made to be looked at' through exaggerating and satirising the heroines' priorities. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget 'glanc[ed] briefly in the mirror and realiz[ed] tonight really would not be a good night for a date with a toy boy' (p. 197); then, when preparing for her date, she asked her followers on Twitter: 'Which is more important? Look nice or be on time?' (p. 203). Instead of spending time with her date or even going on her date, Bridget focuses on looking beautiful. Again, Fielding satirises beauty standards being crucial to attractiveness levels as Roxster (her date) replies to

her Tweet with: 'on time of course. How can you be so vain? That's so unattractive' (p. 203). Roxster's aversion disproves the stereotype that enacting beauty helps gain a romantic partner, suggesting it makes one seem vain and, therefore, unattractive. However, Fielding also critiques Roxster's judgement here: he seems privileged, high-minded and unsympathetic to the time and labour in which Bridget undertakes to correspond to idealised normative femininity. Furthermore, his public shaming of a woman (Bridget) on social media also indicates Fielding's scorn of new modes for communicating chauvinism. Bridget's insecurities alongside vanity are similar in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. She is 'obsessed [...] about [her] unattractiveness crisis' (p. 27), questioning, '[W]hy am I so unattractive?' (p. 16, p. 27) multiple times in the diary entries. While discussing Mark Darcy's human rights career, Bridget comments, 'What about my human right not to have to wander round with fearsome unattractiveness hang-up?' (p. 21). Through Bridget's misappropriation of the concept of 'human rights', Fielding satirises the precedence placed on certain gendered expectations: for example, in this case, that beauty standards and attracting a romantic partner could surpass a human rights lawyer's defence of values such as equality and fairness for all. This, again, alludes to neoliberal feminism's focus on selfhood over collective action. In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik also connects advocacies with beauty. Sofia explains how her friend Hannah's 'activism against the objectification of women includes forgoing makeup. I'm against this too – obviously – but inflicting social trauma because you can't be arsed to put on mascara is a little selfish' (p. 94). Similar to Bridget's connection of human rights to normative beauty expectations, Sofia links activism against women's objectification to inflicting social trauma. Through the humorous and exaggerated tone, Malik also critiques the beauty standards expected for women to enact. Sofia's belief that she

would be 'inflicting social trauma' critiques the deep-seated nature of society's reinforcement of the significance placed on women's aesthetic beauty.

#### Normative Behaviour and Dating: Guidebooks, Domesticity and Chivalry in Chick Lit

Having previously explored conventional aesthetic beauty standards enacted in a heterosexual dating environment, I now focus on representations of women and men's behaviour when dating each other: their actions rather than their outward appearance. McKeown's (2015) research identified how men and women who are traditionally dating 'learn to negotiate certain gendered expectations.'<sup>31</sup> Yet, Eshleman & Wilson (2000) explain that women 'must play by a different set of rules and set different goals than males.'<sup>32</sup> Equally, as Laner and Ventrone (2000) find, dating is 'traditional (i.e. male-dominated) from start to finish. [...] [W]omen's role on the first date is a reactive one.'<sup>33</sup> *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* consider how these traditional dating roles are perpetuated via guidebooks on dating, and contemplate the characteristics of normative, gendered dating behaviours, including women being non-feminist, domestic and passive.

All three novels highlight and satirise the writing and reading of dating guidebooks as a way to learn the 'right' way to act when dating. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget undertakes an 'INTENSIVE DATING STUDY Night after night [...] [she] studied, as

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<sup>31</sup> McKeown, p. 491

<sup>32</sup> J. Ross Eshleman and Susannah J. Wilson, *The Family*, Canadian Edition, 3rd Edition (Ontario: Pearson Canada, 2000), p. 229.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Riege Laner and Nicole A. Ventrone, 'Dating Scripts Revisited', *Journal of Family Issues*, 21.4 (2000), 488–500 (p. 493).

if for an Open University course on how to get off with people' (p. 141). With Bridget's research, Fielding satirises the time and money women spend learning the 'correct way' to perform dating. The child-like tone of 'getting off' is another example of how (despite Bridget's age now) she is a 'child' learning new methods and strategies of dating. Fielding points to the anti-feminist ideology within these guidebooks – adherence to 'tradition', which, as Laner and Ventrone's (2000) work suggests, was necessary for successful dating. The books are titled: '\*What Men Want \*What Men Secretly Want \*What Men Really Want \*What Men Actually Want \*How Men Think' (pp. 141-142). These texts suggest that heterosexual dating behaviours are entirely centred around men's wants. The dating inequalities are also evident in the guidebooks Bridget reads in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, highlighting what little has changed. Bridget exemplifies this with: 'She read somewhere that the best gift a woman can bring to a man is tranquillity' (p. 120) and the consistent references to John Gray's popular *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992). Bridget explains: 'I started with my historical archive – the obvious classics from my thirties [...] somehow it just wasn't enough. I went on Amazon and there were seventy-five pages of dating self-help books to choose from' (p. 142). Not only does Fielding emphasise the commercial gain of the popularity of these dating self-help books, but she also demonstrates the persistent demand for advice concerning dating behaviours.<sup>34</sup> Bridget 'did of course tweet as [she] went along', leading to an 'increasing [of] Twitter followers to a staggering 437' (p. 141). Bridget's increase of followers highlights a cultural inclination to learn dating strategies and behaviours. The persistent demand to learn dating behaviours and the inequalities that the guidebooks

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<sup>34</sup> This could also be a desire to avoid the gendered stigma associated with being a single woman, which is focused on in the second part of this chapter.

perpetuate demonstrates a consistency between 1990s / 2000s and 2010s chick lit—both imply the shortcomings of the guidebooks and therefore suggest exercising caution when taking advice from them.

In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, a book about Muslim dating, the main character Sofia is writing a book about Muslim dating. Malik takes the opportunity to craft a metanarrative that parodies Bridget's use of dating books as guidance. *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* switches the focus from the guidebooks noted in Fielding's texts to one focusing on what women (not men) want; the novel also highlights the problematic background of how dating books are constructed. Sofia's editor Brammers says, '[W]e've published three dating books in the past year' (p. 17), noting the prominence placed on dating books in the publishing industry. Despite this, Brammers is captivated by the possibility of publishing a specifically *Muslim* dating book: it will 'give a fascinating insight into modern Muslim dating and marriage' (p. 19). Her exoticisation of Sofia critiques the publishers' desires to capitalise on diversity. However, as Basu (2022) explains, through the course of *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, the heroine 'realizes that the press expects a formulaic rendition of Muslim dating life from her and is not willing to accept the nuances of her individual situation or the authentic stories she wants to tell.'<sup>35</sup>

Brammers is not willing to accept Sofia's authenticity when, for example, she tells Sofia that she understands there is 'no sex before marriage' but asks her to 'add one chapter involving something sex-like' to make it 'appealing to a wider readership' and less 'tricky for people to relate to' (p. 368). Sofia then thinks 'I didn't know I had to explain my life to people as well as go through the process of actually living it' (p. 368). Sofia's experiences

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<sup>35</sup> Basu, p. 157.

of stereotyping with editorial pressure to match their expectations could also be read in relation to the genre of chick lit, potentially hinting at Malik's experiences of 'rewriting' a formulaic genre. It also establishes an inspiration for one of the plotlines of the novel's sequel, *The Other Half of Happiness*, where Sofia works to co-find a company that focuses on publishing authors from ethnic minorities.<sup>36</sup> Malik's portrayals of the complexities in the world of publishing dating books elucidates how the authors' creations can be subject to the imposition of normative behaviours.

Fielding exemplifies the postfeminist ideology of second-wave feminism being seen as unattractive in dating. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Gray's 'guidebook' contrasts with Sharon's feminist activist statements. As Wilson (2012) points out, Sharon offers 'a third-wave perspective in the novel' because she 'unapologetically champions female independence and criticizes men for exploiting feminine insecurities'.<sup>37</sup> Bridget's friend, Jude, is 'chucked for asking ['Vile Richard (self-indulgent commitment phobic)'] if he wanted to come on holiday with her' (p. 19). As a result, Jude worries she is 'co-dependent' and is 'naturally blaming it all on herself' (p. 19). Instead of the focus being on, as Sharon says, the 'emotional fuckwittage, which is spreading like wildfire among men over thirty' (p. 19), the emphasis is placed on what Jude can do to change her dating behaviour, to match what she (and her friends – influenced by John Gray) think men would want. Bridget and Jude believe 'there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism' (p. 20). Based not on Sharon's feminism, but rather the dating guidebook *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, Bridget determines that Jude

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<sup>36</sup> Ayisha Malik, *The Other Half of Happiness* (London: Zaffre, 2017), p. 326

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, 'Chick Lit in the Undergraduate Classroom', p. 88.

needs to see 'Richard's behaviour [...] more in the light of him being like a Martian rubber band which needs to stretch away in order to come back' (p. 21). Gray's theory places the fault on the woman being too forceful: instead, she should be 'reactive', allowing men to take a leading role in the dating sphere. Chick lit's portrayals of feminism (and the heroines' thoughts towards feminist activism) provide an insight into 1990s postfeminist ideology. Bridget, Sharon and Jude's dissonance regarding Gray, feminism and dating reinforce Guenther's (2005) argument that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a feminist confessional: 'Bridget finds herself compelled by the idea of being a feminist, she has a very hard time living up to what she imagines to be feminism's ideals.'<sup>38</sup> The character of Bridget highlights the postfeminist contradiction of desiring gender equality but also seeing feminism as in conflict with heterosexual dating methods.

In 2018, during the height of the fourth-wave feminist #MeToo movement, Fielding wrote an essay, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary' which was published in a collection entitled *Feminists Don't Wear Pink and Other Lies* (2018). This essay is fictional and set in the time it was published: 2018. Bridget reflects retrospectively on plot points and events relevant to dating and being a single woman in her first novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*. One of these retrospective backtracks is with the above quotation, repeating twice (on the same page) that this 'strident feminism' statement was 'a multi-layered ironic joke!'<sup>39</sup> In her justification, Bridget also adds that,

At that time, I felt like 'a Feminist' was another intimidating thing you were supposed to be: [...] Solemn Feminists like Camille Paglia and Germaine Greer seemed to be always telling us off, for being less Feminist than them, and for trying to combine some sort of economic independence with the reality of finding

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<sup>38</sup> Guenther, 'Bridget Jones's Diary: Confessing Post-Feminism', p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> Helen Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', in *Feminists Don't Wear Pink (and Other Lies): Amazing Women on What the F-Word Means to Them*, ed. by Scarlett Curtis (London: Penguin, 2018), pp. 84–96 (p. 87).



men attractive and wanting to love and be loved, [...] You wouldn't go around asserting that you were 'a Feminist' because that seemed like an insult to all the other women around you.<sup>40</sup>

Fourth-wave feminism is more inclined to endorse celebratory expressions of identifying as a 'feminist,' in contrast to the postfeminist trend of moving away from the term. Bridget here exemplifies this shift. Her justification is that second-wave feminism did not match her ideologies or her desire to attract a man. This aligns her character with a newer social climate and makes Bridget Jones still relevant. Bridget writes, 'Feminism is once again – as Billy would say – a Thing. It's a different thing. It's not appropriated by solemn, self-righteous intellectuals. It's everywoman's now.'<sup>41</sup> Bridget's embrace of fourth-wave feminism implies that the movement appears more accessible than (as postfeminist discourses suggest) second-wave feminism was to certain women. Feminism is now seen as less of a deterrent to men, meaning that heterosexual, single women who want to date can also espouse it. However, the way that feminist beliefs are implied as only acceptable when they do not prevent successful heterosexual dating is also problematic because it limits feminism to issues outside of heterosexual dating.

While both *Mad About the Boy* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* highlight (and critique) the anti-feminism, demand and commercial success of dating guidebooks, they also, with their romantic plotlines, imply how feminism, rather than being unattractive, is actually what can result in successful dating. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* is shown as a contrast to feminist thinking: Bridget tells Mark that the 'good book [she has read] lately' (p. 14) is Susan Faludi's *Backlash* (1991) when

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<sup>40</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 87 – 89.

<sup>41</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 90.

it is actually Gray's text. At this point in the novel, Bridget is not attracted to 'diamond-pattern-jumpered goody-goody' (p. 14) Mark, and, as previously quoted, she thinks that feminism is 'strident and unattractive.' Ironically, Fielding constructs Mark to identify that being a 'radical feminist' (p. 236) was part of his attraction to Bridget. The fact Mark had read *Backlash* and Bridget had not – but had read Gray's text – also breaks the stereotype that women know (and implement) more feminist ideology than men. In her 2018 essay, Fielding writes that Bridget having not read *Backlash* when Mark had was an 'epic feminist fail'<sup>42</sup>, indicating again the shift with regards to Bridget's priorities (dating behaviours given precedence to feminist activism in the 1990s) and the new accessibility of less 'strident', feminist advocations. Similarly, in *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget's eventual love interest at the end of the novel, Mr Wallaker, tells Bridget, '[i]t doesn't make you less of a top professional feminist if you let somebody help you' (p. 452-3), in which Bridget responds in her diary entry, 'Superheroine? I'd still like someone to shag.' (p. 454). Again, the man Bridget ends the novel romantically coupled with, Mr Wallaker, is attracted to a woman he believes is a 'professional feminist', suggesting feminism is attractive and, therefore, should be a behaviour performed to attain dating success. However, Bridget's switch from Mr Wallaker's complement of empowerment to her desire for sexual gratification also indicates postfeminist complexities and supposed dichotomies of sexual attraction and feminist independence.

Adding to this notion of feminism's attractiveness is how the conventional domesticity expected of women is not required to attract the romantic heroes of the novels. As Joanne Knowles (2017) argues, more often than not, the chick lit 'protagonists

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<sup>42</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 88.

who consider themselves bad home managers and domestic failures' are 'exonerated from this lack of achievement.'<sup>43</sup> This challenges previous critics' contention regarding 'chick-lit's postfeminist advocacy of the fulfilling qualities of domesticity.'<sup>44</sup> Fielding and Malik highlight that despite dating roles being 'traditional', cooking and cleaning are not natural skills for women. In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Sofia meets a potential future husband, 'the beardie', with his parents and she is told, '[F]or your home you must make time' and is asked 'Do you like doing housework?' (pp. 249-250). Sofia responds, 'I don't think anyone likes housework' (p. 250). She is then asked, 'Did you help your mama makes these pakoras?' and she simply replies, 'No.' (pp. 251). Malik uses humour to lampoon Beardie's mother's perpetuation of gender roles. Later in the novel, to show her gratitude to Conall for 'occupying his house and destroying it', Sofia decides to 'bake him some cupcakes!' (p. 341). This urge to domesticity is part of learned behaviour from her mother on how to attract a man. The cupcakes ended up 'burnt on the outside but squidgy on the inside' (p. 342). When Conall sees these cupcakes, he says, 'Sofe, why don't you go inside, sit at your laptop and do some work that doesn't involve being in the kitchen, or near anything that you could possibly destroy' (p. 345) – the man Sofia ends the novel with encourages Sofia's career and is attracted to her despite her lack of domesticity. A lack of domesticity while maintaining attraction levels is also emphasised in *Mad About the Boy*. After Roxster eats 'muesli [that] was jumping with tiny insects' and sees 'there was a neat line of ants coming from the basement door', he gives Bridget a 'sexy kiss' (p. 18). Finally, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget hosts a disastrous dinner party, where the '[s]oup is bright blue', 'cherry tomato purée seems to be foaming and

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<sup>43</sup> Knowles, 'The Dirty Secret', p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Knowles, 'The Dirty Secret', p. 99.

three times original volume' because there was 'something in the blender, e.g. Fairy Liquid,' and makes 'marmalade' when it should have been 'orange confit' (p. 270-71). Bridget's insecurities are clear when she compares her cooking disasters with other women: 'Bet Natasha and similar would not feed him blue soup' (p. 275). Yet, Mark is attracted to Bridget anyway and tells her before this, 'Remember everyone's coming to see you, not to eat parfais in sugar cages' (p. 259). All three texts portray the novels' hero as being attracted to the heroine despite her not always performing the traditional dating behaviours (of being naturally domestic), emphasising that espousing normative femininity is not always required for dating success.

However, when the protagonist fails, it gives the hero a chance to 'save' her: enacting chivalry and reinforcing the traditional gender roles. As Knowles (2017) also argues,

One interesting aspect of the representation of domestic management in chick-lit fictions [...] is that while women are judged as lacking in the requisite domestic flair, the narratives nevertheless allow more space to criticize men and masculine attitudes than they do for such appraisals in relation to other areas of social and personal life.<sup>45</sup>

With the blue soup incident, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Mark 'saves the day' when he and Jude 'came in kitchen and helped [her] make big omelette and mashed up half-done fondant potatoes and fried them in the frying pan in manner of hash browns' (p. 271). The irony highlighted here is how Mark helps Bridget with traditionally feminine tasks, but the notion of Mark 'saving' the day is nevertheless implied by Bridget. Equally, Bridget's dating partner Daniel 'fell about laughing when said [she] could not programme video. Said he would do it for [her]' (p. 153). Again, the masculine role of

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<sup>45</sup> Knowles, 'The Dirty Secret', p. 98.

‘saving’ women is perpetuated, but this concept satirised because then something ‘went wrong’, and Daniel had ‘recorded Barry Norman’ instead of what she wanted (p. 153). Fielding’s lampoons Daniel’s chivalrous act by shaming him. Normative masculinity is similarly performed and mocked in *Mad About the Boy*. At Talitha’s birthday party, Bridget ‘took hold of ‘Talitha’s chihuahua’ who ‘barked, nipped [her] hand and leaped out of [her] arms’ ‘into the swimming pool, where she disappeared’ (p. 308). The dilemma meant that Roxster, Bridget’s date, ‘pulled his T-shirt over his shoulders, revealing his ripped torso. He dived straight into the pool, an arc of blue water, spray and muscle, wet and glistening’ (p. 308). Fielding then satirises this act of chivalry as Roxster emerged ‘at the other end of the pool having completely missed the dog, which took a last gulp of air, then sank’ (p. 308). He does eventually ‘emerg[e], holding a whimpering Petula’ (p. 308) – but the scene itself, the way his confident dive is contrasted with a ‘confused’ look, undermines performances of normative masculinity (such as chivalry) in dating.

In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik also challenges traditional dating roles with Conall, who, at the start of the novel, is stereotyped – racist, standoffish, unsympathetic – yet throughout the text, Sofia (and the reader) begins to question the stereotype placed onto him. When Sofia first refers to Conall, she thinks:

Angry-looking, tattooed next-door neighbour witnessed Mum trying to loosen my scarf to at least show that I have a reasonably long neck. He looks exactly like the type of person to tell me to go back home – even though he knows where I live. But no one ever said racists were sensible. (p. 16)

Yet, later in the novel, Sofia discovers that his bookshelves contain ‘lots of Karen Armstrong, Dalai Lama, Simone de Beauvoir (hmmm, interesting)’ (p. 191); he is an equal rights activist, using his photography skills, at one point in the novel, to ‘raise

funds ... to help educate kids who don't have money for school' (p. 384) and in order to be with Sofia, he 'adjust[s] [his] religion' (p. 408). As well as breaking the stereotypes placed onto him through his appearance, the character of Conall also subverts normative masculine gender role in dating: he enacts the 'reactive' role in dating when switching religions, he is caring and compassionate, and he reads feminist philosophy. Sofia's attraction to him, regardless of this subversion, further heightens the challenge to traditional gender roles.

Comparing the three texts illuminates changes to dating behaviours and methods over time, as well as differences potentially due to the age or ethnicity of the protagonists and authors. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget performs the same dating behaviours as she did in the 1990s when dating in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, arguing that 'ON THE FIRST DATE: LET HIM PAY' (p. 120), '[o]n first date just go along with whatever he suggests' (p. 144) and that 'women should '[n]ever pursue a man, it will only make you unhappy' (p. 114). As shown above, Bridget's 'dating rules' have been constructed by studying the many dating guidebooks available to buy; those texts encourage women to be more reactive and passive in a dating scenario. Yet, her friend Talitha disproves of this when she tells Bridget,

'Everything has changed since you were single. There was no texting. There were no emails. People spoke on telephones. Plus, young women are more sexually aggressive now, and men are naturally more lazy. You have to, at the very least, encourage' (p. 113).

She implies that women now take a more active role in dating scenarios – highlighting changes in performative dating behaviours since Bridget was last dating in the 1990s. While Roxster and Bridget's relationship does not result in a happily ever after, Talitha is proven correct at this moment when Bridget texts Roxster and receives a reply.

Similarly, throughout *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik critiques the sexism of dating behaviours. Despite her mother telling her, '[S]ometimes you should stay quiet or you'll be back a day after your wedding' (p. 322), Sofia refuses to capitulate any of her values and beliefs throughout the novel and challenges the passive, reactive upholding of tradition in dating behaviours and methods. Sofia refuses to be with Conall (when she loves him) because '*[h]e's not Muslim*' (p. 406), she will not 'live with [Imran's] parents and a hole-in-the-wall' (p. 21), she compares wearing a 'choker' at her wedding to a 'form of control' and a 'noose' (p. 343), and she does not want to 'change [her] name' (p. 346). The book Sofia writes throughout the novel also highlights how women are expected to be passive. For example, when discussing gender roles with her friend, Foz, she says, 'Men are never the ones to make the sacrifices', and Sofia responds in her diary that it 'seems all the goats in the world are female' (p. 91). Although Foz is referring to the verb sacrifice to mean foregoing or losing something, Sofia immediately draws on the fact that goats are described as 'sacrificed' by Muslims engaged in Hajj during the celebration of Eid. However, these animals are not foregoing or losing something but rather slaughtered. Here, it is almost as though Sofia refers to women as partially getting destroyed when dating: symbolising them losing part of themselves when compensating for another person – becoming passive and reactive. Her rejection of passivity is evident when she states: '*Note for book: DON'T BE A GOAT*' (p. 94). By advocating in her Muslim dating book that women should not be goats, she indicates to her audience that, like her, women should never make any sacrifices or be passive or reactive in their dating behaviours.

### Dating Environments Reinforcing Normative Gender Roles in Chick Lit

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Traditional performative dating behaviours adapt to different environments, for example online dating and dating within the workplace. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget dates her boss, Daniel Cleaver, and the power dynamic difference impacts Bridget's dating behaviour. Their first method of communication is via messages within the 'Office. Oh my God. Daniel Cleaver just sent me a message. Was trying to work on CV without Perpetua noticing (in preparation for improving career) when Message Pending suddenly flashed up on top of screen.' (p 22). Here, Fielding pinpoints how attraction in the workplace impacts participants' careers. Bridget is trying to improve her career, but gets distracted by romance, her boss informing her: 'You appear to have forgotten your skirt' (p 23), 'I like your tits in that top' (p. 29) and that she is a 'frigid cow' (p. 44). While Bridget finds these moments '[u]ndeniably flirtatious' (p. 23), this is workplace sexual harassment. From this instance, Bridget's behaviour at work changes to conform to dating behaviours addressed above: she panics about the 'right' way to message him, worries he has not seen her message, considers going for a walk to distract herself from awaiting a reply, and welcomes sexual harassment ('v. much enjoying being sexually harassed by Daniel Cleaver' (p. 25)). When Bridget and Daniel's dating relationship ends, Bridget leaves her job because 'it is just too humiliating working with Daniel now' (p. 203) and questions, 'What on earth possessed me to think it was a good idea to have an affair with my boss?' (p. 186). With this, Fielding implies the negatives of mixing dating and the workplace, and its subsequent adverse impact on women's careers.

Later, Bridget starts another job with Mr Richard Finch, whose first question is: 'How does a man with a beautiful girlfriend manage to sleep with a prostitute, get found



out and get away with it?' (p. 198). He 'winked' (p. 198) at Bridget, calls her 'my darling' (p. 202) and wants her to wear a 'mini-skirt' (p. 222) on camera. Instead of attraction, though, Bridget calls him 'repulsive' (p. 198). The contrast between the two senior figures indicates the change of behaviours due to the man's perceived attractiveness: with a man she likes, she considers it flirting, and with a man she dislikes, she finds it repulsive. In Fielding's fourth-wave feminist essay, Bridget reflects on this plotline: 'Talk about #MeToo [...] I just accepted that part and parcel of having a job [...] None of that could happen now.'<sup>46</sup> Drunk Bridget also addresses the mutual attraction with Daniel: 'The sexual attraction at work s [sic] not simple and looking back I's [sic] did sexual harass Daniel Cleaver. But thas [sic] difference because I fancied him and er, I was a woman and he was a man? It was reciprocal [sic]? Also, it was really boring in that office and we wanted to have fun.'<sup>47</sup> Bridget drunkenly defending her workplace romance in relation to #MeToo indicates how different conventions regarding dating within the workplace were in 2018 compared to 1996.

In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, while there is no specific dating in the workplace, Sofia does develop romantic feelings for Naim, who is helping her write her book. Like with Bridget, this working relationship gets complicated when Sofia starts being attracted to him. Similar to Daniel and Bridget, Naim and Sofia flirt while addressing work; for example, Sofia says, 'I'm very professional.' Naim responds, 'Professional what? That's what I'm asking. Although, nothing like a bit of mystery to keep things interesting.' (p. 70). Like Bridget, Sofia comments, '[I]t's very liberating being immune to

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<sup>46</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 90.

<sup>47</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 92.

flirtatious banter. Once one is sage-like and focused on the task at hand, they are also impenetrable; emotionally speaking.’ (p. 70). Her later feelings, though, do penetrate her professional task. Sofia’s focus throughout the novel is writing an informative book about Muslim dating; however, in multiple instances when she is working on this, the subject changes to her own love life. After a discussion on her recent breakup with Imran, Sofia says, ‘Anyway, I’ve got a book to write’, and her sister, Maria, responds, ‘And that’s a lot more interesting than men’, which Sofia ‘knew was a lie’ (p. 44-45). Malik’s use of irony here is apparent: the book she is writing is about dating (primarily men), indicating how a person’s social and cultural worth is tied more to their relationship status than their career – there is more emphasis on women to enter a relationship than the workplace.<sup>48</sup>

The examples above explore the challenges of dating and romantic attachment in the physical setting of a shared workspace. In newer chick lit texts, the recent phenomenon of online dating introduces further complexities. While it offers women more power and choice, both *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* and *Mad About the Boy* highlight the deceptive nature of online dating. Both authors also emphasise the superficiality that can arise from online dating platforms. In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik illustrates the lack of authenticity in this dating medium when Sofia says, ‘Take, for example, Jawad, who looked like a decent enough kind of guy in his profile picture. I’m not being superficial but he actually looked like sewer rat guy from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles’ (p. 92). Despite declaring her lack of superficiality, she is focusing primarily on this man’s appearance. This instance, and with Bridget two employers, applies conventional

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<sup>48</sup> A concept explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

masculine beauty standards. The novels critique normative femininity, though offer less satirising of the heroines' judgements of the appearance of men in the novels. *Mad About the Boy* illustrates how easy it is to create a fake profile when Bridget and Jude set up 'Isabella' on 'PlentyofFish' to fool 'Vile Richard' (p. 27). Equally, Jude's match online seems perfect, but then he tells her that he wants her 'to lick things' because he is 'into sexual humiliation', making Jude question: 'Why did he have to wreck it? Everyone meets online now. Turning out to be nuts is such a cliché' (p. 290-291). Like in Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Fielding portrays a woman's character passing judgment and, in this instance, kink-shaming. This highlights how the women in the text, while subject to vicious critique, also deliver it to others. Malik and Fielding suggest that online dating makes it easier to deceive someone: people can manipulate their profiles to adhere to normative beauty and dating behaviours. No one ends the novel with a partner they meet online, implying the lack of success rate from this new mode of dating which anticipates deception and facilitates a continuation of normative gender roles.

## Gendered Stigmatisation

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Regarding feminist criticism of dating, gendered stigmatisation remains a crucial critique. For example, McKeown (2015) found that 'women who are single and post-college/university [age] are more stigmatised than single men of the same age.'<sup>49</sup> Singlism is an effective term when considering how women are stigmatised in dating. Bella DePaulo (2007) explains that singlism 'points directly at single people and the

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<sup>49</sup> McKeown, p. 487.

ways in which they are marginalized and stigmatized.’<sup>50</sup> Pro-couplehood ideology is the ‘other half of the racket’: ‘the glorifying of marriage and coupling.’<sup>51</sup> Likewise, McKeown (2015) confirms ‘this ideology emphasi[s]es the social value placed on the necessity of being in a couple and ties a person’s social and cultural worth to her or his relationship status.’<sup>52</sup> However, as DePaulo (2007) posits, ‘singles are simply not in the same category as the brutally stigmatized groups’ of ‘racism, sexism or heterosexism.’<sup>53</sup> Although this is accurate, a link still exists between gender, race and heteronormativity, as well as age and motherhood expectations, in that they all result in stigmatisation. I now turn to explore chick lit’s portrayal of single women’s experiences of gendered stigmatisation when dating: singlism, pro-family ideology, ageism and Islamophobia. All three texts highlight singlism and pro-family ideology and, although in different ways and to a different extent, satirise these prejudices. The two newer texts (*Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*) expand on the gendered stigma experienced by women, depicting incidences of ageism and Islamophobia. The prominence of these intersectional feminist experiences in the later texts suggests a diversifying of the genre of chick lit.

#### Singlism: Stigmatisation and Challenges in Chick Lit

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Alluding to Betty Friedan’s, ‘The Problem that Has No Name’ (1963) – the unspoken ‘strange stirring’, ‘sense of dissatisfaction’ and ‘yearning that women suffered in the

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<sup>50</sup> Bella DePaulo, *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*, Reprint edition (St. Martin’s Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> DePaulo, *Singled Out*, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> McKeown, p. 487.

<sup>53</sup> DePaulo, *Singled Out*, p. 10.

middle of the twentieth century in the United States’<sup>54</sup> – DePaulo argues that singlism is the ‘twenty-first-century problem that has no name.’<sup>55</sup> In all three novels on which I focus, Malik and Fielding explore, question and critique this ‘problem with no name’: singlism. In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Bridget explains, ‘[s]tereotypical notions of shelves, spinning wheels and sexual scrapheaps conspire to make you feel stupid, no matter how much time you spend thinking about Joanna Lumley and Susan Sarandon’ (p. 20). The connection between the singlism stereotypes of shelves, spinning wheels and sexual scrapheaps with the empowerment felt when seeing strong women in the media, highlights how prejudices towards single women are still perpetuated and overpower feminist beliefs. Fielding satirises these postfeminist contradictions. As Guerrero (2006) argues, in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Bridget’s ‘sense of inferiority is determined by her distance from marriage. Her isolation is particularly reiterated in the presence of her married friends, who patronize her.’<sup>56</sup> Bridget is consistently asked ‘How’s your love-life?’ (p. 40), and ‘why aren’t you married yet?’ (p. 40). The contemptuous questioning indicates the social importance of being coupled, and assumption that Bridget desires couplehood. It also emphasises a sense of fault in Bridget’s dating methods, as though she cannot commit or is too demanding.

In *Mad About the Boy*, the questioning and promotion of couplehood remain, but differently, with Bridget now being widowed rather than single. The same characters, Cosmo and Woney, ask Bridget, ‘When are we going to get you married off again?’ (p. 79) and remark that she is ‘still on [her]... own?’ (p. 79). The circumstance differs from the

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<sup>54</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Problem That Has No Name* (London: Penguin Classics, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> DePaulo, *Singled Out*, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Guerrero, p. 99.

first book because Magda ‘indignantly’ tells Cosmo to ‘Zip it’ (p. 79). The minor sentence imperative from Magda indicates less divide and more defence when people are widowed and are forced, rather than ‘choosing’, to be single. Yet, the social value is still placed on couplehood: Bridget is now seen with sympathy because she has lost the couplehood status that she requires for social acceptance. With *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik also depicts pro-couplehood ideology. After Sofia decides she is ‘no longer looking for a relationship’ (p. 74), she arranges what she deems a ‘professional endeavour’ (p. 75), but her friend calls a ‘date’ (p. 80), with the antihero, Naim. A friend, Katie, texts her ‘remember – open mind’ (p. 75). Sofia’s choice to be single here is overlooked by a social assumption that single women must desire to date (even when they say they do not want to). Particularly as a young South Asian British Muslim woman, there is an explicit pressure to get married from Sofia’s close and extended family throughout the book. Still, with this, it is suggested that this pressure is shared across different cultures and faith.

While Fielding and Malik both craft their protagonist’s responses to the singlism they receive with exasperation, the overall tone in their diary entries differs: Bridget’s is more light-hearted, and Sofia’s is reflective, potentially due to her inquisitive stance as she is crafting a book herself. Both depict the divide created by the perpetuation of pro-couplehood ideology. In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, after Katie’s advice to keep an open mind, Sofia begins to consider Naim as potentially more than just a professional endeavour and, as such, contemplates:

The idea of getting married is so ingrained in us that even when one decides to be alone, all a person has to do is say “keep an open mind” and the notion leaks out of some unknown fold.’ (p. 82)

Malik indirectly refers to singlism here: the concept that 'getting married' is so 'ingrained' – firmly established – in people that even when an individual positively welcomes single life, it does not take much to revert to feeling marginalised. Metaphorically, the concept of couplehood 'leaking' suggests how easily this ideology can escape from the enclosed container of Sofia's reformed embrace of singlehood. Likewise, in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Fielding depicts Bridget's annoyance at being stigmatised for being single. Bridget compares her feelings to a famous fictional singleton 'Miss Havisham' (p. 140), and angrily responds to Cosmo and Woney's questions (in her diary entry) with '*Because I don't want to end up like you, you fat, boring, Sloaney milch cow*' and '*Because actually, Woney, underneath my clothes, my entire body is covered in scales.*' (p. 40). While the mockery and witty quips highlight Bridget's isolation, irritation and insecurities, the reference to a classic spinster character and the use of terms such as 'fat', 'cow' and 'covered in scales' are for a comical effect. Later in the diary of Sofia Khan, she ends a day with 'Sigh. We single people are lone warriors.' (p. 116). The reference to 'warriors' denotes soldiers, specifically experienced ones – suggesting that navigating single life is a continual fight. Moreover, the 'lone' echoes that as soldiers fighting, single people are the minority, implying the most expected outcome is a loss in the fight. Maria even proposes that 'People are always going to ask when you're getting married, [...] That's what makes people actually get married' (p. 45). With this, Malik elucidates a result of singlism: marriage, implying that this is not a product of love but of a desire to end the stigmatisation that single people are subjected to in society. Hence, both Malik and Fielding show their protagonists' annoyance at the stigmatisation they experience as a result of being single women and, consequently, the divide between single people and coupled people. Still,

they do this differently: Malik's is more contemplative, while Fielding constructs light-hearted mockery.

Both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Mad About the Boy* demonstrate contradictory responses to the singlism the protagonists' experience – reminiscent of postfeminist ideology. *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, on the other hand, demonstrates an activist 'calling out' – reminiscent of fourth-wave feminist ideology – when dealing with societal promotions of couplehood. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget consistently switches between feeling proudly independent to self-pitying. She remarks that 'one must not live one's life through men but must be complete in oneself as a woman of substance' (p. 31) – a sense of feminist self-sufficiency – but then, on the same page, she says, 'What's wrong with me? I'm completely alone' (p. 31), questioning herself and desiring romance. The switching between two contradictory mindsets happens at many points in the novel, indicating the postfeminist paradox, potentially due to confusion that stemmed from simultaneous critiques of and feelings caused by singlism. In *Mad About the Boy*, Tom arrives at Bridget's house and explains a new survey has been published which

proves that the quality of someone's relationships is the biggest indicator of their long-term emotional health – not so much the 'significant other' relationship, as a measure of happiness is not your husband or boyfriend but the quality of the other relationships you have around you. (p. 445)

The point derived from the new survey is that an accurate measure of emotional health and happiness for people is the quality of their non-romantic relationships, thus disrupting theories that people in relationships are happier than single people. Publications, such as Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris's (2005) study, highlight people's stereotyping of single people as 'lonely, shy, unhappy, insecure, and inflexible'



in contrast to married people who are characterised as 'happy, loving, and secure.'<sup>57</sup> Ironically, Tom later says, 'I've got to go and meet Arkis [his date] now' (p. 446). Tom's inconsistency emphasises the postfeminist contradiction similar to Bridget's in the first novel. It also implies how ingrained singlism is: Tom explicitly notes a survey result that highlights the importance of non-romantic relationships yet leaves Bridget to go on a date. In both instances, Fielding implies that singlism makes single people react contradictorily.

*Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* highlights changes to women's reaction to singlism within the last twenty years. There are multiple instances where Sofia explicitly calls out the singlism she suffers. First, Sofia is told by her sister's fiancé's father - known in the novel just as Tahir's dad - that 'girls are very fussy nowadays' (p. 115). Malik's decision to assign this opinion to a side character (whose name we do not discover) indicates a lack of value placed on his views. Sofia determines:

[T]he word "fussy" doesn't even rile me anymore. I pity people who think a girl should marry a man who's so overweight beads of sweat drip down his forehead, or a man who, at the age of forty, wants to marry someone no older than thirty, or one who wants his wife to spend her life walking in and out of holes in the wall (p. 116).

The 'pity' reverses the stereotype that the single person is the one to be consoled. Sofia then 'wiped the smug look off his face' when she says, 'I'll gladly pass on any of the above's number for [Tahir's] younger sister who's looking to get married' (p. 116). Tahir's dad's reluctance implies that settling for undesirable men is suitable for other women, but not his own family. Maria asks Sofia to 'not say that kind of stuff [about her

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<sup>57</sup> Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris, 'Singles in Society and in Science', *Psychological Inquiry*, 16.2/3 (2005), 57-83 (p. 61).

refusal to settle in marriage] to my future in-laws' (p. 116). Hence, Sofia must censor her views to prevent Maria from returning to singlehood. Sofia replies, 'I'll happily stop saying shit to people as soon as they stop saying shit to me' (p. 116). This shows how Sofia refuses to censor herself.

Malik explicitly critiques singlism, while Fielding, in the two Bridget Jones novels discussed here, does so implicitly. In Fielding's essay, though, Bridget explicitly highlights a change to women's response to singlism; she comments that 'no one would dare ask a thirty-two-year-old woman why she wasn't married any more, because it would sound ridiculous.'<sup>58</sup> While 'ridiculous' denotes a sense of derision, this is not necessarily due to a decrease of singlism perpetuated, but rather owing to the older age of women getting married: from age 28.8 in 1990 to age 35.8 in 2018.<sup>59</sup> The use of 'dare' implies a level of fear of offence: it is not that women are not subject to singlism, but that it is less acceptable to say something about it. It could also be adapting Sharon's speech from *Bridget Jones's Diary*: '[I]n twenty years' time men won't even dare start with fuckwittage because we will just laugh in their faces' (p. 21). The essay was published twenty years after the novel, and things have partly changed – women are more inclined to defend (and not be ashamed of) their single status. Though, as Bridget elucidates in the essay, 'everything has both changed and not changed.'<sup>60</sup>

The perception of unmarried women as being somehow flawed or undesirable is clear in all three novels and remains a feminist issue. A difference between the three

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<sup>58</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 89.

<sup>59</sup> D. Clark, 'Average Age at Marriage England and Wales, by Gender', *Statista*, 2021

<<https://www.statista.com/statistics/557962/average-age-at-marriage-england-and-wales/>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

<sup>60</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 87.

novels is how singlism is addressed. As Andrea Bain (2018) explores in *Single Girl Problems* (which also puns Friedan's 'Problem'), '[i]n spite of all the amazing things women are capable of, society still views single women over 30 as damaged goods.'<sup>61</sup> 'In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget is deemed, by relatives and her mother, to 'repulse[...] men' (p. 14): the blame is placed on her. Yet in contrast, in *Mad About the Boy*, while the problem of Bridget being unpartnered remains, she is now an empathetic single subject. Instead of her self-pity being due to her not being able to attract a man, like in *Bridget Jones's Diary* – '[W]hy am I so unattractive?' (p. 16) – it is associated with her grief at the loss of her life partner: 'everything is scary and nothing with be safe again' (p. 32). In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik illustrates singlism, with the added pressure that getting married is 'apparently completing half your faith', making Sofia question: 'Does this mean I'm less successful in Islam as well as society?' (pp. 30-31). This is a moment in *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* where religious beliefs and feminism could appear somewhat distinct. Instead, as Basu (2022) argues, it highlights 'her hybrid upbringing as both a Muslim woman of Pakistani descent as well as a British citizen of the twenty-first century.'<sup>62</sup> It suggests Sofia's feelings of confusion arise from postfeminist ideologies (like independence) contradicting, at times, with her heritage traditions (like marriage). It is also worth noting that despite the texts' critical stance towards the singlism through which women suffer – their use of irony and mockery towards the gendered stigma – all three novels end with the woman protagonist in a couplehood status. This potentially

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<sup>61</sup> Andrea Bain, *Single Girl Problems: Why Being Single Isn't a Problem to Be Solved* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2018), p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Basu, p. 154.

indicates the impact of this form of gendered stigma on women: couplehood is unavoidable as a result.

#### Pro-Family Ideology: Ticking Clock, Christmas, Ending and Unhappy Marriages in Chick Lit

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Along with singlism and pro-couplehood ideology, the propagation of motherhood as a main accomplishment for women is a compounding force that encourages women's engagement with dating. As McKeown (2015) argues, 'pro-family ideology emphasizes the value and importance of family life and works to subordinate and degrade other lifestyle choices, engagements, arrangements, as well as other structures not centered on the family (e.g., singlehood).'

<sup>63</sup> Jessica Valenti (2007) dedicates a whole chapter of *Full Frontal Feminism* to mocking the perception that "'Real" Women Have Babies', arguing there is a widespread ideology that 'women *have* to become mothers in order to be good women.'<sup>64</sup> Valenti expands on this recognised ideological force for women in a society where, as Adrienne Rich (1995) explains in her *Of Woman Born*, motherhood is '*defined and restricted under patriarchy*.'<sup>65</sup> The necessity of women to become mothers, and the promotion of family values in society, are addressed and critiqued in all three novels.

*Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* critique this concept by satirising the 'ticking clock' of women's fertility. Katherine Bogle (2008) argues that

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<sup>63</sup> McKeown, p. 493.

<sup>64</sup> Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: Seal Press, 2014), p. 159.

<sup>65</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 14.

'[t]he idea that a woman's "clock is ticking" while a man has "all the time in the world" fundamentally affects who holds the power.'<sup>66</sup> In Fielding's early work, Cosmo patronisingly informs Bridget: '[Y]ou really ought to hurry up and get sprogged up, you know, old girl. [...] Time's running out.' (p. 41). Cosmo's language is derogatory and echoes the expectations placed on women not only to increase their 'social worth' with couplehood, but also with motherhood. Bridget's mother's friend, Una Alconbury, perpetuates this too: 'You career girls! I don't know! Can't put it off forever you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock' (p. 172). With this reference, Fielding refers to another social perception: that a woman's career distracts from her 'natural' duty of motherhood. Based on Una's criteria for social thriving, Bridget represents failure. A postfeminist unease arises from simultaneous advocations of professionalism along with pressures of motherhood and marriage.<sup>67</sup> Chick lit satirises these postfeminist ideologies by exaggerating the perpetuations of standard derogatory practices, such as the metaphor of the ticking biological clock.

Fielding also addresses this ageist gender expectation in the 2018 essay where Bridget reflects, 'I was only thirty-two', highlighting the young age at which women contend with, as Bogle claims, the power imbalance regarding having children.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, in *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, the 'ticking clock' is referred to, but in a different way. When she is on a date with Jawad (who we later discover is misogynistic), he asks her, 'How come you're not married? Do you see yourself having children sooner rather than later?' (p. 93). There is an assumption here that Sofia wants marriage and children

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<sup>66</sup> Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: University Press, 2008), p. 175.

<sup>67</sup> This alludes to the conceptual myth of women 'having it all' that I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>68</sup> Fielding, 'Bridget Jones's Feminism Today Diary', p. 88.

– Jawad is not asking if, but when. In her diary entry, Sofia mocks the ticking clock metaphor: ‘Thanks, God, by the way, for the actual ticking of the clock that we could hear in the coffee shop’ (p. 93). This can be interpreted as similar to Fielding’s satirising of ideological forces for women, especially with the sarcastic ‘thanks’ to ‘God’.

Interestingly, though, what differs is who or what is ‘reminding’ Sofia of her ‘natural’ duty of motherhood: it is an actual clock. This emphasises how pro-family ideology is so widespread that inanimate objects are perpetuating it too.

