

Re-writing the romance? Chick lit after Bridget Jones

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ABSTRACT

In the last 10 years popular publishing has been transformed by the development of a number of new genres that have claimed to 'rewrite' contemporary romances. Many publishers have launched a new imprints with more sexually explicit titles aimed at women (e.g. Black Lace), have commissioned fictions that deliberately build on the popularity of TV shows like *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, and have marketed new sub-genres such as 'mum lit', 'lad lit' and 'dad lit'. Chief amongst these new genres is the phenomenon of chick lit, which burst onto the publishing scene in the wake of the extraordinary success of Helen Fielding's (1996) *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

The focus of this paper is on how chick lit should be understood. Is chick lit 'rewriting' the romance? Do chick lit novels offer new versions of heterosexual partnerships? How different are their constructions of femininity and masculinity from those of 'traditional' popular romances such as those published by Harlequin or Mills and Boon? To what extent do these novels break with conventional formulas, and how, if at all, are they positioned in relation to feminist ideas and concerns.

In order to address these questions the paper is divided into three main parts. In the first section, a review of feminist writing on popular romance is presented, which outlines the different perspectives on romantic fiction and explores the extraordinary tenacity of notions of heterosexual romance against the backdrop of significant cultural and demographic changes, including divorce on a hitherto unprecedented scale, an increase in the number of single person households, and a diversification of family forms (including stepfamilies, lesbian and gay families, and the notion of 'friends as the new family'). The second section discusses the impact of the novels and films about Bridget Jones as perhaps the most important precursor of the success of chick lit. This discussion lays the foundations for the third section which is a detailed analysis of 20 chick lit novels published between 1997 and 2004, examining constructions of sexuality, beauty, independence, work and singleness. The paper concludes that chick lit articulates a distinctively postfeminist sensibility characterised by an emphasis on

neoliberal feminine subjectivities and self surveillance and monitoring; the notion of the (sexual) body as the key source of identity for women; discourses of boldness, entitlement and choice (usually articulated to normative femininity and/or consumerism) and a belief in the emotional separateness of men's and women's worlds. It is also characterised by an entanglement of feminist and anti feminist discourses.

Key words: gender, post feminism, fiction, representation, romance.

Introduction

'His skin was smooth, more roughly textured than hers, but sleek and flexible beneath her palms, his warmth and maleness enveloping her and making her overwhelmingly aware that only the thin material of the culotte suit separated them. He held her face between his hands, and his hardening mouth was echoed throughout the length and breadth of his body. She felt herself yielding weakly beneath him, and his hand slid from her shoulder across her throat to find the zipper at the front of her suit, impelling it steadily downward. "No, Logan", she breathed, but he pulled her hands, with which she might have resisted him, around him, arching her body so that he could observe her reaction to the thrusting aggression of his with sensual satisfaction. "No?" He probed with gentle mockery, his mouth, seeking the pointed fullness of her breasts now exposed to his gaze. "Why not? It's what we both want, don't deny it" ¹

In the last 10 years popular publishing has been transformed by the development of a number of new genres that have claimed to 'rewrite' contemporary romances. Many publishers have launched a new imprints with more sexually explicit titles aimed at women (e.g. Black Lace), have commissioned fictions that deliberately build on the popularity of TV shows like *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, and have marketed new sub-genres such as 'mum lit', 'lad lit' and 'dad lit'. Chief amongst these new genres is the phenomenon of chick lit, which burst onto the publishing scene in the wake of the extraordinary success of Helen Fielding's (1996) *Bridget Jones*. By the late 1990s, the genre was well established, with distinctive titles, heroines and narrative styles, clearly marked cover designs (day-glo or pastel, with cartoon style illustrations) and marketing strategies that aimed to attract single, urban-based white women in their twenties and thirties. The books were heavily marketed to female commuters and in Britain quickly became the archetypal 'tube read' for women.

There are a number of features of chick lit that make it an important object of study -- not least its significant role in the political economy of publishing, and its key role in the development of a sexually differentiated form of address, seen in the layout of bookstores, the purchasing policies of supermarket book

¹ Anne Mater (1977), *Born Out of Love*, Harlequin,

departments and the rise of 'his and hers' discount book clubs. The focus of this paper, however, is on the novels as texts. Specifically, the paper seeks to explore whether and in what ways chick lit might be said to be 'rewriting' the romance. Do chick lit novels offer new versions of heterosexual partnerships? How different are their constructions of femininity and masculinity from those of 'traditional' popular romances such as those published by Harlequin or Mills and Boon? To what extent do these novels break with conventional formulas, and how, if at all, are they positioned in relation to feminist ideas and concerns.

In order to address these questions the paper is divided into three main parts. In the first section, a review of feminist writing on popular romance is presented, which outlines the different perspectives on romantic fiction and explores the extraordinary tenacity of notions of heterosexual romance against the backdrop of significant cultural and demographic changes, including divorce on a hitherto unprecedented scale, an increase in the number of single person households, and a diversification of family forms (including stepfamilies, lesbian and gay families, and the notion of 'friends as the new family'). The second section discusses the impact of the novels and films about Bridget Jones as perhaps the most important precursor of the success of chick lit. This discussion lays the foundations for the third section which is a detailed analysis of 20 chick lit novels published between 1997 and 2004, examining constructions of sexuality, beauty, independence, work and singleness.

Feminist perspectives on romantic fiction

'You start by sinking into his arms and end up with your arms in his sink'²

The Romance Writers of