Both *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Mad About the Boy* reference Christmas as a reminder of their desire for family and the enforcement of pro-family ideology. *Mad About the Boy* explores this further, but differently, with its depiction of widowed Bridget’s desire for the nuclear family she had before Mark died. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) argues, ‘the pairing “families/Christmas” becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of “the” family.’<sup>69</sup> Resonating with Sedgwick, in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Bridget references Christmas as a reminder that she is not part of a nuclear family; she writes: ‘I stared hard at a £185 Philippe Starck colander, blinking back tears. I hate Christmas. Everything is designed for families, romance, warmth, emotion and presents, and [...] you have no boyfriend, no money’ (p. 290). Here, Fielding highlights how the commercialisation of Christmas also advertises the family as key to the day’s happiness. Correspondingly, in *Mad About the Boy*, when Bridget ‘got back from Oxford Street’, which was covered in ‘an avalanche of lights, sparkly baubles, romantic shop-window

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<sup>69</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press., 1993), pp. 5-6.

tableaux and festive songs on a loop', Bridget contemplates the 'the forcing down the throat of perfect nuclear family, hearth-and-home tableaux, the tragic emotions, the helpless flashbacks to Christmases past, and doing Santa on your own.' (p. 148). The 'avalanche' of Christmas suggests how this is sudden, unwanted, overwhelming and isolating for Bridget. The 'endlessly iterated image' of family with Christmas is a subject of pro-family ideology that Fielding articulates in both novels, though with more empathy in her later work.

There are reasons Mark had to die in the Fielding's continuation novel. As Marsh (2019) addresses, it allows for a return of the 'well-known' Bridget Jones from the first novel, who continuously focuses on attaining a romantic relationship rather than already being in one ("Mrs. Darcy").<sup>70</sup> Marsh also identifies how both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Mad About the Boy* begin by recounting a phone call 'in which she is asked to commit to a social occasion that raises problems primarily because she is single.'<sup>71</sup> If Bridget and Mark divorced, it would still leave him as Bridget's potential and inevitable romantic partner. In the second novel of the franchise, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999), for example, the couple break up, only to reconcile at the end. Death finalises their romance and allows not only for Bridget to recommence dating, but to see that there is more to her life than the 'perfect' nuclear family she had. The death of Mark allowed for the emergence of a 'new' Bridget Jones story, with the focus on a single woman dating.

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<sup>70</sup> Marsh, p. 272.

<sup>71</sup> Marsh, p. 273.

The pro-nuclear family concept is further disrupted in all three texts with portrayals of romantic relationships or marriages ending. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget continually references relationships as 'perfect', yet the novel trajectory highlights their imperfections. Examples include Mr Wallaker, who Bridget thinks spends his 'Saturday afternoon in nuclear family,' yet tells her that 'other people's lives are not always as perfect as they appear, once you crack the shell' (p. 398). Bridget envies how 'Rebecca has a husband, or at least a "partner"' (p. 175), but Rebecca responds, 'I never see Jake from one month to the next' (p. 175). This weakens Bridget's theory that everyone in these 'nuclear families' is 'perfect' and 'happy' (and also that a nuclear family is the only route to happiness). More specifically, both *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* show, ironically, how Sofia's and Bridget's mothers perpetuate pro-nuclear family ideology onto their daughters while maintaining unhappy marriages themselves. Comparing each character's mother also illuminates religious and racial differences in the representations of women. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget's mother tells Bridget to 'expect little, forgive much' (p. 195). Yet, she does not do this herself: she leaves her husband, Colin, because she expects more from him than just 'ma[king] such a fuss about doing the bills and the tax – as if that excused him from thirty years of washing-up...' (p. 66), and does not forgive him for letting her 'spen[d] thirty-five years without a break running his home and bringing up his children.' (p. 53). Her reference to their home as 'his' emphasises resentment towards her husband. It also echoes the ideology against which second-wave feminism fought– that the man owns the home, and the woman runs the home. As Wilson (2012) argues, Bridget's mother is 'discovering her own feminist consciousness' and affirms Friedan's 'Problem with No Name', which illuminated a



collective yearning of women to do more than 'run the home.'<sup>72</sup> A comparable portrayal occurs with Sofia's mother in *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*. Sofia witnesses how when Maria returns from a date and tells her mother he is a 'nice guy', her mother's face turns from 'disgruntled housewife to hopeful mother' (p. 60). The 'disgruntled housewife' implies dissatisfaction in her marriage, yet the 'hopeful mother' suggests a desire for her daughter to marry.

Yet, Fielding's and Malik's portrayals differ in the mothers' responses to their unhappy marriages. Bridget's mother leaves Bridget's dad in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, acknowledging that she wants more and, as a result, 'discover[s] power' (p. 66). However, in *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Sofia's father dies and, consequently, leaves Sofia's mother a grieving widow with 'tears down her cheeks.' (p. 366). While Sofia's mother quickly becomes engaged to another man in the sequel, *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017), it is significant that she does not control and initiate the marriage ending, unlike Bridget's mother. Malik could be representing differences in expectations in marriage between traditional Muslim South Asian British women and white middle-class British women. Malik could also be highlighting, as Rivers (2017) identifies, 'the dominant narrative of the second wave as a white, middleclass movement.'<sup>73</sup> The choices created by second-wave feminist movements, such as Friedan's 'Problem with No Name', did not adequately represent or embrace women from BIPOC backgrounds. Either way, like with Sofia, Malik highlights the different forms of expectations that arise for British South Asian Muslim women.

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<sup>72</sup> Wilson, 'Chick Lit in the Undergraduate Classroom', p. 88.

<sup>73</sup> Rivers, p. 29.

## Discriminatory Practices associated with Dating: Ageism, Islamophobia, Homophobia in Chick Lit

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Marginalised women contend with further discriminatory practices when dating.

Fielding's texts connect two different forms of age stigmatisation through references to articles by women which reflect Bridget's contemporaneous experiences. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget refers to a 'patronizing article in the paper by Smug Married journalist' entitled 'The Joy of Single Life' (p. 243) which is beset with singlism. When describing single women, they write:

They're young, ambitious and rich but their lives hide an aching loneliness . . . When they leave work a gaping emotional hole opens up before them . . . Lonely style-obsessed individuals seek consolation in packeted comfort food of the kind their mother might have made (p. 244)

In comparison, in *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget refers to an article called 'The Tragic Fate of the Toy Boy' by Ellen Boschup (p. 318). The article includes many ageist comments: 'older, preying women, or "cougars" as they are appropriately known' take advantage of 'young, defenceless boys who are their prey.' (p. 320). As Beth Montemurro and Jenna Marie Siefken (2014) explain 'as a word, "cougar"—a socially constructed image of desperation and aggression fueled by popular culture, [is] viewed with derision by most.'<sup>74</sup> The derogatory animalistic imagery describing the women emphasises how gendered stigmas adapt and strengthen with age. Both articles are authored by women, revealing the judgements women place on each other. This comparison highlights how elucidating forms of discrimination remains a focus for Fielding's works and feminism.

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<sup>74</sup> Beth Montemurro and Jenna Marie Siefken, 'Cougars on the Prowl? New Perceptions of Older Women's Sexuality', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 28 (2014), 35–43 (p. 38) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.11.004>>.

For a large part of this text, Bridget dates a younger man and the reason why their relationship ends is partially due to the stigmatisation of their age difference. At Talitha's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party, significantly on the same day as Roxster's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, although some friends and family members praise her new relationship with a younger man, Bridget is stigmatised (again) by Cosmo and Woney, this time not for being single, but for dating a younger man: they ask Bridget, 'Is this your nephew?' (p. 305). When Roxster responds, 'That would be a very odd relationship', Cosmo 'looked as though the rug of his socio-sexual world view had been pulled from under him. His face was like a fruit machine with different ideas and emotions whizzing past, failing to find a final combination to rest on' (p. 305). The idiom of 'as though the rug had been being pulled from under him' suggests that something important (in this circumstance, his 'socio-sexual world view') has been taken away from him. Hence, a difference from the assumed dating conventions destabilises Cosmo. The simile 'like a fruit machine' shows his confusion towards it – it just does not make sense to him. Despite this, Roxster says that it 'was the best night of [his] entire life' and tells Bridget afterwards 'I heart you. I've never said this to a woman before I wish I had a time machine. I heart you.' (p. 310). Bridget is troubled by this wishing for a 'time machine', repeating it a few times over the following pages; she says, 'it was the first time he has ever mentioned the age difference. [...] It mattered to him, and with that came the elephant in the room' (p. 310). This elephant (the age difference) and the stigma associated with it eventually leads to their relationship ending. As Whelehan (2014) explains, '[N]ovels which depict older women at the centre also allow us to assess the ways ageism is internalised and inscribed in

conventions of representation of female characters.’<sup>75</sup> The novel highlights intersections of feminism and age, and critiques the gendered stigmatisation caused by ageist discrimination.

Islamophobia is another form of stigmatisation which chick lit addresses. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Fielding includes discriminatory statements for humorous effect as a reaction to the singlism and pro-family ideology perpetuated onto Bridget. Bridget is self-deprecatorily arguing that her single status and lack of nuclear family makes her ‘want to emigrate to a vicious Muslim regime, where at least all the women are treated like social outcasts’ (p. 290). Fielding illustrates Bridget’s ignorance here and the irony that she is herself enacting a form of stigmatisation which she critiques when inflicted on her. Arguably, this quote from *Bridget Jones's Diary* could have motivated Malik to write *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*: to disprove Bridget’s comment about the ‘Muslim regime’ by illustrating a heroine far from the woman Bridget describes. Fielding’s essay in the feminist collection partially shifts with regard to prejudices: her essay advocates for BIPOC women’s rights. Bridget says, ‘We’re not talking about the real gender equality issue here – the developing world, women living below the poverty line who are not trying to avoid being insulted but rather raped, mutilated, killed or starved.’<sup>76</sup> While, in a way, othering women in the ‘developing world’ (so in a way, stigmatising) and persisting with condescending tone, it is clear that Fielding intends to retract the overt racist statement from the first novel. Comparing Fielding’s texts (her first book and later

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<sup>75</sup> Whelehan, ‘Fiction or Polemic?’, p. 43.

<sup>76</sup> Fielding, ‘Bridget Jones’s Feminism Today Diary’, p. 89.

essay) suggests how newer chick lit is less problematic with regards to stigmatisation of ethnic minorities.

As examined above, in *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik articulates how Sofia feels a sense of pressure to look and act a certain way due to perpetuations of normative white femininity. Malik also addresses other areas of Islamophobic prejudice towards single Muslim women when dating, which are less related to normative femininity, and more due to Islamophobic stigmatising. With this text, Malik highlights stereotypes of Muslim women in order to challenge them. For example, Ali et al. (2019) posit that '[a]mong young British Muslims and their families and communities there is a widespread understanding that dating should not be mentioned, seen or acknowledged, either within the family or in public.'<sup>77</sup> Yet, Sofia shares her knowledge (and experiences) of Muslim dating with her white woman boss and agrees to write a book on the topic. Due to her gender and religious beliefs, Sofia is marginalised in her workplace. Brammers assumes '[i]t's so difficult for you' (p. 22) when discussing how it is 'always the woman' who moves in with her husband's parents. However, Sofia challenges this stereotype: '[A] person can say no. I said no' (p. 22). Sofia exemplifies this: she declines Imran's request for her to 'live with his parents and a hole-in-the-wall' (p. 21). Brammers is also reminded of the 'Asian girl in Birmingham' where something (unknown but presumably bad) happened '[j]ust because she wanted to go to university.' (p. 22). Brammers stereotypes all Asian women as part of a culture full of restrictions. Due to the first-person narrative and diary format, we see Sofia feeling like a 'black sheep' (p. 18) because of the need to explain standard Asian dating practices to

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<sup>77</sup> Ali et al., 'Halal Dating', p. 7.

her primarily white book publicity colleagues. When Brammers remarks, '[t]he sexual politics of double standards' when discovering Sofia is a virgin, Sofia adds to the diary, 'talk about limited observation – as if this double standard is just a Muslim phenomenon' (p. 22). Thus, Malik highlights the Islamophobic stigmatisation that Brammers enacts on her colleague. However, her colleagues' reactions underline the necessity of a book, albeit non-fiction (Sofia) or fiction (Malik), which illustrates the realities of modern Muslim dating and marriage.

Sofia has to contend with Islamophobic responses from the men she plans to date or eventually does date due to her wearing a hijab. Yet, Malik critiques the perceived sexist views of women wearing a hijab and highlights how Sofia's faith enhances rather than diminishes her agency. As Newns (2018) puts it, many modern British Muslim women writers (one I argue, is Malik), 'actively destabilize this perceived dichotomy between adherence to Islam and female agency, reasserting faith as integral to gender equality rather than its obstacle.'<sup>78</sup> On Shaadi.com, the online dating website discussed above, Sofia explains,

I've already received one response from Shady: *A hijab???? Seriously??!! You're living in the West!!!* Who is this prejudiced person who suffers from punctuation hysteria, one might ask? A BBC correspondent (p. 43)

The way 'Shady' is worded in the quote makes it seem like 'Shady' is a person – 'from Shady' – not the website itself, implying how this Islamophobic, rude person writing to her is representative of the website's clientele. The fact that Sofia claims this Islamophobic man seemed 'relatively normal' (p. 43) before this response indicates covert Islamophobia: his stigmatisation of Muslim women is disguised, making it more

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<sup>78</sup> Newns, 'Renegotiating Romantic Genres', p. 286.

difficult for women like Sofia to date. The humour used – ‘punctuation hysteria’ – could suggest the frequency with which this occurs; Sofia is unfazed by it, but it also could insinuate a coping mechanism for Muslim women – a way to reduce the marginalised feeling the Islamophobia induces. Finally, the reference to this person as a ‘BBC correspondent’ emphasises a lack of trust in the media: their hiring of covert Islamophobic people, whose news coverage will be impacted by their prejudiced views. Malik highlights how experiences such as these could leave Muslim women feeling that there is a low chance of finding a datable man who sees her equally and respectfully. Malik not only emphasises prejudice, gendered stigma and judgemental attitudes that Muslim women experience when discussing or participating in dating but also proves throughout the novel, that women who wear a hijab are not always opposed to change or innovation and hold traditional values.

Malik’s depiction of a Muslim gay man, ‘Hottie’, implies the complications, complexities and possible stigmatisation of queer culture within the stigmatised Muslim religion, and Sofia’s response to Hottie indicates areas of dating, which are ‘haram’, rather than ‘halal.’ Therefore, discussing Hottie’s dating stigmatisation in this chapter is essential. Claire Chambers et al. (2019) explain that while Malik does ‘make some effort to acknowledge, or at least register same-sex desire as a possibility’, it is ‘disappointing that the encounter is so brief and tinged with sympathy for the gay man’s apparent melancholia.’<sup>79</sup> Sofia goes on a date with ‘Hottie’, but later discovers he is gay. After this revelation, we do not see the character of ‘Hottie’ again, and Sofia considers him with empathy. At the realisation that ‘Hottie’ is gay, Sofia thinks: ‘I’ve not punctured a tiny

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<sup>79</sup> Chambers et al., “Sexual Misery” or “Happy British Muslims”?, pp. 82-3.

hole in his veneer—I've exposed everything completely' (p. 268). Malik's use of 'punctured' has connotations of deflation, sadness and wounds, and the fact that Sofia indicates that what she has done is worse than puncturing someone highlights the distress she feels she has caused Hottie. Chambers et al. (2019) argue that Sofia's empathetic 'thought process appears to be that Islam and LGBTQI+ sexualities are incompatible.'<sup>80</sup> However, it could also be that Sofia feels she has broken his pretence to seem heterosexual, his way of escaping the stigmatisation of queer culture, rather than her believing that his religion and sexual orientation are mismatched. He attempts to hide his sexual orientation because he enacts heteronormativity and dates Sofia. The 'hole in his veneer' language is also similar to the language of exposure explored above with the 'leaks' of marriage that occurs when a person says, "keep an open mind." The fact that it was not a 'tiny hole' but a complete 'exposure' adds to the metaphor that you are either 'in' or 'out' of 'the closet.' With this, there is a connection between singlism (the 'leaking' of marriage ideology) and queer culture (the 'exposing' of his sexuality). This is similar to Tom's theory in *Bridget Jones's Diary* that 'homosexuals and single women in their thirties have natural bonding: both being accustomed to disappointing their parents and being treated as freaks by society' (p. 27).

## Conclusion

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All three chick lit texts discussed in this chapter demonstrate normative notions of femininity: conventional aesthetic beauty standards of the unruly body, pressure to be

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<sup>80</sup> Chambers et al., "'Sexual Misery' or 'Happy British Muslims'?", pp. 82-3.



slim, to discipline the body and to look young, along with traditional performative dating behaviours and methods: women should be domesticated and non-feminist, and men should perform appropriate masculinity. All three texts also satirise these concepts: the romantic partner is attracted to non-normative notions of femininity; unfeminist self-help books generate unsuccessful results; and conventional gender roles are reversed. Comparing older and newer chick lit texts, it appears that aesthetic appearance (including conforming to the 'ideal woman') is becoming less critical in dating. Furthermore, non-normative notions of femininity are increasingly deemed humorous rather than self-deprecating. Newer chick lit texts offer representations of BIPOC and older women's complex, conflicted feelings towards normative femininity. Dating is shown as less traditional: women's roles are more than just reactive, and agency and opinion are encouraged more. Dating methods have also evolved: dating within the workplace is now viewed with more caution and the possible downsides of online dating are acknowledged.

Fielding and Malik depict gendered stigmatisation in their works. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the form of gendered stigma is narrow: Bridget experiences singlism and pro-family ideology. Fielding does critique this, though, with the diary entries, allowing us to see Bridget mock the views and perpetuations of her family and friends. She also emphasises the divide between women created by these forms of gendered stigma. One difference between the three texts is the heroine's reaction to the stigma they receive. In the first novel of the series, Bridget's response is self-pity due to her single status and anger towards herself. Then, in *Mad About the Boy*, this remains, but because of grief and loss: so widowhood rather than singlehood. With *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Malik constructs Sofia to openly defend her single status and challenge the expectations of

marriage perpetuated onto her not only by society, but also in her family tradition and religion. Malik adapts the gendered stigma that Bridget experiences in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and illuminates the added obstacles for South Asian British Muslim women. In a way, her *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* satirises *Bridget Jones's Diary's* narrow form of gendered stigma. Likewise, Bridget's new form of stigmatisation from her loss of the romance she had (widowhood) undermines the original stigmatisation (singlism) she experienced in the first novel.

When comparing *Bridget Jones's Diary* to *Mad About the Boy* and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, it is clear that specific changes have occurred alongside changing feminisms, and that the two newer texts justify the classification as 'neo chick lit.' The genre has further politicised: women are shown with more agency and control in their dating behaviours, feminism is seen less as unattractive, workplace romances are more taboo, and the challenge to gendered stigmatisation is elevated. *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated's* adaptation of instances in *Bridget Jones's Diary* to match a more intersectional feminist angle sheds light on less mainstream and publicised issues, indicating a diversifying of chick lit. The older, widowed woman is a significant theme in the newer book by a precursor chick lit author, suggesting the genre's maturation. However, the analysis in this chapter also tells us that quite a few areas of dating for single women have not changed. Concepts such as conventional aesthetic beauty standards and singlism remain in both precursor and later chick lit novels. The 'ideal woman' is still perpetuated in society, women are still expected to adhere to conventional beauty aesthetic standards, and dating guidebooks remain commercially successful. Consequently then, while certain areas have adapted, certain representations remain relatively static. This could be due to the lack of change since the 1990s in women's experiences in the dating

sphere. While modes and methods have changed, critiques of feminine expectations, dating inequalities, and stigmatisation endure in changing feminisms, but to different degrees. The stagnation could also be because the tropes tied to the theme of a single woman dating remain crucial to chick lit. Advancing to chapter two, I am interested to see if these continuities persist when examining sex and sexual politics in Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996), her newer work *Is There Still Sex in the City* (2019), and Candice Carty-Williams' novel *Queenie* (2019).

## CHAPTER 2 – ‘INTERNATIONAL CRAZY GIRLS’: SEX, RAUNCH AND RAPE CULTURE IN CHICK LIT

In the first chapter, I examined the theme of a single woman dating in chick lit. This chapter will continue to explore heterosexual relationships but with a focus on the next stage of dating in a conventional chick lit narrative: sex and the attendant sexual politics. Quoted from Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, the 'international crazy girls' are 'a certain type of woman' who 'virtually no men are able to resist.'<sup>1</sup> As discussed in more detail below, these women are grouped as a specific, hyper-conventional example of sexual attractiveness. This elucidates how this foundational chick lit text aligns with the core themes of my chapter. Sex and sexual politics are crucial areas that distinguish chick lit from romance, a genre category it is often aligned with.<sup>2</sup> This showcases the themes' significance to the genre. Through applying feminist concepts relevant to raunch culture and rape culture, this chapter examines to what extent chick lit's representations of women's sexual experiences and sexual politics have matured, diversified and become more politicised since the 1990s.

Feminist thinking harbours a consistent interest in examining sex and sexual politics, even if specific movements find new areas of focus. For example, the 1990s saw a postfeminist critique of second-wave feminism's 'Take Back the Night' marches

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<sup>1</sup> Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City* (London: Abacus, 2008), pp. 47-8. All further references will be given in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> Kiernan, 'No Satisfaction: Catch Kiss, Sex and the City, Run and the Conflict of Desires in Chick Lit's New Heroines', p. 208; see also: Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 'Rewriting The Romance', p. 496.

alongside advocations of women's sexual freedom.<sup>3</sup> The 2010s saw fourth-wave feminist movements in public events like SlutWalk, websites such as Jezebel and Black Girl Dangerous and the online actions and campaigns of #MeToo, #SayHerName, No More Page Three and the Everyday Sexism Project.<sup>4</sup> Both movements promote women's choices to be sexually free without shame, but the postfeminist critique of the second wave differs from the fourth wave's expansive list of campaigns against women being sexualised, harassed or abused. Intersectional feminism also encompasses ideologies related to sex and sexual politics, emphasising how it is important to recognise how BIPOC women face elevated issues related to sex and sexual politics. For example, Akeia A. F. Benard's (2016) study discovers how:

an Internet image search for "White female models" yields far different results than an Internet image search for "Black female models" [...] The former displays thumbnails of mostly head shots of White women. The latter displays images of full body shots of women in hypersexualized positions.'<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while intersections of feminism, postfeminism, fourth-wave feminism share certain core principles, there are particular distinctions in their discourses' priorities with regards to sex and sexual politics.

Alongside *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996) is celebrated as a founding text of the chick lit genre.<sup>6</sup> Its success is apparent in its popular adaptation into a television series (1998-2004), two films (2008, 2010), a 'prequel' series (2012-14), and the more recent rebooted continuation of the original series, *And Just Like That*

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Roiphe, *The Morning after*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Gill and Orgad, 'The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power'.

<sup>5</sup> Akeia A. F. Benard, 'Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism: Feminist and Human Rights Perspectives', *Sexualization, Media, & Society*, 2.4 (2016), 1-11 (p. 5) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2374623816680622>>.

<sup>6</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 6. See also: Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, pp. 16-17.

(2021-). *Sex and the City* is a collection of essays that originate from Bushnell's columns initially featured in the *New York Observer*. It calls to this chapter's focus even by just the first word in its title (Sex), and as Kiernan (2006) summarises, 'the heroines often demonstrate a greater concern for getting sexual kicks than for getting hitched'.<sup>7</sup> Mandy Merck (2003) points out that 'Bushnell's columns are mostly about men, successful Manhattan men and their deep antagonism to women' and notes that her work is a 'dark satire of metropolitan misogyny'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a key discussion area in this chapter will be Bushnell's tone and critique of the unequal sexual politics in 1990s New York. In 2003, Naomi Wolf interviewed Bushnell and asked her whether she considered herself a feminist. Bushnell affirmed, with no hesitation, Wolf paraphrases her explanation: '*Sex and the City* came out of women's experience in the early 1980s, when they were told to have a career before marriage. This, plus the sexual revolution, "created a huge amount of confusion for women."<sup>9</sup> Bushnell's direct quote is enclosed within double quote marks. Her references to confusion arising from second-wave feminist goals echoes postfeminist discourses.

Discussing her new book *Is There Still Sex in the City?* (2019) in a 2022 interview with Jia Tolentino, Bushnell was likewise asked to discuss her feminist ideologies. Tolentino's summary and Bushnell's response, likewise, harbour postfeminist ideologies. Tolentino consolidates Bushnell's 'sort of feminism' as 'a feminism dedicated to a woman's right to reject mainstream expectations of domesticity, to choose her own

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<sup>7</sup> Kiernan, p. 207.

<sup>8</sup> Merck, 'Sexuality in the City', (p. 49, p. 52).

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Wolf and Candace Bushnell, 'Cover Story: Sex and the Sisters', *The Sunday Times*, 20 July 2003 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cover-story-sex-and-the-sisters-8jp8nx96mmt>> [accessed 21 October 2022].

vision of happiness. But there are other expectations you seem to have embraced: youthful beauty, bloneness, heels.’<sup>10</sup> Bushnell responds, ‘I think the reality is, if you’re a heterosexual woman, you’ve got hormones, and there’s a part of you that wants to go out and attract a partner. A sex partner, even.’<sup>11</sup> Bushnell’s perpetuation of postfeminist ideologies suggests a sustained association with postfeminism. She also highlighted how her continued focus is on the sexual experiences of women. Regarding her inspiration behind *Is There Still Sex in the City?*, she said, ‘I had all these friends who were suddenly divorced. It was literally my friends who I wrote about in “Sex and the City,” but twenty-five years later, with these very different lives. The challenge is almost that you have to find yourself again, in a new way, with different cards.’<sup>12</sup> Bushnell’s re-entering the chick lit genre twenty-five years after the book that made her career was published and attempting to elucidate the changes to women’s experiences over this period not only emphasises the value of comparative research but also hints at the maturing of the genre of chick lit alongside social change.

The final primary text of this chapter is Candice Carty-Williams’ *Queenie* (2019). *Queenie* has been categorised in many different genres: from ‘chick lit’ to ‘contemporary’ to ‘literary’ fiction, emphasising how genre affiliation is often a flexible designation. The protagonist of *Queenie* has been marketed as a ‘Black Bridget Jones’, and understandably so: the text focuses on a Black heroine who, like Bridget, explores a woman’s experience of dating, sex, friendship and the workplace. This tagline has not always been favourably

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<sup>10</sup> Jia Tolentino and Candace Bushnell, ‘Candace Bushnell Is Back in the City’, *The New Yorker*, 16 February 2022 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/candace-bushnell-is-back-in-the-city>> [accessed 19 May 2023].

<sup>11</sup> Tolentino and Bushnell.

<sup>12</sup> Tolentino and Bushnell.

received by fans who argue it ‘profoundly underestimates’ the novel and that *Queenie* has ‘a lot more to offer’ than ‘chick lit.’<sup>13</sup> The denigration of chick lit here indicates the assumption of the genre’s lack of political depth and impact. Carty-Williams aimed for her novel to be ‘widely read’ and not ‘pigeonholed into literary fiction’, allowing for broader resonance.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in a BBC documentary, *Being Bridget Jones* (2020), Carty-Williams explains she has a ‘deep and long-lasting affection for’ Fielding’s works.<sup>15</sup> The author, then, seems less likely than these fans and critics to read her novel’s association with chick lit as a negative. Heike Mißler’s (2023) work magnifies this, arguing that *Queenie* ‘adopts chick lit features’, making it ‘recognizable’ for ‘readers of chick lit’ while also adding ‘overtly political elements’ to highlight that ‘the pursuit of love and happiness is not the same for people of colour.’<sup>16</sup> The addition of these ‘overtly political elements’ and representations of BIPOC to a text which also maintains chick lit features suggests a diversification and politicisation of the genre.

Ferriss and Young (2005) posit that, ‘[a]lthough Terry McMillan remains the original progenitor of popular black women’s fiction, most of the recent crop of black chick-lit titles owe more to *Sex and the City* than *Waiting to Exhale*.’<sup>17</sup> Although Ferriss and Young’s publication – and therefore their argument – precedes the publication of

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Don’t Call “Queenie” a “Black Bridget Jones”’, *Time* <<https://time.com/5554283/queenie-candice-carty-williams/>> [accessed 29 January 2023]; Aoife Smith, ‘Revolutionizing Chick-Lit With Queenie By Candice Carty-Williams’, *CLEVER-ISH*, 2019 <<https://www.cleverishmagazine.com/revolutionizing-chick-lit-with-queenie-by-candice-carty-williams/>> [accessed 29 January 2023].

<sup>14</sup> Anita Sethi and Candice Carty Williams, ‘Candice Carty-Williams: “When I Was Growing up, Humour Was a Deflection”’, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2020, section Books [accessed 29 January 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Nicholson, ‘Being Bridget Jones Review – a Sense of Humour That Came to Define an Era’, *The Guardian*, 22 December 2020, section Television & radio <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/dec/22/being-bridget-jones-review-a-sense-of-humour-that-came-to-define-an-era>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

<sup>16</sup> Mißler, ‘A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams’s *Queenie* (2019): Challenging Discourses of Race and Gender in the Chick-Lit Genre’, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, p. 8.



*Queenie*, the notion of *Sex and the City* inspiring Black chick lit remains and underlines the importance of comparing Bushnell's works to *Queenie* (2019), despite the different social contexts (US/UK) of the two.

This chapter compares representations of sex and sexual politics in *Sex and the City*, *Is There Still Sex in the City?* and *Queenie*. The first half of the chapter explores raunch culture, a term used to describe 'empowering miniskirts' and 'feminist strippers', and is defined as 'the dramatic sexualization of the body, underwritten by the beauty industry emphasis upon the look (and feel) of the female body as the key site of femininity.'<sup>18</sup> Raunch culture's principles are often associated with the postfeminist era of the 1990s and early 2000s. The second section of the chapter focuses on rape culture, a term that has been deployed within contemporary fourth-wave feminism and refers to a culture where 'rape isn't simply a common experience, but one which is normalised, tolerated, sometimes even encouraged'; 'the casual and pervasive presentation of women's bodies as both territory and commodity.'<sup>19</sup> Applying concepts associated with these cultures leads to an identification of similarities between postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism. Although texts like *Sex and the City* and *Queenie* reflect different sociocultural moments, they share a preoccupation with and recognition of the lived experiences of both raunch culture and rape culture.

The key differences between the older and newer chick lit is in the diversifying, maturing and politicising of the narrative. When comparing *Queenie* to *Sex and the City*

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<sup>18</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Woman and the Rise of Raunch Culture* p. 11; Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 165; see also S. L. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*.

<sup>19</sup> Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*, sec. 416; Tracey Nicholls, *Dismantling Rape Culture: The Peacebuilding Power of 'Me Too'* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 38.

and *Is There Still Sex in the City?*, it is clear that Carty-Williams' text underscores the harsher realities of sex and sexual politics that BIPOC women confront. For example, *Queenie* amplifies portrayals of sexualisation by also depicting the exoticisation and fetishisation of Black woman. *Is There Still Sex and the City?* offers an adapted portrayal of sex and sexual politics by focusing concepts most associated with mature women, like the shaming of older women's normative sexiness, and the term 'MILF.' The texts also suggest that the genre has become more politicised. Instances of patriarchal structures are more directly challenged in the two newer works than the satirical underscoring of Bushnell's foundational text.

## Raunch Culture

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*Sex and the City*, *Is There Still Sex in the City* and *Queenie* all examine raunch culture's ideologies of sex, speaking to both the positive elements of casual sex and sexual desirability, but also the negatives – like being subjected to judgement, slut-shaming and sexualisation. Regarding raunch culture, Ariel Levy (2006) concludes that,

the proposition that having the most simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been offered to us, and we have accepted it.<sup>20</sup>

Symptomatic of raunch culture's perpetuations of stereotypes of female sexuality and mantras of sexual liberation and empowerment for women is the strand of postfeminism: 'do-me feminism'. Genz and Brabon define 'do-me feminism' as 'a highly sexualised version of power feminism, [...] that sees sexual freedom as the key to female

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<sup>20</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 136.

independence and emancipation.’<sup>21</sup> They argue how do-me feminism and raunch culture ‘blend the sometimes conflicting ideologies of women’s liberation and the sexual revolution by heralding sexually provocative appearance and behaviour (including exhibitionist stripping) as acts of female empowerment.’<sup>22</sup> Bushnell and Carty-Williams highlight the pressures and discomforts that arise from conflicting perceptions of do-me feminism and raunch culture, including both its fostering of feelings of empowerment but also its dependency on male partners. This section explores three strands of raunch culture: casual sex (and ensuing judgments), sexual desirability and the sexualisation of women (including exoticisation and fetishisation).

#### ‘Sex like a man’: Casual Sex (and Ensuing Judgments) in Chick Lit

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All three novels emphasise the complexities associated with raunch culture’s advocacy of the merits of being sexually free and engaging in casual sex. I refer to casual sex as Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun’s (2016) research defines it, as any ‘sexual activity, coital or otherwise, that occurs between two people (e.g., strangers, recently met acquaintances, friends) outside the context of a committed, romantic, or longer-term relationship.’<sup>23</sup> Casual sex is an expression of sexual freedom: a product of a ‘postfeminist, neoliberal moment in which young women should not only be beautiful but sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practised and always ‘up for it.’<sup>24</sup> Postfeminist Naomi

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<sup>21</sup> Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> Genz and Brabon, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun, ‘Unpacking the “Pleasures” and “Pains” of Heterosexual Casual Sex: Beyond Singular Understandings’, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 54.1 (2016), 1–18 (p. 2).

<sup>24</sup> Rosalind Gill, ‘Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising’, *Feminism & Psychology*, 18.1 (2008), 35–6 (p. 35).

Wolf (1993) alludes to do-me feminism when articulating how casual sex should be applauded and not judged:

Why should the sentence “I want to make love”, when spoken to a man, subordinate a woman? Or even “I want to go down on you”? or “Fuck me”? Why shouldn’t I talk about the absolute delight that male sexual response instils in me?<sup>25</sup>

Wolf aimed for her work to ‘chart a path through the controversy that will let a woman simultaneously embrace sex and fight rape.’<sup>26</sup> Postfeminist ideology heralds the positivity associated with women engaging in casual sex. Bushnell and Carty-Williams display casual sex, but also highlight the complications associated with engaging in it. As Laura Thompson (2018) explores,

[e]ngaging in casual sex is often depicted as an expression of sexual liberation for (young, attractive and single) women, and yet sexual double standards stubbornly persist. Women who appear in public, sexualised spaces (i.e. ‘hookup’ apps) may thus face abuse for not living up to impossible demands to be sexually available (and not prudish) but not ‘slutty’.<sup>27</sup>

*Queenie*, *Sex and the City* and *Is There Still Sex in the City* all illustrate these impossible demands for women: to express a form of sexual liberation that can lead to judgement and shaming.

Through portrayals of these complications and contradictions, Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* critiques the notion of fulfilment gained via having ‘sex like a man.’ Caroline Smith (2008) argues that ‘Bushnell’s book [*Sex and the City*] contains a cast of female characters, many of whom exude sexuality and whom experiment sexually.’<sup>28</sup> One such sexually-experimenting character is Samantha Jones, who is hailed as following the

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<sup>25</sup> Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Thompson, “‘I Can Be Your Tinder Nightmare’: Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace”, *Feminism & Psychology*, 2018, 69-89 (p. 85).

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, p. 89.

mantra “screw it” and just go out and have sex like a man’ (p. 40). ‘Sex like a man’ is implied as engaging in sex with no feelings, illustrating casual sex and sexual liberation advocated as part of raunch culture, but also alluding to ladette culture. Imelda Whelehan (2000) argues, ‘the term ladette is arguably a male invention, a mere appendage to the lad, expressing the view that young women can behave as badly as young men’; ‘the ladette offers the most shallow model of gender equality.’<sup>29</sup> With reference to the television adaptation, Ariel Levy (2006) argues that ‘*Sex and the City* divided human behavior into like a man’s or like a woman’s. Instead of being a confident woman, Samantha had the “ego of a man.”’<sup>30</sup> While Bushnell does highlight a gendered division with regards to human behaviour that expresses young women ‘behaving as badly as men’, she also complicates the normative gender roles associated with sexual politics. Through referring to Samantha as having ‘sex like a man’, Bushnell satirises postfeminist preoccupation with ‘reclaiming’ essentialist gender roles.<sup>31</sup> Samantha’s outcome at the end of the book critiques the contradictory ideologies imposed upon women to both embrace emotionless sex and desire couplehood. In the ‘Epilogue’, Bushnell explains how ‘Samantha Jones decided to give up on New York. She went to L.A. for the Oscars and met Tyler Kladd at a party where they were both naked in the swimming pool. They’re now living together’ (p. 244). Bushnell implies the postfeminist irony that embracing sexualisation (swimming naked) results in lasting partnership (living together). Through the implication of the complexities associated with gender roles, and a coupled outcome of one of the characters who engages in emotionless sexual

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<sup>29</sup> Whelehan, *Overloaded*, p. 49 and, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 120.

<sup>31</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, p. 21.

encounters, Bushnell highlights contradictions and areas of dissatisfaction associated with certain strands of raunch culture.

The positive connotations of raunch culture's sexually free women are also challenged by Carty-Williams. *Queenie's* heroine engages in many sexual encounters throughout the novel, but they leave her feeling dissatisfied and objectified. Zooming into Queenie's sex with Adi demonstrates this: she 'try[s] to direct [her] attention to something completely removed from the car' while he 'smacked [her] bottom'.<sup>32</sup> Adi fetishises Queenie's Black body: "Cause I love black girls' bums, innit, Queenie. Das why. My wife, yeah, she's got a pretty face but she's skinny. No bum.' (p. 52). Queenie's disassociation of pleasure and intimacy from sex is ironically prompted by what she believes she should enjoy. After sex with Adi, she wonders 'if it had been that encounter with Adi that had turned [her] into some sort of male-voice-command-activated sex-bot' (p. 118). Carty-Williams highlights the negative experiences and feelings that can arise from casual sex. '

In *Is There Still Sex in the City*, the narrator is a divorced older woman who chooses to not engage in casual sex. She finds herself

for the first time in thirty-four years to be man-free. This also meant being sex-free. At this point in my life, I'm not a casual sex person. I didn't talk about it, of course. The topic of sex—once the source of so much amusement, embarrassment, fear, and joy—rarely came up.<sup>33</sup>

The 'point in her life' echoes how previously she had been a 'casual sex' person, highlighting her choice now, as an older woman, not to return to this. The 'of course' tag

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<sup>32</sup> Candice Carty-Williams, *Queenie*, Kindle Edition (London: Trapeze, 2019), p. 53

<sup>33</sup> Candace Bushnell, *Is There Still Sex in the City?* (New York: Grove Press, 2019), p. 10. All further references will be given in the main text. The title will also be shortened to *Is There Still Sex*.

after 'I don't talk about it' suggests the expectation that discussing sex, and most likely having casual sex, is a younger woman's arena. Bushnell complicates this implication, though, with the narrator's later actions: 'we did what we'd done years ago, [...] [w]e gathered together to figure it out. [...] And almost immediately, the way it had years ago when we were all single, the topic turned once again to sex' (p. 18). In doing so, *Is There Still Sex*, like its predecessor twenty-five years earlier, comments on and defies assumptions about women and their sexual experiences. By extending these talks to older women, Bushnell is maturing the genre.

While *Sex and the City* subtly points out that a potential negative consequence of casual sex is pregnancy – when Carrie spells out 'C-O-N-D-O-M' to a child (p. 164) – both of the newer works of chick lit more explicitly highlight the medicalisation and realism of casual sex. Firstly, both of the more contemporary texts include discussions of sex in a healthcare setting towards the start. Queenie starts the novel 'in the stirrups' (p. 1) with 'three hospital staff' (p. 2) staring at her coil (a form of contraception) on an ultrasound as she is told that she has had a miscarriage; the staff explain this can 'happen' but at least the coil has 'done the job' (p. 7), meaning it has prevented a pregnancy. Protected and unprotected sex is a common theme in the novel. Carty-Williams disrupts ideals of casual sex by demonstrating realistic complications: STIs, pregnancy and abuse. Similarly, in Chapter 2 of *Is There Still Sex*, the narrator visits the gynaecologist, where sexual protection is also openly discussed as the doctor informs the narrator: '[t]he hormone ring isn't working. Your vagina is not flexible enough' (p. 20). Before this revelation, the doctor's news is built up as a very serious concern: the narrator 'felt the familiar trickle of fear. Had I missed something? Had I done something wrong? Was I now doomed? I got dressed and headed into her office, bracing for the worst' (p. 20).

The imagery, questioning and 'bracing' for bad news suggests something medically serious. Instead, her contraceptive is simply not working. The exaggeration here is for comical effect; it satirises the social preoccupation with women maintaining youthful, flexible vaginas. The novel also points out the importance of sex being safe and protected. Despite the alarmist accounts of sexual health, depicting gynaecologist offices in chick lit normalises the practice as part of peoples' sexual lives and suggests the importance of depicting realistic concerns that can stem from casual sex.

In *Queenie*, Carty-Williams highlights how women receive conflicting messages when engaging in casual sex, in terms of both raunch culture and broader judgements. Inequalities within and inadequacies of the healthcare system are further implied. When Queenie visits the clinic, she is questioned by the nurse about her sexual history. Queenie feels judged when the nurse repeats a string of questions four times: asking when she last had sex (and then 'the partner before that'), whether the partner was long-term or casual (in which Queenie answered 'casual' each time), whether the sex was protected or not (unprotected in Queenie's case), whether the partner was from Africa, and whether it was 'oral, vaginal or anal sex' (p. 127-9). Queenie's continual response of 'unprotected' emphasises the healthcare worker's inference of her sexual behaviour as irresponsible. As he goes on continually asking her these questions, Queenie's frustration becomes clearer. For example,

'And before that?'  
 I counted on my fingers. 'A week and a half before that?'  
 'Was the partner –'  
 'Casual!' I responded.  
 'And was the sex –'  
 '– unprotected. Not African.' I nodded.  
 'And before –'  
 'One week before that, casual, unprotected, vaginal.'



'Okay, I think I get the picture.' The nurse scratched his head and began to type. (p. 129)

The blunt and candid tone of the healthcare worker highlights the apathetic, standard, formulaic procedures they implement, and the use of exclamations and dashes hint at anger and interruption, respectively. Queenie's interruption indicates her feelings of discomfort in the situation. Consequently, Carty-Williams emphasises the stigmas and shaming associated with engaging in casual sexual encounters. The query, '[w]ere they from ... Africa?', allegedly because this would correlate with a '[h]igher risk of HIV', is exclusionary and foregrounds inequalities of the healthcare system (p. 128). With this scene, Carty-Williams inscribes safety, implying the consequences of unprotected sex for women. It also illustrates concerns and problems with the healthcare service.

In *Queenie*, Carty-Williams uses her protagonist's experiences to illustrate the deficiencies in women's sexual health treatment. Social judgement in a medical setting is further highlighted later in the novel when Queenie must return to the clinic for a fuller examination. This time, she is seen by Elspeth, a 'health advisor' who is described as a 'slim, pale woman with almost white-blue eyes and grey hair', and who 'looked like she was going to tell [Queenie] off' (p. 137). When leaving to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases, she is given 'a word of warning' by Elspeth: '[b]eing on the IUD actually makes you more likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection. Use protection if you're going to have such varied and frequent sex' (p. 138). As mentioned above, a level of judgement is implied with the two adjectives 'varied and frequent' emphasized by 'such', and the command of 'use protection' indicates Elspeth's feelings of superiority. Similarly, the 'word of warning' and added 'actually' suggests condescension. In the following chapter, despite this 'advice', Queenie says, '[w]e didn't

use protection again. I needed to take this seriously and not self-sabotage. The last thing I needed adding to my unclear relationship situation was an STI. What was wrong with me? I wished at this point I cared about myself enough to try to answer the question' (p. 142). Along with elucidating Queenie's mental health struggles, this also emphasises the clinic's neglect of Queenie through providing judgement and condescension instead of support and guidance.

In *Is There Still Sex*, Bushnell accentuates feelings of discomfort when visiting a gynaecologist. The narrator makes a 'garbled' reply in response to the gynaecologist's question, '[w]hen was the last time you had sex?' (p. 20). Her nerves stem from her recent lack of sex; considering this interaction alongside Queenie's, this dialogue implies that women get judged whether they are seen to be having 'too much' sex or 'not enough'. The gynaecologist then advises the narrator to have the 'Mona Lisa treatment' which 'restores thickness and elasticity to the vagina', informing her, 'you'll find it makes a huge difference when it comes to sex' (p. 20). The named association of this treatment with a painting of an attractive woman who is believed to be in her twenties implies that the treatment will make a vagina appear beautiful and youthful. The way the gynaecologist was 'sounding like a woman in an advert' highlights the consumerism at work in selling this product, rather than a medical need. When the narrator discovers the treatment costs three thousand dollars, she sees this as an elucidation of gender inequalities: '[a]s usual, there's a big difference in the price men pay for youth versus what it costs women' (p. 20). Her comparison of the cost of women's pleasure in contrast to man's (Viagra) is exemplified further by the fact the pamphlet is described as 'purple' (p. 20): a normative 'feminine' colour equivalent to the 'blue pill' of Viagra. The narrator's abrupt decline of the procedure (p. 20) disrupts the sexual primacy often

associated with Bushnell's works. It could appear incongruous that an author whose foundational work demonstrated the prominence of sexuality in 1990s New York considers a product which makes a 'huge difference when it comes to sex' is not worth the money.

Slut-shaming is also represented as a negative social and interpersonal consequence of casual sex in these texts. As the above suggests, *Queenie* highlights this judgement when the protagonist visits the sexual health clinic. Queenie returns after what she describes as 'two vaginally restorative weeks of no sex' (p. 135) and is told, '[t]he last time you came in here, you had vaginal bruising, some anal tearing, and bruises on your bottom and thighs, which meant that you weren't able to have a full examination' (p. 137-8). Queenie then jokingly responds, '[a]h, but at least I had my pride' (p. 138). The sarcastic response is archetypal of chick lit, where a woman is in an awkward position and uses humour to lighten the situation's seriousness. In this instance, Queenie is embarrassed and uses humour to create a more receptive environment. She is asked, 'was the sex consensual?' and angrily squawks her response: '[y]es, it was! My God, listen to me! If I were in danger I would say! [...] You're all so judgmental' (p. 138). She then must deal with microaggressions from the nurse who says, "your ethnic group puts you at a higher risk of being in an abusive relationship. No need to be so shrill. I'll update the file." *Tap tap tap*' (p. 138). The '*[t]ap tap tap*' describes the nurse's move away from the care of Queenie (the patient) and towards the impersonal procedures and standards in medical professions. Throughout this scene, Carty-Williams demonstrates that even a place meant to offer support and healthcare can be discriminatory.

All three texts highlight women slut-shaming other women within friendships. In *Sex and the City*, Cici and Carlyne both slut-shame one another due to their attraction to and sexual relations with the same man, Sam. Carlyne and Sam have slept together 'about twenty times', with the 'last time' being 'that hand job at System' (p. 129). After hearing this, Cici condescendingly questions, '[y]ou gave someone a hand job at a club?' (p. 129), implying a level of judgment at the setting of this sexual activity. Sam invites Cici to Carlyne's birthday party, to Carlyne's shock; she says to Sam, '[g]et out and take your cheap little slut with you' (p. 130). The use of 'slut' here is meant to be offensive: it highlights a move away from sexual liberation and towards judgement (as 'slutty'). It emphasises how these demands placed on women – as the above critical quote of Thompson's (2018) suggests – are impossible because they are subjective: activity that is sexually available for one person could be deemed 'slutty' by another. Before this section starts, though, Bushnell writes that 'Carlyne and Cici are best friends through the usual conduit of bonding female friendship in New York: Over some jerky guy' (p. 128), emphasising how despite their slut-shaming of one another, they still became friends. This also suggests that slut-shaming is so common and expected by women at the time of writing that they move on from it quickly.

The two examples of slut-shaming are slightly different in the above section of *Sex and the City* – one is as a result of risqué behaviour (hand job in a club) and the other is normative sexual behaviour, but with a man who is perceived as 'taken'. *Queenie* also illustrates how slut-shaming from another woman can result from one woman having an existing relationship with another's sexual partner. While Queenie's friend Cassandra judges her before it is revealed that Queenie has had sex with Cassandra's boyfriend, the slut-shaming is elevated once Cassandra knows her friend's casual sex is being

experienced with her 'Guy.' This is revealed when Cassandra visits Queenie's home to go for breakfast together: 'quietly', Queenie tells her, 'I've got company', 'Cassandra snort[s]' a reply of, '[o]h my god, another one? How many is it now?' (p. 230). As Queenie notices, the implication here is "judgement" (p. 230). She tells Cassandra, '[t]hat's not a very feminist question' (p. 230), echoing postfeminist advocations for sexual liberation for women. When Cassandra discovers that Queenie's casual sex partner is Guy, Cassandra's boyfriend, she, like Carolyn in *Sex and the City*, insults Queenie, saying, '[d]on't touch me. You slut [...] I knew that if you met him, you'd want to fuck him, like you fuck literally all men who look your way these days [...]. Let me guess where he comes in the sequence? First, second, thirtieth? I hope you've been using protection! [...] [A]ll you can do is fuck, fuck, fuck, to fill a fucking void" (p. 234). Like with *Sex and the City*, the terminology 'slut' is used to shame Queenie. The repetition of the expletive 'fuck' also emphasises that Cassandra's anger and upset is the source of her slut-shaming. Unlike *Sex and the City*, which treats the interaction humorously, through *Queenie's* first-person perspective, we see Queenie's hurt from hearing these words. 'I felt like the floor was whipped away from under my feet' (p. 233) demonstrates Queenie's shock at Cassandra's response. Carty-Williams highlights that even friendships can be broken through these impossible demands on women. Cassandra is constructed as one of the anti-heroes of the novel: Queenie did not know Cassandra was in a relationship with the person she was having sex with, and yet Queenie is the one she is angry with; also, Cassandra does not support Queenie through her mental health troubles, but instead adds to them. However, the novel's conclusion sees Queenie and Cassandra become friends again, they 'put it all behind' them and 'move[d] on', like Cici

and Carolyne (p. 382). This, then, likewise indicates that friendship should overpower sexual relations.

In *Is There Still Sex*, as well, Bushnell shows friends slut-shaming one another.

Sassy is having sex with a younger man, James, and when the narrator discovers this, she offers a level of judgement to Sassy:

‘I decided to pop over to Sassy’s. The cars were there, so I went inside. The place was empty. I wandered into Sassy’s room just to be sure. The bed was a mess, and the pillows on both sides had been used. On the floor was a torn packet of foil.’ (p. 89)

Having the short sentence start with ‘on the floor’ places emphasis on what was on the floor: the ‘packet of foil’ implied as a condom. The abruptness indicates a subtle shaming. Furthermore, this scene presents the narrator as invasive – entering a house uninvited, wandering around, and investigating. The multiple short sentences build a sense of mystery as to what the narrator is going to find. The outcome being a condom is anticlimactic. This resembles the scene at the gynaecologist analysed above where tension is built to trivialise the emphasis people place on having youthful vaginas. Bushnell suggests exaggeration here to satirise the judgement women place on each other – implying what does it matter if Sassy and James are having sex: they are both consensual, single adults. We then see the narrator share this news (and judgement) with her friend, Tilda Tia: “‘Sassy and James are not just friends. They’re sleeping together.’ I said this thunderously, as if I were Charlton Heston in one of those religious movies.’ (pp. 89-90) The ‘thunderously’ and the ‘religious movies’ is hyperbolic, ridiculing the anger felt by the narrator. She borrows from the religious connotations of ‘shaming’ their sex, deliberately aping Heston. Like Cici and Carolyne and Queenie and Cassandra, Sassy and the narrator remain friends, despite her slut-shaming (p. 90).

Arguably, then, the slut-shaming transpires when there is an age gap, or the woman is having sex with the other's 'boyfriend'. The slut-shaming reveals social pressures and engrained habits of judgement that sometimes contradict social shifts (i.e. a context where casual sex is encouraged in principle but castigated in practice).

#### Sexual Desirability: Challenges to Transactional Relationships and Women's Ephemeral, Narrow and Expanding Sex Appeal in Chick Lit

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All three texts depict women using their sexual desirability to gain emotional or physical benefits. Genz and Brabon (2009) evaluate how 'the do-me feminist consciously employs her physical appearance and sexuality in order to achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over her life.'<sup>34</sup> With the outcomes of certain characters, the authors promote the ideology that women should not see their sexiness as their key or sole source of identity by elucidating how it leaves the heroines discontented. Rosalind Gill (2009) identifies that 'it is possession of a "sexy body" that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity' and 'any woman who is unable to live up to the increasingly narrow standards of [...] sex appeal [...] [is] never accorded sexual subjecthood.'<sup>35</sup> By emphasising the dissatisfaction of this way of gaining control over her life and highlighting the impermanence of women's normative sexiness, Bushnell and Carty-Williams challenge the strand of postfeminism associated with do-me feminism and raunch culture.

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<sup>34</sup> Genz and Brabon, p. 92.

<sup>35</sup> Gill, Rosalind, 'Supersexualize Me! Advertising and the "Midriffs"', in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualisation of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2009), pp. 93–109 (p. 100, p. 104)

In *Sex and the City*, Bushnell suggests a step away from transactional relationships and offers a critique of the do-me feminist strand of women using their sexual desirability for social and material gains. At one point, Carrie and Robert discuss the ‘international crazy girls’ on the phone:

“You’ll run into one of these girls in Paris, and they’ll be wearing a see-through dress and it will drive you nuts and you see their pictures in *W* and places like that, and their allure keeps growing on you. Their sexual power is like this amazing, dazzling force that can change your life, you think, if you can touch it, which you can’t, which ...”  
Carrie hung up on him. (p. 48-49)

The ‘sexual power’ that Robert refers to here is the women’s sex appeal and his desire for them. Bushnell plays on words because, as the text demonstrates, these women’s ‘sexual power’ is dependent on men. Robert’s sentence trails off, and Carrie hangs up on him – her reaction implies the idiocy of his words and suggests that similar expressions of desire should be ignored. Amalita, an example given in *Sex and the City* of an ‘international crazy girl’, pre-orders a coat from Gucci, knowing that the next day she will go shopping with a wealthy male stranger who she knows will then buy her the coat (p. 48). Similarly, Ray, another ‘international crazy girl’, survives by taking ‘gifts. A Bulgari watch. A Harry Winston necklace. Clothing, cars, a bungalow on someone’s property, someone who wants to help her. And cash’ (p. 54). Amalita, though, is dissatisfied with this lifestyle: she ‘could have been a call girl, it would have been so much easier. It’s not the sex that’s the problem—if I like a man, I’m going to do it anyway—but the fact that you’ll never be on their level. You’re an employee. But at least you might walk away with some cash’ (p. 54). References to a fantasy of being an ‘employee’ demonstrates how she recognises that her sex is already in some ways transactional. Legitimising this would guarantee the benefits and rewards, suggesting



that they are not certain in her current, non-call-girl situation. But at the end of the text, Amalita's 'daughter got into the prestigious Kitford preschool in New York. Amalita started her own consulting firm' (p. 244), suggesting she managed to create a business, earn money and send her daughter to a good school without relying on transactional relationships with men.

The representation of sexual desirability and transactional relationships shifts in *Is There Still Sex*, prompted by Bushnell's focus on women in their fifties. Like she does with the 'international crazy girls' in *Sex and the City*, Bushnell crafts an image of 'middle-aged madness, or MAM' women who are 'expected to exercise, start new business ventures, move to a different state, have casual sex with strangers, get arrested, and start all over again' (p. 132). One such 'MAM' experience is Ess, a divorced woman who gains a new form of sexual desirability through breast enlargement. After this, Ess notices 'an unfamiliar weight on her chest. The weight of breasts. Of sexiness. Of desire and of being desired' (p. 138). The short sentences and repetition of different feelings emphasise the novelty of the new sexual allure she now experiences due to having larger breasts. Abstract items – sexiness, desire and desirability – are also depicted as 'heavier', indicating both the gains and burden of the breast implants and associated sexuality. Bushnell writes of Ess, '[t]he thought of men looking at her, of desiring her, turned her on again' (p. 138). A sense of attracting men gives Ess a sense of sexual pleasure. Furthermore, Ess openly reveals she wants to 'find a rich man to marry' (p. 139). Like with Amalita, the transparency of Bushnell's characters satirise her concepts (like marrying and dating for money) more clearly. Bushnell's narrator states, '[i]n the story of marrying a man for his money, the woman isn't supposed to admit it. She's supposed to at least pretend to love the guy. But Ess didn't do that' (p. 139). Instead, she openly

reveals her plan to achieve personal and professional objectives, and eventually marries the wealthy Eddie. Her two children 'had a fine roof over their heads, and they had the best schooling, and that was what mattered' (p. 140). Here, despite Ess' problematic actions – using a man for money – Ess appears selfless because 'what mattered' is her children. Later, though, 'one of Ess's breast implants exploded' (p. 143). Bushnell, then, satirises the sense of desirability and sex appeal which Ess gained from her breast implants – it did not last.

Of the three novels I consider in this chapter, *Queenie* is most attentive to the complex power dynamics of sexual desirability and transactional relationships. Queenie exudes sexual desirability: many men express their desire for sex with her throughout the novel. One such instance is her sex with Adi, an old friend, who has 'been on [her] case relentlessly, before and after his lavish desi wedding to his girlfriend of eight years', asking her, 'ready for me yet?' when she is 'stood at the bus stop' (p. 22). The 'relentlessly' highlights Adi's persistence in his attempts to have sex with Queenie. The heroine also gains 'objectives' from her sexual desirability: Adi drives her around in his 'black BMW' (p. 22) because she has limited transport options. In their sexual encounter, though, Adi perpetuates narrow standards of sex appeal onto Queenie: '[w]hy are you wearing full knickers? I like my girls in thongs.' (p. 52) Thus, Carty-Williams critiques whether the use of her sexual desirability is ultimately to a woman's advantage: men then feel a sense of control and entitlement to enforce a form of normative sexiness onto women.

The ephemerality and narrowness of sex appeal and possession of a sexy body are also depicted in both of Bushnell's works. In *Sex and the City*, the 'toxic bachelors' scorn older women:

For a woman who's older, forty maybe, it's going to be harder because you're not going to feel that strong, initial attraction. You'll have to see them a lot before you want to sleep with them, and then it's about something else. (pp. 27-8)

The narrator mocks his theory with the minor question: '[s]exy lingerie, perhaps?' (p. 28). Adding humour to a conversation minimises his contention and elucidates the narrow-mindedness of these 'toxic bachelors.' Similarly, in *Is There Still Sex*, Bushnell evaluates that 'middle-aged men were often still of the mindset that women over fifty weren't all that appealing' (p. 194). The 'still of the mindset' suggests a continuation of the previous shaming of older women.

Men desiring youthful women is shown in more detail with Kitty and Harold in *Is There Still Sex* and with Mr Marvellous in *Sex and the City*. Harold initially seems interested in Kitty, a woman in her fifties, but she doesn't hear from him, only seeing him six months later 'with a woman. She, too, had a cool downtown haircut. But she looked young. She didn't have a line on her face. Kitty decided she couldn't be more than twenty-five' (p. 195). He tells Kitty he is 'about to become a father again', leading the narrator to summarise how '[n]o matter how age appropriate he is and no matter how great you are, in less time than it takes to get a blow-dry he has not just a new relationship but a whole new family' (196). Bushnell elucidates gender double standards with regards to both stereotyping and fertility: how an older man continues being fertile and attractive while a woman loses her sex appeal and reproductive capacity. Harold is comparable to *Sex and the City*'s Mr Marvelous, who is first introduced to the text as 'sixty-five, says he's sixty. Square jaw, silver hair, bright blue eyes, athletic – all parts

work on demand. Married (and divorced) five times. Twelve kids' (p. 97). Throughout the chapter, we see Mr Marvelous flirt with 'Sabrina: thirty-two, breasts spilling out of a black Donna Karan tank top' (p. 100), 'an attractive blond with a cocker spaniel' whose 'boyfriend walks up' (p. 101) and 'a student' who is 'awkwardly rollerblading. She's wearing a tight white T-shirt and tiny black shorts. She has long dark hair tied up in a ponytail, but it's her legs that get you' (p. 102). The three different women in the space of a few pages all indicate his 'youthful' fantasy. With Audrey, the final rollerblading student, he sees her randomly in the street and decides he is 'in love.' (p. 102). Mr Marvelous comments to Carrie and Mr Big that '[s]he had a ring on her finger. What's her husband doing letting her roller blade by herself?' (p. 103). The 'letting her' suggests Mr Marvelous believes that a husband should control his wife, and the 'by herself' implies that a husband should protect his wife, linking again to infantilisation. Bushnell mocks the character of Mr Marvelous; his name takes on an ironic tone and he is coded as pathetic. Later in the novel, Mr Marvelous 'turns his Mercedes into the road where he last saw Audrey. He gets out, opens the trunk, and after a certain amount of struggle, puts on a pair of rollerblades.' (p. 104). Rollerblades symbolise youth and innocence: Audrey wears them, and Mr Marvelous struggles to put them on. This implies that he struggles to return to the same youthful, innocent persona that he is attracted to. With both texts, Bushnell satirises the concept of men sexually desiring youth despite their own advanced ages.

Both of Bushnell's works emphasise the consumerist elements associated with possessing a youthful, sexually desirable body. Indirectly referencing raunch culture, Laura Kipnis (2007) argues that sexuality is 'packaged and sold back to women in the form of pricey accoutrements: the bad girl lingerie, the kitten-with-a-whip wardrobe,

the fuck-me heels, and the regular bikini waxes.’<sup>36</sup> This insistence on maintaining sex appeal is evident in the way *Sex and the City*’s Amalita gains financial income at the start of the text. Amalita feels she has to ‘keep up. With the clothes and the body. The exercise classes. The massages, facials. Plastic surgery. It’s expensive. Look at Ray. She’s had her breasts done, lips, buttocks; she’s not young, darling, over forty. What you see is all she’s got.’ (p. 54) Listing all the different purchases that constitute Ray’s attractiveness emphasises the superficiality of the ‘sexy body’ that women are instructed to desire, and demonstrates how these narrow standards are perpetuated by ‘pricey accoutrements.’ That Ray’s extensively laboured-over body is ‘all she’s got’ demonstrates the vulnerability of women who rely on their sexual attractiveness for survival. This is underscored by Robert’s first two questions to the narrator, ‘[i]s she still alive? Still beautiful?’ (p. 48), which indicates his ageism. When Amalita enters motherhood, she finds herself less desirable to men – suggesting the impermanence of sexual desirability. In *Is There Still Sex*, Bushnell also lists Bushnell the consumer elements that can aid in maintaining a youthful sexiness: ‘[d]ue to exercise, hair extensions, Botox and filler, healthy eating, and advanced skin care, even if a woman is technically too old to bear a child, she can still look like she can’ (p. 65). Despite the publication date being twenty years later, the lists include similar items: exercise, Botox, filler and plastic surgery. This suggests that corporations have continued to capitalise on the enduring perception of sexual desirability being associated with youth.

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<sup>36</sup> Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing: Dirt, Envy, Sex, Vulnerability*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 64.

*Is There Still Sex*, though, does offer exceptions to this norm. The more contemporary work offers a new perspective of the women who exude sensuality, more specifically, older women. It adheres with Sharron Hinchliff's (2014) work on the new visibility of sexuality in older women: 'the boundaries around the age at which women are identified for their sexiness are blurring.'<sup>37</sup> This highlighted in the text with the term 'MILF'. Bushnell explains, '[t]hanks to pornography, things have changed. In 2007, the most googled porn request was 'MILF' – mothers I'd like to fuck.' (p. 65) While the term 'MILF' is problematic, the articulation and critique of it in Bushnell's work indicates that *Is There Still Sex* is a more intersectional publication than Bushnell's first. As Sharon Hinchliff (2014) points out, older women being offered further normative sex appeal is not a straightforward development for feminism: it can be viewed as 'offering freedoms (from the stereotype of asexuality) and opportunities (for new types of relationships) but also [...] comes with added responsibilities and dangers.'<sup>38</sup> Melissa Ames and Sarah Himsel Burcon (2016) expand on this, arguing:

The word 'mom' is not in the subject position; rather, it is the object of the verb 'fuck'. The clause strips the woman it refers to of any agency; after all, it is not 'moms who like to fuck'. The implied speaker, the 'I', or the subject, is assumed to be male, and arguably a young male.<sup>39</sup>

By identifying the concept of the 'MILF' in her work, Bushnell enters the debate of the positives and negatives of this more visible approach of sexualising older women. She identifies a change since 1990s in that 'there is now a whole generation of young men who've been turned on by the idea, at least, of sex with a woman twenty and possibly

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<sup>37</sup> Sharron Hinchliff, 'Sexing Up the Midlife Woman: Cultural Representations of Ageing, Femininity and the Sexy Body', in *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism: Harleys and Hormones*, ed. by Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 63–77 (p. 69).

<sup>38</sup> Hinchliff, 'Sexing Up the Midlife Woman', p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> Melissa Ames and Sarah Himsel Burcon, *How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life: From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the Prowl* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 172.

thirty years older' (p. 65). This suggests a strand of raunch culture is propagating: sexual desirability is not only linked to younger women, but older women now too.

In *Is There Still Sex*, Bushnell also structures an entire chapter (4) on 'Get ready Ladies, the Cubs are Coming to Town', switching the renowned, derogatory term 'cougars' ('predatory' older women 'attacking' younger men) out for one which directs the attention to the men themselves – as 'cubs'. In this chapter, Bushnell also highlights the ageist stigmas associated with the term 'cougar'.<sup>40</sup> As Montemurro and Siefken (2014) find:

The majority of women who did not like the term cougar were in their forties, fifties, or sixties and most were in their forties. Only two women in their twenties and one in her thirties rejected this term. Women in their forties may be most likely to object to this term because they are in the relevant age bracket and may be more aware of ag[e]ist devaluation of women's sexuality.<sup>41</sup>

With the later work, Bushnell and her narrator are close to 'the relevant age bracket' of women who 'did not like the term cougar', which could contribute to why a Bushnell allocates more space for depictions of sexy, not threatening, older women. However, it could also be that there is less focus towards youthful sexiness during the time of writing than in the 1990s of *Sex and the City*. Bushnell lists reasons why a 'woman is vulnerable to a UCP (unexpected cub pounce)' (p. 72). 'Vulnerable' has connotations of someone being threatened or subject to harm or damage. Highlighting the irony of the 'cubs' being youthful yet their 'pounce' being menacing lampoons the 'cougar' stereotype. Bushnell's discussions of the terms 'MILFS' and 'cougars' highlight both a shift in representations in chick lit and a shift of sexual desirability. Thus, raunch culture,

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<sup>40</sup> Fielding's use of the term 'cougar' in *Mad About the Boy* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>41</sup> Montemurro and Siefken, 'Cougars on the Prowl? New Perceptions of Older Women's Sexuality', p. 38.

a phenomenon associated with 1990s and 2000s remains pertinent to feminist ideologies in the 2010s too.

### 'Sexual Beings': Critiques of the Sexualisation, Objectification and Fetishisation of Women in Chick Lit

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Across all three texts, Bushnell and Carty-Williams highlight and critique men's sexualisation and objectification of women. With Bushnell, this is with a comparison of 'pretty women' and 'sexual beings'; with Carty-Williams, this is shown through racial difference. Firstly, in *Sex and the City*, Walden and Stephen tell the narrator about women they love but would not date because they are not 'pretty' (p. 125). Bushnell explains, '[l]ike most men in New York, [Walden] made up his mind about a woman right away. Put her in a category—one-night stand, potential girlfriend, hot two-week fling. [...] Libby was definitely a one-night stand. She wasn't pretty enough to date, to be seen in public with' (pp. 120-21). Men categorising women implies that in heterosexual sexual relations, men hold power. It also highlights the objectification that women face and the superficiality of men – only wanting to date a woman with a specific appearance. Stephen similarly describes his sexual relationship with Ellen; she

began describing a recent sexual encounter with her boyfriend. She had given him a hand job using Vaseline. Stephen suddenly popped a woody. 'I began to see her as a sexual being,' he said. 'The thing about these girls who aren't beauties—they have to put sex on the table. They can't nuance it.' (p. 123)

Bushnell lampoons Stephen with, 'popped a woody', stressing how his focus is on Ellen as someone to appeal to his sexual needs. Both Walden and Stephen explain that there are certain things a 'pretty woman wouldn't do', as in '[a] pretty woman would never let you have the TV on during sex' (p. 123). After Libby tells Walden, 'I really want to have



sex with you', Walden reflects, '[a] pretty girl wouldn't have said that, he thought, as he put down his beer and began undressing her' (p. 121). Bushnell illustrates the contradiction of Walden judging Libby negatively at the same time as undressing her, emphasising, again, how men hold the power in sexual relationships. Stephen and Walden also treat Ellen and Libby differently than how they would a 'pretty woman'. Stephen 'met a girl, a babe, late one night at a party in a grungy loft in TriBeCa. He introduced her to his parents almost immediately, even though he had none of the kinds of conversations with her that he had with Ellen' (p. 124). By contrast, Walden 'met all [Libby's] friends but wouldn't introduce her to his' (p. 122). They were both 'in love' with Libby and Ellen but in 'an utterly mundane way' (p. 125). Therefore, Bushnell emphasises the divide between beautiful women and women who are seen as only sexualised by men characters. Because these women are not 'pretty', their sexual appeal is not immediately obvious (unlike the 'pretty girls'), so they have to undergo a process of sexualisation in these men's eyes.

*Queenie* also explores the sexualisation of, more specifically, Black women. According to Benard (2016): 'Black women are defined by their sexuality and as their sexuality.'<sup>42</sup> This is illustrated in *Queenie* with the protagonist and the characters of Guy and Cassandra. Guy, the character we see Queenie having aggressive sex with the most in the novel, is also romantically dating (and not having sex with) Queenie's white, middle-class friend Cassandra. With Queenie, Guy sends her a collection of messages saying,

I came to yours and fucked you senseless? [...] I'm hankering after your arse again. There's a lot I wanted to do to you [...] If I wanted to talk about work I

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<sup>42</sup> Benard, 'Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism', p. 3.

would have sent a text to my mum. [...] I want to come round, obviously, give you a second dose (pp. 135-7).

Queenie is treated as a sex object and sexualised by Guy. His treatment of Queenie, though, contrasts his romance with Cassandra. In the same chapter, Cassandra tells Queenie, "[Guy] comes to meet me after work and we walk back to mine, or dinner, cinema, you know, just nice date things." *Just nice date things*. What were those?' (p. 139) The form here, of Queenie repeating what Cassandra says back in italics, emphasises Queenie's confusion, implying how dissociated from dating (not just sex) Queenie is. Carty-Williams shows that Black women are defined by their sexuality by showing Queenie's treatment in contrast to Cassandra's. The heroine attempts to gain some form of affection from Guy by putting 'a hand on his chest' (p. 120), and this action is met with a harsh response, 'I don't really like people touching me' (p. 120). Interestingly, this is situated just after Guy and Queenie have 'touched' everywhere on each other's bodies during their aggressive sex. The irony stands that he can grab, pull, bite and scratch her, but she cannot touch him for an intimate moment before she sleeps. In contrast, 19 pages later, Cassandra describes her time with her boyfriend (who at this point is only known as Cassandra's 'perfect boyfriend'; the reader does not yet know the boyfriend is Guy). Cassandra explains how 'we fell asleep hugging, Queenie. Properly wrapped around each other, with my head on his chest and his hands stroking my hair and face. It was so nice' (p. 139). The contrast suggests that Cassandra is able to access romance in a way that Queenie is not.

Both romance and sexualisation are undercut with the character of Guy in *Queenie*. Cassandra boasts, 'we didn't have sex,' because she has 'decided that [she's] not having penetrative sex with someone until [she's] sure that [she's] into them. He didn't

mind that, though' (p. 139). However, as Cassandra tells Queenie later in the novel, '[w]e don't have sex because he says he's too tired from *shifts* and we don't *talk* about not having sex because he gets cagey' (234). While this shows a contrast to Queenie, and an indication that he is satisfying his sexual desires elsewhere (with Queenie), it also highlights how Cassandra is dissatisfied by the lack of sex in their relationship. With this, alongside Queenie's dissatisfaction from the lack of intimacy, Carty-Williams suggests that both women are subjected to patriarchal structures that are unsatisfying.

While Bushnell highlights how certain men sexualise women, Carty-Williams shows how multiple partners sexualise Queenie. Queenie is the 'other woman' with Adi, Ted and Guy: the men are either in a relationship or married. This is true even with Tom, though his sexual relationship with Queenie is not confirmed as infidelity: Queenie thinks Tom and his partner are 'on a break' (p. 35). Other than Adi's wife, all the women these men are romantically involved with are white. Tom ends the novel with a 'petite blond girl' (p. 240); Ted's wife is 'blonde, and wide-set', and, as stated, Guy also has a relationship with Cassandra, who is described as having 'golden-brown hair' (p. 142). Carty-Williams implies Queenie is used as a sexual outlet in these men's romantic relationships. Joel R. Anderson et al.'s (2018) research found that 'individuals attend more often, and for longer durations, to the sexual body parts of Black women compared to White women, particularly when presented in a sexualized manner.'<sup>43</sup> The way men treat Queenie in the novel highlights this. When Ted first sees Queenie's naked body, he says, '[l]ook at your beautiful brown skin' (p. 188) – Queenie is exoticised. She is shown

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<sup>43</sup> Joel R. Anderson, Elise Holland, Courtney Heldreth, and Scott P. Johnson, 'Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 42.4 (2018), 461–76 (p. 461) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684318791543>>.

as a fantasy, not a girlfriend, to these men. Ted attempts to justify his affair with Queenie when he tells her, '[y]ou're young, and you're so appealing, with your beautiful big lips, that skin and those curves' (p. 366). The objectification and sexualisation Queenie is subject to leave her feeling dissociated from her body. Throughout the novel, she identifies how men have sex not with her, but with her body: 'he came round that night, had sex with my body twice and left' (p. 142); 'having all these random one-night stands with men who treat my body as a sex aid' (p. 242); and 'men who just want to have sex with my body as and when it suits them' (p. 344). Queenie's dissociation from her body could be an effect of the trauma she is experiencing through the objectification from men: they see her as an object of their desire, without her own emotional needs, so she begins to see herself in these terms. By depicting the dynamics of Queenie's sexual relationships alongside her personal struggles, Carty-Williams provokes questions about where the heroine should find her self-value.

In the newer works, the sexualisation of women is filtered through the use of online dating apps. In their research, Laura Thompson (2018) writes, 'in the online sexual marketplace, women should "know" their place is to be subservient to men's sexual desires.'<sup>44</sup> This is articulated in both works *Is There Still Sex* and *Queenie*. Firstly, in *Is There Still Sex*, Jude, a date of the narrator's acquired through Tinder,

pointed out that Tinder was gamed against women because it was created by the sexist minds of men who wanted to increase their chances of getting laid. 'It's all about what can you do for me? Men see women as commodities. Objects. Because it's on a screen,' Jude explained. 'That makes it not real. You can take that image of a woman and do whatever you want to her in your brain' (p. 53).

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<sup>44</sup> Thompson, "I Can Be Your Tinder Nightmare": Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace', p. 84.

Through explaining how apps such as Tinder present a collection of bodies for people to choose from, Jude implies how women are objectified through online platforms. The sexualisation is clear in that Jude believes Tinder was created to be able to see women as '[o]bjects' and to increase men's chances to 'get laid.' The 'do whatever you want to her' is also problematic, highlighting their level of control, and their focus on the sexualising of the woman's image, rather than the app's supposed purpose: to date. Next, in *Queenie*, the heroine also contemplates the sexualisation she experiences via online dating. The first message Queenie receives says: '[n]ice pics. How big would your tits be in my hands ?' from 'This\_Guy\_Fucks' (p. 59). Through the first-person narration, Queenie's reception of this message is clear. She asks herself: '[i]s this how it's going to go? I am a young woman, with a good job and fairly nice pictures and the first message is about my breasts?' (p. 59). Her reflection in response to his derogatory question contrasts Queenie's rational emotions with his sexist objectification. Carty-Williams implies how, as Thompson observes, '[m]en respond to women who occupy a public, sexualised space with harassment and objectifying speech perhaps to try to humiliate women.'<sup>45</sup> Men maintaining control is also emphasised with the following message Queenie receives: 'I like the one of you laughing. What else does that mouth do?' (p. 60). Queenie responds sarcastically, 'And the second message is about my mouth, fantastic' (p. 60), ridiculing this man's attempt to 'humiliate' her through 'objectifying speech'. Both of these men's messages show their first instinct is to objectify Queenie's body via the images posted on the app, thus critiquing the new (online) platform for the sexualisation associated with raunch culture.

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<sup>45</sup> Thompson, p. 84.

The two newer texts emphasise that the heroines are not usually treated by men on dating apps as human beings, implying that these platforms are not a viable way to seek encounters with men. In the concluding chapter of *Queenie*, she congratulates herself, stares at her reflection and says, '[y]ou've deleted those bleak-as-fuck dating apps that only really served to make you forget that beneath the big boobs and bum you are a human person who is easily damaged' (p. 386). Carty-Williams summarises Queenie's experiences with being sexualised via dating apps as 'bleak-as-fuck' and highlights how they flatten people's identity into just 'big boobs and bum', making Queenie forget that she was a human person. Negative experiences with men on dating apps are also emphasised in *Is There Still Sex*. After the narrator's Tinder date failed to appear for their date, she says 'I, too, had become Tinderized. Because I just didn't care' (p. 59). By creating this new terminology, the verb 'tinderized', Bushnell emphasises the common experience of a lack of emotion and misfortune in this form of meeting sexual partners: the narrator's experiences are not unusual. Towards the end of *Is There Still Sex*'s chapter on Tinder, 'The Russian' describes why relationships are not formed through Tinder (p. 61). The answer to this is implied throughout the whole chapter: women are not treated as human beings by the men on the apps, and they have high expectations that women should look and act a certain way. However, 'The Russian' believes it is because: 'women never change. [...] we women never know what we want!' (p. 61) This makes the narrator question that 'hoary old paternalistic cliché', and then she has an epiphany: 'women do know what they want. And mostly, it seems, what they want is simple. A modicum of respect. To be treated, as Hannah said, like a human being' (p. 62). She contradicts 'The Russian' and the perception that women want to be commodities; she explicitly describes how women want to be seen as real people –

humans: more than just objects. Illustrating the feelings of a human being behind the profile on the app also happens in *Queenie*. With the people *Queenie* meets online, as well as her sexualisation by Guy, Adi, Ted and Tom, Carty-Williams implies that continued exposure to the sexual objectification of women causes a sense of worthlessness and surrender in women.

*Queenie* also expands on the depictions of the sexualisation of women by highlighting the fetishisation connected to the sexualisation of Black women via online dating apps. Firstly, she is defined as ‘Chocolate Girl ;)’ in two messages on a dating app, OK Cupid (p. 60). The use of food as a point of comparison, ‘chocolate’, points to the fetishisation of Black women; it also objectifies her as something to be consumed. Carty-Williams reveals not only the sexualisation of Black women but also the racism of men perpetuated within online dating. Consequently, in order to ‘remind men that [she] was a person as well as someone they could have sex with’, *Queenie* ‘filled in [her] profile and added some things about [her]self in the About Me section’ (p. 60). This is shown to be unsuccessful when she then meets a ‘giant cherub’ who, during their first conversation (in person), suggests, ‘we could go back to mine?’ (p. 73). Furthermore, *Queenie*’s other date sourced online, Courtney86/Balding Alpha, immediately ‘slipped a hand down so that it rested on [her] bum’, takes her back to his house and assumes sex: ‘I’m just gonna go and get a condom’ (p. 335). When *Queenie* calls out his racism in his saying she ‘tastes like chocolate’, he ‘nastily laughed’ saying negatively that he ‘knew she was one of those Black Lives Matter girls’ – despite it being clear as it ‘says it really high up on [her] dating profile’ (p. 356). This indicates he did not read her profile, but only looked at her pictures, suggesting his only interest was with *Queenie*’s body and not her personality.

Carty-Williams highlights how exoticisation, fetishisation, sexualised objectification and racism also finds its way into the online dating sexual marketplace.

## Rape Culture

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Discussions of rape culture pervade both Bushnell and Carty-Williams' works of chick lit. Thompson's (2018) study posits that because of gender associations of women as "[n]aturally' more resistant to sex' and men as 'more interested in heterosex', 'women are considered to need some persuasion and indeed may even enjoy being overpowered by men.'<sup>46</sup> They critique how 'this trope downplays the need for mutual and affirmative consent,' foregrounding rape culture 'wherein violence against women is cast as unremarkable, inevitable and even excusable.'<sup>47</sup> While a relatively new term, and most associated with fourth-wave feminism, criticisms of the aspects that we now see as underpinning rape culture were still being implied in 1990s discourses. Rape culture is comparable to the 1990s era's 'bro' or 'lad' culture which is deeply entwined with the normalization of sexism and misogynistic behaviour. Sharon Hayes (2014) defines bro culture as where 'women are (or should be) willing objects of control and domination, desperate for a "real man" to "give her what she wants."' <sup>48</sup> The difference between bro culture and rape culture is how 'rape culture' also includes the abusive behaviour that bro/lad culture enables. Another key difference when considering rape culture in 1990s / 2000s and 2010s is with the recent increased visibility. Kaitlynn Mendes et al.'s (2018)

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<sup>46</sup> Thompson, p. 73.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Sharon Hayes, *Sex, Love and Abuse: Discourses on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 96.



research identifies the recent methods that people are using to make visible and challenge rape culture: 'Since 2014, we have been studying the ways feminists have increasingly turned to digital technologies and social media platforms to dialogue, network and organize against contemporary sexism, misogyny and rape culture'<sup>49</sup> Increased visibility, as well as more direct address and challenge, is also clear when comparing representations of aggressive domination, sexual harassment, gaslighting and romanticising toxic, unequal relationships in works of chick lit.

#### Aggressive Domination: Control and Intimidation in Chick Lit

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*Sex and the City* and *Queenie* highlight complications associated with consent and representations of aggressive domination; Carty-Williams amplifies this by demonstrating the heightened levels of violence that Black women can be subjected to. As Lola Olufemi (2020) frames it

sexual encounters are one of the arenas through which power relations are played out. That doesn't mean that sex with men is inherently dangerous for women – what is dangerous is the assumption that sexual violence only occurs because of a lack of understanding of consent and not because men are socialised to constitute themselves and their masculinity through aggressive domination.<sup>50</sup>

This 'assumption' that acts of sexual violence transpire due to a misunderstanding of consent is what serves as a significant linkage between aggressive domination and rape culture: the lack of challenge, and form of acceptance, towards sexual violence against women. Bushell and Carty-Williams showcase Olufemi's argument that men are

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<sup>49</sup> Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, '#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25.2 (2018), 236–46, p. 236 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818765318>>.

<sup>50</sup> Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*, pp. 73–74.

socialised to constitute themselves and their masculinity through aggressive domination, implying a critique towards rape culture.

In *Sex and the City*, Jim's experience of a threesome alludes to questionable consent of one of the women. He explains, 'one of the girls in my threesome; she loved to have sex' and 'the other girl was the opposite of the first girl. She was kind of virginal' (p. 66). 'Virginal' conveys the man's fantasy of a 'girl's' purity and innocence. The fact she is the 'opposite of the first girl' suggests the 'virginal girl' does not 'love to have sex', so their pursuit of her indicates a disregard for her feelings. The way these women are named too – just by their relation to sex – accentuates their purpose to Jim: sex. Then he describes (in a predatory way) how he managed to include the 'virginal girl' in his sex with the 'crazy girl'. Jim's description of how he and the 'crazy girl' were 'looking at her' while she was 'trying to do her own thing' suggests harassment (p. 66). Hearing this story, another man, Simon, then asks, '[w]hat did she have on?' (p. 67) as though he is trying to fantasise and recreate this harassment in his head. Jim responds, 'I don't remember, [...] [b]ut we finally grabbed her hand and pulled her into the bedroom.' (p. 67). 'Grab' and 'pull' questions her consent in this; the fact he 'cannot remember' what she was wearing hints at his disaffection (despite the sexual attraction) for the woman. Simon then jokes, '[a]nd then you raped her' (p. 67). Joking about a crime normalises aggression and dominance towards women and belittles harmful behaviour. With the 'virginal girl' finally brought into the bedroom, Jim boasts about how he and the 'crazy girl'

sat her down on the bed and just started touching her. Rubbing her back. Then we pulled her down onto the bed. The two girls were apart, so I just started putting one girl's hand on the other one's chest (p. 67).

The actions here indicate how the 'virginal girl' has a lack of control and power in this scenario. The way Jim shares this instance with the group, too, indicates an unapologetic pride at this act of aggressive domination.

*Queenie* also portrays aggressive domination and control through the character of Guy, but in a significantly more explicit way than *Sex and the City*. Aptly, Mißler (2023) compares *Queenie's* use of 'three-letter names or nicknames' with the 'typification and de-personalisation of men' in *Sex and the City*, arguing 'this tool of overgeneralisation [...] drive[s] home the idea that the mistreatment Queenie suffers at their hands is not an exception but the result of a pervasively racist and sexist culture.'<sup>51</sup> As such, the naming of Guy – a general way to refer to a man – as well as referring to him as 'Welshman' implies that his actions are not unique but rather reminiscent of a 'pervasively racist and sexist culture.' Before they even get undressed and have sex, Guy is violent towards Queenie: 'digging his nails into [her] skin' and 'bit[ing] [her] hard on the cheek' (p. 117). The way he causes Queenie pain foreshadows their sex together and indicates his desire for dominance. Consent is complex in this text because, despite feeling pain, Queenie continues to have sex with him; for example, Queenie explains: '[w]hen Welshman pushed me onto the bed, facedown, and hit my bottom with the back of his hand as hard as he could, I realized that there was a pain that I couldn't take. I gritted my teeth and said nothing' (p. 118). Referring to consent, Olufemi (2020) contends that it is 'not easy, or simple. It is a negotiation of the structures that shape our existence. Yes does not always mean yes. 'Yes' might mean, I am scared for my safety if I say no.'<sup>52</sup> With

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<sup>51</sup> Mißler, 'A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams's *Queenie* (2019): Challenging Discourses of Race and Gender in the Chick-Lit Genre', p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Olufemi, p. 74.

Queenie's sex with Guy, Carty-Williams complicates the idea that consent is easy and simple. Queenie's lack of sexual pleasure, 'gritted my teeth', and thus her questionable consent should be seen by Guy, without her having to say explicitly. She confirms this with, 'I squirmed with discomfort, but instead of taking a second to step out of his own pleasure and see that I didn't like what was going on, he reared up and pushed himself into me from behind' (p. 119). Queenie is moving ('squirming') in discomfort but, selfishly and dominantly, Guy continues to 'rear up'; both connotations – of horses in an aggressive state and describing someone who is reacting forcefully in a situation – emphasise Guy's belligerence towards Queenie. Carty-Williams portrays Guy's animalistic nature: Guy ignores consent and exerts his dominance over Queenie.

After this sexual encounter, Queenie visits the sexual health clinic, and the tearing and bruising on her body concerns the nurse, making them ask, '[d]o you know how you might have sustained these injuries?' (p. 130). 'Injuries' insinuates accidental and non-intentional harm, implying a disapproval to what Queenie calls 'rough sex' (p. 129). The chaperone's response to seeing inside Queenie's vagina is 'one of abject horror, as though she'd just witnessed a car crash or a drive-by' (p. 129). The exaggeration of 'abject horror' (blood and gore) and 'car crash' or shooting (traumatic event) magnifies the physical damage caused by Guy's aggressive domination. The nurse tells Queenie of their concerns due to her 'injuries' being 'largely consistent with sexual violence', offering her a pamphlet for '*victim support*' (p. 130). The direct use of the term 'sexual violence' illustrates the severity of Queenie's trauma. Through this encounter and its consequences, Carty-Williams escalates Bushnell's illustration of masculine dominance in sex, depicts further implications of the complexities of consent, and adds more explicit discussions of how aggressive dominance during sex can affect women.

Both Bushnell and Carty-Williams demonstrate masculine dominance during sex and touch on issues of consent, but Carty-Williams extends this to how women of colour can experience elevated sexual aggression and control. Mißler (2023) provocatively argues that Guy and Queenie's sexual relationship is 'suggestive of master-slave interactions.'<sup>53</sup> While problematic in its comparison to a sensitive historical context, the power dynamics in their sexual encounters highlight this, and Queenie's and Guy's racial difference also adds to the symbolism. Guy's way of speaking to Queenie is commanding and reprimanding: "'Take your clothes off," he sneered, removing his shirt and then his trousers. "Hurry up, come on, I haven't got all day"' (p. 118). He dominates both the situation and Queenie here, suggesting his time is more valuable than hers – she is subservient. He asks Queenie if she 'likes it', and when Queenie 'didn't say anything', he repeats himself and 'pulled [her] hair so that [her] head was whipped back next to his mouth' (p. 119). This scene is emotionally distressing because it evokes connotations of slavery and racial oppression: the pulling of Queenie's hair asserts Guy's dominance over her body, and additionally, the use of the word 'whipped' alludes to physical abuse that enslaved people were subjected to. After their sex, Queenie thinks, 'if I pretended the night had been amazing, maybe I could rewrite the memory of Guy in my head so that I felt like slightly less of a sex aide to him' (p. 122). 'Sex aid' is a common phrase to refer to something (not someone) which enhances sexual pleasure, but switching 'aid' to 'aide' (which refers to a person who assists the works of others), spotlights how Queenie feels that with Guy, she was just utilized to support his sexual pleasure. In another instance of them having sex, Guy texts Queenie, '[s]have your legs before I get there', which indicates

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<sup>53</sup> Mißler, 'A Black Bridget Jones? Candice Carty-Williams's *Queenie* (2019)', p. 8.

how she is having sex on his terms (p. 162-3). Ironically, in a therapy session later in the novel, Queenie concludes that 'the casual sex (I am dependent on it, to validate my body and my control)' (p. 295). However, the sexual partner's actions towards her body suggest an invalidation and controlling of it. Carty-Williams implies that while Queenie perceives herself as having control, external factors can impose constraints and factors that limit a woman's agency.

### Sexual Harassment: Men Feeling Entitled to Women's Bodies in Chick Lit

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Both Bushnell and Carty-Williams portray at least one form of sexual harassment of women. As Kalpana Srivastava et al. (2017) explain, 'sexual harassment includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.'<sup>54</sup> This is illustrated in the works of chick lit: both authors articulate day-to-day experiences of grooming and unwelcome sexual advances. The concept is closely linked to rape culture in that it highlights men's feelings of entitlement to women's bodies. Laura Bates (2018) argues, sexual harassment is a 'way of letting [women] know that a man has the right to [her] body, a right to discuss it, analyse it, appraise it, and let [her] or anybody else on the vicinity know his verdict.'<sup>55</sup>

This entitlement is made clear by both Bushnell and Carty-Williams. In *Sex and the City*, while discussing 'Manhattan Ménage', Peter explains how the modelling industry is 'grooming' women for threesomes, 'pushing favors from the girls to get them

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<sup>54</sup> Kalpana Srivastava, Suprakash Chaudhury, P. S. Bhat, and Samiksha Sahu, 'Misogyny, Feminism, and Sexual Harassment', *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, 26.2 (2017), 111-13 (para. 10). <DOI: [https://doi.org/10.4103/ipj.ipj\\_32\\_18](https://doi.org/10.4103/ipj.ipj_32_18)>

<sup>55</sup> Laura Bates, *Misogynation: The True Scale of Sexism* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2018), p. 4.

bookings' and therefore, '[a]ll the models are getting stroked in the loo' (p. 60).

'Grooming and 'Stroked' have connotations of animals (like stroking a cat or dog), and likening the women to pets emphasises the unequal power dynamics that the models face. Grooming also implies sexual grooming: building a relationship with a young person to exploit and abuse them. Peter goes on to explain how: 'We're leading high sensory-saturated lives [...] High-density. Intensity. Millions of appointments. Millions of lawyer appointments. A simple thing is no longer fun. Now you have to have two or three girls, or exotic strippers at Pure Platinum' (p. 61). Instead of attending the 'same damn' parties with the same 'insincerity' and 'bullshit', 'you go into the bathroom, and you get a blow job from someone in the fashion industry' (p. 62). With Peter, there is a lack of care and respect given to the models: they are purely seen as sex objects and are exploited as such. The narrator adds, '[t]here was a brief and, if I'm not mistaken, awed silence' (p. 62) by the men listening to Peter. These men are not disgusted by Peter's language and actions but rather admire him. The 'if I'm not mistaken' highlights the narrator's disbelief that the silence is through awe and not upset, showing Bushnell's critique of these men.

*Queenie* also depicts men feeling as if they have a 'right' to women's bodies. Carty-Williams expands on Bushnell's work by narrating multiple instances of sexual harassment: workplace, street, coercion and in online dating. *Queenie* highlights both the severe consequences of sexual harassment and the flawed systems which attempt to prevent or punish it. Queenie is first harassed by Ted in the workplace. During one of their first conversations, Ted openly admits he has been 'tracking [her] around the building for weeks' (p. 81). He later explains that he likes the building they work in because it has 'a lot of secret rooms' (p. 88). He is described as 'lurking in the corner'

(pp. 131-2) – lurking has connotations of ensnaring and ambushing, indicating how Carty-Williams presents Ted as a symbol of the workplace harasser. He constantly emails her after she says many times she is not interested, and his persistence is predatory. At one point, she ‘got up and walked towards the toilet’; she ‘could hear Ted following [her], so sped up’ (p. 185). She locks herself in the toilet and says, ‘[I]eave me alone, please. What you’re technically doing is stalking’ (p. 184). Her rejection still does not stop Ted: Queenie ‘put [her] head around the door and saw Ted on the floor leaning against it’ (p. 185). After they have sex in the workplace toilets, though, Ted goes ‘silent’ (p. 197), implying sexual relations (her body) was all he intended from Queenie. When Queenie looks for Ted, she discovers a ‘whiteboard that appeared to have some sort of thinly veiled staff sex conquest and ratings system scribbled onto it’ (p. 200). The rating system of women suggests that these harassers see women as conquests and objects. Ted then files ‘an official complaint with HR’, ironically saying she has ‘been paying him a lot of attention, saying suggestive and inappropriate things, following him around, and that it’s making him entirely uncomfortable and stressed in his place of work’ (p. 269). This meeting also encourages Queenie’s mental breakdown: she starts to ‘shake violently’ (p. 271) and ‘couldn’t respond’ (p. 271) to her boss Gina’s questions. Carty-Williams underscores the state of overwhelming distress experienced by Queenie: she has reached a breaking point where she cannot endure any more trauma. While the charges were later dropped and Queenie was reinstated, this plot point demonstrates workplace inequalities and highlights the flaws in the systems and procedures that suspended Queenie.

As well as workplace harassment, Queenie also deals with street harassment with Adi: ‘Whenever I bumped into him, he’d talk very matter-of-factly and at excessive



length about black women being forbidden fruit to Muslim men, but mainly he gave me lots of chat about big black bottoms' (p. 22). After they have sex, though, Queenie is fat-shamed by his wife, and Adi does not offer her any support or defence (p. 204). Again, the harasser's lack of care for the woman after sex highlights how his intentions were purely sexual. Now that they have had sex, Adi has confirmed his 'right to her body' and, therefore, has no further interest in Queenie. These incidents are commonplace in *Queenie*: towards the novel's start, she meets with an estate agent who requests sexual favours: "[d]on't go so soon," the estate agent said, stepping close to me. "There is a way that it could be a bit cheaper'" (p. 33). Carty-Williams implies that Queenie cannot escape the harassment she experiences; it follows her in the street, in houses, online and at her workplace.

*Queenie* illustrates the increased vulnerability of women of colour to sexual harassment and exploitation in Western rape culture. Katherine Giscombe (2018) found that because of stereotyping and economic vulnerability, 'women of color have been more susceptible to sexual harassment and assault than [w]hite women have been.'<sup>56</sup> Despite this, 'some women, particularly white women, within the feminist movement, still barely acknowledge or understand the unique, racialized and gendered harassment experiences that women of color face.'<sup>57</sup> The #MeToo hashtag was started by a woman of colour Tarana Burke, ten years before white woman Alyssa Milano. Yet, Milano is most commonly associated with initiating the hashtag. So, Onwuachi-Willing states, 'The recent resurgence of the #MeToo movement reflects the longstanding marginalization

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<sup>56</sup> Giscombe, 'Sexual Harassment and Women of Color'.

<sup>57</sup> Onwuachi-Willing, 'What About #UsToo: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement', p. 119.

and exclusion that women of colo[u]r experience within the larger feminist movement in U.S. society.’<sup>58</sup> *Queenie* directly illustrates this. While discussing #MeToo with her white boss, Gina, she explains, ‘[l]oads of people posting their stories of sexual assault without thinking about how women who didn’t feel like they could spe-’ (p. 147). At this point in the novel, Queenie has experienced instances of sexual assault and harassment but feels that #MeToo is too vocal and could distress other women who do not feel they can speak up. It is dramatic irony: she is one of those women afraid to speak. It could also be that Queenie does not feel like she is a part of the movement, understanding it to be exclusionary. This argument is strengthened by Gina, her boss, who cuts her off in the middle of the word ‘speak’: she takes Queenie’s voice away. She symbolises the ‘some women’ within the feminist movement, who barely acknowledge the racialized harassment experienced by women of colour.

Another significant symptom of rape culture is how women are made to feel vulnerable to violence from men. In *Sex and the City*, the intimidation of the ‘modelizers’ is clear when Barkley reveals ‘[t]he models hang out in posses and live in groups in model apartments. They don’t feel safe unless they go out together. It’s intimidating to a guy’ (p. 35). Bushnell’s irony is that the models feel they need to go out in groups because these men make them feel scared, yet Barkley makes it about his lack of sexual success with multiple women together. Bushnell writes about how ‘George knows all of the model apartments now. [...] But he’s got to keep up, because the girls come and go all the time, and you have to stay close to at least one girl in the apartment’ (p. 35). Knowing where the apartments are suggests the men stalk the models, implying

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<sup>58</sup> Onwuachi-Willig, p. 107.

vulnerability. George explains his strategy is to 'pay attention to the older girls. They always want to go home early because they have to get up and work. You walk them out to a cab, being a gentleman, then you go back in and attack the young ones' (p. 38). The 'attack' hints at his malicious intentions. They expand on this by explaining, '[t]hey're so young. They're just finding their way in a grownup world. They're not fully developed, and they meet these guys who know all the tricks. How hard can it be?' (p. 38). Their exploitation and lack of compassion towards these young models who are just 'finding their way' is clear.

Similarly, in *Is There Still Sex*, Bushnell illustrates one man's sexual insistence and intimidation with the character of Arnold, who interacts with the narrator. At first, 'Arnold really wanted me to see his house' and suggests that 'he could pick me up and take me to his town and then I could always spend the night at his house if I needed to' (p. 199). Bushnell's narrator ridicules this with '[a] sleepover? With a seventy-five-year-old man I didn't know? I don't think so' (p. 199). They agree that the narrator will drive to his house, and again Arnold persists with, '[o]r spend the night he suggested again' (p. 200). When she arrives, Arnold 'shut[s] the door and lock[s] it', making the narrator joke that she 'hoped Arnold would not turn out to be a psycho killer', summarising, 'it was extraordinary how this sentiment still crossed all demographics, dating methods, and ages' (p. 201). The humour hints at the narrator's discomfort, and the 'still' suggests that something which has not changed since the 1990s is how women feel vulnerable to male violence. She later writes how she feels 'loaded for bear': meaning she is ready for a potentially threatening or dangerous situation (p. 201). Arnold gives the narrator a tour of the house, and 'within seconds of the tour, we were in his bedroom' (p. 201). He 'proudly' tells the narrator that the best part of the bedroom is 'The bed. I've had it for

twenty years, [...] This bed has bought me good luck. I've had a lot of great sex on that bed [...] I hope to have a lot more in the future' (p. 202). Discussing his past sexual experiences with the narrator is invasive, as is the insinuation that she will be a part of his future sex on the bed. Possibly due to his insistence and as a way to make her feel more comfortable, the narrator 'pictured him naked on the sheets, his great white belly sluicing from side to side' (p. 202). This scolding demonstrates her unease. This implies how women can use humour and insults as a defence mechanism to get through a distressing situation. She is prompted to resort to a fatphobic comment in order to feel like she has some power over him.<sup>59</sup> With its focus on the woman's perspective and humour as a conventional trope, chick lit is an ideal space for sexual harassment to be challenged.

#### Perpetuations of Rape Culture in Chick Lit

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While Bushnell and Carty-Williams highlight explicit incidents of rape culture – aggression, harassment and intimidation – they also demonstrate the subtle ways in which rape culture is perpetuated: through phallocentric sex and the romanticising of psychologically manipulating men. Firstly, both authors critique phallocentric sex, or sex focused on a man's pleasure and satisfaction. In *Is There Still Sex*, while Jess 'performed cunnilingus, his tongue darting here and there', Mia notes that 'it was like being in a porn film' (p. 82). Direct references to porn make clear the cultural influences of rape culture

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<sup>59</sup> This is reminiscent of Chapter 1's discussion of the women in chick lit passing judgement on the men they meet online (appearance and kink shaming). I argued that this highlights how the women of chick lit, while subject to vicious critique, can also deliver it to others. This is also true in this instance with the narrator 's fatphobic comment about Arnold.

that young men are subjected to; often, porn focuses on masculine pleasure and the objectification of women. The candid tone of this scene, with phrases such as 'his cock was shortish and fat' and she 'rubbed the top of his penis against her vagina, feeling for the magic opening', makes the sex humorous, satirising the idealising and glorifying often present in porn (p. 82). She began feeling 'like she could be in a porn film. Ride 'em, cowgirl, she thought' (p. 82-3). The switching between the start of the paragraph as 'then it was like being in a porn film' to the end where Mia felt 'as if she were kind of an expert' emphasises her disapproval and restraint at the beginning and then her active participation towards the end. The '[r]ide 'em, cowgirl' evokes her taking control in the sexual encounter (p. 83). This is followed by '[a]nd then he came when she was almost ready to come but didn't' (83). Like often in porn, the woman's pleasure and orgasm are subordinated to the man's. Jess' phallocentrism is solidified when he leaves 'ten minutes later' (p. 83).

Similarly, in *Queenie*, Ted and Queenie's sex is also focused on the man: Ted started by 'unbuttoning [Queenie's] shirt with confident hands', but when she 'tried to undo his shirt' 'he took [her] hands and moved them down by [her] sides', saying, '[n]o, stop, leave it. I need to keep it on' (p. 186-7). Ted then, in contrast, 'tore [Queenie's] shirt off and threw it on the floor before unhooking [her] bra and dropping it at [her] feet.' (p. 187). Whatever Ted's reason for keeping his shirt – perhaps because he is in the workplace, and wants to ensure his safety – these reasons only extend to himself; Queenie's protection is irrelevant. After the sex, he says, 'I should go before anyone comes', and Queenie says to his back '[t]he only person that came was you', indicating, like Mia, that the man is the only one who consistently orgasms in a heterosexual encounter. Queenie and Ted's sex is also porn-like with added humour: 'Ted spat onto

his hand and wiped it between my legs. “I’ve only ever seen that in porn,” I joked again uneasily as he eased himself into me, his spit allowing for entry’ (p. 187). Yael Levy (2020) argues that, in the TV series *Insecure*, ‘by injecting awkwardness into scenes that feature the sexuality of black women, the series destabilizes the traditional objectification of the black woman, complicates the formulaic jezebel, and humanizes her.’<sup>60</sup> Carty-Williams does the same with *Queenie*: the heroine makes jokes about the situation, showing her awkwardness and emotions as a way to humanise her.

Alluding to a similar selfishness as with Jess and Ted, Bushnell’s earlier book highlights a man’s fantasy and desire to have sex with younger women. After ‘two great weekends together’, Cici found her boyfriend, Sam, ‘rubbing up against a sixteen-year-old model who had just come to town.’ (p. 133) He tells Cici: ‘[y]ou’ve got to let me live out my fantasies. I have a fantasy of being with a sixteen year old’ (p. 133). While also highlighting his betrayal to Cici and a ‘fantasy’ that would constitute statutory rape in New York at the time, Bushnell critiques the patriarchal structures that dominate rape culture. Sam believes Cici should ‘let him live out his fantasies’ because rape culture tells Sam his sexual pleasures are more important than her feelings. All three texts demonstrate phallocentrism and/or selfishness as a symptom of rape culture, but the two newer works do this more explicitly with the use of humour and depictions of the heroines’ emotional responses.

*Sex and the City* and *Queenie* both highlight the harmful consequences that perpetuations of heteronormative romantic ideologies can have on women, for example,

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<sup>60</sup> Yael Levy, ‘A Sexual Subject: Black Women’s Sexuality in *Insecure*’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 21.7 (2020), 1209–21 (p. 1209) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1722723>>.

by encouraging women to tolerate and forgive their own 'romantic heroes' who are benefit from rape culture, oppress and treat women as inferior. Caroline Smith (2008) proposes that in *Sex and the City*, 'Bushnell seems to suggest that Carrie's search for love is much more complicated than romantic comedies might expect her to think. [...] Bushnell articulates the crippling effects that romantic ideologies can have upon women.'<sup>61</sup> Merck (2003) explains, in *Sex and the City*, 'Big's superiority to a mere columnist in wealth, power and age is the romanticised version of the sexual ratio that prevails throughout the city.'<sup>62</sup> Mr Big is both represented as a romantic hero but is also critiqued as such. When he and Carrie meet, he is 'twirl[ing] a cigar', they drink 'Crystal champagne' and he tells her, 'I'm not going to let you go home now' because it is 4 am (pp. 44-46). The romantic concept of being protected and saved by the romantic hero is depicted in this scene, as he wants to take care of Carrie.<sup>63</sup> However, it also signals control: the choice to leave should be hers. Throughout the text, he belittles her, saying '[i]f you think [you are smarter than me], you're really stupid' (p. 219). When Carrie is upset, he suggests 'I think maybe we should take a little break, spend a couple of days apart until you get over this mood' arguing that he doesn't 'want any hassles' (p. 219). Bushnell complicates romantic ideologies by depicting a seemingly idealistic romantic hero's neglect, control and feeling of superiority over the text's heroine.

Mr. Big is renowned as a key romantic hero in the television series of *Sex and the City*, but is shown as gaslighting Carrie in the book. As Paige L. Sweet (2019) defines it, gaslighting is 'a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, p. 92.

<sup>62</sup> Merck, 'Sexuality in the City', p. 49.

<sup>63</sup> This also connects with Chapter 1's discussions of chivalry and normative masculinity.

“crazy,” creating a “surreal” interpersonal environment.’<sup>64</sup> Mr. Big tells Carrie, ‘people don’t like you as much as you’d probably like to think they do’, that ‘they think you have an agenda’ and how he is ‘just trying to help you. They think you’re aggressive’ (p. 236). He also adds, ‘[y]ou’re a little crazy [...] you’re too old to act the way you do. You’ve got to grow up’ (p. 239), leading her to feel she needs to be institutionalised (p. 235). Sweet argues that ‘[t]oday, gaslighting is an increasingly ubiquitous term used to describe the mind-manipulating strategies of abusive people. This does not mean that people were not gaslighting before ‘today.’<sup>65</sup> As Mr. Big and Carrie’s relationship implies, gaslighting also occurred in 1990s. Through her depiction of Mr Big and Carrie’s relationship, Bushnell validates this. She critiques emotional abusers benefitting from the inequalities, the feelings of superiority and control over women, sustained through romantic comedies and rape culture.

The notion of emotionally abusive romantic heroes being complicit in the gains from rape culture is also represented in *Queenie*. Carty-Williams does not construct one single romantic hero, despite there being multiple men with whom Queenie has sex throughout the novel. Guy’s aggression with Queenie, yet being a romancer to Cassandra, implies that even some women’s romantic heroes benefit from rape culture. Carty-Williams also parodies the ‘meet cute’ with Ted and his latter treatment of Queenie. Her stomach is hurting, and consequently, she ‘stumbled over’ but ‘didn’t have the strength to stop [her]self from falling to the floor’ (p. 79). Ted comes to save her: she ‘felt someone grab onto [her] with both hands’ (p. 79). Queenie’s feelings of weakness

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<sup>64</sup> Paige L. Sweet, ‘The Sociology of Gaslighting’, *American Sociological Review*, 84.5 (2019), 851–75 (p. 851) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419874843>>.

<sup>65</sup> Sweet, p. 851.



are due to her physical pain but could also be read as her feeling weak at the knees as this new romantic hero enters the scene. Carty-Williams describes the moment as such:

[he] looked down at me with bright green eyes dotted with flecks of amber.  
‘Don’t apologise.’ He smiled, and his eyes crinkled.  
‘Okay.’ I swooned.<sup>66</sup>

The ‘I swooned’ is not in the novel’s Trapeze (UK) edition but in the Gallery/Scout Press (US) version. The addition of it adds to the romantic scenario created. The removal could suggest the UK version does not want to describe Queenie as reacting positively to the ‘hero behaviour.’ Queenie says, ‘[i]t was so nice to be physically supported by someone [...] He was taller than I’d realized’ and in the Gallery/Scout Press (US) edition, she also adds, ‘[a]s if height equaled the protection and manliness that I was lacking thanks to Tom’s cold shoulder.’<sup>67</sup> The ‘protection’ and ‘manliness’ of a stereotypical romantic hero are subverted in Ted’s destructive actions later in the novel.

Tom is presented as the person Queenie thinks will be her ‘romantic hero’, yet throughout the novel, we see many instances of him gaslighting Queenie. Most of Queenie’s negative sexual encounters take her back to Tom; she believes she needs to punish herself because of how she acts towards Tom, pointing to his remaining control and power over her. For example, to Queenie, sex with Tom contrasts with the objectification and dissatisfaction of her sex with Adi (pp. 56-57). Yet, in flashbacks, Tom minimises Queenie’s feelings and allows his family to racially abuse her (p. 43). One instance is when he repeatedly tells her, ‘you ruined my mum’s birthday’, comments, ‘I don’t want any more drama’, and claims, ‘[i]t’s constant, with you. It’s too much. [...]

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<sup>66</sup> Candice Carty-Williams, *Queenie* (New York: Gallery/Scout Press, 2019), p. 80  
<<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/Queenie-Carty-Williams-Candice-GalleryScout-Press/30776199254/bd>>  
[accessed 27 March 2023].

<sup>67</sup> Carty-Williams, *Queenie* (New York: Gallery/Scout Press, 2019), p. 80.

You're too much, Queenie' (p. 46). Despite barely appearing in the text's present, Tom remains a significant figure throughout the novel. This points to the pretence of the romantic hero figure: it is just an ideology. The way Queenie perceives Tom also does not match his actions –highlighting how he is a symbol of the idealised romantic hero, whose unfair treatment is easily forgiven and tolerated by the heroine. Thus, Carty-Williams heightens the critique of ideologies perpetuated in romantic comedies by emphasising how every man in *Queenie* is an emotional abuser complicit in benefitting from normalisation of men's control over women symptomatic of rape culture.

Undermining the happily-ever-after trope of romance is clear in Bushnell and Carty-Williams' works, both emphasising other means of securing happiness for women that do not underscore rape culture. Caroline Smith (2008) also argues that Bushnell's 'narrative consistently undermines the happily ever after ending that readers of her text might expect, and, in doing so, she critiques the reductive nature of romantic comedies, particularly in regard to female sexuality.'<sup>68</sup> With *Queenie*, as Mißler proposes, Carty-Williams constructs an 'ending that appears more timely in the days of the [#]MeToo and the Black Lives Matter movement, as it privileges self-care, strong community ties, and female solidarity over romantic ambitions.'<sup>69</sup> Instead of a romantic 'happily ever after', Queenie gains happiness through her family, friends and finalising the ending of a relationship with Tom. The first line of the whole novel is a text message sent to him saying, '[i]n the stirrups now. Wish you were here ...' (p. 1) emphasising the significance of his character in the novel. Queenie later discovers Tom has a new girlfriend, Anna,

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<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture*, p. 88.

<sup>69</sup> Mißler, Heike, 'A Black Bridget Jones?', p. 11.

despite agreeing with Queenie that they would 'revisit where we were in three months' (p. 243). In the book's final chapter, Queenie is inclined to call Tom, reminiscing about how he told her he would 'never abandon her', but 'something shifted' when she looked at his contact page and, instead, she presses 'Delete' (p. 387). The circular structure of the novel shows how much the character of Queenie has developed: from 'wishing [Tom] was here' to actively 'deleting' him. 'Delete' is also given a single-word paragraph to highlight how conclusive this ending is. The 'something shifted' emphasises that the flashbacks do not give Queenie the same feelings as before: he told her 'he'd never abandon her', yet she had to deal with her mental health struggles, and he was not there through any of it. Queenie overcomes the barrier and point of ritual death by moving further away from men. Symbolically, removing Tom's number makes Queenie's illness feel better too: she 'walked back into the restaurant and with the heat that hit me, a different type of warmth filled my chest' (p. 387). Queenie's family and friends give her more comfort than any of the men in the novel, and as such, are awarded the 'happily ever after.' Carty-Williams promotes friendship as a way to challenge rape culture through their support, empowerment and creation of safe spaces.

With the second edition of *Sex and the City*, Bushnell significantly changes the ending. The Epilogue remains the same except for one line. In the original edition, it reads: 'Carrie and Mr. Big are still together',<sup>70</sup> leading critics to argue 'that nothing has changed, that the romantic formula is entirely intact.'<sup>71</sup> However, in the newer edition, after the extra two chapters where we discover Mr Big's affair and see him gaslighting

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<sup>70</sup> Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City* (London: Abacus, 1999), p. 228.

<sup>71</sup> Kiernan, p. 217.

Carrie further, the ending is: 'Mr. Big is happily married. Carrie is happily single' (p. 245). While a traditional romance would describe the first ending as the happily ever after, the newer one seems more optimistic due to the problematic relationship between Mr Big and Carrie. The repetition of 'happily' with different circumstances and distinct from each other further elevates how a romantic union would be unrealistic alongside the misogynistic men that centre Bushnell's book.

Finally, her newer text also showcases the complications of the happily-ever-after romance trope. In *Is There Still Sex*, many sad events occur alongside the narrator meeting a new boyfriend: there was 'a spate of deaths and suicides that month' (p. 248), including her dad and her friend, Marilyn (p. 225, p. 247). Consequently, after Marilyn's death, the narrator writes, '[w]e felt encased in our grief, trapped under a perpetual low-hanging cloud. We couldn't move. We couldn't breathe. We were exhausted. We'd go to each other's houses and sit at the kitchen table and stare' (p. 248). The repeated 'we' she refers to is herself and Marilyn's friends, emphasising the importance of her other friends during the grieving process. The sadness is magnified because just a few pages before, the narrator wrote that Marilyn was 'proof that every once in a while, just like in a movie, a person can get their happy ending' (p. 239). The irony that she then 'took her life' subverts the romance's expected ending. Although it is left on an optimistic note with the narrator raising a glass with her new boyfriend and her friends on her sixtieth (p. 258), the sombre tone that ruminates the last couple of chapters is far from the 'happily ever after' of traditional romance. Like with *Sex and the City* and *Queenie*, the author draws attention to the complications of promoting romantic reunions and love and critiques the reductive nature of romance, especially where rape culture also persists.

## Conclusion

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Genz and Brabon (2009) point out that '[c]hick lit [...] presents women as sexual agents who knowingly employ their femininity – frequently as a statement of empowerment – and do not need to be sheltered from male advances.'<sup>72</sup> A study of these three chick lit texts – *Sex and the City*, *Is There Still Sex* and *Queenie* – challenges this: the women may appear to be sexual agents, but as proven, their agency and empowerment are tied with their desirability to men, and is therefore limited and ephemeral. Bushnell and Carty-Williams demonstrate the commercialisation and sexualisation of women when 'employing' their femininity, critiquing the concept of women as commodities. Likewise, although the women characters do not consider themselves victims, the actions of the men in the novels demonstrate that women do, in fact, need to be sheltered from male advances, and how it is inadequacies, inequalities, and complicity that allow the negative consequences of raunch and rape culture to persist.

Mißler (2023) argues, '*Queenie* has put to good use the critical potential at the heart of the chick-lit formula and shows that discourses of romance and love cannot be thought separately from the politics of gender and race.'<sup>73</sup> This chapter shows that the newer works, *Queenie* and *Is There Still Sex*, are more political than Bushnell's precursor text. They advocate against sexism more explicitly: providing a more personal, emotional response to trauma, through changes to narrative perspective and tone. They also provide more intersectional frameworks to explore womanhood and offer alternative views to chick lit's usually white, middle-class, young heroines. Genre fluidity

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<sup>72</sup> Genz and Brabon, p. 90.

<sup>73</sup> Mißler, 'A Black Bridget Jones?', p. 11.

also allows for more serious topics – like violence and harassment – to be taken more seriously in newer works of chick lit; this could be why these more recently published books are categorised fluidly.

In summary, this chapter suggests chick lit's representations of sex and sexual politics have adapted since the 1990s alongside changing feminisms and genre fluidity. However, the change is not substantial, but rather an adjustment as to how the concepts are conveyed (the scope and methods). Certain elements remain, such as the challenges to raunch culture's restrictions and limitations, and rape culture's issues and problems. The way that they are represented has become more politicised, matured and diversified, and thus these newer works warrant the subcategorization of 'neo chick lit.' As alluded to in this chapter, friendship is presented as a means to challenge aspects of rape culture in chick lit; it is portrayed as more rewarding than heterosexual romantic relationships. I now move to explore this further: examining representations of women's non-romantic relationships in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), her later text, *It's Not All Downhill from Here* (2020) and Kiley Reid's debut novel *Such a Fun Age* (2019).

## CHAPTER 3 – ‘SISTERS’: FRIENDSHIP, SUPPORTIVE AND COMPETITIVE SISTERHOOD

*‘now, you don’t want to look at men, never mind have sex with them. [...] when you go back out into that restaurant, look. Look at all those people, who love you.’<sup>1</sup>*

While Chapter One and Two highlighted how dating and sex in heterosexual relationships are essential themes to chick lit, friendships between women are also critical and thus take the focus of this chapter. As the previous chapter explores, *Queenie* suggests that illustrations of sex and sexual politics in chick lit have somewhat developed since the 1990s. However, as with the majority of chick lit novels, this text also comments on women’s friendships and relationships with one another. The epigraph to this chapter is a quote from *Queenie*, and is taken from the end of the novel, when Queenie feels the urge to call her emotionally abusive ex-boyfriend, Tom. She leaves the restaurant table, where all her family and friends have gathered to celebrate her overcoming the past year, to go to the bathroom. The friends’ celebrating of the positives, and Queenie’s escape to the bathroom, are both areas which are relevant to the supportive Sisterhood I discuss later in this chapter. She tells herself these words, emphasising how Queenie’s ‘happily ever after’ is more focused on the importance of family and friendship than her romantic relationships. Considering feminist concepts relevant to supportive Sisterhood and competitive Sisterhood alongside works of chick

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<sup>1</sup> Candice Carty-Williams, *Queenie*, Kindle Edition (London: Trapeze, 2019), pp. 386-7.

lit allows this chapter to question in what ways chick lit's representations of women's friendships and relationships with one another have evolved since the 1990s.

This chapter focuses on works that align with the subgenre of chick lit 'sistah lit.' In these works, friendship is portrayed as having greater importance compared to other subgenres. This does not mean that friendship is not an important theme to the overarching genre of chick lit; it signifies how works of sistah lit centre their narratives more strongly around friendships.<sup>2</sup> Lisa A. Guerrero (2006) argues that while friends 'serve as the primary support system for both groups of women, a self-centeredness comes through in the friendships of chick lit, whereas in sistah lit the friends form a communal unit.'<sup>3</sup> Mallory and Young (2005) posit that sistah lit change(s) the focus 'from the naive single white woman seeking a fairy-tale romance to a more experienced black woman opting for the reality of friendship.'<sup>4</sup> McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), her *It's Not All Downhill from Here* (2020) and Reid's *Such a Fun Age* echo this in that they all focus on a Black protagonist and her friendships. Each primary text also portrays at least one woman referring to a non-related friend as her 'sister', clarifying the quote in this chapter's title.

The novels I discuss in this chapter were chosen for their specific, complex illustrations of constructive and destructive friendships, alongside feminist concepts of Sisterhood and the struggle for feminist solidarity within a society which promotes male

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<sup>2</sup> Friendship is important to chick lit as a whole, too. In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Harzewski identifies, 'scenes of female bonding and friendship communities are plentiful in chick lit' (p. 146); Linda Chávez Doyle (2018) argues that this is central to chick lit's enduring popularity, positing that 'Reading chick lit is fun because it is often humorous and there is an emphasis on female friendship.' in 'Writing Chica Lit', in *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, ed. by Erin Hurt (Milton: Routledge, 2018), pp. 177–92 (p. 179).

<sup>3</sup> Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves": Chick Lit in Black and White', p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 6.



company and whiteness as favourable. Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) explores the friendships of Bernadine, Savannah, Gloria and Robin. McMillan's narrative allows their perspective to be seen by alternating chapters in the novel. The novel has been adapted into a commercially successful film (1995) starring Whitney Houston, and McMillan has also written a sequel to it, *Getting to Happy* (2010). *Waiting to Exhale* is McMillan's third novel, but it is the text heralded most as debuting sistah lit.<sup>5</sup> As Erin Hurt (2018) writes, *Waiting to Exhale* shows the additional complexities of the postfeminist moment for Black women:

Chick lit illustrates this postfeminist moment of living in a world where expectations have changed but the conditions and structures have not. While Bridget Jones illuminates the complicated shape this takes for white women, *Waiting to Exhale* shows that love and success, for black women, are further complicated by additional layers of oppression and marginalization.<sup>6</sup>

While postfeminist theories are still relevant to McMillan's text, the additional layers of oppression and marginalisation experienced by Black women are often overlooked in postfeminist discourses. This is arguably why the text is connected to the genre but given a distinct subgenre designation. This is a key area that needs to be considered when exploring postfeminist ideologies in the text.

McMillan's more recent text, *It's Not All Downhill from Here* shows changes in alignment with fourth-wave feminism. While *Waiting to Exhale* does have a sequel which features most of the same characters, the publication date falls before the arrival of fourth-wave feminist discourses and, thus, is not as suitable for this study as McMillan's later text, *It's Not All Downhill from Here*. This novel focuses on an older protagonist,

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<sup>5</sup> Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves': Chick Lit in Black and White', p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> Hurt, 'The White Terry McMillan: Centering Black Women Within Chick Lit's Genealogy', p. 155.

Loretha, and her struggles with grief, with the support of her friends Korynthia, Poochie, Lucky and Sadie. The text's representation of older female protagonists and the impact of age on friendship and Sisterhood is explored in this chapter.

The third and final novel evaluated in this chapter is Reid's *Such a Fun Age*. This novel focuses on Emira and Alix's relationship with one another and their other friends, evaluating how race (and racial conflict) factor into it. While often categorised as literary fiction and longlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize, the reviews of the novel align with chick lit: satire, humour, rom-com, Jane Austen and wit are all relevant to the genre. The book's satirical approach to white neoliberal feminism was emphasised by reviewers, who noted that *Such A Fun Age* 'satirizes the white pursuit of wokeness' and applies 'needling wit' to 'interracial relationships.'<sup>7</sup> A key part of the novel's marketing and audience response was how the novel has 'a setup made for a rom-com' and is a 'smart comedy of manners', similar to that which 'Jane Austen had applied to class 200 years earlier.'<sup>8</sup> This suggests the fluidity of the genre of chick lit.

*Waiting to Exhale* is directly mentioned in *Such a Fun Age*. When protagonist Emira first visits her new boyfriend Kelley's house, she notices that 'to her right, next to the record player, was a milk crate full of albums. "Why do you have the *Waiting to Exhale* soundtrack?" she asked. [...] "Because I have the music taste of a middle-aged

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<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Hayes, "'Such a Fun Age' Satirizes the White Pursuit of Wokeness', *The Atlantic*, 8 January 2020 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2020/01/review-such-fun-age-kiley-reid/604552/>> [accessed 28 July 2023]; Claire Armitstead, 'Kiley Reid: "The Premise That Literary Fiction Has to Be a Drag Is so Silly"', *The Observer*, 27 December 2020, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/27/kiley-reid-interview-such-a-fun-age>> [accessed 28 July 2023].

<sup>8</sup> Lauren Christensen, 'When It Comes to Race, How Progressive Are the Progressives?', *The New York Times*, 31 December 2019, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/31/books/review/such-a-fun-age-kiley-reid.html>> [accessed 28 July 2023]; Armitstead, 'Kiley Reid: "The Premise That Literary Fiction Has to Be a Drag Is so Silly"'.

Black woman" he said.<sup>9</sup> This highlights the status of *Waiting to Exhale* as a pop cultural phenomenon with wide-ranging audiences, but also associated with a particular time and place (indicated by the "middle-aged" part of Kelley's reply).

The connection between the race politics of *Waiting to Exhale* and *Such a Fun Age* illuminates the similarities and differences between the two. One such difference is the explicit depiction of neoliberal, white feminism with the character of Alix (relevant to both postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism). Similar to how analysing *Waiting to Exhale* elucidates the additional complexities of the postfeminist moment for Black women, *Such a Fun Age* emphasises the heightened intricacies faced by Black women within the fourth-wave feminist movement. Banet-Weiser (2018) posits how

[T]he march was an example of a primarily popular white feminism, with many of its stated goals intended to empower white middle-class women, especially in the capitalist workplace. Indeed, many called out the march for its lack of intersectionality, and its refusal to recognize that vectors of power work differently if one is a woman of color.<sup>10</sup>

Neoliberal, white feminism is challenged more in recent popular publications. For example, Mikki Kendall (2020), Koa Beck (2021) and Lola Olufemi (2020) address the inequalities associated within the fourth-wave feminist movement.<sup>11</sup> The last ten years has also seen the evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement, advocating for racial justice and fairness. This underscores the problematic similarity between postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism regarding their lack of inclusivity within their movements.

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<sup>9</sup> Kiley Reid, *Such a Fun Age*, 1st edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 70. All further references will be given in the main text.

<sup>10</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, p.180.

<sup>11</sup> Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot*; Beck, *White Feminism*; Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*.

However, a notable distinction lies in the increased challenges faced by the current movement in addressing this issue.

Sisterhood is a concept explored throughout this chapter. I discuss chick lit portrayals of the friends-as-sisterly bond, but also address the concept of Sisterhood as the general expectation of solidarity between women.<sup>12</sup> Feminist theorist bell hooks (1986) explains how 'Sisterhood' refers to women uniting against 'male supremacist ideology [that] encourages women to believe [they] are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men.'<sup>13</sup> So, a sense of solidarity is fostered from a collective rebelling against patriarchal ideologies that encourage women to see each other as enemies and competition. hooks (1986) adds that we are 'taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another.'<sup>14</sup> Then, in 2020, Hazel Tionloc Biana's recent study, 'Extending bell hooks' Feminist Theory', pinpoints how 'women of color are still invisible, discriminated and marginalized by virtue of them being women and people of color. [Thus] assertions that hooks makes on feminism and culture are still quite relevant today.'<sup>15</sup> While the lack of diversity is highlighted and challenged more now, discrimination and lack of solidarity still exist. As Olufemi (2020) explains,

Solidarity is hard to define. In the simplest terms, it can range from: working across difference, standing together in the face of shared oppression and standing alongside those with whom you do not share a common experience of the world.

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<sup>12</sup> For clarity, I use lowercase 's' when referring to individual relationships, friendships (sisterhood) and an uppercase S when referring to a wider feminist movement, solidarity (Sisterhood).

<sup>14</sup> bell hooks, 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women', *Feminist Review*, 23 (1986), 125-38 (p. 127).

<sup>15</sup> Hazel T Biana, 'Extending Bell Hooks' Feminist Theory', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21.1 (2020), 13-29 (p. 14).

It's a slippery concept, it moves about, it unites and divides the movements we are part of.<sup>16</sup>

Reid's *Such a Fun Age* highlights the socio-political structures that can weaken this notion of an automatic Sisterhood between women. This fellow-feeling of solidarity among women, Sisterhood, is an idealistic view which overlooks all the other cross-currents of race, class, economic status and domestic status.

Sisterly support, celebration, and solidarity remain key concepts in both postfeminist and fourth-wave feminist approaches. There are differences but these are more with relation to degree and diversity. For example, feelings of solidarity between women strangers seem to have increased since the 1990s. In 1990, Wolf explained how 'Solidarity is hardest to find when women learn to see each other as beauties first. The [beauty] myth urges women to believe that it's every woman for herself.'<sup>17</sup> Then, in 2013, Cochrane argued that gathering together through social media hashtags provides an 'undeniable force.'<sup>18</sup> Chamberlain (2017) expands, 'This creates a sense of solidarity: a mass sharing that draws parallels between women that might not have existed before.'<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as Banet-Weiser (2018) writes, regarding their participation in the 2017 Women's March in Los Angeles, 'I was truly bolstered by the feelings of solidarity, not just with fellow demonstrators around me but also with the constant texting of images from my friends and family. The sheer numbers of people demonstrating were important politically.'<sup>20</sup> While the concept of a collective Sisterhood

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<sup>16</sup> Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (Guardian Books, 2013), ch. 4, para. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality*, p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, p. 179.

is idealistic considering socio-political structures that exist, there has been a form of uniting against inequalities which strengthened by the use of fourth-wave feminist social media hashtags.

The chapter is structured into two parts, each of which explores a significant concept for both feminism and chick lit. Firstly, 'Supportive Sisterhood' explores friends' support through stress and trauma, as well as celebration, the ever-presence of friends and scenes of solidarity. Secondly, 'Competitive Sisterhood' focuses on instances of judgement, resentment and romantic competition and considers how race and privilege factor into advocations of feminist activism and solidarity. It evaluates to what extent changing feminisms and genre fluidity impact chick lit texts' politics, maturity and diversity. Overall, this chapter argues that the positives of friendship are similarly depicted in older and newer chick lit, while the negatives of Sisterhood are more explicitly critiqued in the more recent works: friendship is preserved in chick lit novels and portrayals of women's relationships with strangers shift.

## Supportive Sisterhood

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'Friends are the family we choose for ourselves', a phrase often attributed to writer Edna Buchanan, is a common saying used to refer to close friendships.<sup>21</sup> The concept suggests that your family is fixed and predestined, but friends are optional and of your own choice. In her study of chick lit, Harzewski (2011) demonstrates how 'Bridget's "urban

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Nicole Mowbray, 'Now We Can All Play Happy "Framilies"', *The Observer*, 8 April 2006, section Society <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2006/apr/09/uknews.theobserver>> [accessed 24 August 2023].

family” of single friends became a stock feature of the genre. The friendship circle stands in for family, as immediate relatives are often dead or absent.’<sup>22</sup> However, as Lisa A. Guerrero (2006) argues, the ‘urban family’ trope of chick lit was visible in *Waiting to Exhale* years before *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. She explains how ‘the “urban family” often provides - or at least supplements - the emotional closeness and support expected from the traditional nuclear family.’<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as Nally and Smith (2015) contend, ‘We can understand friendship and solidarity as something that is characterized linguistically by humour, compliments and personal comments.’<sup>24</sup> These linguistic characteristics are used in the novel to highlight further how friends are perceived as the heroines’ urban family. *Waiting to Exhale*, *It’s Not All Downhill* and *Such a Fun Age* all present friendships to be more meaningful, implying a continuity between postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism: friends support each other through stress and trauma, celebrate with one another, remain consistent in each other lives (when men come and go), provide a safe space for women to compliment and comfort and nourish a form of feminist solidarity.

### Sister Friends: Support Through Stress and Trauma in Chick Lit

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All three texts demonstrate how friends can help each other through stress and trauma, in relationships based around shared support and sisterhood. As Thelma Bryant-Davis (2013) notes, ‘[S]ister friends can be crucial in assisting African American women and

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<sup>22</sup> Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Guerrero, ‘About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary “Chick” Culture’, p. 202).

<sup>24</sup> C. Nally and A. Smith, *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 45.

women of ethnically diverse backgrounds to face, address, and overcome, major transitions including stress and traumatic stress.’<sup>25</sup> Friendship between women is more important in chick lit with BIPOC protagonists as demonstrated in *Waiting to Exhale* when Gloria suffers a heart attack and her friends Bernadine, Robin and Savannah immediately arrive at her bedside and tell the doctor: ‘We’re all responsible for her. [...] She’s our sister. Please tell us she’s going to be all right.’ The doctor looked at all three women. He knew Bernadine was lying. But he was used to this.’<sup>26</sup> With this use of ‘sister’, it is a matter of interpretation between the doctor and the friends regarding what this term signifies. This is a lie for the doctor because they are not formally related, but for the friends, this is their truth: she is their sister regarding their feelings towards her. Not only does this emphasise how these three women see Gloria as their family, not just a friend, but it also highlights how many other friendship groups have done the same thing in the past.

The way humour is used in the scene also solidifies their supportive role. Bernadine says, ‘Gloria! You’ve got some nerve, having a damn heart attack when you knew well Onika [her daughter] was coming in to get her hair permed’ (p. 445). This moment in the novel becomes more powerful when juxtaposing sincerity and comedy because it further elucidates their strong friendship bond: their desire to make Gloria laugh, despite their worry for her. Humour is an important trope in chick lit, and as Mißler (2016) explains: ‘Almost any chick-lit novel features at least one close friend the

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<sup>25</sup> Thema Bryant-Davis, ‘Sister Friends: A Reflection and Analysis of the Therapeutic Role of Sisterhood in African American Women’s Lives’, *Women & Therapy*, 36.1–2 (2013), 110–20 (p. 110) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2012.720906>>.

<sup>26</sup> Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale*, Reprint edition (New York: Berkley Books, 2011), p. 443. All further references will be given in the main text.



heroine can joke and laugh with. [...] [L]aughter shared with friends always has a function of comic relief, and it is used as a base for female bonding.’<sup>27</sup> Humour is used throughout the three novels, strengthening the portrayal of the bond between friends. Arguably, this also contributes to the marketability of chick lit – by making the woman reading the novel laugh, it could feel akin to having a conversation with a close friend.

Similarly, in *It's Not All Downhill from Here*, Loretha, Sadie, Korynthia and Lucky refer to their late friend, Poochie, as their sister. In a suicide note, Poochie explains how she had been ‘battling colon cancer for quite some time’ but ‘didn’t want to scare you all and I didn’t want you to feel sorry for me.’<sup>28</sup> The care for her friends surpasses the pain and loneliness she must have felt keeping the disease a secret. When they discover her body, they are ‘howling and stomping our feet in disbelief’ (p. 236). The animalistic cry signifies their anger and traumatization. They find two letters: one which ‘had all of our names on it’ and ‘the other one was lying flat and faceup, and on the front Poochie had written: *Open Immediately*’ (p. 236). One letter was for whoever found her body – with details of funeral arrangements and the other was for her friends. She wrote her suicide note for her friends, emphasising that these friends were the most important people she needed to say goodbye to – they were her family. Upon finding these letters, Loretha says, ‘You didn’t have to go through this all by yourself. We are your sisters, Pooch. We will always be your sisters’ (p. 236). Despite the sadness of this scene, the sincerity of the friendship's sister-like bond is powerful. The term ‘sister’, here, like its usage at the hospital in *Waiting to Exhale*, is used with a connection to trauma and demonstrates the

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<sup>27</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 136.

<sup>28</sup> Terry McMillan, *It's Not All Downhill from Here* (New York: Ballantine, 2020), p. 238. All further references will be given in the main text. The title will also be shortened to *It's Not All Downhill* for the remainder of this chapter.

truth of how Loretha feels towards Poochie – to her, she really is her family, and ‘always’ will be. Poochie’s suicide note to her friends includes a warming level of amusement, ‘*It does not have to be all downhill from here. So put it in fourth gear and floor it!*’ (p. 238) leaving her friends with ‘smiles on [their] faces’ (p. 239). So, similar to *Waiting to Exhale*, humour – or more specifically the exclamatory, high-spirited tone – is used to lighten a sad, serious moment. The difference is that Poochie, unlike Gloria, has died and is not there to see and participate in the smiles. This implies that comfort between friends should be altruistic.

Next, in *Such A Fun Age*, friends are also shown as providing familial-like support to protagonist Emira. Towards the novel's start, Emira’s boss Alix asks her to babysit her daughter, Briar, in non-working hours. Emira, Zara and Briar go to Market Depot and a security guard is racially prejudiced towards them (pp. 8-12). Kelley – Emira’s future boyfriend – records this encounter on his phone (p. 16-7), and later in the novel, the video is shared online (p. 241-2). Once her friends think they discover who spread the footage – Kelley – their love for Emira is evident through the anger they feel towards him. The sincerity and attentiveness Emira needs and her friends give her is clear: Zara tells her other friend, Shaunie, to

grab Emira’s stuff and then Josefa declared that she was getting an Uber. [...] Zara grabbed onto Emira’s hand and steered her through the crown in a way that felt young and reminded her of college. Somehow Shaunie appeared by the stairs to the street with Emira’s coat and presents, like a boyfriend who had treated his partner to a shopping spree. [...] Emira took a tighter grip of Zara’s hand on the fresh layer of snow. (p. 247)

The reference to ‘like a boyfriend’ is ironic because we have just discovered that the ‘boyfriend’ caused something traumatic for Emira. This suggests that women should value their friends more than their boyfriends because friends can provide a supportive

role without being the reason behind the trauma. The 'fresh layer of snow' indicates a new time in Emira's life (one without a boyfriend), and the fact that this makes her take a tighter grip of Zara's hand is symbolic of how she needs and appreciates her friends during this time. The repeated mention of Zara's hand with Emira's also hints at how she will always be there for her. The way Shaunie 'somehow' appears at the stairs suggests that Emira is not thinking straight, but also that there is a sense of magic (a surpassing of reality) with friendships. Humour also heightens the friendship bond in this scene - her friends change Kelley's name on her phone to 'Don't Answer' (p. 250). This could make Emira smile, thinking that her friends are helping her the best they can when she is going through trauma. The reference to Kelley's number being saved as 'Don't Answer' is referred to at the end of the novel. After Emira had 'stuck it to Mrs. Chamberlain with a remix of his breakup line', he contacts her with a 'clunky and trite text of encouragement that Emira did not enjoy' (pp. 302-3). Emira realizes that 'there was no way that she and Kelley would ever recover' so 'Emira never texted him again. His name in her phone remained Don't Answer' (p. 303). Incorporating humour into moments of distress in chick lit novels can reinforce the novels' underlying messages, for example, with how greater value should be placed on friendships rather than romance.

### Ever-Present: The Unwavering Support of Friendship in Chick Lit

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McMillan and Reid also portray positive instances of friendship groups to emphasise that friends are as important as family and should be prioritised over romantic relationships. One of the women's birthdays provides a focus for friendship in each novel. McMillan depicts three of Loretha's birthday celebrations in *It's Not All Downhill*.

As Loretha's 68<sup>th</sup> birthday approaches, Loretha reminisces about her last birthday, remembering how her husband, Carl, had filmed her party. After she sees the title card for her party and her dog, B.B., starts snoring, she 'fast-forward to the touching toasts my girlfriends made, and remember they'd sounded more like testimonials from old Oprah Winfrey shows.' (p. 10) The dog's snoring indicates Loretha's own boredom of the video and the way she 'fast-forwards' to her friend's speeches demonstrates her attempt to pique her interest. It illuminates how much these women mean to her: more than any other moment of the tape. The reference to 'old Oprah Winfrey shows' demonstrates how popular culture illustrates the terms and languages of friendships echoing how chick lit reflects these kinds of relationships in real life. McMillan introduces each friend in sequence as they toast Loretha, illustrating how each has different personality traits and histories, but they align in their love for one another. Regarding last year's 'dull party', Loretha says:

My BFFs were there, though. Lucky. Sadie. Korynthia. Even Poochie made the trip from Vegas. I grew up with all of them. Occasionally we all get on one another's nerves. Sometimes to the point that our friendships get temporarily annulled. But we always come running back because we loved one another longer than some of us have loved the men in our lives. (p. 7)

The friendships are compared to romantic relationships – they 'get temporarily annulled' – but the difference between the friends and men is that the annulment is not forever: 'we always come running back', hence highlighting the familial-like bond of friendships, especially in comparison to romantic relationships. Friendships are shown as more robust because the women always come back together after a divorce.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, Gloria is feeling despondent, so her friends collectively come together to plan her birthday – making it a celebratory gathering in an attempt to lift her mood: 'Now she was waiting for her girlfriends to show up: They'd told her "not to do a

thing.” Leave everything to them.’ (pp. 356-7). At the gathering, the conversation turns to men, where Gloria declares, ‘Men ain’t everything. When are you gonna realize that? I’m having a good time sitting here acting silly with you guys, and do you think if any of us had a man we’d be here doing this?’ (p. 366). While problematic in its suggestion that, if coupled, one would not attend an event hosted by a friend, Savannah responds,

‘If I had a man and it was your birthday and you were going to be over here by yourself all lonely and shit and Robin and Bernie called me up to come over here to help you celebrate, I’d still be here, girl. So don’t ever think a man would have that much power over me that I’d stop caring about my friends’ (p. 366)

Savannah’s speech affirms how she believes friendship’s power should outweigh a man’s love or control in a romantic relationship.

Birthday celebrations also significantly demonstrate familial friendships in *Such a Fun Age*; the novel is structured around three separate birthday celebrations. During her birthday celebrations at Tropicana 187, Emira watches ‘her girlfriends hold their shots up and lick the excess from their fingers. For a moment, she felt the way she did when Briar saw a picture of a flower, sniffed it, and said, “Delicious”’ (p. 234). Reid compares Emira’s feelings of seeing her friends drinking on her birthday to the child she babysits, Briar, smelling and appreciating the scent of a picture of a flower. By doing so, she emphasises the affection Emira feels towards her friends, the playful behaviour of her friends on her birthday and the childlike simplicity of these friendships. In this instance, Kelley contrasts with her friends: the feeling of love towards her friends is juxtaposed with the upset that the release of the video brings (Emira believes it is Kelley who released the video).

With the examples given above – friends’ support through stress and trauma and celebrations through birthdays – the constant presence of friends is clear. Continuing her

study of 'sistah lit', Guerrero (2006) argues how 'the friend unit is a constant presence, and crises take on a communal sense regardless of which individual woman is experiencing them.'<sup>29</sup> The focus on 'constant presence' is relevant in all three texts: there is a unit – a group of friends – who are shown as consistently helping other women in the group overcome anything, at any time, in a crisis. A way of demonstrating the friends' consistent presence within the texts is by looking at the circular structure. While other relationships adapt throughout the book, either positively or negatively, the relationship which remains consistent is the friendship unit. At the beginning of *Such a Fun Age*, Zara accompanies Emira when she is asked to babysit, defends her during harassment by supermarket security, and provides immediate consolation in the aftermath. One of the text's key plotlines is how Emira has to contend with racist prejudice throughout, and her friends, including Zara, help her to do this. Importantly, Emira's outcome of the novel is independent of her boyfriend, Kelley and employer, Alix. Instead, her concluding narrative focuses on her friends: '[S]he'd gone to Mexico for Zara's birthday' (p. 301). Travelling to Mexico is hinted at previously in the novel as an event that Emira wants to attend but does not think she can afford (p. 130). Therefore, the fact she ends the text accomplishing it demonstrates how much Emira has grown with the help of her friends – entering her 'happily-ever-after' with a friend and not Alix or Kelley.

There is a comparable emphasis on friendship as a vital source of support, in *Waiting to Exhale*. The novel starts with Bernadine's divorce – her crisis – and her friends tell her, 'I won't be able to rest until I know you're okay' (p. 85) and 'I'da caught the next plane out of here and you know it' (p. 124). Then, at the novel's end, Bernadine

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<sup>29</sup> Guerrero, p. 97.

receives her divorce settlement and wants to celebrate with her friends. She calls Savannah, who had a date, but says “I’ll cancel. For you.” Bernadine was flattered.’ (p. 450). While Bernadine’s mood shifts, what remains is how supportive her friends are. After she hangs up, Bernadine reflects that

her girlfriends were just as elated with the settlement as she was. She could hear it in their voices. Hell, they’d been waiting as long as she had. Now it seemed as if they’d all won the lottery. And as far as Bernadine was concerned, they had’ (p. 454)

The ‘they’d been waiting’ reflects the constancy of their friendship throughout the novel, and her focus on the fact that, from her perspective, her friends had won the lottery too implies that what is hers is also theirs.

While new relationships form by the end of the novel – Gloria and Marvin, Savannah and her new date – what remains constant (and is implied as more valuable) is how much these friends mean to each other. This is true with Robin, too: after the discovery of her pregnancy and the death of her father, Robin has a revelation, as with Bernadine, that her friends are the constant, secure element of her support system. Her character alters from having an obsessive need to be loved by men and, if not, questioning her self-worth – ‘Why couldn’t you just tell me what I was doing wrong, and I could’ve fixed it. What was wrong with me, Russell?’ (p. 299) – to no longer needing men to give her validation – ‘I’m tired of being a fool. Tired of giving him so much power. Over me. Over my life’ (p. 446). Her friendship group encourages this new independence (from men) by reassuring her that she is not alone: ‘Me, Gloria and Savannah’ll help you do everything but breast-feed the little rug rat when it’s born’ (p. 452). Humour is again used here to lighten the mood: a potentially concerned Robin is worrying about her new experiences and attitudes, but the sincerity of her friends’ offer to help is unmistakable.

As with *Such a Fun Age* and *Waiting to Exhale*, the central friendships remain the same, if not more robust, throughout *It's Not All Downhill*, showing the sustainability of women's friendships through challenging times. The difference in this text is its depiction of a friendship group of older women, and one of them, Poochie, ends her life. The novel's structure follows multiple instances of 'crisis' where these friends have supported one another, including Loretha's grieving process for her husband, Korynthia's son's death, Sadie's affair, Lucky's issues with her husband, and Poochie's suicide. Loretha also opens a new shop where 'Like clockwork, at two forty-five my girls arrived dressed to kill' (p. 329), emphasising the dependability of their friendship. While Loretha starts and ends the novel with different romantic attachments, her friends remain a reassuring presence throughout. The significance of the hint at romance in the last few sentences is that her friends have encouraged her and given her the confidence to overcome her grief at losing Carl. The friendship group meets monthly for dinner and to 'catch up and bitch and pretty much have our own version of female church. It's a thing we've done for decades, through multiple kids and multiple husbands and good and bad' (p. 60). Loretha realises they had not had one of their monthly meals since Carl died, and she

missed us spilling our guts and being silly all together. My friends are the sisters I wish I had, even when they do get on my nerves and call me out on my BS. But we've been doing this for one another all our lives. We grew up in the same neighborhood, went to middle and high school together. (p. 60)

The novel is set around Loretha's 68<sup>th</sup> birthday and she explains that these women went to school together, emphasising how consistently these women have been in her life. Loretha comments on the fact the topic of their conversations has changed throughout the years: 'In our younger days, our once-a-month catch-up dinners usually meant



complaining about ex-husbands or current husbands' but recently, 'new health problems or old ones take up the majority of the time' (p. 88). Thus, this demonstrates how even when 'new' events happen, what remains constant is the friends with which the chick lit protagonists discuss them with.

### Positive Displays of Solidarity in Chick Lit

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All three texts also highlight how bathrooms are a space that foster support between women: both friends and strangers.<sup>30</sup> Ruth Lewis et al.'s (2015) study analyses women's interviews on the concept of safety in experiences of women-only space, noting it 'made them feel "safe to" engage and participate more meaningfully than in other spaces.'<sup>31</sup> The novels reflect Lewis et al.'s claim that "'safe" environments enable freedom': a place you can be authentic. While Reid illustrates a friendship group offering support in a woman-only space – at a time when a man has upset a woman – in McMillan's texts, it is strangers providing a sense of sisterly support to other women.

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<sup>30</sup> My thesis does not address trans women's experiences because the primary texts being analysed do not include depictions of trans women. Furthermore, the decision is influenced by practical considerations, such as the limited space and scope of this research project. It is important to note that the omission of trans women's experiences is not a reflection of their significance or validity but rather a result of the specific focus and source material of this study. As Ruth Lewis et. al explain, "'safe spaces" for "women" is a hotly contested theme in feminist theories due to recent discussions of rights of trans male-to-female people to access spaces designed for 'women only' (Browne 2009, Westbrook and Schilt 2009; The Roestone Collective 2014). In some debates, the term 'woman' is qualified by 'cis' to differentiate between women designated at birth as a woman, and those who feel 'at home' in that gender, and those whose preferred gender does not match their designated gender. Importantly, as with Lewis' study, my thesis does not address 'trans women's experiences of space or the politics of trans inclusion in 'women-only' activities, both of which are important areas for exploration of ideas of gendered experiences of safety. The women within these novels identify as cis women (their gender matches the gender that they were designated at birth), as do the women within Lewis' study of the women's experiences of women-only safe space. See: Ruth Lewis and others, "'Safe Spaces": Experiences of Feminist Women-Only Space', *Sociological Research Online*, 20.4 (2015), 105–18 <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3781>>.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis and others, pt. 4.1.

In *Such a Fun Age*, Emira's friends discover that the video of her being racially harassed by a security guard has been released online, and their reaction is to immediately get Emira's attention and take her to the bathroom: 'Emira allowed Josefa and Zara to pull and push her toward the bathroom' (p. 240). The bathroom here is symbolic of safety, a place away from Kelley where they can comfort and help Emira. In the bathroom, 'Zara shoved [Emira] and Shaunie into a handicap stall. Josefa locked the door behind them' (p. 240), and 'Emira found herself backed up against the filthy stall wall covered in stickers and Sharpie and names and numbers' (p. 241). While in a small, filthy space together, the focus of Emira's friends is on trying to help her, which outweighs the uncomfortable and dirty feeling. The stall is covered in stickers and markings: these could represent how the space is marked with women's thoughts and, at times, even their upsetting and messy situations. This is one of those situations – Emira's friends are trying to discover if Kelley sent out the video. While in the stall, Emira hears women exchanging compliments – 'From the bathroom stall, Emira heard a group of girls scream with recognition and joy' and saying 'Girl, you look good!' (p. 244) - which contrasts with the upsetting situation she feels she is in at that current moment. *Such a Fun Age* signifies how the bathroom allows women to unite in positive and negative situations. Furthermore, Emira is shown as more focused on her environment than the situation itself: the filthy stall and the conversation outside the stall grab her attention, even though she has just found out some upsetting news. This reinforces the concept of the bathroom being a place of safety: a way to avoid the messiness of the current situation. The fact that Zara then breaks free from the bathroom and immediately addresses Kelley illuminates this further: she must leave the 'woman-focused' and 'woman-only' space to confront the 'man' to defend her friend.

Similar to the 'Girl, you look good!' compliment in the bathroom in *Such a Fun Age*, women are also depicted as being kind to other women in *Waiting to Exhale*. In McMillan's earlier work, Savannah attends a New Year's Eve party and goes to the bathroom, which is 'packed with rhinestoned, sequined, glowing, glittering women' (p. 21). Her noticing demonstrates the beauty efforts women make when attending parties and how bathrooms are used as an area with a mirror, away from men, to perfect their beauty. Savannah receives a compliment from her: "'That's a bad dress, girl, and you're wearing the hell out of it," she said. "That's the truth," somebody in front of the mirror said. "Thank you," I said, and smiled' (p. 21). This shows how bathrooms can be a place where women increase other women's confidence. Savannah and Denise form an unspoken connection through their shared experiences of the expectations of modern womanhood. They engage in flattery and respect, significantly, in an environment separate from men. This echoes the potential of 'women-only spaces': environments where women can unify away from male control. However, when the romantic competition (Lionel) is in direct contact with both women, the unspoken connection is broken, and instead, the other woman is deemed a rival. This emphasises the possibilities of the bathroom space for women – the positive way women nourish one another - but also its limitation: how the sisterly support does not extend outside the bathroom.

In *It's Not All Downhill*, McMillan also shows the bathroom as a place of support for the woman protagonist. Loretha is 'at Nordstrom Rack in the dressing room' when her phone 'shivers' in her pocket, and she reads an email from her daughter (p. 283). Loretha then

grabbed a wrap, tried it around me, and ran as fast as I could do to the ladies' room where I opened a stall and sat down on the toilet and dropped my head into both palms and started crying like a baby (p. 284).

When Loretha starts crying, she immediately thinks of going to the bathroom to shut the stall and be alone, but another woman empathises with her and attempts to comfort her.

McMillan writes,

[S]omeone said, "Are you alright in there?" I pulled off too much toilet paper and wiped my eyes and said, "Yes, I'm fine. These are tears of joy and thank you very much for asking." She tapped on the door three more times as if to say, *Right on!* (p. 284)

The two women do not see each other face-to-face, but Loretha appreciates the support, and the other woman celebrates Loretha's happiness. This scene is a representation of the unspoken sympathy and attachment that women have towards other women, even if they are strangers – the shared, collective experience of being a woman – that, in these chick lit novels, is expressed in bathrooms.

All three texts also highlight a sense of solidarity between Black women: a 'standing together in the face of shared oppression.'<sup>32</sup> In *It's Not All Downhill*, loyalty and unity towards other Black women are evident. Korynthia tells Loretha to sell her shop to 'somebody black. Make C. J. Walker proud' (p. 49). Contextually, C. J. Walker owned a successful hair care business, but she was also a pioneer of global Black activism, therefore the reference to her subtly hints at the importance of fighting against racial injustice. Later in the novel, Loretha proudly declares how she 'sold the L.A. store to two beautiful young black college graduates' (p. 209). Furthermore, Loretha asks explicitly for a Black psychiatrist for her daughter, Jalecia: 'I would really like to find her a good

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<sup>32</sup> Olufemi, p. 100.

black psychologist and psychiatrist. Preferably female' (p. 251). This demonstrates not only the desire to support other Black people but also how Jalecia's experiences of being Black and female may have impacted her mental health issues, so a white male psychologist would not as readily understand these feelings of oppression.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, there is an actual Black feminist group which promotes solidarity: Black Women on the Move (BWOTM). An example of their work is when

once a year we have this all-day event, with all kinds of workshops: how to deal with breast cancer, incest, sexual harassment on the job, single parenting, financial planning, stress – you name it. Anything that's helpful to black women. (p. 193)

This demonstrates an active approach to improving Black women's lives in their community. Due to each chapter in *Waiting to Exhale* illustrating a different woman's point of view (of the four friends), McMillan showcases how Bernadine joins BWOTM from both her and Gloria's points of view. Firstly, Bernadine explains:

You complained to Gloria, your crazy hairdresser, who told you that one cure for chronic boredom was to get involved in something worthwhile. She belonged to Black Women on the Move, a support group that held workshops for women who wanted to do more with their lives than cook, clean and take care of the kids. [...] So you joined it. (p. 38)

Bernadine expresses her fears and worries to Gloria, her hairdresser, who suggests she join something worthwhile: somewhere where she can make a difference. The second-person narration of 'you joined it' and 'you complained to' involves the reader, potentially implying how feminist activism benefits everyone. Similar to the bathroom being shown as a safe space, the hairdresser is another space where women unify, hence the way Bernadine's hairdresser gives her this information, and they have been friends since. Later in the novel, McMillan illustrates the same plot point (of Bernadine joining the BWOTM support group) but this time from Gloria's point of view:

And when women sat in *her* chair, they usually told Gloria all their business. Bernadine was no exception. She had told Gloria how bored she was with her life, and especially with John, but all Gloria could think of was suggesting that she join Black Women on the Move, since Bernadine never mentioned anything about getting a divorce. (p. 84)

This suggests that Gloria's invitation for Bernadine to join was a far more understated proposal than Bernadine initially perceived. Boredom is used in both perspectives highlighting Bernadine's desire for more in her life. The main characters connect and grow primarily through these meetings, echoing a sense of Black women's feminist solidarity. After being encouraged to join, Savannah believes, '[T]his is a good group. I wish we'd had something like this in Denver' (p. 208). This shows a political aim of the book: to encourage groups similar to BWOTM – Black women supporting other Black women - in other areas of America.

*Such a Fun Age* also illustrates a connection between friendships and broader feelings of Sisterhood between women. After Emira discovers that Alix shared the video capturing the security guard's racial prejudice, Zara extends her defense of her friend, Emira, to a collective action to address racism on a broader scale. Alix arranges for Emira to be interviewed on television to allow Emira to share her side of the story, but when it is revealed that Alix shared the video, Emira says,

"I'm doin' this thing, okay? But as soon as I give you a look, I want you to make a scene." Zara shook her head in reluctance, obligation, and stoic confirmation. "Mira, don't play with me 'cause you know I'll start some shit." (p. 275).

Emira asks Zara to create a scene to embarrass Alix, like she felt embarrassed when the video was publicly released. The 'reluctance, obligation, and stoic confirmation' shows the stages that Zara went through before she accepted. Once given 'the look', Zara 'jumped into the frame' explaining how Emira has a new job with the Green party,

shouting and clapping on every syllable of “This is what democracy looks like!” (pp. 287-8). Then, while Emira has an intimate moment with Briar, Zara distracts everyone, chanting, “Whose streets?!” She clapped three times. “*Our* streets!” She clapped again.’ (p. 290). Zara conveys the impression of an empowered Black woman who wants to fight for equality and against prejudice. Her ‘scene’ defending Emira is adorned with the activism of the American civil rights movement and the later Black Lives Matter movement. The collision of friendship and politics is apparent and emphasises how singular protection and loyalty between friends can strengthen more prominent political activism – and vice versa.

## Competitive Sisterhood

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Women’s relationships with one another in chick lit novels are shown not only as supportive but also competitive. Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) argue, ‘Despite a popular belief that chick lit portrays strong female friendships, in fact other women are frequently represented as competitors and therefore not to be trusted.’<sup>33</sup> Laura Tracy (1991) posits that ‘Sisterhood is painful, incomplete, and occasionally humiliating. It is marred by distrust, disapproval, rejection, bitterness, envy, jealousy, despair, and hatred.’<sup>34</sup> While support and celebration are crucial to chick lit texts and different strands of feminism, complications of Sisterhood, including women’s judgement and

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<sup>33</sup> Gill and Herdieckerhoff, ‘Rewriting The Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?’, p. 498.

<sup>34</sup> Laura Tracy, *The Secret Between Us: Competition Among Women*, 1st edition (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1991), p. 209.

resentment of one another, seeing each other as romantic competition, and exclusionary feminism, are also significant aspects explored in the novels.

### Judgements and Resentments Between Women in Chick Lit

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*Waiting to Exhale*, *Such a Fun Age*, and *It's Not All Downhill* explore women's judgement and resentment towards one another, including within their friendship groups. As Leora Tanenbaum (2011) provocatively writes,

the success of another woman translates into my failure. And my success translates into her failure—which makes my success all the more sweet. Although I am a feminist, [...] there is also a part of me that feels reassured if a woman on the same playing field stumbles.<sup>35</sup>

This suggests the complex and contradictory attitudes that women can feel about one another. Tanenbaum displays an inner conflict: while desiring to be 'a feminist' and embrace other women's success, she acknowledges that she, instead, can feel resentment and focus on how their successes reinforce her own failures. McMillan and Reid indicate the potential for resentment to arise when one woman falls short of specific success metrics, especially when another woman succeeds. The novels portray this as a negative outcome, depicting how women utilise their own strengths and knowledge to assess and judge others.

*Such a Fun Age* highlights feelings of resentment towards other women succeeding in areas where they believe they are 'failing.' When her friend Shaunie is promoted, Emira wonders if 'there was an appropriate amount of support and

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<sup>35</sup> Leora Tanenbaum, *Catfight: Women and Competition* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), p. 9.



enthusiasm you needed to have for a friend, because if there was, then Shaunie was hitting her retainer' (p. 127). Emira's resentment towards Shaunie, though, is more to do with her own self-doubt and her feelings of failure in the areas where her friend is succeeding. Emira evaluates how,

Every week it was something. Wasn't it so great that Shaunie got this internship? Wasn't Shaunie's new boyfriend so cute? Wasn't it so nice that we got free drinks from the old guy who loved Shaunie's smile? (p. 127)

The questions demonstrate the different elements that Emira resents: career, romantic life and appearance. The repetition of 'Wasn't' implies that women feel restricted from supporting other women's success due to their own pressure to be successful. Emira admits, '[S]he was jealous, and then she wondered, *Is that what we're supposed to be doing right now? 'Cause if it is, I ain't there.*' (p. 132). Despite a lack of evidence, Emira believes her friends judge her for her babysitting job, but this, as shown above, is more about her own insecurities of not being 'there' rather than her friends' actual judgment of her. Her resentment prevents her from feeling happy when her friends come together to celebrate Shaunie's promotion, affecting her ability to be a good friend. Reid implies Zara acknowledges this and says, '[Y]ou need to check yourself and be happy for Shaunie' (p. 130). Therefore, on Instagram, Zara comments, as Emira, on Shaunie's post: 'OMG Shaunie. Slay bitch. Exclamation point, star emoji, black girl emoji, cash bag emoji', and she 'liked Shaunie's photo – the one of her jumping in front of the Sony building- and a tiny heart flashed' (p. 130). The 'tiny heart flashing' suggests the simplicity of showing love in contemporary society, but also the inauthenticity of showing support in this way on social media. Zara tells Emira, 'We have the technology' (p. 130), so even when resenting a friend, you can easily still show a sense of sisterly love.

As well as illustrating women's resentment towards one another, *Such a Fun Age* also highlights how women can judge other women in areas they feel they succeed in. Emira and Alix consistently judge one another in different ways, but both judgements underscore how women tend to evaluate other women in areas where they themselves thrive. Affluent Alix who lives in a beautiful, big house disparages Emira's apartment. When she first enters, her reaction is, '*Oh man, this is depressing*. Emira's apartment looked like one of those graduate college dormitories.' (p. 253). 'Depressing' demonstrates Alix's shallowness, patronising nature and her feelings of superiority. With Alix, Emira judges her parenting skills. When Alix says, 'I'd rather that [Briar] miss the Halloween party at ballet that she has been looking forward to than have her asking questions about it [her dead fish] all night long', she 'thought she heard Emira laugh, but not as if she'd heard a joke' (p. 116). Because the narrative shows both points of view, we can see that the laugh is indicative of Emira's judgment of Alix for not taking the time to appreciate the daughter she has. Emira says,

Every day I watch her [Briar] grip tighter and tighter onto the feeling of being ignored by the person she loves most. And she's this awesome, serious child who loves information and answers, and how could her own mother not appreciate the shit out of this? (p. 29).

Alix's success is with her house and Emira's is with caring for Briar. Both women are shown to judge each other in the domains where their expertise lie. This reinforces how women judge in areas in which they feel successful in.

*Waiting to Exhale* also illustrates judgement and resentment between women. Like in *Such a Fun Age*, the judging of other women arises in areas where the woman feels she is succeeding. Robin is consistently told she is beautiful, thin and sexy, so she

judges Gloria's weight and ability to attract men: 'Gloria doesn't know anything about men, because she's never really had one. It's a shame, if you ask me. She's too pretty to be so damn fat.', 'losing sixty or seventy pounds wouldn't hurt her' (p. 189). Robin's judgement of Gloria's weight is a way of gaining control when judged for her promiscuity (for example, 'she's like a walking billboard: "Here I am, and I'm Available."' (p. 227)). Because she feels criticised, she uses what she thinks is her strength (beauty) to become the judge rather than the judged. McMillan highlights how a negative consequence of this is how the women characters then feel they must hide elements of their life from their friends to prevent judgement. Robin asks Savannah not to say anything to their friends about her wallet going missing:

"I hope you didn't mention anything about my wallet and that stuff about Troy to Bernadine, did you?"

"No"

"Gloria?"

"Nope."

"Good." Robin sighed. "Some things I don't like to tell them." (p. 283)

The secrets demonstrate how Robin feels she must modify her behaviour to prevent her friends from judging her. Interestingly, at the same BWOTM event, Bernadine also asks Savannah not to say anything to Gloria and Robin about her taking antidepressants: 'Do me a favour, don't mention this to Gloria or Robin, because I haven't told them about it' (p. 283). This shows how women feel they need to be secretive amongst other women, even when advocating for collective action. Bernadine summarises, 'Sometimes all the petty gossip that went on made her sick: who's making more money than whom, and who's got a bigger house.' (p. 107). The way these occur at BWOTM events is ironic because they are meant to unite Black women, to discuss ways to improve their

community and discourage prejudice, yet women congregate and pass judgement on one another.

The apparent contradictions and tensions depicted in *Waiting to Exhale* show how the criteria for happiness for women differ, and there is no guarantee of happiness in conventional measurements of success. For example, Bernadine and Robin have a complicated relationship in *Waiting to Exhale*: Robin resents the life Bernadine led (before her divorce), yet Bernadine is unhappy with this lifestyle. Bernadine explains how she and Robin 'hit it off' (p. 38), but these two appear as opposites in the novel. Bernadine feels unsatisfied as a housewife: '[Y]ou spent your afternoons taking John junior to piano lessons, karate, Club Scouts, T-ball, and soccer. You dragged Onika to ballet and gymnastics when the child could barely walk straight.' (p. 37). The second-person narration (references to 'you' rather than 'I') highlights a feeling of disconnection that Bernadine has with this life. The listing echoes a sense of monotony. This is solidified when Bernadine adds, 'you had not been educated to become a permanent housewife' (p. 38). In contrast, Robin desires this lifestyle; she argues she 'would be content being a housewife [...] tak[ing] [her] kids to ballet or karate and piano lessons after school and still be home in time to grin in [her] husband's face' (pp. 59-60). This direct reference to the same activities of piano lessons, karate and ballet: one as a boring reality and one as an aspiring future, indicates how friends can be envious of their friends' lifestyles, despite their friends' lack of satisfaction with it. With the illustrations of complexity and contradiction, McMillan critiques the resentment that can be found in friendships. Once pregnant, Robin's aspirations change too. In the last chapter that centres on her perspective, Robin discusses her workplace success alongside her

pregnancy (p. 447). This echoes how lifestyles can appear idealistic when friends have them, but the reality can be disappointing.

There are similar representations in *It's Not All Downhill*. Poochie appears via a camera in one of their meetings because she lives in Las Vegas, and Loretha's reaction is: 'Even though we're all friends, I thought she could've put on some kind of powder and any kind of lip gloss just to look more presentable' (p. 83). 'More presentable' underscores the idea of judgement emerging in friendship scenarios. Poochie is seeing her friends, she should not have to worry about her appearance. Loretha is a beauty expert: her career is focused on making women look better. Hence, it is something she continually assesses in others. She also judges her doctor's appearance: 'My doctor told me to consider giving spinning a try and I wanted to tell her she should consider getting a makeover' (p. 14). When Loretha believes her doctor is criticising her, she, in return, judges her too. Her way of taking control of being told what to do is through disparaging another woman in area in which she knows she succeeds: her appearance. However, when Dr. Alexopolous praises her diet and weight-loss success towards the end of the novel, the assessment adapts to a more positive judgement:

I can't believe how much I used to not like her. She is much nicer and the frown she used to wear is gone. Like maybe she'd had a little Botox. Her hair is thicker, and I wanted to take back all my mean thoughts' (p. 303)

When Loretha believes the doctor is not judging her anymore, she becomes less critical of her appearance. McMillan continues to point out the notion that women judge because they feel they are getting judged themselves.

Loretha also uses her friends as a metric of success to boast to her sister: 'Don't twist this round on me, Odessa. I have a basketball team's worth of close friends who

will do anything in the world for me. How about you?' (p. 45). Using friendship as a benefit in a woman's life promotes friendship-based sisterhood; however, ridiculing other women for not having friends paradoxically demonstrates how even when uniting, women compete with other women. Loretha even knows that Odessa resents her success:

It's a fact that Odessa has been jealous of me for years. Jealous I was crowned the first black homecoming queen at our predominantly white high school, even though I wasn't pretty and I'm not pretty now. Jealous I know how to make myself appear to be more attractive than I am, and occasionally still get honked at. Jealous of my being a successful entrepreneur. She has never once come to my Pasadena store. Never once given me a compliment, no matter how nice I might look. I didn't know our lives were a contest. (p. 6)

The success metrics for a woman are implied here: being beautiful, appearing attractive to men (including the problematic 'honked at') and having a successful career. These align with Emira's jealousy of Shaunie too. The notion of Odessa 'never giving a compliment' demonstrates, as with Emira, a sense of jealousy and, thus, a lack of comment towards their fellow friend/sister's success. The way McMillan crafts Loretha to disparage her own beauty ('I wasn't pretty') highlights Loretha's insecurities and weakens the argument that Odessa has something to be jealous of. This implies how support should overpower resentment. It also demonstrates that her self-doubt lies more with beauty (more so than career and men), or that this area means more to her, which could indicate her reasoning for opening beauty stores: to give women more confidence in their appearance. The text's implication that jealousy arises from women's insecurities also functions when as Odessa begins to feel like she is achieving more of the success metrics for a woman, her relationship with her sister improves. Odessa admits how she felt Loretha was 'successful and [she] wasn't', in which Loretha

responds, 'you were successful, too. The problem was comparing our success' (pp. 289-99).

## Romantic Competition and Infidelity in Chick Lit

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As I discuss in the first two chapters of the thesis, women are trained to value men's opinions more than that of other women. This can, as Tanenbaum posits, 'be at the expense of [S]isterhood.'<sup>36</sup> Though defining infidelity is difficult because what constitutes 'cheating' is subjective, Lauren Rosewarne's (2009) definition is applied here: 'For infidelity to occur, secrecy, emotional intensity, and sexual chemistry need to happen with a person external to the committed relationship.'<sup>37</sup> Different forms of romantic competition and infidelity, and its subsequent relationship to Sisterhood, are highlighted in all three novels.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, there are many illustrations of affairs: Russell and Robin, Bernadine and Herbert, Bernadine and James, and Savannah and Kenneth. A crucial part of the plotline is that Bernadine is distraught when she discovers her husband, John, is having an affair with a younger white woman, Kathleen. Bernadine is shown as feeling insecure about this: 'Kathleen is twelve years younger than you. She is twenty-four. She is white' (p. 33). This second-person narration underscores Bernadine's emotional response to the marriage ending because of John's affair: as though she feels she needs to remind herself about the shocking, hurtful news regarding her marriage because it

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<sup>36</sup> Tanenbaum, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Lauren Rosewarne, *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* (Westport: ABC-CLIO, 2009), p. xvi.

does not feel real. She explains, 'He leaves me for a trifling scabby-ass white bitch! And I'm over the hill and shit -' (p. 366). This shows Bernadine's anger towards Kathleen not only for 'stealing' her husband but for being thin, white, attractive and young, illustrating a sense of envy towards what Kathleen has. The fact her husband left her for Kathleen (and what Kathleen represents) also implies the reality behind women's worries that other women's beauty is in competition with their own, and the man is the prize. The insecurity that arises from Kathleen's age and race, and in general, the fact her husband had an affair, could contribute to Bernadine's consequent affairs: as a way to boost her confidence and reject the traditional marriage institution that caused her pain.

Rosewarne (2009) argues: 'the single woman is not simply engaging in a relationship with a committed man; rather, she is also actively, knowingly, hurting another woman and more broadly, the [S]isterhood.'<sup>38</sup> Her marriage ended because a single woman had an affair with her husband. Thus, her subsequent affairs imply a loss of faith with the concept of Sisterhood.

Despite Bernadine's marriage ending because of an affair, other committed women in the novel are rarely addressed or empathised with in the narrative; the focus remains on the 'single woman' protagonists and their freedom and pleasure due to their affairs.<sup>39</sup> However, McMillan does, on occasion, craft her characters to question the single woman's affairs. Still, the focus is more on the possibility of the single woman's heartache at the committed man hurting her rather than encouraging a sense of

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<sup>38</sup> Rosewarne, pp. 41-43.

<sup>39</sup> This continual focus on the single woman in chick lit aligns with my findings in Chapter 1.



Sisterhood with other women. Gloria questions Bernadine's behaviour and refers to the fact this man, Herbert, who she is having sex with, is married:

"I can't just sit around here and wither up. I'm a woman, and I've got needs like any other woman, and hell, he's a nice man."

"Yea, but he's married"

"So what? I don't want to marry him. I'm just fucking him."

"How can you say that?"

"Say what?"

"That you're sleeping with him for the hell of it."

"Easy. Men've been doing this shit for years."

"Yeah, but what if you end up really liking him?"

"I already like him, but big deal. I'm not falling in love with his ass, and I'm not trying to take him from his damn wife. It's just nice to know I can get what I need when I need it." (p. 215)

The reference to the 'I've got needs like any other woman' echoes that Bernadine is now the single woman having an affair and how she has been made to feel like this because a fellow woman, Kathleen, originally had these 'needs' and 'got what she needed when she needed it' from Bernadine's husband. Furthermore, the comment, 'Men've been doing this shit for years' echoes the feminist agenda of sexual freedom explored in the previous chapter: why are women not entitled to do this if men have always been doing it? Although addressing that he is married, Gloria's focus is more on how Bernadine would feel if she ended 'up really liking him', rather than the fact she is doing something that specifically would hurt another woman. This implies the text's greater focus on the bond of friendships than with feminist Sisterhood with women who are strangers.

McMillan's later novel, *It's Not All Downhill*, also demonstrates infidelity but the friends' reactions differ from *Waiting to Exhale*: they contemplate the effect this has on the committed woman, not just their friend. Loretha directly refers to the wife of the man with whom single woman, Sadie, is having an affair: 'Has she even bothered to

imagine how she'd feel if *she* was the minister's wife?' (p. 108). The italicised 'she' suggests a sense of judgement towards her friend – as though she should have thought about the impact of this affair on the committed woman. Her anger is also due to how Sadie is devoted to her religion and the married man is a priest, emphasising how infidelity even affects the people who promote monogamy. After Sadie tells Loretha that he has left his wife and she cannot host their monthly dinners at her house because he is staying there, Loretha says, 'I am so pissed at you I would like to slap you into next week. No, I'm not pissed. I'm embarrassed for you. That you would stoop this low over a man, and a married one at that' (p. 175). The verbs 'pissed' and 'embarrassed' – and her naming of Sadie as an 'adulterer' (p. 107) and 'the adulteress' (p. 131) throughout the novel - show Loretha's anger towards Sadie, contrasting the light-hearted, empathetic discussion between Gloria and Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale*. Their anger, though, is also about Sadie prioritising a man over her friends. Therefore, in her later work, McMillan shows a different perspective of friendships when women choose romance over their friends.

Like *Waiting to Exhale*, the novel also demonstrates the importance of friendship when infidelity occurs. Alongside the scorn for what she is doing, McMillan also portrays Loretha's love for Sadie: 'Even though she'd been stupid, I could tell her heart was broken, which was why I reached under the table and took her hand and squeezed it' (p. 136). The silent communication and comfort she gives Sadie through the 'squeeze' all because her heart was 'broken' demonstrates a strong friendship that bypasses differences. When Sadie ends the affair with the minister, she has a conversation with his former wife and discovers:

“She didn’t want him back. She changed the locks and filed for a divorce.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I called her to apologize for what I had done, and she told me I wasn’t the first but I was the last. She said as women we need to stop blaming each other when it’s really men who are weak.”

“And you thought she was your enemy,” I said.

“The problem was I never thought about her at all, enemy or otherwise.” (p. 203)

The repeated use of ‘enemy’ implies this sense that women are encouraged to see each other as competition and natural enemies. Sadie, though, acknowledges that this is not what happened in this situation – she simply did not think about the committed woman at all. What is most potent is how they both unite despite their differences. An affair is represented in the novel, but it allows for advocations which are not *Waiting to Exhale*’s sense of ‘men can do it so we can too’, but rather are more ‘men are doing it, but women should come together and stop allowing them to break up Sisterhood.’ This idea highlights that, in this later chick lit work, Sisterhood is shown as more important than the affair, an adaptation from McMillan’s earlier work. This adheres with Lolu Olufemi’s (2020) argument that ‘feminism does not promise us easy answers. It promises us the hard work of seeing each other for all we are: including our faults, oversights and the ways we fail one another.’<sup>40</sup> Despite Sadie ‘failing’ Sisterhood, McMillan pinpoints how women should unite and overcome mistakes.

While no explicit physical affair exists in *Such a Fun Age*, romantic competition and emotional infidelity are addressed. The central competition in the novel is Alix’s resentment that Kelley – her ex – is now with Emira – her employee. Alix’s obsession

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<sup>40</sup> Olufemi, p. 103.

with these two can be aligned with emotional affairs. In their (2019) study, Lindsey Morrissey et al. interviewed eight women with the aim 'to define emotional infidelity among professional women who are in monogamous, cross-gender romantic relationships.'<sup>41</sup> Some of the respondents' comments were as such:

"With the physical, there's not necessarily an attachment. You can walk away and not even think about that person anymore. With emotional infidelity, it's like you start thinking about that person." [...]

"you get that fluttery feeling like 'I can't wait to be there or think about this or be with that person.' Just that excitement to be around that person." [...]

"if you're seeking out ways to spend more time around that person, that would be a red flag."<sup>42</sup>

So, emotional infidelity includes the committed person thinking about the single person 'all the time' – more so than their current partner, getting excited to be around them, looking forward to seeing them and seeking ways to spend more time with them. Firstly, Alix keeps things from Peter, her husband, 'Alix watched the video [of Emira] on her iPad five times, sitting on the bathtub as Peter slept.' (p. 256). From the narrative perspective of Alix, we see that 'just the idea of Emira being there too made her blush into her scarf' (p. 140). The reference to 'blushing' is linked to romance – the triggering of passion or romantic stimulation. Also, the narrative comments that 'Alix had developed feelings toward Emira that weren't completely unlike a crush' (p. 76) and 'Alix recognized that she was very much courting her babysitter' (p. 79). The 'crush', 'courting' and 'blush' imply a youthful, child-like sense of attraction, potentially hinting at this as a sense of entertainment and a way of gaining attention for Alix. It also echoes

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<sup>41</sup>Lindsey Morrissey, Kara B. Wettersten, and Julio Brionez, 'Qualitatively Derived Definitions of Emotional Infidelity Among Professional Women in Cross-Gender Relationships', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 43.1 (2019), 73–87 (p. 73) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684318806681>>.

<sup>42</sup> Morrissey, Wettersten, and Brionez, pp. 77–78.

Alix's older stability and perhaps her admiration towards the free spirit she believes Emira is. Alix's romantic feelings are never confirmed in the novel: the text leaves her possible infidelity open to question, but her obsessive nature towards Emira suggests a lack of fulfilment in her married life.

After Alix discovers that Kelley is Emira's boyfriend, her obsession increases to include him: 'After her family was asleep, Alix had taken the tablet into the bathroom where she stayed for two hours to search, scroll and stare at any image of Kelley Copeland she could find' (p. 197). Both when watching the video of Emira and looking for Kelley online, Alix goes to a private space (the bathroom) so Peter would not disturb her, indicating a sense of her keeping something from him. The bathroom is used alternatively than discussed above – as a way to compete in Sisterhood rather than support. When Alix's friend, Jodi, asks her if she will tell Peter that Kelley is her ex, Alix responds, 'Not tonight.' (p. 160). Jodi tells Alix (regarding Kelly and Emira's romance): "Call me crazy . . . but it seemed like he really liked her." This observation made Alix's ears burn' (p. 201). The reference to burning suggests Alix's anger at Kelley 'really liking' Emira. It is ambiguous whether Alix is jealous because of her still unresolved feelings for Kelley or her new obsession with Emira. Most likely, it is that they are entwined. This sense of emotional infidelity plays a significant part in the narrative and pinpoints a difference in depictions of 'cheating' from McMillan's texts: the focus is less on sexual relations but more on emotional obsessions.

## Challenges to Feminist Solidarity in Chick Lit

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Competitive Sisterhood is also depicted in these chick lit texts through challenges to feminist solidarity. Reid complicates the straightforwardness of Black solidarity by showing that such a community is not always possible. When one of Alix's friends, Tamra, first meets Emira, she says, 'Bring it in, sister.' (p. 154). However, Tamra's economic wealth and privilege mean that Emira does not feel the sense of Sisterhood that Tamra alludes to here. Reid emphasises that Sisterhood is not always automatic: socio-political structures – race, class, economic status and domestic status – can weaken this notion of an automatic Sisterhood between women. When Tamra enters the room, she 'came down the stairs appearing, as she typically did, presidential and important. She opened her arms to Emira as if she were a ringmaster at the top of the show' (p. 154). The 'presidential' demonstrates a sense of power that Tamra feels over Emira because of her economic wealth, and the 'ringmaster' indicates her way of being like a performer and in charge. Furthermore, Zara calls Tamra 'Uncle Tom Tamra' (p. 267), alluding to 'Uncle Tom', the title character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Patricia Turner (2008) explains how Uncle Tom is a character 'who will sell out any black man if it will curry the favor of a white employer, a white master, a white mistress.'<sup>43</sup> Hence, Zara's reference to Tamra as this character indicates she believes she is shameful in the Black community: as a woman who will betray her principles in favour of acting and serving the 'white' community. The 'Uncle Tom Tamra' also reveals Tamra's relationship with Alix: unequal and inferior to Alix. Reid depicts Tamra valuing her friend, Alix, more than

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<sup>43</sup> Patricia Turner, 'Why African-Americans Loathe "Uncle Tom"', *NPR.Org* (2008) <<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93059468>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

Zara's political message, emphasising a negative collision between friendship and politics. Tamra tries to prevent Zara from voicing anti-racism messages at the interview: 'Emira heard Tamra say, 'Girl get down from there!'" (p. 290), indicating how because of Tamra's economic wealth, she disengages from the aspects of Black identity that Zara is expressing.

McMillan and Reid also elucidate a lack of solidarity between women of different races. As Guerrero (2006) explains, 'Much of *Waiting to Exhale* deals implicitly (and oftentimes, explicitly) with the socially created battle between black womanhood and white womanhood over the mantle of beauty and worthiness.'<sup>44</sup> McMillan portrays a narrative focus of Black women arguing that white women are 'stealing' Black men from them. When John leaves Bernadine for Kathleen, Bernadine thinks, '[T]his kind of betrayal, this kind of insult. [...] I was his white girl for eleven years.' (p. 29) Here, it is not only upsetting for Bernadine that John decides to end their marriage for another woman, but the fact that he has left her for a white woman indicates his desire to leave the Black community. The 'I was his white girl' suggests Bernadine feels he made her act 'white' during their marriage: this is further emphasised by her mentioning *his* constant need to act 'white' in their marriage too. Additionally, Tarik, Gloria's son, only dates white women. Gloria dislikes this, questioning: "'[Y]ou mean to tell me you're screwing a white girl?', 'that itty-bitty white girl who lives two doors down', 'Are there any black girls you like?', 'But you like white girls better?' (p. 117-8). Gloria asks 'if "our" men were running to white women again because we were doing something wrong? [...] Did white women have something we didn't?' (p. 117). The reference to 'our' men suggests rivalry

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<sup>44</sup> Guerrero, p. 93.

towards white women. Later in the novel, Robin also mentions the concept of ‘running to white women’ (p. 200). The repetition of the verb ‘running’ demonstrates a fast-paced abandonment of Black women, as though the men’s preferences have quickly changed to a different race. Likewise, Gloria questions Tarik’s ‘type’ of woman:

For some reason, all the girls he brought home seemed to have the same thing in common: They had long hair and light skin and were pretty. [...] What was wrong with black girls with dark skin and short, nappy hair? Didn’t he think they were pretty too? (p. 335)

This is questionably less about Tarik’s choices of who he wants to date and more in line with Gloria’s insecurities and anger at a society that promotes beauty as ‘white.’ Robin voices what many intersectional feminists did at the time of publication, ‘I hate the fact that they think white girls epitomize beauty and femininity’ (p. 200).<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, but from the opposite angle, in *Such a Fun Age*, Alix is critical of Kelley for dating only Black women. When Alix finds a space alone, she

located all of Kelley’s ex-girlfriends, and – surprise, surprise – none of them were white. Alix wasn’t sure if any of them identified as black (one of them has a black father but this was all she could confirm) – however they were all ethically ambiguous looking with names like Tierra and Christina, Jasmine and Gabi. (p. 198)

Her microaggression is apparent when she identifies their names as ‘ethnically ambiguous.’ She then calls the music these women listen to ‘quirky’, their widow’s peak as ‘dramatic’, and questions how they start their days with ‘intricate smoothie recipes’, asking, ‘*Is this a thing?*’ (p. 199). Her judgement of white men dating Black women is shown through the sarcastic addition of ‘surprise, surprise.’ The way she ‘locates’ them

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<sup>45</sup> A comparison to the newer chick lit novels in the thesis suggests that white normative femininity is a concept that remains critiqued in chick lit with BIPOC protagonists, both in older and newer chick lit. This is an area I expand on in more detail in the conclusion.



seems invasive, as though she has spent a lot of time trying to find them. For Alix, it appears as though having her ex-boyfriend date Black women is an insult to her. Likewise, when hearing Emira has a boyfriend, Alix automatically assumes that he is Black because she considers the benefit of this: he would be an extra Black attendee at her Thanksgiving dinner (p. 160). This suggests a cultural assumption of romantic relationships within the same racial group. On the discovery of Emira and Kelley dating, Alix and her friends extensively discuss the 'rights and wrongs' of white men dating Black women, concluding that the 'white guys' who 'only want to date black women' are 'racist' and 'fetishiz[ing] black people in a terrible way' (p. 199-200). Simultaneously, Alix is fetishising Emira, so Tamra's explanation of how these white men think 'it says something good about them, that they're so brave and unique that they would even dare to date black women. Like they're some kind of martyr.' (p. 200) could be applied to Alix's thought process and actions with Emira. Alix's argument of Kelley's prejudice towards Emira is confounded because she does what Kelley does: just via employment rather than romantically.

The final points in this chapter relate solely to *Such a Fun Age* and suggest the significant new additions and adaptations in the depictions of women's relationships with one another in newer chick lit: portrayals of a neoliberal and corporate feminism, strategically racial friendships, white saviour complex and exclusionary, white feminism. Reid depicts Alix as a symbol of a neoliberal, fourth-wave, corporate feminist woman who, rather than focusing on fighting structural inequalities, focuses on working on herself. The ideal female subject emerges when the self becomes a business enterprise: looking at all aspects of life as capital—hobbies and friendships as investments

beneficial for business.<sup>46</sup> Neoliberalism has previously been connected to white, middle-class chick lit novels' heroines.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, *Such a Fun Age's* switch of applying this concept from the heroine protagonist, Emira, to one of the text's antiheroes, Alix, satirises and undermines the notion of neoliberalism: the text points out how self-focused, exclusionary, white and privileged this strand of feminism is.

When Alix is first introduced in the novel, it concerns her success in her LetHer Speak career: 'Seemingly overnight, Alix Chamberlain became a brand' (p. 21). The reference to her being a 'brand' detracts from the point of this being feminist activism: it becomes about corporate, self-successful feminism. This resonates with fourth-wave feminist publications such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013), who, as Banet-Weiser (2018) critiques, is known for 'offering her own brand of motivational and aspirational corporate feminism.'<sup>48</sup> Alix also utilises feminism's renewed popularity to gain more individual work: she was hoping to be involved in Clinton campaign, so she purposefully does not use her breast pump, positions herself between two men, is relieved 'finally' when Briar wakes up, and despite her daughter asking for Cheerios and not milk, she brings her onstage to breastfeed (pp. 27-29). Her planning and plotting to breastfeed on stage appears calculated and manipulative and echoes Alix's neoliberal feminism: making everything a business endeavour to encourage her own success. Alix then 'block[s] her daughter's face with black letters spelling out Small Business Femme' (p. 29) when taking a photograph afterwards. Her priorities here show how self-serving Alix's feminism is (the opposite of the aims of feminist solidarity): even more important

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<sup>46</sup> Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism', p. 420.

<sup>47</sup> Butler and Desai, 'Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism', p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, pp. 7-8.

than her own daughter. While appearing to be fighting for women's rights, Alix is just fighting for her individual achievements, which she then gains when the Clinton campaign contacts her – highlighting how this neoliberalism stretches wider than just Alix.

Alix's neoliberalism expands also to include her friendships: certain women do not match Alix's standards for being her friend. To Alix, friendship is an investment so she must gain something from it. Alix thinks her friendship with Tamra is equal, but throughout the novel, it is apparent that this is not the case due to how Alix acts towards her. Tamra is implied to be Alix's 'Black friend' who is strategically added to the friendship group for diversifying purposes. This is highlighted most through the continual references to Tamra by her race. Alix's pride in this is shown by how she 'fantasized about Emira discovering things about her that shaped what Alix saw as the truest version of herself. Like the fact that one of Alix's closest friends was also black' (p. 139). Moreover, for Alix, having Black people at her house for Thanksgiving is a positive affirming statement; she 'had been so pleased as she counted in her head how many African American guests would be present at her Thanksgiving table. The number had totaled five.' (p. 160). This also pinpoints how much Alix cares about visibility. In an attempt to seek reassurance that arranging an interview for Emira to 'clear her name' was 'the right thing', Alix asks Laney, Peter's co-anchor (p. 276). Laney quickly responds, 'Yeah. Totally.' (p. 276), encouraging Alix to conclude that she 'would wait to receive better confirmation from Tamra' (p. 276). These examples demonstrate how, to Alix, Tamra is a strategic friend who is an investment for Alix, especially in a contemporary society where the Black Lives Matter activist group and embraces of diversity are at the forefront.

Previously in the novel, Tamra offers reassurance to Alix, indicating how she feels that Alix's conduct toward Emira is positively contributing to Emira's personal development. Tamra tells Alix,

“you're the best thing that ever happened to that girl. You should step into her life in any way you can. [...] that girl is very lost. She's twenty-five years old and she has no idea what she wants or how to get it. She doesn't have the motivation to maintain a real career *the way our girls will have*, [emphasis added] which is probably not her fault but it doesn't make it any less true” (p. 203)

The language used in this context carries implications of a class division. Reid emphasises that, to Tamra and Alix, affluence is a marker of success. This also ties to how Alix notes, ‘out of her group of friends, Alix and Peter actually had the smallest salaries, and that Tamra was the one who always flew first class’ (p. 139).

Acknowledging that the Black woman is the one who always flies first class indicates Alix's assumption that she and Peter would be the wealthiest and her pleasure in performatively breaking expectations (while simultaneously underscoring them).

After Tamra tells Alix that her help is ‘the best thing that ever happened’ to Emira, Alix's reaction is emotional relief: ‘The tears came so easily that through her sobs, Alix thought, *Thank God*. It felt like Emira really was hers. And that Alix's intentions must be good after all.’ (p. 203). Alix is relieved at the inequality between her and Emira because it means she can help her: she can be ‘hers.’ Alix's relationship to Emira embodies a ‘white saviour complex.’ While identifying classic depictions of ‘white savior films’, Matthew W. Hudgey (2011) identifies the trope as featuring

a group of lower-class, urban, nonwhites (generally black and Latino/a) who struggle through the social order in general, or the educational system

specifically. Yet through the sacrifices of a white teacher they are transformed, saved, and redeemed by film's end.<sup>49</sup>

This theory can be applied to Alix's attempts to 'transform, save and redeem' Emira.

Firstly, Emira is Alix's employee, so unequal power dynamics are implied. When the point of view in the chapter is from Emira, Alix is referred to as 'Mrs Chamberlain', indicating the performative 'white teacher' of Alix. Reid shows Alix's beliefs that Emira's way is wrong and her way is the 'right' way, meaning Alix cannot wait for the opportunity to transform Emira: 'She couldn't wait to reach a point in their relationship where she wouldn't have to sit on opportunities for growth that Emira would hopefully carry with her for the rest of her life' (p. 261). The fact Alix believes she can offer Emira 'opportunities for growth' also indicates Alix's privilege; the 'rest of her life' suggests the greatness of the impact that Alix believes she could have on Emira. Emira begins to enact the transformation of herself when she arrives for the interview: 'Her hair was straightened and curled in a way Alix had never seen before, and she'd ditched the chunky eyeliner. A simple gold necklace sat on her chest, and when Alix saw it, she thought, *Good girl.*' (p. 261). Alix's condescending tone demonstrates her attempts to transform Emira from her Black identity and use her feminist influence to make her appear as a specific type of affluent, educated, chaste whiteness. She is pleased with the indication that she is more aligned with Tamra's ideologies than Zara's. Moreover, the fact that Alix is so emotional and relieved after Tamra insults Emira's intelligence, saying she has no 'motivation to maintain a real career', could also be a reason for the tears: the reassurance that the 'teacher' will not lose her 'student.'

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew W. Hughey, 'The White Savior Film and Reviewers' Reception', *Symbolic Interaction*, 33.3 (2010), 475-96 (p. 475).

*Such a Fun Age* also directly addresses the exclusion of Black women from fourth-wave (arguably also white and privileged) feminism. One of the most appealing factors for Alix when hiring Emira is that she had not heard of Alix (and her feminism) before: 'Most importantly, Emira Tucker had never heard of LetHer Speak' (p. 31). This echoes the recent real world hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. As Mikki Kendall (2013) explains, this hashtag arose because 'these feminists were, once again, dismissing women of color (WOC) in favor of a brand of solidarity that centers on the safety and comfort of white women. For it to be at the expense of people who were doing the same work was exceptionally aggravating.'<sup>50</sup> Thus, not only does the fact a Black woman, Emira, had not heard of LetHer Speak allow Alix to 'teach' her, but it also demonstrates Alix's lack of care about engaging with women of colour in her feminist solidarity mission. The way Emira had not heard of LetHer Speak should concern Alix regarding her feminism's outreach but, instead, she sees this as 'important.' The way Alix gets Emira to wear a uniform also suggests the exclusionary and forceful nature of Alix's feminism. She angrily tells Kelley that Emira 'wouldn't have got in trouble that night if she'd be wearing a uniform, now would she?' (p. 228). It is as though Alix believes that if Emira were demonstrating 'white feminism' (her uniform is a #LetHerSpeak polo), then she would not have to deal with racism. This highlights Alix's naivety, lack of understanding towards racial prejudice and her level of privilege. The racist prejudice connected with Emira's uniform symbolises how racism is coded in feminism. Moreover, the advertising for Alix's feminist campaigns also shows how racially coded it is: 'It

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<sup>50</sup> Mikki Kendall, '#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen: Women of Color's Issue with Digital Feminism', *Guardian*, 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/14/solidarityisforwhitewomen-hashtag-feminism>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

didn't help that Alix's large blue eyes and surprisingly long legs were extremely editorial' (p. 21-22). The 'editorial' elements of Alix's appearance parallel Koa Beck's work in *White Feminism* (2021), where they argue that no matter what Black women do or say, there is 'always going to be some feminist-identified branded content editor who would use words like "trashy" to describe our class, our sexuality, our race, our culture, our politics, our history, and, most importantly, our strategic goals as marginalized genders.'<sup>51</sup> The critique of how Alix's whiteness is 'editorial' also adds to Reid's satirical adaptation of conventions of chick lit: the generic white chick lit character, Alix, is under scrutiny in the novel, not celebrated.

## Conclusion

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Like the themes of previous chapters, friendship, remains similar in chick lit's newer and older works. Most specifically, there are illustrations of 'Supportive Sisterhood' in all three texts. This remains a crucial theme in chick lit (or rather 'sistah lit') regardless of changing feminist ideologies. What does partially alter is the implications of women's relationships with strangers - newer texts critique 'Competitive Sisterhood' more than the older work by highlighting the impact of romantic competition or infidelity on the committed woman. Black feminist solidarity is shown as having complications with regard to privilege, and neoliberal, white exclusionary feminism is challenged.

All three texts portray women's friendships as comparable to familial bonds, highlighting the importance of this theme in chick lit novels. This is perpetuated through

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<sup>51</sup> Beck, *White Feminism*, p. xiii.

support, humour, celebration, compliment and constancy. A slight shift in illustrations is with *It's Not All Downhill* where the focus is on a friendship group of older women. Their trauma is more serious (including death), meaning there is partially less constancy of friendships, and the women's conversational discussions adapt to correspond with different issues for women at an increased age.

While intersectional feminist solidarity is illustrated in all three novels, McMillan and Reid also highlight racial conflict. Furthermore, *Such a Fun Age* elucidates how solidarity is not always possible among women of the same race – class, wealth, and privilege can also impact its display. Both authors also emphasise how romance can affect women's solidarity with one another: *Waiting to Exhale* considers white women 'stealing' Black men, and *Such a Fun Age* explores the notion of a white woman being critical of a white man only dating Black women. Reid's novel adds further examples of a lack of solidarity between women, suggesting neoliberal, privileged, white feminism's exclusion of Black women, and enacting specific strategies towards being friends with and 'saving' Black women. Furthermore, Reid critiques the neoliberal feminist ideologies of generic white, middle-class chick lit heroines by crafting Alix as an antihero, instead of the protagonist.

This chapter does not confirm a complete diversification of chick lit – McMillan's early text solely focuses on Black protagonists and has been argued as a progenitor of the sub-genre 'sistah lit' – but it does imply that there is a heightened visibility of BIPOC and older women protagonists in more recent chick lit. As Whelehan (2005) explained about *Waiting to Exhale*, the novel provides 'challenges to how mainstream culture perpetuates a favoured view of white femininity as at the heart of western notions of



beauty.’<sup>52</sup> However, this chapter does demonstrate the importance of considering diversity not only with the chick lit genre’s origins and development, but also with postfeminist and fourth-wave feminist ideologies too. The genre certainly matures too: *It’s Not All Downhill* implies the value of friendships for older women.

As Erin Hurt (2018) explains, ‘While *Waiting to Exhale* offers an early example of neoliberalism within chick lit, a more contemporary example, the film *Girls Trip* (2017), shows how this governing rationality continues to represent itself in new and more cunning ways to continue its existence.’<sup>53</sup> I demonstrate in this chapter that neoliberalism is depicted in a new way in *Such a Fun Age* too. Therefore, this chapter highlights how earlier chick lit can be political (as examples in McMillan’s early work shows), and newer chick lit can be more overtly political (as *It’s Not All Downhill* and *Such a Fun Age* demonstrates). The way that these two newer works of chick lit are diverse / mature and more overtly political, maintain themes of friendship and Sisterhood, and deploy conventional chick lit tropes of a woman’s narrative perspective, satirical tone and use of humour, demonstrates how *It’s Not All Downhill* and *Such a Fun Age* correspond with the chick lit subcategory of ‘neo chick lit’ that I define in the Introduction to this thesis.

In the following final chapter, I consider whether newer chick lit texts warrant the subcategorization of ‘neo chick lit’ when I compare illustrations of women in the workplace in Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada* (2004), her *The Wives* (2018) and Meryl Wilsner’s *Something to Talk About* (2019). I question to what extent the

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<sup>52</sup> Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller*, p.18.

<sup>53</sup> *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*, p. 218.

concepts of 'The Queen Bee' stereotype, the Glass Ceiling Effect and 'having it all' mature, diversify and politicise alongside changing feminisms and genre fluidity.

## CHAPTER 4 – ‘CLACKERS’: WORKPLACE, THE QUEEN BEE SYNDROME AND THE GLASS CEILING COMPLEX IN CHICK LIT

A woman's career is an important topic in chick lit. In the foundational chick lit primary text for this chapter, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Weisberger crafts the term 'clackers', as in this chapter's title. While Andy is waiting for the elevator for her *Runway* job interview, she notices a group of women and starts to panic. This encourages her to refer to them as, 'leggy, Twiggy types. [...] Their lips never stopped moving, and their gossip was punctuated only by the sound of their stilettos clacking on the floor. Clackers'.<sup>1</sup> The term remains throughout the novel to refer to a group of gossiping, stylish workers at *Runway*. Adhering to previous chapter findings, it is implied that Andy's crafting of this term is a defence mechanism, which stems from her feelings of intimidation at their appearance, envy at their workplace community, and competition between women. It also derives from Andy's condescension at working in the fashion industry, which is ironic as she is on her way to an interview there. The term is also gendered since the clacking noise refers to women gossiping and wearing stilettos. The derision, competition and inequalities that this term suggests provides this chapter's focus on the queen bee syndrome and the glass ceiling complex. By considering these concepts alongside works of older and newer chick lit, this chapter explores to what extent chick lit's

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Weisberger, *The Devil Wears Prada* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), p. 13. All further references will be given in the main text.

representations of women's workplace experiences have diversified, matured and politicised since the 1990s.

Chick lit texts focusing on a young woman's complications when entering the professional workplace inspired the subgenre of 'underling lit' or 'assistant lit.' As Mißler (2016) argues, 'Especially in the novels written after the recession of 2007/8, work and the workplace have become new battlegrounds for gender equality, shifting the focus away from the importance of the love relationship.'<sup>2</sup> This chapter concentrates on novels that are, or should be, categorised with this subgenre and focus on the 'work world': Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), her later text, *The Wives* (2018), and Meryl Wilsner's debut novel, *Something to Talk About* (2020).<sup>3</sup>

A career being considered an obstacle for the protagonist is true for the novels previously focused on in the thesis: the precarity and ambivalence towards entering the workplace is made clear in the narratives. As Ferriss and Young (2006) argue, chick lit novels 'treat the professional world as the ultimate chick challenge.'<sup>4</sup> For example, in *Such a Fun Age*, Emira's insecurities are evident when she tells herself:

You don't have a real job. This wouldn't have happened if you had a real fucking job. [...] You wouldn't leave a party to babysit. You'd have your own health insurance. You wouldn't be paid in cash. You'd be a real fucking person.<sup>5</sup>

The way Emira collates not having a 'real job' to not being a 'real person' highlights how she devalues herself based on this and the importance that these chick lit characters

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<sup>2</sup> Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ferriss and Young (2006) argue that 'Novels focusing more specifically on the work world, such as Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* and Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus's *The Nanny Diaries*, have also formed a subgroup of their own.' (*Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 7).

<sup>4</sup> *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Kiley Reid, *Such a Fun Age* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), pp. 39-40.

place on their careers. While *Such a Fun Age* and the other texts analysed within this thesis address workplace complexities for women, Weisberger's and Wilsner's books focus most extensively on the workplace setting and will therefore provide the best framework for comparison.

Women's workplace inequalities remain a continual focus for feminism: from postfeminism to fourth-wave feminism, women's disadvantages in comparison to men are represented and tackled. What slightly shifts within the discourses, however, is the degree and method of the address of these issues. For example, women's individual 'choice' to leave the workplace has become more contested. As Siri Øyslebø Sørensen's (2017) study of postfeminism explores, 'the conflict between ideals relating to family life and professional success is framed as particularly pressing for women, indicating that what is commonly referred to as 'work-life balance' is a gendered issue.'<sup>6</sup> Sørensen's literature review reveals that 'choice' is a crucial term 'either as an observed practice, or, from feminist perspectives, as an opportunity or problem for women.'<sup>7</sup> They establish that 'choice' functions as a dissolution of gender inequalities in the workplace. Gill's (2007) study strengthens this when they argue that 'the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances.'<sup>8</sup> When women 'choose' not to progress in their careers, reduce their hours or leave their jobs, companies can contend that workplace discrimination does not exist because they

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<sup>6</sup> Sørensen, 'The Performativity of Choice: Postfeminist Perspectives on Work-Life Balance', p. 397.

<sup>7</sup> Sørensen, p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', p. 153.

can argue it is woman's choice, and not because the workplace is inflexible and therefore drives them out.

Fourth-wave feminism challenges the notion that it is the 'woman's choice' more explicitly than postfeminism. Fourth-wave feminist Perez (2020) writes that 'Some call women's segregation into low-paid work a choice. But it's a funny kind of choice when there is no realistic option other than the children not being cared for and the housework not getting done.'<sup>9</sup> They explain how 'globally, 75% of unpaid work is done by women, who spend between three and six hours per day on it compared to men's average of thirty minutes to two hours.'<sup>10</sup> This leaves women financially vulnerable so Perez argues that 'governments must address feminised poverty in old age by introducing policies that enable women to stay in paid work.'<sup>11</sup> This suggests that the postfeminist 'having it all' has switched to a fourth-wave awareness of structural inequalities.

As the work of Elizabeth Hale (2006), Kerstin Fest (2009) and Nour Elhoda A. E. Sabra (2016) implies, Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* is an ideal primary text for this chapter focusing on women in the workplace.<sup>12</sup> The novel's plotline centres on Andrea (Andy) Sachs and her new career as Miranda Priestly's assistant at *Runway* magazine. The confessional, first-person narration providing Andy's point-of-view allows for a clear indication of the job's challenges, especially with her boss, Miranda, and senior assistant, Emily Charlton. The novel was hugely successful, selling over four

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<sup>9</sup> Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Perez, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Perez, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Hale, 'Long-Suffering Professional Females: The Case of Nanny Lit'; Fest, 'Angels in the House or Girl Power: Working Women in Nineteenth-Century Novels and Contemporary Chick Lit'; Sabra, 'Dare You Rocking It: Contemporary Women and the Trap of the Glass Ceiling in Chick Lit'.

million copies, and was adapted into a profitable film starring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway (2006). Led by director Anna D. Shapiro and with music by Elton John, the book has also been crafted into a musical and was first performed in Chicago in 2022. In an interview with *The Independent*, Weisberger comments on the lasting legacy of the novel: 'It's so cool that it still feels relevant, it still holds up.'<sup>13</sup> While problematic in the way it 'still holds up' in its depictions of gender stereotypes for women in their careers, the novel is notable for the consideration of how elements of chick lit and feminism have changed (or not) since it was published in 2003.

Weisberger's later text, *The Wives* (2018), focuses on senior assistant Emily Charlton from *The Devil Wears Prada*. Alternating between multiple narrative perspectives, Weisberger explores Emily's, as well as new characters Karolina Hartwell's and Miriam Kagan's, experiences of working life in their mid-thirties. When Karolina is falsely accused of drunk-driving and loses custody of her stepson, Emily and Miriam team together to repair her reputation and their own careers. While *The Devil Wears Prada* follows twenty-three-year-old, unmarried, childless Andy, *The Wives* more explicitly illustrates how motherhood and ageist discrimination impacts women's careers.

The final primary text for this chapter is Wilsner's *Something to Talk About* (2020). The novel centres on the romance between two protagonists. Jo Jones is a Chinese American queer woman boss – the showrunner of popular programme

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<sup>13</sup> Lauren Weisberger and Hannah Stephenson, 'The Devil Wears Prada Author Lauren Weisberger on Lockdown, Competitive Parents and Not Actually Being a Fashionista | The Independent', *The Independent*, 3 August 2021 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/elton-john-prada-anna-wintour-david-furnish-connecticut-b1895680.html>> [accessed 28 August 2023].

*Innocents*. Emma Kaplan is a white, bisexual woman, and an assistant to Jo. Despite this text's usual categorisation in the 'romance' genre, chick lit tropes are maintained throughout the novel, as this chapter will show. In *The Lesbian Review*, Martha Miller (2020) establishes that '[t]he way Emma is treated by Jo reminds me of *The Devil Wears Prada* in that Jo never thanks Emma for her hard work. Jo, though isn't really an ice queen.'<sup>14</sup> The quote shows both a comparison and a contrast between women bosses in chick lit, implying both alliances and difference between early and later works' portrayals. *Something to Talk About's* discussions of sexual harassment and workplace romance (alongside #MeToo of fourth-wave feminism) indicates that this text should provide fruitful insights into the similarities and differences of chick lit since Weisberger's publication. *Something to Talk About* is the only chick lit text in my study that addresses queer women in the workplace. While speaking to *The Guardian* about her new text, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (2023), Margot Canaday points out that 'queer precarity is on everyone's mind in a way that wasn't the case as much 10 years ago, [...] People have a heightened sense of it now and a greater interest in it. I also think that an awareness of queer precarity is growing.'<sup>15</sup> This chapter, then, also considers how portrayals of women's careers diversify when the protagonist is queer.

The chapter is split into two subsections, both significant to the chick lit primary texts and feminist concepts. The first explores 'queen bee syndrome', including

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Miller, 'Something to Talk About by Meryl Wilsner: Book Review', *The Lesbian Review*, 2020 <<https://www.thelesbianreview.com/something-talk-about-meryl-wilsner/>> [accessed 19 May 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Margot Canaday and Veronica Esposito, "'Work Is about Belonging": LGBTQ+ People's History in the Workplace', *The Guardian*, 1 February 2023, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/01/margot-canaday-queer-career-book-lgbtq-work>> [accessed 25 August 2023].



treatment of employees, competitive individualisation and gendered stereotypes. The second considers chick lit's illustration of the 'glass ceiling effect', where the workplace is presented as a hostile and precarious environment for chick protagonists. This includes mothers, aging women, queer women and BIPOC women. In this subsection, I also compare how romantic partners either support or hinder women's careers in chick lit, portrayals of sexual harassment and instances of sexist, homophobic, ageist and racist discrimination in the workplace. This chapter demonstrates how women in the workplace in all three novels are shown as having many obstacles preventing their professional/career success. Through comparing the theme of the workplace in older and newer works of chick lit, this chapter identifies certain differences. All three novels illustrate the queen bee syndrome, but Wilsner's critique is more direct than implied, showing a shift in feminisms represented in chick lit fiction. The glass ceiling effect is shown as remaining in the later novels of chick lit, but it is more explicitly illustrated that women should find methods and ways to shatter it.

## The Queen Bee Syndrome

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The 'queen bee syndrome' is a stereotypical phrase used to describe a woman in a position of power who tries to maintain this by undermining and mistreating other women who are subordinate to them, or who they perceive as a threat. These 'queen bee' women bosses, as the term suggests, are usually stereotyped, and as a result feel, if relevant, that they must shed their femininity and enact masculinity to keep this position of power. First coined in 1973 by *University of Michigan* psychologists, the queen bee syndrome has been described as 'a woman in a position of authority in a male-

dominated environment who treats subordinates more critically if they are female.’<sup>16</sup>

Chick lit novels provide vivid and influential representations of queen bee figures.

Miranda Priestley, the vicious employer in *The Devil Wears Prada*, has become so archetypal that her image was used to illustrate a 2015 *Guardian* article on the topic.<sup>17</sup>

This subsection explores strands of the queen bee syndrome: types of women bosses (cogs in the machine and agents of change), competitive individualisation and stereotypes associated with working women.

### Women Bosses in Chick Lit: Cogs in the Machine vs Agents of Change

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Similar to how Sabra (2016) applies Philip N. Cohen and Matt L. Huffman’s (2007), and David J. Maume’s (2011) theories to their research, I also consider their theories of women bosses as ‘cogs in the machine’ and ‘agents of change’ in terms of my primary texts.<sup>18</sup> Cohen and Huffman’s (2007) study examines whether a manager’s gender and behaviours impact the level of gender equality in the workplace, offering the analogy of women bosses as either ‘agents of change’ or ‘cogs in the machine.’ With regards to ‘agents of change’, they suggest:

[F]emale managers may enhance the labor market prospects of the women who work below them. Their homophilous preferences or affiliations might promote equality, and they may have less to gain from discrimination and therefore be

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<sup>16</sup> Reality Check team, ‘Queen Bees: Do Women Hinder the Progress of Other Women?’, *BBC News*, 4 January 2018, section UK <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41165076>> [accessed 22 July 2021].

<sup>17</sup> Viv Groskop, “Queen Bee Syndrome”: The Myth That Keeps Working Women in Their Little Box’, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2015/jun/08/queen-bee-syndrome-myth-working-women>> [accessed 3 September 2021].

<sup>18</sup> Sabra, ‘Dare You Rocking It: Contemporary Women and the Trap of the Glass Ceiling in Chick Lit’, p. 162; Philip N. Cohen and Matt L. Huffman, ‘Working for the Woman? Female Managers and the Gender Wage Gap’, *American Sociological Review*, 72.5 (2007), 681–704; David J. Maume, ‘Meet the New Boss...same as the Old Boss? Female Supervisors and Subordinate Career Prospects’, *Social Science Research*, 40.1 (2011), 287–298.

more motivated to help other women. Additionally, women may be more aware than men of discriminatory practices and less susceptible to cognitive processes leading to gender bias. Any of these processes may smooth the social and organizational path of female subordinates.<sup>19</sup>

Alternatively, with 'cogs in the machine', 'bureaucracy, market pressures, divided loyalties, past discrimination, or the mandates of those more powerful may render the ascriptive characteristics of managers largely moot with regard to inequality.'<sup>20</sup> Overall, women bosses who are 'cogs in the machine' do not proactively champion the career advancement of their subordinates or gender equality in the workplace. 'Cogs in the machine' reinforce patriarchal structures, making them more anti-feminist than pro-gender equality. 'Agents of change' foster the opposite: they promote women's careers and attempt to mitigate gender inequality. Sabra's (2016) study notes the similarities between cogs in the machine and queen bees.<sup>21</sup> My work, like Sabra's (2016), considers the 'cogs in the machine' a key element to the stereotype of the queen bee, and 'agents of change' as a more egalitarian alternative. While Sabra's (2016) research is useful in its consideration of these bosses in *The Devil Wears Prada*, my study expands on this by considering to what extent these representations have shifted in chick lit of the last thirty years.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda is representative of a cog in the machine through her role as a woman boss. Sabra (2016) shares this perspective, arguing that this is because Miranda 'is the most powerful woman in the fashion field, and does not help her female subordinates to advance their careers; on the contrary, she humiliates

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<sup>19</sup> Cohen and Huffman, 'Working for the Woman? Female Managers and the Gender Wage Gap', p. 684.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen and Huffman, p. 684.

<sup>21</sup> Sabra, p. 162.

and belittles them.’<sup>22</sup> An example of this is Miranda’s critical, fear-inducing nature throughout the novel. When she returns to the office, there are ‘panicked cries’ and ‘a particularly blood-curdling cry’ (p. 106). Andy crafts the term ‘Runway Paranoid Turnaround’ to describe instances where a staff member says something negative about Miranda but then quickly backtracks due to paranoia of her finding out (p. 41). Also, when Andy attends a gala ‘the office worked itself up to a nearly hysterical frenzy’ trying to get her ready for the event (p. 279). Miranda ‘had taken to calling both Emily and [Andy] “Emily”, suggesting, quite rightly, that [they] were interchangeable. Somewhere in the back of [her] mind [she] was offended, but [she’d] grown accustomed to it by this point’ (p. 146). Through the hyperbolic, (‘blood-curdling’, hysterical frenzy’) and sarcastic (‘quite rightly’) narrative, Weisberger critiques the frantic and uncomfortable working environment that a cog in the machine woman boss imposes.

Despite Andy’s disdain for Miranda’s behaviour, throughout the novel, she begins to parallel Miranda’s cog actions. This is shown in many instances throughout the novel. Firstly, she has a lack of empathy when Emily is ill, saying, ‘I never really believed it when anyone said they were really sick: without a diagnosis of something very official and potentially life-threatening, you were well enough to work at *Runway*’ (p. 301). She notes how her questioning of Emily’s sickness sounded ‘aggressive and accusatory’ (p. 301). This is similar to Miranda, who ‘didn’t think that having mono really qualified [Emily] as sick’, so the doctor had to confirm that the illness was infectious (p. 302). Next, when Andy herself was ill, she ‘ducked into [the doctor’s] office and ordered them to see [her] right away’ (p. 301), exhibiting a similar feeling of entitlement to Miranda. Andy’s

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<sup>22</sup> Sabra, p. 162.

transition into Miranda is solidified when Miranda tells Andy: 'You remind me of myself when I was your age' (p. 368).

Weisberger suggests that when you start to become a cog in the machine, you begin to see the complexities and depth of other supposed cogs, understanding that it takes a lot to get to that position of power. Andy humanises the 'cog in the machine' nature of Miranda in the novel. Ilana, who considers Miranda a 'first-rate bitch' (p. 289), gives Andy a photoshopped image of 'Miranda as Snake' (p. 293). At first, Andy finds it humorous, deeming it 'perfect' (p. 293) – ironically, a few pages after she called Miranda's actual appearance 'perfect.' This image gives Andy a sense of revenge over the horror she has had to deal with since starting at *Runway* or conveys a sense of envy at her position of power. However, when she receives an enlarged copy, she 'looked into Miranda's eyes' and sees that 'she'd also looked sad, and not a little lonely' (p. 296). Here, Weisberger elucidates a more 'human' side to a 'queen bee', one who is sad and lonely, highlighting how women's pursuing a career makes them at times lonely and sad. When Miranda tells Andy she reminds her of herself, Andy wonders 'if this was the proudest or the most humiliating moment of [her] life' (p. 368). When Andy succeeds, though, she loses her job. Thus, with this outcome, Weisberger implies the difficulties women face in the workplace.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Weisberger also offers an alternative to the 'cog in the machine' with the 'agent of change' character of Loretta. Sabra (2016) explains that agents of change 'prefer to hire female subordinates and [are] more likely to befriend, mentor and favorably evaluate their female subordinates helping them to pursue their

positions in the workplace and climb the hierarchical managerial ladder.’<sup>23</sup> When Loretta and Andy first meet, Andy says: ‘It was storybook-like, nauseating, really, how well we’d instantly hit it off, how effortlessly we shared our nightmares about *Runway* [, ...] how quickly we realized that we were the same person, just seven years apart’ (p. 388). A direct comparison of the two women bosses is expressed by Andy when Miranda gives her a difficult talk, ‘The woman had a very special gift for wrecking my life.’ (p. 284). But when Andy starts corresponding with the new boss, Loretta, she says: ‘[T]hen Loretta strolled into my life and made it instantly better’ (p. 389). So here we see the impact of the two types of bosses on their staff: ‘wrecking their life’ and ‘making their life better’. This also emphasises the impact that career success has on women: it influences their mood and outlook of life in general. Another significant example of Loretta as an agent of change is when Andy says, ‘Loretta had become my mentor, my champion, my savior’ (p. 388). The different roles highlight how many different levels of support Loretta provides for Andy, and the ‘savior’ echoes how she needed saving from the example of a cog in the machine, Miranda. Andy says that Loretta had a ‘bizarre obsession with helping me make contacts’ (p. 389). The use of ‘bizarre’ here indicates how this is unusual to Andy: a woman wanting to help other women succeed in the workplace.

In *Something to Talk About*, the sole, central boss is an agent of change: this suggests a shift from the postfeminist *The Devil Wears Prada* to fourth-wave feminism in newer works of chick lit. Jo is more similar to Loretta than Miranda. Both Andy and Emma work as assistants, desire success and hope their women bosses will help them get it. Emma says, ‘Granted, knowing Jo Jones would be pretty damn helpful when it

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<sup>23</sup> Sabra, p. 162.

came to moving on from being an assistant.’<sup>24</sup> This is similar to how Andy believes, ‘Work a year for Miranda and don’t get fired, and she’ll make a call and get you a job anywhere you want’ (p. 25). This demonstrates the impact that a boss’ status can have on her employees’ future careers. Boss Jo contrasts Miranda, and aligns with Loretta, because she is the one who pushes Emma to her dream of being a director: “I always help put my assistants on the right career track,” Jo said. [...] Usually by this point in Jo’s working relationship with her assistant, she’d know exactly what said assistant wanted to do with their career’ (p. 50). Jo gives Emma directing “homework” and encourages her to ‘move to associate producer’ (p. 82) on the set of *Innocents*. Therefore, Jo is also depicted as a woman who inspires change for women in the workplace. After an employee is sexually harassed in her workplace, Jo starts the Cassandra Project: ‘Some sort of foundation, nonprofit—some kind of organization to support people facing sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood’ (p. 208). It is ‘named after the figure from Greek mythology to acknowledge that for too long women hadn’t been believed when it came to sexual harassment and assault’ (p. 210). Jo uses her power to harbour change and make a difference for women in the workplace. She also helps her friend and Emma’s sister, Avery, with her business: ‘You basically offered me a hundred thousand dollars a year, just because you’re nice’ (p. 119). Thus, Wilsner suggests that women in power should use their status and money to inspire and support other women.

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<sup>24</sup> Meryl Wilsner, *Something to Talk About* (London: Piatkus, 2020), p, 17. All further references will be given in the main text.

## Competitive Individualisation in Chick Lit: Battling, Killing or Collaborating for Success

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As the above comparison suggests, queen bees can be considered cogs in the machine. The next concept of queen bees I examine is competitive individualisation. This is a form of behaviour that queen bees can enact – one that views other women as competition rather than collaborators. As Anita Harris (2003) summarises, competitive individualisation is how ‘people are expected to create their own chances and make the best of their lives.’<sup>25</sup> This competitive sense creates a divide between women: seeing each other as competition to get to the top. Sabra (2016) argues that ‘the competitive individualization that post-feminists adopted and fostered by the society [sic] left modern women vulnerable. Each one has to fight alone.’<sup>26</sup> Competitive individualisation is highlighted and critiqued in all three novels, though to different extents.

In both of Weisberger’s texts, Emily is portrayed as seeing other women as a threat to her own success. In the precursor, Emily is a senior assistant and Andy is a junior assistant to Miranda. In the latter, Emily is her own boss and works as a Public Relations agent. Despite occupying different job roles, Emily maintains feelings of competitiveness towards other women in her career. Firstly, in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the reception that senior assistant Emily gives Andy when she first arrives at *Runway* is unfriendly, insensitive and not unlike Miranda’s. Emily tells Andy: “‘Oh, just so you know, now that you’re pretty much trained, you’ll still get in at seven, but I don’t come in until

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<sup>25</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Sabra, p. 162. As Chapter 3 of this thesis argued, competition between women is a theme continually explored in chick lit. This chapter concentrates more on the environment of the workplace, considering how representations of women’s competitiveness within their careers adapts in the newer works of chick lit.



eight. Miranda knows – it's understood that the senior assistant comes in later since she works so much harder." I almost lunged at her throat.' (p. 122-3) The condescension and superiority that Emily imposes on Andy encourages a hierarchy in their employment, not an equal relationship. Emily sees Andy as competition for success in the workplace so enacts competitive individualisation – a focus on her own progression rather than the collective advancements of women in their careers. Later in the novel, Andy posits how things could have unfolded differently if Emily and Andy had worked together:

It felt good to be part of a team, one half in the battle against the oppressor. I realized then for the first time what a different year it would have been if Emily and I could have truly been friends, if we could have covered and protected and trusted each other enough to face Miranda as a united front. (p. 300)

The way they could have been a 'team' in the 'battle' of the workplace suggests

Weisberger's implication that what is needed is support between women, not division.

Weisberger critiques how Andy and Emily react to each other, implying this is how it 'should be' instead. The 'covered', 'protected', 'trusted', and 'united front' all suggest

Andy's longing for solidarity and companionship when facing the 'oppressor.' Then Andy judges Emily, and we see a role reversal in that Andy now feels superior to Emily:

'[B]esides, I'd managed to ignore a couple strep throats, a few bouts of bronchitis, a horrific round of food poisoning, and a perpetual smoker's cough and cold and hadn't taken a single sick day in nearly a year of work.' (p. 301) The sense of comparison here indicates the inevitability of conceit and competition between women.

*The Wives* also illuminates the competitive individualisation required for queen bee syndrome to flourish with its depiction of a woman's success being as a result of another woman's setback. Emily's competitive character trait persists. Towards the start of the novel, Emily is told that her client, Rizzo Benz, is hiring Olivia Belle instead. Emily

explains how ‘this was the third big job she’d lost to that bitch’ because she was ‘moving in on Emily’s clients as if she owned the industry’.<sup>27</sup> The paranoia that Emily feels emphasises the perception that there is only one set of clients and only one person can do this job. She thinks, ‘Olivia Belle? If that was even her real name. [...] *She was a child.* Granted, one with an Instagram following of more than two million people, compared to Emily’s twenty thousand.’ (p. 46) The reference to ‘child’ almost contradicts her popularity on social media, demonstrating her expertise and experience in contrast to Emily. Emily is thirty-six in this book, only ten years older than Olivia, suggesting an exaggerated generational divide that satirises the ageist stereotypes applied to women in the workplace. However, Olivia Belle loses all her clients because she gets ‘hacked’ towards the novel’s end, and Emily gets all hers back. This adds to the mockery of youth being preferred in industry and suggests that the phase of social media (and the expertise of this) will not always be so necessary in the workplace, but instead it is experience of the job that can help you succeed. However, this is also problematic because it suggests that a young woman must be taken down in order for the protagonist to achieve reach her goals.

Emily is not the only representation of ‘competition’ in *The Devil Wears Prada*. After gaining the position at *Runway*, Andy starts to see success in everyone else’s careers and compares it to her own, resulting in envy towards them: ‘feeling primed and ready to lay into this lazy girl who had a far better job than my own.’ (p. 261). The use of ‘lazy girl’ is because of her desire for that job and the feeling that she would do a better

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<sup>27</sup> Lauren Weisberger, *The Wives* (London: HarperCollins, 2018), p. 46. All further references will be given in the main text.

job. However, despite Andy's absence of enthusiasm towards her *Runway* career, she is continually reminded that 'a million girls would die [or kill] for' her job at *Runway* (for example, p. 17, p. 19). The way you must 'kill' for the job indicates competitiveness but also exaggerates how much women's career success can mean to them: enough to 'kill'. Andy is also told that 'it's a tough thing to do right out of college, you know. Lots and lots of competition out there for very few jobs that are available' (p. 15). The reiteration of women's desire for the job and the scarcity of jobs encourages Andy to aspire for a position she considered beneath her: 'I'd never read an issue of *Runway* in my life [...] no one cared about *Runway*. It was a *fashion* magazine, for chrissake' (p. 16). Weisberger insinuates that competition encourages women to want to win and, most importantly, beat other women to do so, even if the prize is unrewarding. Capitalism is alluded to here, suggesting Weisberger's critique of how an object's relative or subjective value is marked by its demand rather than its objective or functional value. The 'million girls would die for' phrase even continues into Weisberger's newer text (approximately three times), when Emily contemplates returning to *Runway*: 'Emily couldn't return to *Runway*. No matter how many girls would die for the job' (p. 169). This suggests that while competitiveness remains, the slightly different phrasing of 'no matter how many' and Emily's resistance demonstrates a change in her character since the first novel: competition is no longer as much of an inducement to partake in this job as it once was.

While this comparison suggests that competitiveness is less of a compelling a reason to take a job as it is once was, women still see Emily as competition in *The Wives*. When Emily returns to *Runway* for a meeting with Miranda, she is 'met with a death look from Miranda's junior assistant' who 'clearly meant to offer anything but help' (p. 330). This new assistant, Elle, feels the same way Emily felt when she worked for *Runway*: any

other woman entering the doors is a competition. When Elle panics about offending her, Emily even reminisces, 'Oh, how she remembered those days' (p. 330-31), alluding to the 'Runway Paranoid Turnaround.' Furthermore, after she realises that Miranda is calling Elle the senior assistant's name, Juliana - like how she interchangeably uses hers and Andy's names in *The Devil Wears Prada* - Emily says she found it 'bizarrely reassuring to see that nothing ever changed' (p. 332). Emily's limited empathy and relief at her own escape shows a postfeminist focus on individualism, rather than unity between women in the workplace. Instead, Emily feels a sense of power (over this other woman) now she has left *Runway*. This is similar to how Andy responds to the new assistant towards the end of *The Devil Wears Prada*. Andy re-enters the Elias-Clark publishing company building, the place where *Runway* and other magazines are published, as a freelance journalist and sees Miranda's new assistant struggling. Like Emily, she relates to being in the role, but the main concern is with comparing herself to the new assistant: 'And then, while the pretty brunette girl finished singing her verse, he buzzed me through like I was someone who mattered' (p. 391). This is the novel's last sentence and highlights a change in Andy's character from a naïve, mistreated and overlooked assistant to someone of meaning and significance. Thus, Weisberger highlights the postfeminist individualisation of women in their workplaces.

Alternatively, in *Something to Talk About*, the portrayal of competitive individualisation has decreased, and there is a growing sense of an honest desire for another's woman's success. Wilsner models potential workplace practices in their representation of Jo's working relationships with her employees. Jo and Chantel represent two women in power who could readily see one another as competition but, instead, collaborate to strengthen the trajectories of their careers. At times, their ideas

do not align, but the novel shows how this is effective because the more opinions there are, the better the outcome:

It was true. On Jo's first show, Chantal had regularly contradicted Jo's ideas. Most people thought they hated each other, but Jo cherished having another perspective, someone who wasn't afraid to tell her when she was wrong. Now, more than a decade later, *Innocents* was the only program on network TV with two women of color at the helm. Jo and Chantal got to this point by not bullshitting each other.' (p. 55)

'Cherish' demonstrates the merit that Jo places on her working relationship with Chantal. Both want *Innocents* to succeed, so trust the other one's input. Because *Innocents* was the 'only program on network TV with two women of color at the helm' (p. 55), Jo and Chantal may also consider the importance of their work to inspire other women of colour. After '*Innocents* won for Outstanding Drama Series' (p. 63) at the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) awards, she explains in her speech: 'I write fiction, but these are real stories. These are important stories. *These are our stories*, she thought but did not say as people applauded. This wasn't about her, not really.' (p. 64). Alluding to metafiction, Wilsner highlights Jo's motivation for writing queer women in her narratives: to elevate a sense of inclusivity and unity. Jo's appreciation of other people when claiming her success is also elucidated, not just her appreciation of the workers on her show but of the people who inspire her to write. After the ceremony, Jo acknowledges that her assistant should be sharing in the success of the award, too:

"You know I appreciate everything you do, Emma," Jo said. "That award belongs to you, too—I wouldn't get half as much done without you."  
Emma shrugged it off. "Sure you would."  
"I wouldn't," Jo insisted. (p. 71).

*Something to Talk About* stresses the importance of recognising the help of other women when achieving individual success. This novel illustrates the benefits of women collaborating instead of competing.

## Stereotypes of Career Women in Chick Lit

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As the term 'queen bee syndrome' suggests, self-determined women in the workplace are stereotyped. Rudman and Phelan (2008) argue that 'agentic women are rated as highly competent and capable of leadership, but they are also viewed as socially deficient and unlikable by both male and female perceivers.'<sup>28</sup> They go on to argue how this bias is evident in epithets such as "dragonlady," "battleaxe" and "iron maiden." All three texts include derogatory epithets women in power have had imposed upon them. Weisberger's debut novel's title referencing Miranda as a devil implies a level of hostility directed towards the woman in charge at *Runway*. Equally, in *The Wives*, Emily is described as 'such a bitch' and 'a first-rate ball-buster' (p. 63), similarly implying a negative perception of confident and tenacious women. However, the signal of Emily's ability to 'bust' a man's 'balls' hints at her will to break gender stereotypes and her willingness to undercut male colleagues to achieve the top position. In Wilsner's novel, Jo assumes that the media will perceive her as a 'dragon lady' when they see pictures of her and Emma (p. 167) because of Jo's Chinese heritage, older age and the fact she is in a position of power as Emma's boss. Wilsner suggests how additional prejudice can prevail in derogatory epithets: the 'dragon lady' not only symbolises dominance and assertiveness but also discriminatively alludes to Jo's Chinese heritage and age. All three texts present stereotypes of women bosses.

But there are differences in how the authors portray the characters which are labelled with derogatory terms. Wilsner depicts Jo as hard-working, warm, caring, and

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<sup>28</sup> Laurie A. Rudman and Julie E. Phelan, 'Backlash Effects for Disconfirming Gender Stereotypes in Organizations', *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 28 (2008), 61–79 (p. 64).

breaking assumptions about women in power. In *Something to Talk About*, Wilsner refers to the ice queen stereotype:

Jo grinned. She didn't think about how it helped, the ice queen persona. That people tried to hurt you less if they didn't think you had feelings. That the only way to get anything done as a woman in Hollywood was to have everyone assume you took no shit. (p. 119).

By providing an explanation as to why Jo adopts the no feelings persona (in an attempt to avoid judgment), Wilsner reclaims the stereotype. Her language alludes to the fourth-wave feminist strand #GirlBoss. Popularised by Sophia Amoruso's usage in her business memoir, *#GirlBoss* (2014), the term refers to women who attempt to achieve success in a masculine-dominated environment. As Amanda Mull (2020) explains, *#Girlboss* argues that one individual woman's professional 'pursuit of power could be rebranded as a righteous quest for equality, and the success of female executives and entrepreneurs would lift up the women below them.'<sup>29</sup> The addition of #Girlboss ideologies associated with fourth-wave feminism, then, points to a shift in individuals' relationships to stereotypes such as the ice queen.

Wilsner also implies a change in stereotyping women: Jo expects she will encounter gendered stereotypes in the media but is proven wrong when this does not align with what is printed. For example, when she and Emma are seen together, Jo believes the media story will be 'Jo Jones is so obsessed with work she brought her assistant to an awards show,' and not 'Jo Jones is dating her assistant' (p. 42). While problematic in that Jo cannot escape being judged by the media, the way they assume Jo

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<sup>29</sup> Sophia Amoruso, *#Girlboss* (London: Penguin UK, 2014); Amanda Mull, 'The Girlboss Has Left the Building', *The Atlantic*, 25 June 2020 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/girlbosses-what-comes-next/613519/>> [accessed 29 September 2023]

and Emma are dating rather than Jo being work-obsessed suggests a hopeful change in how the media critique professional women. Jo is forty-one and has ‘dealt with the press, with journalists and people who shouldn’t be allowed to call themselves journalists, since she was a teenager’ (p. 42). Thus, the fact that they do not stereotype her workplace success here suggests a different focus for the journalists: one more towards acceptance, rather than judgement, of women succeeding in their careers.

Alternatively, in *Something to Talk About*, Wilsner shifts the negativity associated with the queen bee syndrome – that women have to act in conventionally ‘masculine’ ways to gain success in the workplace – and illustrates a protagonist using stereotypically feminine qualities to achieve career success. Firstly, Wilsner identifies the stereotypes of women having ‘too many feelings’ and being ‘too soft’ to execute the job sufficiently. Even with the reputation that Jo upholds, ‘people still thought she was too soft to write Agent Silver’ (p. 119). She was ‘undermined by people who didn’t think a woman could write an action movie.’ (p. 225). Emma defends Jo’s abilities to write the Agent Silver script: ‘God forbid a woman write an established male character. What if she gives him feelings that aren’t punching and having sex?’ (p. 52-3). When reading Jo’s first draft of the film, Emma criticises Jo’s story as almost replicating the male writers:

“In a lot of the movies, Silver’s kind of an asshole. But, like, an asshole who is written by a dude who doesn’t think he’s writing an asshole character.” [...] “You’re not an asshole, and your Silver isn’t going to be, either,” Emma said. “You shouldn’t make him a dick just because other people are afraid you’re going to make him too nice.” (p. 106)

At first, Jo resists, believing that ‘it was a nice sentiment’ (p. 106), but thinks he needs to be written this way to be accepted in the industry. However, Emma changes her mind: ‘a light bulb went on in Jo’s head’ (p. 106), metaphorically giving Jo the clarification that



providing a character with more depth would be beneficial for the films. Instead of suggesting that a woman could write a script as good as a man, Wilsner implies that Jo could write it better by applying 'softness' and 'feelings' to the work. Symbolically, this indicates women should use their softness and feelings in order to progress in the workplace and break the queen bee stereotype.

## The Glass Ceiling Effect

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The 'glass ceiling' is a term used to describe the invisible barrier that certain people, typically women and minorities, face which prevents them from advancing to higher roles within the workplace; the effect of this is gender and diversity disparities.<sup>30</sup>

Manuela da Costa Barreto et al. (2009) argue that,

[P]articular aspects of the metaphor of the glass ceiling are still relevant. [...] It is clear that the ceiling is still a real barrier to career advancement for many women. It is therefore clear that women still face important obstacles to their career advancement and that—like glass—many of these are difficult to see.<sup>31</sup>

Despite this, many studies have been conducted to consider whether this gendered aspect of workplace discrimination actually exists.<sup>32</sup> The glass ceiling remains an issue preventing women from career advancement but, as the metaphor implies, it is invisible and is therefore less verifiable. The inequalities, then, are difficult to prove. There have

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<sup>30</sup> Merida L. Johns (2013) defines the glass ceiling as 'a metaphor for the invisible and artificial barriers that block women and minorities from advancing up the corporate ladder to management and executive positions.' in 'Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Structural, Cultural, and Organizational Barriers Preventing Women from Achieving Senior and Executive Positions', *Perspectives in Health Information Management*, 10.Winter (2013), 1–11, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Manuela Barreto, Michelle K. Ryan, and Michael T. Schmitt, eds., *The Glass Ceiling in the 21st Century: Understanding Barriers to Gender Equality*, 1st edition (Washington: American Psychological Assoc, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example: Janeen Baxter and Erik Olin Wright, 'The Glass Ceiling Hypothesis: A Comparative Study of the United States, Sweden, and Australia', *Gender & Society*, 14.2 (2000), 275–94.

been changes to the way the glass ceiling is represented and discussed since the 1990s: for example, gender inequality and sexism in the workplace are more challenged. In 2013, *The Economist* started publishing the 'Glass Ceiling Index', which combines data from many different indicators (for example, workforce participation, pay, child-care costs, maternity and paternity rights) of all OECD countries to identify where women would be most likely to attain equal treatment in the workplace.<sup>33</sup> Wilsner and Weisberger elucidate the glass ceiling effect in their works of fiction; all three texts explore the workplace as a hostile environment and precarious for women, especially those who have children. Sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace are also referred to in the texts, as well as ageism, racism and homophobia.

### Women's Careers: Hostility and Precarity in Chick Lit

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In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Weisberger depicts a metaphorical representation of the glass ceiling. On Andy's first day, she struggles to get through the doors to enter the building, but the 'glowing' lobby of the 'warm, welcoming place' suggests a sense of warmth and wonder within Elias-Clark:

The lobby glowed behind the glass doors in the early-morning darkness, and it looked, for those first few moments, like a warm, welcoming place. But when I pushed the revolving door to enter, it fought me. Harder and harder I pushed, until my body weight was thrust forward and my face was nearly pressed against the glass, and only then did it budge. When it did begin to move, it slid slowly at first, prompting me to push even harder. But as soon as it picked up some momentum, the glass behemoth whipped around, hitting me from behind and forcing me to trip over my feet and shuffle visibly to remain standing. (p. 38)

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<sup>33</sup> The Data Team, 'The Best and Worst Places to Be a Working Woman', *The Economist*, 3 August 2017 <<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/03/08/the-best-and-worst-places-to-be-a-working-woman>> [accessed 23 August 2023].

When Andy first enters the door is personified as 'fighting' Andy: it is as though the building itself is pushing Andy away. Juxtaposing the fight with the warmth implies the false appearance of corporate urban environments: they promote spaces as inclusive and welcoming, but in reality, they are exclusive and unwelcoming environments. Andy's 'body ... thrust', and 'face ... pressed against the glass' echoes how women have to fight to break the glass ceiling, pushing their way through the barriers, and 'only then [do they] budge.' The repetition of 'harder' further expands this metaphor of the struggle to break the glass ceiling. After this, the 'glass behemoth whipped around' – demonstrating the expansiveness of the glass ceiling – and the way it then 'hits her from behind' are a reminder that the glass ceiling still exists and women still have to fight this invisible barrier to success. This entrance also foreshadows Andy's negative experiences working at *Runway*. Weisberger's subtle indication is that the urban environment is a hostile place for women. Towards the end of the novel, Andy returns to Elias-Clark to interview for a writing job at *The Buzz*, and she 'proceeded to heave [her] weight against the revolving door' (p. 390): the glass door still resists her even when she is entering the building for a different, more suitable, job position. Therefore, Weisberger metaphorically suggests that the glass ceiling remains for women in various careers – even the ones that appear more receptive.

An implied solution proposed for the hostile work environment is workplace flexibility. Both of Weisberger's texts highlight the way women feel happier when they have a sense of freedom as to where they work. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy ends the novel in a freelance position (p. 384): a job where she can work anywhere. Her pleasure at this working style is suggested due to its surfacing at the end of the novel when Andy is the most content. She explains how Loretta's help and 'eagerness to get in touch with

people at other magazines who might just be interested in some freelance stuff' was 'even more exciting' than Loretta's buying some of her already written pieces (p. 389). Similarly, in *The Wives*, Emily also addresses the benefits of having freedom in one's own career. When considering returning to *Runway*, Emily says,

"I'd feel ridiculous going back. New York, sure. But to give up my autonomy? I decide where and when and how I work, for whom, and how much. It feels like the wrong move to give that up and go back where I started" (p. 47-8)

The freedom that Emily values now she is self-employed deepens Weisberger's point that women are happier and have job fulfilment when they have autonomy regarding where to work. Echoing the fourth-wave feminist #Girlboss discussed above, this also suggests how becoming one's own boss is an approach which extracts women from the hostile environment. However, this has its own problems in that work can permeate many different aspects of life and indicates a sidestepping, rather than confronting, of workplace inequalities.

In the older and newer works of chick lit, an effect of the glass ceiling is elucidated through women's sense of unease about their future careers. As Ferriss (2015) argues, 'in their depictions of the economic lives of young women, chick lit novels highlight their precarious status.'<sup>34</sup> In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Emily is complimented when Andy tells her she will make a fantastic fashion editor:

"Really? You think so?" [Emily] asked eagerly, happily. Why my opinion as the biggest fashion loser ever to hit the scene was at all relevant, I didn't know, but she sounded very, very pleased.  
"Definitely. Not a doubt in my mind." [Andy replied] (p. 379)

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<sup>34</sup> Suzanne Ferriss, 'The Precariat of Chick Lit', in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, by Elana Levine (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 177-95 (p. 182).

Andy believes (and most likely Emily would too) that Andy is the 'biggest fashion loser ever', but because she is flattering Emily and her career and the industry is so precarious, she automatically feels validated despite who is saying it. In *The Wives*, when Emily begins to lose clients to Olivia Belle, she feels 'the deflation. The dread. Another client lost to Olivia Belle. Another humiliating and high-profile firing. Another step closer to having to shutter her business altogether' (p. 75). She is scared about losing her successful career. Similarly, in *Something to Talk About*, we see Emma's insecurities about 'climbing the ladder' in her career. She repeats 'I like my job' four times to her boss, Jo, and questions whether moving to another career would benefit her: 'I like my job. [...] This job. And I'm good at it. What if I'm not good at whatever I move on to? What if I don't like it?' (p. 81). Emma's insecurities and fear of failing are apparent. She explains how 'Jo had always had her back. [...] Jo had always been there for her professionally' (p. 254). Emma may be disinclined to seek a change from her current supportive boss because the working world lacks adequate support for women. The precarity these women feel towards their careers highlights the inequalities perpetuated by the glass ceiling.

### Having it All: Motherhood and Careers in Chick Lit

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One prominent feature of the glass ceiling complex is how mothers are treated in the workplace. Malin Noem Ravn's (2005) study establishes that '[t]he cultural valuation of a family life is inscribed in the individual and manifests itself as a naturally based wish

for children.’<sup>35</sup> As Sørensen’s (2017) study suggests, women’s ‘choice’ functions as a dissolving of gender inequalities in the workplace: the glass ceiling does not exist, it is merely women choosing to not progress, reduce their hours or leave their careers.<sup>36</sup> The phrase ‘having it all’ is also key here. Inspired by Helen Gurley Brown’s *Having it All: Love, Success, Sex, Money, Even if You’re Starting with Nothing* (1982), this concept refers to women being able to find success in their careers while also raising a child and maintaining healthy romantic relationships (including marriage).<sup>37</sup> The ‘having it all’ ideology has been critiqued by scholars. While evaluating the media-driven backlash against the second-wave feminist advancement, in *Backlash* (1991), Susan Faludi argues that, in the 1990s, there was a consensus that feminism was ‘women’s own worst enemy’ because it had led women to be overworked, grieving from a ‘man shortage’, depressed and childless.<sup>38</sup> The ‘having of it all’, then, has resulted in women’s unhappiness, and the blame supposedly goes to feminism. Genz and Brabon (2009) expand on this and argue that ‘backlash not only warns women that they cannot “have it all” and must choose between home and career, but also makes the choice for them by promoting wedded life and domesticity as a full and fulfilled existence.’<sup>39</sup> The idea of ‘having it all’ is represented in chick lit: in the newer texts, there is less critique of ‘having it all’ and more emphasis placed on the structural, gendered inequalities that persist in the workplace.

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<sup>35</sup> Malin Noem Ravn, ‘A Matter of Free Choice? Some Structural and Cultural Influences on the Decision to Have or Not to Have Children in Norway’, in *Barren States: The Population “Implosion” in Europe*, ed. by Carrie Douglass (Oxford: Berg, 2005), pp. 29-47 (p. 45).

<sup>36</sup> Sørensen, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Having It All: Love, Success, Sex, Money Even If You’re Starting With Nothing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Genz and Brabon, p. 55.

With the character of Miriam in *The Wives*, Weisberger portrays a woman who attempted to 'have it all' and failed, implying structural, gendered inequalities. Miriam worked 'eighty hours a week helping multinational companies and was the breadwinner for [her] family' (53-4) but 'chooses' to leave her career because, as she asserts, 'I blinked, and my kids went from newborns to school-aged real human beings with their own thoughts and feelings, and I missed most of it because I was always at work' (p. 54). Emily critiques this decision throughout the novel: 'Why didn't you think about me for one second when you made this asinine decision to be a suburban housewife?' (p. 47). 'Asinine' emphasises Emily's disapproval of Miriam leaving her career to be a stay-at-home mum. Miriam's decision is critiqued in terms of her new appearance too: 'Emily forced a smile and remembered the old Miriam, the Miriam of Manhattan: slim, put together, professional, totally on top of her game. Where had that woman gone? Did it mean she was depressed?' (p. 202). The reference to the 'old Miriam' suggests that she has become a completely different person since she left her career – one that is not at the 'top of her game' anymore. She tells Emily, 'Seriously, Em, how lucky am I right now? I have choices. Not a lot of people can say that. You can too.' (p. 54). Miriam's 'choice' not to work reiterates the postfeminist ideology that 'choice' has allowed Miriam to pick the traditional gender role that society favours for women (and she says Emily can, too). This also highlights Miriam's middle-class privilege of work not being necessary. This conversation with Emily, though, transpires through the embarrassment Miriam felt after a discussion with her children: Matthew, the boy, said, 'When I grow up, I want to be an inventor just like Daddy', and Maisie 'without missing a beat, says, "Well, when I grow up, I want to go to the gym like Mommy"' (p. 53-4). The direct comparison of gendered aspirations inspired by older generations is why Miriam feels the need to

justify her decision to Emily. Emily believes having a child means she would have to 'throw away her life and career on a crying, pissing, spitting thing' (p. 254), and, as such, she is opposed to it. Weisberger highlights the either/or association between having a child and a career, critiquing the notion of a woman being able to 'have it all.'

Weisberger critiques the postfeminist focus on women's 'choice' to leave the workplace by demonstrating Miriam's feelings of sadness and embarrassment after she has left her job. She tells Emily, 'Just give up. I have.' (p. 53), echoing her feelings of defeat. When Miriam unexpectedly sees an old employee, Stephanie, and tells her that she has ended her career because she thought it would be 'good for the family' (p. 258), she could 'feel the flush start in her chest' (p. 258). While 'there wasn't the slightest hint of condescension or envy in Stephanie's tone, Miriam sensed herself being hyper-vigilant to it.' (p. 258). This suggests that women could feel embarrassed when leaving their careers for motherhood, despite it being their 'choice' to. Miriam thinks, 'She had quit her job to stay home and be more present with her children. She had zero plans to go back to work, even if there were days when she missed it like an amputated limb' (p. 259). The comparison of Miriam quitting her work to a missing a body part reflects how attached she was to her career, emphasising her feelings of loss now she has left her job.

The challenges created through the glass ceiling pose a significant barrier for mothers, to the extent that they feel compelled to leave, even when they gain fulfilment and are accomplished in their field. Later in *The Wives*, Miriam returns to the workplace. Her inspiration to return to the workplace comes from when she helps her friend, Karolina, gain custody of her child. Emily tells Miriam: 'Your skills are needed now. By us.' (p. 240). Her husband also impacts the decision when he arranges an office space for



her to work. He tells her: 'You're an incredible mom – don't get me wrong – and the kids are so lucky to have you at home with them, but we both know it's not making you happy' (p. 346). When she returns to work towards the end of the novel, she is 'pleased by her professional tone. It had been only a few months since she'd settled into her new office and taken on new legal work, and she was surprised by how much she was enjoying it' (p. 373). When Miriam is given workplace flexibility and away from the 'eighty hours a week helping multinational companies', the job becomes a more pleasurable experience. Weisberger highlights the glass ceiling effect: the workplace is not designed for women to negotiate family and the workplace. It shows how a woman being able to 'have it all' is a myth. Miriam felt she had to leave a career she was good at and enjoyed because of the societal expectation for women to look after their children. The way that it takes Miriam's friends and husband to motivate her to return to her career illuminates the level of resistance that glass ceiling inequalities can impose on mothers.

In her earlier work, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Weisberger also demonstrates the struggle for women to maintain having it all. When describing Miranda's office, Andy says,

I loved the drama of standing in the dark in the power monger's office, staring out at a flashing and restless New York City and picturing myself in one of those movies [...] feeling on top of the world. And then the lights would blaze forth, and my fantasy was over. The anything-is-possible feel of New York at dawn vanished, and the identical, grinning faces of Caroline and Cassidy were all I could see (p. 139).

Miranda feeling 'on top of the world' in her 'power monger's office' is a 'fantasy' because 'when the lights blaze forth' all Andy can see are her children: the 'grinning faces of Caroline and Cassidy.' The text implies that when a woman becomes a mother, her

priorities shift away from her workplace – symbolically, just as Andy’s did in this fantasy. The way the children became ‘all she could see’ suggests the societal expectations regarding Miranda’s primary concern. Weisberger highlights the fantastical element of having it all as a woman, implying it is impossible because either way, the woman fails in one of the areas.

Applying Sørensen’s (2016) subject positions in the intersection of work, career and motherhood to the chick lit texts implies the impossibility of womanhood. The first subject position is the ‘exceptional career mother’ who manages to maintain ‘having it all’ - a successful career and motherhood - with the help of nannies, au pairs, cleaners and more.<sup>40</sup> *The Devil Wears Prada*’s Miranda is reflective of this strand: she has ‘a full-time driver, housekeeper, and nanny’ (p. 3), as well as two assistants. However, Sørensen also discovers that the ‘coin portraying the exceptional career mother is easily flipped, morphing into a portrait of the stereotypical career woman who fails at motherhood.’<sup>41</sup> The failing career mother manifests ‘having it all’ as unrealistic because when pursuing a career and funding childcare, supposedly mothers neglect the ‘best option’ for the child, which is deemed the full-time mother.<sup>42</sup> The reverse is true in chick lit: not choosing careers is failing as a career woman.

There are signals throughout *The Devil Wears Prada* that Miranda is the ‘stereotypical career woman who fails at motherhood’, echoing the ‘easily flipped coin’ from exceptional to failing. When Emily and Andy are discussing Miranda’s recently fired nanny, Cara, Emily says, ‘Miranda never liked that Cara didn’t speak French. How

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<sup>40</sup> Sørensen, p. 305.

<sup>41</sup> Sørensen, p. 306.

<sup>42</sup> Sørensen, p. 306.

are the girls supposed to learn to speak it without an American accent?' (p. 224). The narration subsequently conveys Andy's point of view: '[P]erhaps from their own fluent mother who had herself lived in France, still visited a half-dozen times a year and could read, write, and speak the language with perfect, lilting pronunciation?' (p. 224).

Miranda is judged as a mother because she hires help, instead of teaching them herself, demonstrating how quickly the 'exceptional career woman' can move to 'failing.' This is strengthened when Miranda gets angry at Andy because she discovers that her children's passports have not been renewed (p. 370). Andy was 'unable to understand how it was [her] fault that [Miranda's] ten-year-olds had expired passports when they, theoretically, had two parents, a stepfather, and a full-time nanny to oversee such things' (p. 371). Weisberger critiques the concept of privileged, high-class mothers who maintain 'having it all' because of the infrastructure enabling this choice.

*Something to Talk About* also complicates the notion of having it all. On the one hand, Jo is constructed as a working woman who has not sacrificed her family while maintaining workplace success – she is shown as managing her career and familial obligations. Jo has 'never wanted kids' (p. 43) but always makes time to attend her nephew's baseball games: 'Even when she was busy, she found time for their baseball games and birthday parties and anywhere else they might want her' (p. 44). Later in the novel, 'she was a little busier than usual. Still, she made an effort to go to every one of Ethan's games.' (p. 104). While there is a vast difference between going to baseball games and the daily commitment of full parenting, with Jo, Wilsner implies that familial responsibilities should not have to interfere with a woman's workplace success. Jo is committed to her career but believes 'family days were off-limits, in her mind' (p. 99). On the other hand, Wilsner also highlights an either/or situation with work success and

having children. While Jo has no children herself, the way she describes her production company is that it is her baby: 'Her production company, the Jones Dynasty—yes, she threw shade in naming it and it made her laugh every time—was her baby, had her name in big bold letters' (p. 101). While Wilsner's connection of an aspect of work with babies is problematic because it reinforces the gendered stereotype of women's primary identity being motherhood, it also challenges Ravn's theory of the cultural imperative to have children by showing other methods of creating 'babies.' Jo's baby as her production company is depicted in this context as a positive because of Jo's pride in accomplishing it.

Unlike Wilsner, Weisberger implies that women seeing their work as their baby is straightforwardly troublesome. Andy describes her relationship with Miranda as like a foetus in a womb: 'I loathed that fucking cell but could not ignore it. It kept me tied to Miranda like an umbilical cord, refusing to let me grow up or out or away from my source of suffocation.' (p. 94). The connotations of this are that Miranda treats her employees like her children and her work as a 'baby'. However, because of the suffocation this makes Andy feel, this is a clear critique of seeing work as a 'baby.'

Both of Weisberger's texts illustrate how the actions of a heroine's romantic partner can impact a woman's success in the workplace and strengthen or weaken the glass ceiling. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Alex, Andy's boyfriend, imposes the ideology of the home as a 'domestic, warm, comforting, feminine private' place onto Andy. As Fest (2009) suggests, 'The distinction between home and work, between domestic and public has always been read in gendered terms. [...] The private is soft, warm, comforting, and

feminine. The public is cold, challenging, competitive, and masculine.’<sup>43</sup> After Andy’s increase in workload and her not seeing Alex as much, he shouts at her, saying:

“No, you listen! Forget about me for a second, not like that’s such a stretch, but forget that we never, ever see each other anymore because of the hours you keep at work, because of your never-ending work emergencies. What about your parents? [...] And your sister?” (p. 310)

The listing of her neglect of him, her parents, her sister, and his interrogative manner demonstrate the extra conventionally feminine pressures of domesticity that women can have placed on them by their romantic partners. Alex then goes on to say that she is a completely changed person from the woman he fell in love with: ‘My Andy would have never even entertained the idea of choosing a fashion show or a party or whatever over being there for a friend who really, really needed her’ (p. 381). The repeated ‘really’ emphasises Alex’s emotional manipulation of Andy. His desire for control and possession of Andy is also implied with the ‘my’ before her name, as does his critique of her passion for her career over her family obligations. At the beginning of the novel, Andy is solicitous of Alex’s needs: she chose to live with Lily because she ‘didn’t want Alex to feel suffocated’ (p. 24); she thinks, ‘Poor thing [Alex] looked so miserable that I felt guilty bothering him with the details of the interview’ (p. 25); and she ‘was careful not to let [her] wet hair soak his pillows’ (p. 29). Weisberger suggests that when Andy gains more of a voice, more of her ambitions, Alex feels like he has lost ‘his Andy.’ Alex also pushes the concept of the private, home space onto Andy. When she is in Paris for work and Lily has been in an accident, he asks, ‘When are you coming home?’ (p. 363). He repeats: ‘I said, when are you coming home?’ When I was silent for a moment, he continued. “You are coming home, aren’t you?” (p. 363). Then, when she arrives, he says,

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<sup>43</sup> Fest, p. 50.

'I'm glad you decided to come home – that you know it was the right thing to do' (p. 381). The repetition of 'coming home' is patronising and emphasises the negativity perpetuated towards the public workplace and the elevation of the private 'home' space.

In recent interviews, the actor Adrian Grenier who plays Alex's equivalent, Nate, in the film adaptation of *The Devil Wears Prada* has argued that he is the real enemy – the real devil – in the film, and not Miranda or Andy. He explains: 'In many ways he's very selfish and self-involved. It was all about him; he wasn't extending himself to support Andy in her career.'<sup>44</sup> The change in the reading of the character of Alex / Nate is reflective of the shift in feminism. Postfeminist ideology posits that women can 'choose' to leave their careers and focus on their family and husband. Fourth-wave feminism more explicitly advocates against structural inequalities (the glass ceiling) that prevent women from having it all. Therefore, Alex's lack of support for Andy is now seen differently than it was in 2006.

In *The Wives*, husband Paul rents and designs an office space for Miriam, suggesting that the romantic interest influences their partner's return to the workplace and how men can make space for women in the workplace. He tells her: 'You don't want to go back to working eighty hours a week and commuting to and from a demanding firm in the city, but I can also tell that going to gym classes and PTA meetings all day long isn't doing it for you' (p. 346-7). While this could be read as Paul being a supportive husband – encouraging his wife to enter, instead of leave, the workplace, the 'you don't

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<sup>44</sup> Adrian Grenier and Emily Tannenbaum, 'Adrian Grenier Admits Nate Was the True Villain of "The Devil Wears Prada"', *Glamour*, 19 June 2021 <<https://www.glamour.com/story/devil-wears-prada-star-adrian-grenier-admits-nate-was-the-true-villain-of-the-movie>> [accessed 15 September 2021].

want to go back to working...' echoes a sense of control. Also, it is only when Paul holds 'open the door' for Miriam that she sees the room 'was filled with the most incredible light' (p. 345-6). The light symbolises the illumination and positive direction that Miriam should follow: to re-enter the workplace and escape the 'darkness' of not working. While it could be read that Miriam only re-enters the workplace when a man facilitates the space, the text implies that her husband, a man, is championing fourth-wave #Girlboss ideology of encouraging women to work outside of masculine office spaces. In contrast to Alex of *The Devil Wears Prada*, Paul imposes the public, rather than the private, onto his partner.

Chick lit explores the stereotype that women should stay home, and men should work (and are less available for their children).<sup>45</sup> In *The Wives*, when Emily meets Alistair Grosvenor on the train, he tells her the reason for his marriage split:

"We were happy for a while, but apparently I pressured her a lot: to get married before she was ready, to move back to London with me when she didn't want to leave her family, to give up her job and stay home with the girls. Nice, right?" (p. 114).

Alistair highlights an example of a man exerting pressure on a woman to abandon her career ambitions to look after their children. Emily responds, 'I've heard of worse crimes. And I'm sure it wasn't just you' (p. 114-5). Her reaction does not match her career-mindedness or the scolding she directs at Miriam for leaving her job to look after her children. This hints at how easily persuading someone to leave the workplace can be and how the partner can perceive their suggestion as compelling. Alistair's divorce indicates, however, that this level of pressure is unattractive. This is also shown with

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<sup>45</sup> Chapter 1 provides a more detailed discussion of normative femininity and gender roles.

Karolina and her marriage with Graham. The implication is that Karolina raised their son, Harry, alone. Emily reminds Karolina:

“Did you not tell me that in ten years he has never taken Harry to a doctor’s appointment? Or gone to more than one baseball game a season? Has never taken him away alone anywhere? Doesn’t know the names of any of his friends? Doesn’t attend parent/teacher conferences?” (p. 248).

The multiple questions echo the little that Graham does with or knows about his son.

Exposure of a father’s lack of a role in his child’s life is a benefit of chick lit: a genre women-focused. Instead of the focus being on the ‘failing’ mother, the failures are with the father. Despite the love she provides to his son, Graham leaves her for another woman, Regan. Regan is known in the novel as intelligent and successful: ‘the closest thing to real life political royalty in this generation. Twenty-nine years old, brilliant, accomplished, gorgeous, polished, and a humanitarian to boot’ (p. 98). Yet, when she enters a relationship with Graham, her priorities shift to Harry – she rings Karolina and says, ‘Graham asked if I could call you to discuss Christmas. He thinks it would be a good idea for us to get to know each other – to establish a working relationship – so we can make decisions that are best for Harry’ (p. 383). Alistair and Graham represent men who believe that the woman should take the maternal, home role, while they provide the financial income.

## Workplace Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Chick Lit

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Sexist discrimination arguably contributes to the persistence of the glass ceiling. In all three texts, the chick lit authors demonstrate the sexist behaviour women feel they must contend with in the workplace. In *Something to Talk About*, Jo explicitly raises awareness



of this, arguing: 'People are going to find any way they can to dismiss Emma the way they dismiss every woman' (p. 292). Jo advocates for a woman's right not to change themselves – mainly because people will judge and reject successful women either way, as Jo's past experiences confirm. In *The Wives*, Miranda's perception of mothers, despite being one herself, is an example of sexist discrimination. She says, 'Four children is appalling. Not to mention I've already had to endure three maternity leaves' (p. 170). By Miranda deprecating women for pregnancy, Weisberger alludes to how even women themselves can be a factor in the glass ceiling persisting. At the end of *The Wives*, Emily discovers she is pregnant and at her baby shower Miranda tells her: 'I can no longer have you in the office looking like ... that' (p. 405). Despite Miranda previously 'begging' (p. 171) Emily to return to *Runway*, once she discovers she is pregnant, she no longer wants her to enter the workplace. While alluding to how Emily's new baby bump does not correspond with the usual appearance of *Runway* workers, this also stigmatises new mothers and perpetuates unequal opportunities. Miranda gives an 'obvious once-over of Karolina's figure and outfit. Then, as though relieved that yet another person wasn't pregnant, she said, 'You can take over for Emily during her maternity leave' (p. 405). Miranda's relief when she sees Karolina is not pregnant suggests that Miranda views pregnancy as a hindrance in the workplace, reinforcing gender bias towards mothers, implying women cannot 'have it all', and consequently strengthening the glass ceiling.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the gender inequalities are less explicit and more implied by certain men's actions. When Gabriel Brooks, Christian Collinsworth's agent, meets Andy, his greeting is gendered and patronising:

"Andrea, a pleasure to meet you," Gabriel said, extending a hand and taking mine in one of those annoyingly delicate I'm-not-shaking-your-hand-as-I-would-a-

man's-because-I'm-sure-I'd-just-snap-your-girly-little-bones-in-half clutches. (p. 257)

Gabriel typifies the sexism women continually receive in the workplace; the fact that Andy says 'one of those' implies this is not the first time she has been treated in this inferior way. Weisberger suggests that women are not treated the same as men.

The security guards at Elias-Clark, Eduardo and Mickey, are also sexist towards Andy. The fact that these are the first people that staff and visitors see when they enter the building and the person that people would go to for 'security' is ironic with the discomfort they make Andy feel. It also demonstrates the lack of care the high-powered people at Elias-Clark have towards the actions of the lower-powered staff. When Andy trips through the glass door when first entering Elias Clark, Mickey 'chortle[s]' and says, 'Tricky, eh? Not the first time I seen that happen, and won't be the last.' (p. 39). Adding to the symbolism of Andy's trip representing an attempt to break through the glass ceiling, the security guard's 'laughing' when he sees Andy struggling suggests his ignorance of the struggles women face to get into and remain in the workforce. His disregard for it 'happening all the time' not only echoes the repetition of gender inequality in the workplace, but also echoes and foreshadows his many sexist experiences with Miranda's assistants. His actions make Andy decide 'to hate him and kn[o]w that he would never like me, regardless of what I said or how I acted.' (p. 39) This symbolises how women are treated with inferiority and scorn in the workplace – no matter what they do or say. When Andy tells Mickey her name and that she is there to be Miranda's new assistant, he laughs and says, 'Where you from, girl, bein' all friendly and shit? Topeka fuckin' Kansas? She is gonna eat you alive, hah, hah, hah!' (p. 39). The

infantilisation of 'girl' emphasises his disrespect for Andy. Next, Eduardo is introduced to the scene:

'a portly man wearing the same uniform came over and with no subtlety whatsoever looked me up and down. I braced for more mocking and guffaws, but it didn't come. Instead, he turned a kind face to mine and looked me in the eyes.'  
(p. 39)

Looking her 'up and down' is sexist, judgemental and intimidating, but Andy does not feel this. She believes he looks 'kind', implying a greater tolerance for workplace sexism than in newer chick lit. He infantilises her, too: '[G]ood luck today, girl. You gonna need it.' (p. 39). Eduardo's presence remains an annoyance for Andy throughout the novel. He makes her sing before he lets her through the turnstiles. She explains,

'I was left, as I was every morning, wanting to reach across the security counter and tear the flesh from Eduardo's face. But since I was such a good sport and he was one of my only friends in the place, I weakly acquiesced.' (p. 136)

Andy feels uncomfortable and angry towards Eduardo but believes this man, enacting sexism, is one of her only 'friends in this place.' While depicting the protagonist's apathetic response to sexism and inequalities, Wiesberger's narrative itself highlights that Elias-Clark is an unsupportive, unsafe environment for women to work in.

Eduardo's harassment is left unchallenged by the novel's conclusion. Andy has left *Runway* and returns to the same building for an interview at a different magazine. She sees Eduardo acting the same way with another young woman working for Miranda. The young woman is repeatedly 'banging against the turnstile', but he refuses to let her through until she sings American Pie – repeating the lyric '*this will be the day that I die*' (p. 391). When Andy looks at Eduardo, 'he smiled quickly' and 'winked' (p. 391). The relevance of the song lyric here is that it reflects the unhappiness of working for Miranda and the fact that this man is forcing Miranda's new assistant to act in a way she

does not want to when running errands for her boss. Her 'banging against the turnstiles' suggests her impatience and desire to leave the reception. Solidified by his inappropriate wink at Andy, his persistence is a form of harassment and something that does not get resolved through the course of the novel. With the narrative, Weisberger offers a critique of the postfeminist ideology that gender equality has been gained and sexism has been resolved; she implies that inequalities persist, women are just less likely to challenge them than they were during second-wave feminism.

Specifically, hostile sexism is also an important factor affecting women's workplace experiences and encouraging the continuation of the glass ceiling complex. Since the rise of fourth-wave feminism, there has been an increase in the number of women speaking out about their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace. The #MeToo movement encouraged women to collectively expose the realities in their careers. As Perez (2020) finds, many women experience harassment in the workplace: 'The UN estimates (estimates are all we have) that up to 50% of women in EU countries have been sexually harassed at work.'<sup>46</sup> While sexist behaviour is implied in Weisberger's texts, Wilsner elaborates on the concept of sexual harassment. It originates from Barry Davis, an Oscar-nominated director, who is invited onto the set by Jo for Emma, an aspiring director, to 'To learn from. To impress, in all likelihood' (p. 131). Despite the text previously portraying Emma's awe and gratitude at meeting Barry – noting that he 'was a great means to Emma's success' (p. 151) – after being introduced to Emma, he offers inappropriate incentives in exchange for sexual activity:

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<sup>46</sup> Perez, pp. 91-2.

“If you can handle me, I know a guy who’s looking for a second AD. I’ll recommend you.” [...]

“If I can handle you?” she said. Maybe playing innocent would get her out of this.

“I mean, you are more than welcome to use your mouth,” Barry said so casually that he could be talking about traffic, “but your hand is all I need.” (p. 159)

Because the narrative perspective is from Emma’s point-of-view, her outrage at this suggestion is clear:

Emma wanted a lighting fixture to fall on his head. No, she wanted to bring it down on him herself. There was a scream inside her mouth, behind her eyes, building from a clenched fist in her chest.

“Please excuse me,” she said, and hated herself for the civility. (p. 159)

Emma’s feelings of anger are shown in how her body is reacting to this situation.

Wilsner illuminates the emotional distress sexual harassment in the workplace provokes. Afterwards, Emma worries she could be perceived as ‘a slut making false accusations about an industry golden boy’ (p. 176). The threat of a woman losing her professional career position makes Emma worry about coming forward. This is symbolic of the #MeToo movement and Harvey Weinstein’s widespread sexual-abuse allegations.<sup>47</sup> Weinstein was convicted of rape and sexual assault in 2020; he believed that #MeToo ‘skewed’ his conviction.<sup>48</sup> A sense of solidarity in shared experiences was fostered in the #MeToo movement – encouraging women to call out sexual harassment in the workplace. The text shows Emma coming forward, with the support of her boss, Jo, initiating ‘an article with quotes from Annabeth Pierce and three other actresses

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<sup>47</sup> Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (London: Palgrave Pilot, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Associated Press, ‘Harvey Weinstein Says #MeToo Skewed New York Rape Conviction in Appeal’, *The Guardian*, 11 January 2023, section World news  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/harvey-weinstein-metoo-new-york-conviction-appeal>> [accessed 24 September 2023].

detailing further harassment from Barry Davis' (p. 205). Wilsner implies coming forward is important because it makes other women feel more comfortable to do so too.

Wilsner also highlights issues of objectification, lack of consent and self-doubt associated with sexual harassment. Before the explicit comment above happens, Barry objectifies Jo – his eyes were 'glued to [Jo's] ass' (p. 157) – and he intimidates Emma: he 'stepp[ed] closer to Emma' on two occasions (p. 156, 158). Instead of Barry seeing Emma's lack of consent and discomfort, he gave a 'quiet chuckle [that] sounded predatory' (p. 158) when Emma stepped back. The use of 'predatory' suggests his animalistic hunting. Moreover, the concept of Barry being a predator, implies this is not the first time he has done this. Barry's actions appear cunningly crafted: when Jo leaves the room, he crudely insinuates that Emma must 'know those talents well' (p. 156), hinting at the rumour of Emma and Jo dating. Yet when Jo returns to the office, he 'somehow [makes] it look like he hadn't been in Emma's personal space, like he hadn't made an inappropriate comment' (p. 156). Emma's perspective also allows us to witness her self-doubt: Maybe he didn't mean it that way, she told herself. She was just being sensitive.' (p. 156) and 'She was probably overreacting. Maybe she had misinterpreted.' (p. 157) Wilsner reveals the thoughts of someone who experiences sexual harassment with words such as 'overreacting' and 'sensitive' implying the worry of women being thought of as exaggerating.

While Emma and Jo's workplace relationship could be considered problematic in that Jo is Emma's boss and their feelings for each other become clearer as the novel progresses, Wilsner does not imply that Jo is using her power to gain Emma's affections. The fact we see both characters' perspectives allows for the disclosure of both their

motives – making it clear that it is romantic for both. There are certain instances where the power dynamics obstruct the affection - for example, on their first date, Emma calls Jo 'boss' (p. 306) - but they also foster arousal: 'Jo liked being called boss in bed' (p. 311). They also discuss the potential stereotypes that could form because of their relationship. Emma says to Jo: 'You're seen as getting some hot young thing. I'm the one who people think is unable to get a job without sleeping with someone' (p. 166). Jo replies, 'You think people don't look at pictures of us and think I'm corrupting this lovely young lady?' (p. 167). Both are stereotyped negatively, hinting at the automatic assumptions currently pervasive at workplace relationships, even consensual ones.

Wilsner also addresses the contrast between workplace harassment and workplace romances. Feeling insecure about her feelings towards Emma because she is both her assistant and younger than her, Jo tells best friend Evelyn: 'She's more than a decade younger than me and she's my assistant. Talk about a predatory lesbian' (p. 242). 'Predatory' is used three other times in the novel: once is when Jo thinks about what 'people' will say about her when they see the pictures of them (p. 167). Another is when referring to Barry's chuckle during his harassment of Emma (p. 158). This connects both instances of office interactions and highlights the difference between the two: one is consensual and the other is not. Finally, after Jo's doubts, Evelyn assures her (and the readers): 'You're not a predatory lesbian, [...] You're not treating Emma like *prey*. You have feelings for her. You're allowed to' (p. 242). The use of this term in different circumstances suggests that with workplace relationships, in contemporary fourth-wave discourses, there is an assumption that the one with the most workplace power is considered to be seeking to exploit their subordinate. Wilsner seeks to demonstrate that consensual workplace relationships can occur too. The romanticising of their

relationship also encourages less judgment and more endorsement of their romance. For example: 'Jo's tongue brushed Emma's, and asthma really was the best metaphor for their relationship—Emma wasn't sure she was ever going to be able to breathe normally again' (p. 297). The implication of Jo 'taking Emma's breath away' is a romantic expression conveying an overwhelming feeling of love. Moreover, in the instance with Barry, Jo is representative of safety for Emma: she 'shuffled a little closer to Jo' (p. 157) and away from Barry. Wilsner's crafting of Barry's explicit, hostile sexual harassment contrasts with Jo's support and love for Emma. The juxtaposition of explicit sexual harassment with Jo and Emma's relationship makes their workplace romance seem less problematic and more permissible to readers.

### Discriminatory Practices associated with Workplace in Chick Lit

Ageism, racism and homophobia also contribute to the persistence of the glass ceiling. These forms of discrimination are highlighted most explicitly in the most recent works of chick lit, *Something to Talk About* and *The Wives*. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, while Miranda is an older protagonist, the narrative perspective does not allow us to see things from her point of view. This highlights the ageist conventions of the time of publication: a usual and expected focus of chick lit perspectives in 2004 would be a young woman in her 20s. As Fest (2009) confirms, chick lit 'very often tells the story of young, unmarried, and childless women in the workplace.'<sup>49</sup> The expansive discussions in *The Wives* of motherhood in the workplace and protagonists over 35 show a

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<sup>49</sup> Fest, p. 60.



difference in Weisberger's newer text. After her jealous remarks regarding Olivia Belle, Emily tells Miriam, 'I'm being Snapchatted to irrelevance. When did we get so old? (p. 52). The repeated connection of social media and obsolescence throughout the novel highlights the age-related bias prevalent in women's careers. In *Something to Talk About*, ageism is shown through the media's stereotyping of Jo as an older woman going through a 'midlife crisis' (p. 51). The paparazzi ask her whether her supposed relationship with Emma and her taking the job of writing an action movie are due to her being 'terrified of getting older' (p. 51). This questioning implies they think a woman's decisions are age-driven.

Wilsner's debut chick lit text further diversifies the genre by illustrating the ramifications of racism in the workplace too. Through the character of Chinese American Jo, the novel elaborates on the racial discrimination in the workplace that Jo has had to contend with throughout her lifetime. Her career started with acting when she was thirteen and 'the adopted Chinese daughter of a typical white family.' (p. 99). Jo then 'published a column. She wrote about what it was like being a Chinese American in Hollywood. What it was like to be the butt of racist jokes on her own television show. About casting notices asking for white actresses only. She stopped being offered scripts' (p. 99). As a consequence of Jo's sharing her truthful experiences of racism in the workplace, she is prevented from getting more career opportunities. Jo stopped being offered scripts, so she started writing her own. Her resulting success is Wilsner's implication that discrimination should be challenged, not just accepted in the workplace. Like with #MeToo and the instance of sexual harassment discussed above, Wilsner suggests that speaking up is important, should be encouraged and can have an impact.

Wilsner illustrates Kimberly T. Schneider et al.'s (2017) findings that 'day-to-day workplace interactions may be rife with incivility, micro-aggression, and subtle discrimination (including homophobic jokes or keeping marginalized employees "out of the loop") that signal to LGBT employees to stay in the closet.'<sup>50</sup> As discussed above, one major plot point of *Something to Talk About* is the media assuming Jo and Emma are dating after they attend the SAG Awards together. Emma calls out the paparazzi's homophobic prejudice: 'Normally we deal with them because they *like* you, not because they're being dicks to you!' (p. 51). That the paparazzi become homophobic 'dicks' when they discover Jo is queer is ironic. It draws attention to and ridicules the contradictory notion that someone's sexuality can lead to a development of homophobic discrimination. Next, after 'rumors swirled harder' about Jo and Emma dating, 'the network scheduled a phone call with Jo' (p. 57). The phone call displays a significant amount of prejudice against LGBTQ+ individuals:

"It all seems a little inappropriate," said John or Dave or whatever his name was; Jo could not for the life of her remember. [...]

"Perhaps you could go out with someone else," Jake said. "Pick a guy, pick a restaurant, and—"

"I know you did not just tell me I should be seen out with a man in order to quell rumors about a relationship with a woman," Jo said. "Rumors that are having zero effect on our ratings and advertisers." (p. 59)

The 'whatever his name was' with the reference to two widely used names (John and Dave) implies the irrelevance of this fact because it is who the men symbolise – a collection of homophobic people who communicate these micro-aggressions. The way ratings for the show have not changed and yet the network executives want her to

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<sup>50</sup> Kimberly T. Schneider, Eric D. Wesselmann, and Eros R. DeSouza, 'Confronting Subtle Workplace Mistreatment: The Importance of Leaders as Allies', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8 (2017), 1-4 (p. 1) <DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01051>>.

pretend to date a man undermines the suggestion because it makes it clear that there is no reason other than homophobia. Emma goes on to say that the network is 'worried about their reputation' (p. 59) emphasising the traditionalist, heteronormative environment that Jo works in. Throughout the novel, Jo repeats how she 'never comment[s] on [her] love life' (p. 30, p. 32, p. 43, p. 58, p. 62-3) and thinks 'To do so now would be tacky. And offensive, as this is the first time a prolonged rumor has concerned [her] and a woman' (p. 58). This suggests that her refrain is a way for her to avoid the workplace discrimination that she predicts she will experience, and then actually does. Jo elaborates, noting that 'she considered it once, when she was nineteen. She came out to her parents first. Her mom told her to think of her career. Her father told her they were never going to speak of it again' (p. 63). This provides an explanation for Jo's hesitance at revealing her sexuality in her workplace.

Wilsner presents Jo as an exemplar of a woman who uses her power and voice in an attempt to change the experiences of women in the workplace. The development of a lesbian relationship in a workplace environment is at the centre of *Something to Talk About*. In the novel, awards signal a development of Jo's relationship with Emma, but also highlight Jo's journey in navigating concerns about facing homophobic workplace discrimination if she were to disclose her sexuality. Jo and Emma attend the SAGs at the start of the novel, and they are falsely assumed to be in a relationship. Then, when Jo attends the GLAAD Awards, she sees 'young women holding hands' and 'her heart ached' (p. 62). At the end of the novel, Jo and Emma attend the SAGs awards again, but as a couple. The speech that Jo gives at the GLAAD Awards seems to foreshadow her own journey: 'Thank you for being proud in the face of people who think you should be ashamed. Thank you for being here, in this world. For surviving. You are an inspiration'

(p. 64). GLAAD is an organisation that advocates for LGBTQ+ representation and inclusion in media. Jo's show, *Innocents*, wins the 'Outstanding Drama Series' award that year and has for 'three years running now' (pp. 63-64). Jo is shown as an activist in this novel – for women who have been sexually harassed, for women who have been racially abused and for the LGBTQ+ community.

## Conclusion

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In all three novels, the queen bee syndrome is evident, but Wilsner's criticism is more overt compared to the subtler approach used in the other novels. *Something to Talk About* provides more representation of agents of change women bosses than cogs in the machine and suggests that women should collaborate, instead of seeing each other as competition in the workplace. The implication of more supportive women bosses, and the success gained from doing this demonstrate the decrease of postfeminist ideology of competitive individualisation, and an increase of fourth-wave feminist ideology of support of other women in the workplace. All three works elucidate the stereotypes associated with working women: 'devil', 'ball-buster', 'dragon lady' being examples of the epithets. *Something to Talk About* adds a level of racial prejudice to this too. The stereotypes are most challenged in *Something to Talk About* with the depiction of kind, supportive boss, Jo.

The glass ceiling effect still exists in the later chick lit novels, but the idea that women should actively seek ways to break through it is presented more explicitly. *The Wives* and *Something to Talk About* highlight the value of women's careers for their identities. The comparison of these chick lit texts demonstrates that the 'having it all'

myth is strengthened by postfeminist ideology's focus on individual, rather than collective, success and fourth-wave feminist texts direct greater attention towards unity rather than rivalry in the workplace. Chick lit also adapts from representing postfeminist rhetoric of choice (for example, to leave the workplace when you have children), to the fourth-wave concept of #Girlboss and a heightened awareness of structural inequalities. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, sexism is not challenged but in *Something to Talk About*, it is confronted. This reflects the calling out culture that transpired after the fourth-wave #MeToo hashtag. The later works' address of racism, ageism and homophobia which women can experience in the workplace also suggests the diversification and maturation of the genre. Comparing these works reveals how chick lit is more political now due to specific heightened elements of fourth-wave feminism. As shown, there are also areas in which the ideologies of the two strands of feminism remain similar. All three texts highlight women's precarious roles in the workplace, and they all illustrate women sustaining and maintaining the structures that constrain themselves and others. This implies the feminist fluidity in chick lit. Consequently, the diversifying, maturing and politicising of these works, while concurrently maintaining chick lit conventions, validates the newer works as 'neo chick lit.'

## CONCLUSION

One of the main objectives of the thesis was to consider the degree of similarity between the four foundational texts, the foundational author's continuations, and the four works of post-2010 debut chick lit, questioning what this suggests about the genre of chick lit and feminism. My main research question was: to what extent has chick lit adapted for contemporary readers? The chick lit texts I analysed extend across the last thirty years, and all correspond with the definition of chick lit outlined in my introduction: from older, foundational, 'postfeminist' chick lit to new emerging writers who have published concurrently with the rise of fourth-wave feminism. To my knowledge, this thesis marks the first comprehensive study that considers how chick lit has changed, through close attention to chick lit tropes, chick lit's reflection of the changing feminisms of different eras and genre fluidity. I distil my thesis findings and their broader implications into five significant statements: 1) the genre has diversified; 2) the genre has matured; 3) the genre has become more politicised; 4) the genre demonstrates fluidity in its representations of changing feminist ideologies; and 5) the genre's fluidity warrants the term 'neo chick lit.'

This thesis has demonstrated how various works of chick lit, in distinct ways, address gender discrimination, inequality and oppression. One of the study's most noteworthy findings is the similarities between foundational chick lit texts, foundational author's continuations and post-2010 debut chick lit', notwithstanding the transition in feminist movements. Despite the diversifying and/or maturing of the protagonist and the addition of more political content, these fictional works still maintain many generic

chick lit conventions. The three categories of writing I analysed – foundational chick lit, foundational author's continuations and post-2010 debut chick lit – demonstrate the fluidity of the chick lit genre. In this conclusion, I explain and expand on these findings. I also discuss the thesis' limitations and make recommendations for future research.

The first significant finding of the thesis is that the genre of chick lit has diversified. While publications that use chick lit tropes featuring Black characters, such as the works of Terry McMillan, were being published in the 1990s, the genre was largely dominated by representations of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. This is highlighted in that the most popular chick lit heroines are Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw – both white, heterosexual, middle-class women. However, my thesis found that Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, Carty-Williams' *Queenie*, Reid's *Such a Fun Age* and Wilsner's *Something to Talk About* – all four works of post-2010 debut chick lit – represent the experiences of BIPOC, working-class and queer women, and highlight the discrimination marginalised women encounter, specifically Islamophobia, racism and homophobia.

In the 1990s, BIPOC chick lit authors' works were less likely to be labelled as chick lit. While scholars have identified works such as *Waiting to Exhale* as 'Ethnic lit' or 'Sistah Lit', the need for a subgenre to connect texts to a genre is indicative of a lack of inclusivity to the wider market. Specifying that these works centre on BIPOC protagonists implies previous genre associations of exclusivity within the chick lit market, most specifically to white, young, heterosexual, middle-class women.

Through a chronological approach, my thesis argues that the genre should be understood as capacious, and therefore a whole range of texts which might not be

thought of as chick lit can be categorised within the genre. There is an interesting resonance between McMillan's exclusion from the category of chick lit in the 1990s and the reluctance of authors and publishers to market debut publications in the 2010s as 'chick lit'. While for different reasons, the label 'chick lit' has always been unevenly applied. However, instead of this being an exclusionary marketing choice, which it still could be, my analysis of post-2010 debut chick lit suggests that the texts are purposefully doing something complex with their use of chick lit genre tropes and consequently diversify the genre.

Marketing their main protagonists as 'Muslim' and 'Black' Bridget Jones allows Malik and Carty-Williams to gain access to a genre that has previously underrepresented Black and Muslim authors and characters. Their works may have been categorised as a subgenre of chick lit but the nicheness of the subgenres indicates a form of prejudice. By analysing these works and demonstrating their deep connections with foundational chick lit, we can now regard these authors as integral members of the chick lit genre.

Other debut writers purposefully distance themselves from the label of chick lit altogether, indicating the stereotypes and stigma associated with the genre. Like with many genres of women's fiction, including romance, the genre is generalised, critiqued and dismissed, so new debut contemporary writers may be cautious to align themselves with it. However, through identifying similarities between foundational chick lit texts and post-2010 contemporary fiction, this thesis's comparison suggests that a core element to chick lit is how it represents women's point of view and challenges instances of sexism. My work emphasises how the genre should be given due consideration: it is valuable and complex.



A significant rethinking of foundational chick lit expectations is rendered through *Queenie* and *Such A Fun Age*. Carty-Williams and Reid adapt the chick lit genre by highlighting the villainous qualities and neoliberal white feminism of those characters who correspond with the foundational, generic expectation of a chick lit protagonist. The novels provide caricatures of conventional chick lit protagonists such as Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw. Cassandra and Alix are white, western, heterosexual and middle-class. What differs between these two sets of characters is how Cassandra and Alix are presented as less endearing, and more villainous, than Bridget and Carrie. In *Queenie*, Cassandra is depicted as an anti-hero of the novel: she slut-shames Queenie, exacerbating, rather than supporting, her mental health issues (p. 233), and ‘violently’ (p. 142), ‘viciously’ (p. 260) flips her ‘golden-brown hair’ (p. 142, p. 260). She also consistently underscores her greater wealth to Queenie (p. 141). Her narcissism, flaunting and gloating emphasise her unlikeable qualities. Alix, similarly, is portrayed as egocentric and privileged. While projecting the image of a feminist activist, she is more interested in her ‘brand’, utilising the popularity of contemporary feminism to encourage her own individual success. For example, she purposefully does not feed her daughter, so she has to breastfeed on stage (p. 27-29). Alix also, like Cassandra to Queenie, implies her feeling of superiority over Emira. This is highlighted distinctly when she gets Emira to wear a #LetHerSpeak polo as her uniform (p. 228). Her ‘editorial’ appearance (p. 22) also indicates that she is a satirical adaptation of generic white chick lit character. Portrayals of Cassandra’s and Queenie’s privilege and egocentrism, then, is another mode of critiquing and reshaping the chick lit genre.

This thesis demonstrates how works of post-2010 debut chick lit are more attentive to race and religion because they highlight BIPOC women’s exclusion from

normative beauty and the sexualisation of their bodies. *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, *Queenie* and *Such a Fun Age* illustrate the BIPOC protagonist's feelings of insecurities with regards to the social favouring of white femininity. This indicates that the concept of social favouring of white femininity is a shared and discriminatory experience of BIPOC. I found that portrayals of the sexualisation of women is exacerbated when the heroine is Black – highlighted most through *Queenie*'s portrayals of exoticisation and fetishisation, but also in *Such a Fun Age*. This elucidates the commonality of representations of racialised sexualisation of Black women.

Racial conflict is also a significant aspect that post-2010 debut chick lit addresses more explicitly. I discovered that while a sense of collective solidarity between Black women is maintained, the primary texts also depict instances of racial conflict between women. Sofia's, Queenie's and Emira's bosses, Brammers, Gina and Alix, are all white women, and are implied as imposing a form of whiteness onto their employee. Brammers exoticises Sofia – she is 'fascinat[ed]' by her Muslim dating 'stories', generalises all 'Pakistani boys', and tells her that her 'way of life' is 'admirable'; she also imposes a sense of whiteness on the book Sofia is writing (p. 368). Likewise, Queenie is told by Gina that her writing pitches (about racist police shootings) are too '*Radical* for *The Daily Read*' explaining how she should 'get some of that passion into a pitch for the magazine that's a bit more ... palatable' (p. 212). Queenie then offers the suggestion of shin[ing] more of a light on Black Lives Matter' by doing 'this in the context of the women's march', which is met with a remark from an 'older man' of "All that Black Lives Matter nonsense", '*All* lives matter' (p. 212). Queenie 'looked first at Gina, then around the room to see if anyone was going to back [her] up' (p. 212). Alix also imposes a sense of whiteness onto Emira – like with the uniform above, before her interview on

television, she thinks '*Good Girl*' when Emira straightens her hair, ditches the chunky eyeliner and wears a simple gold necklace (p. 261). Post-2010 debut chick lit divulges the emotional realities of white privilege. The fact these women are the bosses too, alludes to the confrontation of inequalities in the workplace portrayed in works of post-2010 debut chick lit.

Regarding women bosses, Chapter 4 established that that newer works of chick lit demonstrate more 'change agent' women bosses, who shed the 'queen bee' stereotype and instead adopt an appreciation of other women in the workplace, providing a positive model of potential workplace practice. However, unlike Jo in *Something to Talk About*, the three other post-2010 debut chick lit texts studied in this thesis highlight problematic white bosses. A key difference is that in *Something to Talk About* Jo is a Chinese-American woman. In contrast to Brammers, Gina and Alix, my analysis has shown that Jo encourages a fairer and communicative workplace environment – women working together to confront hostility and attempt to break the glass ceiling, rather than overlooking employees' views, ideas and identity. This is shown most distinctly with Jo and Chantal's working relationship where both trust and value the others' input. The text makes it clear that their programme, *Innocents*, is the 'program on network TV with two women of color at the helm' (p. 55). The comparison of the women bosses, then, implies the benefit of BIPOC women as bosses, encouraging a fairer and more communicative environment. All four chapters highlight the way the genre has diversified and elucidate chick lit's connection to discrimination and intersectionality.

The second discovery of this thesis was closely connected to diversification: foundational author's continuations have matured since their precursor novels. While

age is a protected characteristic like race or sexuality, I have considered 'maturation' as distinct from 'diversification' because this is a particularly prominent theme for, not so much post-2010 debut chick lit, but with the foundational author's continuations. The 2010s has seen an emergence of chick lit narratives focusing more positively on older women. All four foundational author's continuations display an older woman's experiences with dating, sex, friendship and the workplace. Fielding's *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, Bushnell's *Is There Still Sex in the City?*, McMillan's *It's Not All Downhill From Here* and Weisberger's *The Wives* centre on fifty-one-year-old Bridget, fifty-nine-year-old Candace, sixty-seven-year-old Loretha, and thirty-six-year-old Emily, respectively. The texts are interested in discussing the discrimination older women face. While Emily is a lot younger than Bridget, Candace and Loretha, with her own discussions of feeling 'old' in comparison to younger women in text, and the ageist discrimination highlighted in novel, Weisberger implies, contextually, that we are meant to perceive her as 'older' – especially in comparison to her twenties character in the precursory novel. Like the foundational precursor chick lit novels, the texts comment on gender inequalities and sexism, but offer something new to correspond with the age of the woman whose experiences they are highlighting.

As I've identified in this thesis, a key theme associated with the chick lit genre is a single woman who dates. Foundational authors, who are now writing about older women, still manage to continue to illustrate this theme. In *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget enters widowhood, as does *It's Not All Downhill* with Loretha. Both characters convey a form of self-compassion that is also a key feature of chick lit, while beginning to consider entering the dating sphere again. The narrator of *Is There Still Sex* is divorced at the start of the text – again, allowing her the space to be a single woman dating again. In *The*

*Wives*, while all three are married, Karolina and Graham split up during the novel's first half. Therefore, each 'mature' foundational author's continuation novel includes a woman returning to her single, dating state. These authors' works have matured: they maintain their authorial voice, tropes associated with the genre and mostly the same (or similar) characters. They adapt the core chick lit themes I focus on each chapter to correspond with their now older age and contemporary moment.

In accordance with chick lit texts' emphasis on dating and sex, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2, the texts highlight prejudiced experiences women feel as a result of ageing. Firstly, this is highlighted through representations of women's bodies and conventional appearance. As women age, their body anxieties adapt and change. While discussions of weight remain, the focus is more on how the older woman's body is negatively perceived as *old* (rather than fat), although this is more of a concern for the women protagonists older than fifty. Secondly, both *Is There Still Sex* and *Mad About the Boy* critique the derogatory term 'cougar.' I have outlined how the texts also comment on the double standard: how an older man dating or having sex with younger women is accepted more than when the genders are reversed. These chick lit texts critique the double standard, highlighting the predatoriness of men looking for younger women, rather than women 'cougars.' Comparing these representations to their precursor novels highlights how these elements of dating and sex are heightened when the woman is older. My findings of the diversification, and the more specific maturation, suggest that the genre has adapted: chick lit has become more inclusive of marginalised women, and challenges further forms of discrimination.

The third and fourth findings of the thesis can initially appear contradictory. My thesis found that newer chick lit – both foundational authors’ continuations and post-2010 debut chick lit – highlight a politicising of the genre with the addition of fourth-wave feminist ideologies, but also a fluidity of the texts’ representations of feminisms. Through my comparative analysis, I found that the newer works of chick lit are more overtly political than works of the 1990s and 2000s. Chick lit is a responsive genre, so it shifts with the zeitgeist. My analysis suggests that the arrival of fourth-wave feminism impacted the texts’ portrayals. However, chick lit aligns with postfeminist ideologies. My thesis does not dispute this, nor does it argue that newer works of chick lit are divergent from postfeminism. What my comparison does demonstrate is that the ideologies of the two strands of feminisms appear, at times, similar in the texts. There are differences in the way postfeminist and fourth-wave feminist ideologies are presented – implicit vs explicit and indifference vs challenge – and specific additions which correspond with the arrival of the fourth-wave in 2010s. This is what I argue makes the works of foundational author’s continuations and post-2010 debut chick lit more politicised.

One of the ways newer works of chick lit differ from postfeminist portrayals is in the newer works’ illustration of women taking a more active role in dating and maintain less shame about their single status. This suggests that a strand of fourth-wave feminism is an advocacy of women’s assertiveness, that is, less of a willingness to yield to men’s preferences and dominance in order to gain romance. In *Such a Fun Age*, Alix’s workshop ‘Making the First Move’ supports this by implying, with just the title, that women should adopt a more proactive approach to dating. Also, when discussing the Tinderellas (young women who use Tinder regularly) in *Is There Still Sex*, Candace explains how these Tinderellas indicate that things have changed for the better because women are

now more likely to speak their minds, and men still find them attractive. Queenie, Emira, Loretha, Emira, Jo and Emma illustrate fewer feelings of shame and more acceptance towards being childless and single, in comparison to Bridget Jones of Fielding's first novel.

One key difference established in the changing feminisms (from 1990s - 2020s) that is reflected in chick lit is the arrival of the #MeToo movement. This is made the most clear in Chapters 2 and 4, which focus on sex and the workplace. However, as explored in Chapter 1, Daniel sexually harasses Bridget in the workplace. The difference between this and newer works is that the harassment is only implied in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, but not explicitly challenged. Fielding redresses this in her essay when she also attempts to justify his sexual attraction by explaining how it was reciprocal and their flirtation was fun. Harassment is also implied towards Andy in *The Devil Wears Prada*, where security guard, Eduardo 'look[s] [her] up and down' when she first arrives (p. 39), makes her feel uncomfortable by getting her to sing before he lets her through the turnstiles (p. 136) and winks at her (p. 391). Despite this, Andy considers this harasser her friend. *Sex and the City* also shows harassment. Jim describes his threesome experience with a 'crazy' and 'virginal' girl, explaining how 'the virginal girl was a girl [he]'d been pursuing for a year' and with the crazy girl, they 'sat her down on the bed and just started touching her' (pp. 66-67). While their behaviour is not endorsed and is critiqued in the satirical narrative, instances are not overtly challenged.

Yet, in *Queenie* and *Something to Talk About*, instances of sexual harassment are explicitly challenged and addressed in the novels. Plotlines follow Ted's workplace harassment of Queenie (his complaint of hers, and then the resolution of the truth) and

Barry's harassment of Emma (he offers sexual favours). Both plots are concluded with the harasser losing their job. This implies that the fourth-wave advocates for less acceptance and more calling out of sexual harassment, assault, and misconduct, especially when experienced in the workplace.

Solidarity between women strangers is also an area which is articulated more in newer works of chick lit aligning with fourth-wave feminism. With regards to infidelity, I found in Chapter 3 that *Waiting to Exhale* offers less sympathy to the betrayed spouse than *It's Not All Downhill* does. In the latter, the feelings of both women (the one in the unfaithful relationship and the one with whom the man is being unfaithful) are illustrated with more compassion and in more detail than in the earlier works. Also, the man having an affair is critiqued more profusely in the newer works. Another key example of this is in *Queenie*: Carty-Williams articulates both the feelings of Cassandra (in the unfaithful relationship) and of Queenie (the one with whom the man is unfaithful). While Cassandra is shown with little empathy in the novel, Guy (the unfaithful man) is illustrated as the most morally questionable. This is significantly amplified by the fact Queenie did not know he was committed to someone else. This suggests that fourth-wave discourses promote solidarity more as a core tenet than postfeminism does.

Many of the foundational chick lit texts are explicitly anti-feminist. The narratives themselves satirise and critique anti-feminist, conservative concepts, such as normative femininity, but the characters in the novels also openly disparage feminist activism – like Bridget with her strident feminism. In *Sex and the City*, a collection of 'pretty' women (the chapter title is Tales of the Pretty) are discussing how certain men make them feel



safe. Kitty says, 'I don't buy this whole feminist idea. Men have a need to be dominant—let them. Embrace your femininity' (p. 111). The 'post' prefix of postfeminism is clear in the way that the novels suggest a move past, a move beyond, feminism, but the texts also indicate that certain ideologies, like gender equality in the workplace, remain crucial to all feminist waves. This apparent contradiction is reminiscent of postfeminism. Yet, in newer works, protagonists are not afraid to label themselves as 'feminist' and 'feminism' as a term is used more in the newer works. On a walk, the narrator of *Is There Still Sex* spoke to her friend 'About feminism and the meaning of life' (p. 13). In *The Wives*, Miriam tells Emily 'no American Girl store please' and Emily responds 'Why not? Too commercial? Anti-feminist?' (p. 325). These differences are why I argue that foundational author's continuations and post-2010 debut chick lit are more political than foundational chick lit.

Because the texts indicate the zeitgeist, in my analysis, I also observed how postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism are similar. While older works most clearly demonstrate postfeminist ideologies, and newer texts cleave more closely to fourth-wave feminism, there is some blurring between the two strands of feminism in both older and newer works. There are undoubtedly differences, as outlined above (variations in degree, diversity, and additional or modified elements), and for that reason, I argue that newer chick lit is more political. However, my analysis also found that the concepts (normative femininity, gendered stigmatisation, raunch and rape culture, supportive and competitive Sisterhood, queen bee syndrome and the glass ceiling effect) are prevalent to both postfeminist and fourth-wave feminist discourses.

As established with the three texts in Chapter 1, normative femininity expectations and gendered stigmatisation are significant concepts for older and newer chick lit. This is true of the other chick lit texts in the thesis too. All the primary texts illustrate discussions of, or explicit representations of, sex and sexual politics (Chapter 2's focus). As this thesis noted, there has been a common assumption that raunch culture is connected with postfeminism (1990s, 2000s) and rape culture with fourth-wave feminism (2010s, 2020s). However, while elements of rape culture and raunch culture are heightened in the publications of the relevant eras, as Chapter 2 identifies, the ideologies associated with both cultures transpire in both texts published in the 1990s and more contemporary works, highlighting the fluidity of the way these texts represent ideas from the feminist waves. The foundational chick lit texts, *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Waiting to Exhale* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, indicate how ideologies associated with rape culture existed in the 1990s and early 2000s. Similarly, certain core ideas associated with raunch culture remain represented in the newer works, *Mad About the Boy*, *Is There Still Sex in the City*, *It's Not all Downhill from Here*, *The Wives*, *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, *Queenie*, *Such a Fun Age* and *Something to Talk About*.

As I argued in Chapter 2, the romance genre trope of the happily-ever-after is problematised and not guaranteed, despite chick lit often being considered a subgenre of romance, and romantic relationships usually being one of the text's central elements. The only works in line with the romance genre conventions are *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated*, *Mad About the Boy* and *Something to Talk About*. Notably, the first two of this list subvert the happily-ever-after in their sequels. The other two works differ from depicting the conventional heterosexual young couple by centring their narratives on a widowed woman finding love again and two women gaining their

happily-ever-after with each other. The happily-ever-after is only given to certain protagonists (and not all) in *Waiting to Exhale* and *The Wives*. *It's Not All Downhill from Here* only alludes to a happily-ever-after with an agreement to get coffee; *Is There Still Sex* portrays a romantic couple at the end, while also illustrating deaths and grief. Two alternative endings are offered for *Sex and the City* – one eradicating the happily-ever-after – and *Queenie*, *Such a Fun Age* and *The Devil Wears Prada* show no conventional romantic reunion, instead offering friendship and/or a career as being a viable mode of fulfilment for women. The insecurity associated with the happily-ever-after in a genre continually associated as a subgenre of romance emphasises that in a society marked by gender inequalities and unfair treatment of women, heterosexual romantic relationships may not always represent the most favourable choice for women. This, again, is something that remains in changing feminisms and newer and older chick lit.

Friendship continues to be offered as a more rewarding alternative to heterosexual romantic relationships in newer and older chick lit. Each of the twelve texts depicts at least one friend to the protagonist, with the majority illustrating a group of friends. These include Sharon, Jude and Perpetua in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the Corgis in *Queenie* and Emily, and Miriam and Karolina in *The Wives*. Women needing their friends' support and guidance when addressing their own crises remains crucial to chick lit. A closer examination reveals that humour, compliments, celebration, support through trauma, and a constant presence foster the friendships. This also implies that one of chick lit's objectives is to advocate that women should unite, not divide, to fight against patriarchy. While positives associated with friendships are highlighted in older and newer chick lit, factors that elicit a divide between women are also maintained. Judgement, resentment and jealousy towards other women remain in chick lit. One of

the highlighted causes for this is romantic competition. Women are portrayed as feeling envy or bitterness towards other women they fear might receive attention from the person they are romantically attracted to. As well as competition, infidelity is addressed in both newer and older chick lit. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Sex and the City*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Queenie* and *The Wives* present further instances to the ones discussed in Chapter 3. Portraying affairs in chick lit disrupts the heteronormative patriarchal expectation of marriage for women. Thus, continuing these themes in chick lit implies a continuation of feminist ideas from postfeminism into fourth-wave feminism.

Regarding women in the workplace, the concept of 'having it all' is critiqued in both older and newer works of chick lit. The novels acknowledge that the workplace environment is a hostile space for women, while satirising the stereotypical association of women with domesticity and men with business. The discourses of both postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism propose that the workplace is not tailored to address the needs of women.

Both postfeminism and fourth-wave feminism are critiqued as being white-centric. As explored above with the white women bosses, certain works of post-2010 debut chick lit imply that fourth-wave feminism includes a strand of white, privileged, exclusionary and neoliberal feminism. Postfeminism also often excludes BIPOC women and potentially, as a consequence, *Waiting to Exhale's* feminist ideologies differ from the three other foundational chick lit novels studied in the thesis. Unlike the other three foundational chick lit texts which portray characters that are directly anti-feminist, McMillan illustrates feminist characters, a feminist activist entitled *Black Women on the Move*. This organisation is a 'support group' that held workshops for

women who wanted to do more with their lives than cook, clean, and take care of the kids; [...] for women who wanted to be more than role models, who were willing to make the time to do something for black folks whose lives-for whatever reason-were in bad shape. (p. 38)

While it never directly deems itself a 'feminist' group, its ethics and ideas match those of feminist activism. This adheres to the contention that the postfeminist movement, like foundational chick lit, is inclusive of only white, middle-class, heterosexual women.

The thesis' fifth and final point, which somewhat encapsulates the first four, is that the genre is fluid and therefore, the newer works warrant the new term of 'neo chick lit.' Chick lit is not dead, nor a time-specific genre – it is adaptable and versatile. Works of chick lit are still being published, despite authors distancing themselves from the label and rumours of the genre's death. The genre just appears distinct because it has evolved. This is where the term neo chick lit is most useful to categorise this new strand of the genre.

While Malik, Carty-Williams, Reid and Wilsner's works are often categorised in other genres, as the thesis demonstrates, their texts can be considered works of chick lit. My comparative study highlighted many similarities, not just between the feminisms, but also among the themes, form and narratives. As the chapters' themes suggest, these chick lit texts, both older and newer, maintain similar themes of dating, sex, friendship and workplace. This is true even if the modes or environments change – online dating is something which is added in the newer works, for example. Portraying the women's perspective is a significant factor in the newer works too. The epistolary form of chick lit that is most associated with foundational *Bridget Jones's Diary* is also showcased in three of the four post-2010 debut chick lit texts. All twelve chick lit texts analysed in this thesis

also illustrate at least one man who negatively treats a woman, highlighting inequalities, misogyny and patriarchy.

As this thesis and the conclusion have addressed, there are differences too. This is what allows us to categorise the works as neo chick lit. Both foundational author's continuations and works of post-2010 debut chick lit are works of neo chick lit. I have demonstrated how these texts centre on marginalised women and are published concurrently with the rise of fourth-wave feminism. These works offer a more serious tone, at times, or as Spurling defines it 'a darker satirical edge.' The novels address traumas with more depth and severity than earlier works of chick lit. This is made clear with more explicit depictions of women's emotional responses to trauma. Emma's (*Something to Talk About*) and Queenie's (*Queenie*) abuse is not taken frivolously, and the narrative addresses the gravity of the mistreatment. Death, illness and suicide are also elements that arise in newer chick lit, especially the foundational authors' continuations: the protagonist's Loretha's friend Poochie commits suicide in *It's Not All Downhill* as does the narrator's friend Marilyn in *Is There Still Sex*. This elucidates the impact that diversifying, maturing and politicising a genre can have, so much so that it warrants the use of 'neo chick lit' to define it.

The scope of this study naturally provides a set of limitations for the thesis, but it also offers fruitful areas for future research. My thesis concentrates on themes which remain consistent in older and newer chick lit to focus intently on the elements which have been adapted for contemporary readership. For example, I chose not to centre a chapter on the generic feature of consumerism and shopping because representations of these are less common in newer chick lit. However, given additional room, examining

further chick lit themes and texts could yield different, equally interesting, results.

Analysing further foundational chick lit texts with other newer works and exploring more themes associated with the genre would provide a broader contextual framework.

Future studies could also expand upon my analysis of the chick lit texts' series.

The *Bridget Jones* series has a further two books I could have analysed, *Waiting to Exhale* has a sequel, *Getting to Happy* (2010), as does *The Devil Wears Prada* (*Revenge Wears Prada* (2013)). Furthermore, *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* itself has two sequels (*The Other Half of Happiness* (2017) and *Sofia Khan and the Baby Blues* (2022)), and it may be interesting to consider in what ways Malik's neo chick lit has itself developed over the last seven years.

An issue that was not addressed in this study was whether my findings are limited to Anglophone, UK/US fiction. My rationale for choosing primary texts focused more on the texts' popularity and connection with the genre, than with the place it was published, its setting and language. My focus on the postfeminist and fourth-wave movements also led towards a focus on Anglophone, global north culture. All twelve UK / US primary texts work in this instance to highlight my significant findings in the thesis and reveal the development of the genre. However, the genre of chick lit, and feminist movements and activism, exist outside of the UK and USA, in different countries and different languages. Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), first published in Lebanon in Arabic, has been previously considered an essential work of 'ethnic' chick lit. The novel is set in Saudi Arabia, a country that only granted women the right to vote in 2015. Considering the feminism within this text could harbour fruitful findings. Deborah Rodriguez, who taught and directed at Kabul Beauty School in Afghanistan, has written a

trilogy of chick lit novels, *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011), *Return to the Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2016) and *Farewell to The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2023). Two months ago, the Taliban ordered the closure of all hair and beauty salons in Afghanistan, and are strengthening many other restrictions for women. A greater focus on global chick lit and feminism could yield interesting widespread results about the relationship between feminism and chick lit. Analysing further fiction and activism by women, for women, and about women could indicate international trends. It would certainly provide additional evidence to support the value of studying chick lit in academia. This is an area I wish to examine further in my future studies.

This thesis identified a new strand of contemporary literature that can be termed 'neo chick lit.' These are texts that simultaneously maintain and evolve the chick lit genre, thereby paving the way for additional explorations of how genres have developed through time, most pertinently alongside the arrival of new feminist movements. While a growing body of research exists that focuses on the study of contemporary, genre and popular fiction, this field of English literature remains understudied in comparison to literary fiction. A further natural progression of this work would be to analyse more works of contemporary literature, questioning whether other genres adapt to reflect the changing feminisms of different eras. A future study could consider contemporary literature variably marketed within different genres, including romance, domestic noir, coming-of-age stories and psychological fiction.

The insights gained from this study may be of assistance for future teachings of contemporary literature and feminist ideologies. The work invites further consideration of the worth of literature, especially chick lit, in revealing the zeitgeist. My research also



fosters an in-depth examination of the discriminatory practices and stereotypes that marginalised individuals endure, even in feminist movements advocating for inclusivity. While #MeToo has provided renewed popularity of feminist activism and, as my research suggests, this is reflected in works of literature, gender inequalities persist. Hopefully, though, with the prospect of further fictional portrayals shedding light on gender-based injustices in the future, we can aspire to witness positive change.

As outlined in my thesis introduction, the term 'chick lit' has been previously considered a derogatory and dismissive categorisation. However, as my thesis study has shown, this collection of books written by, centred around, and marketed towards women are valuable, insightful and relevant to studies of genre, literature and feminism. It therefore feels appropriate to switch the term's linguistic inferences. While chick has been seen as derogatory, an objectifying and belittling reference for a woman, I see the word 'chick' as referring to 'young', signalling the genre's continual rebirth: its changeability alongside the zeitgeist. Equally, rather than indicating literature, I propose 'lit' as an adjective meaning 'politically aware', indicating how the genre highlights discriminations experienced by women based on their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race and age. As discussed, chick lit has been proposed as a dead genre: a category that has become obsolete. While chick lit's death is clearly debatable, let us momentarily consider it as a valid assertion; in such a scenario, my thesis demonstrates how the genre has been reincarnated with a contemporary twist.

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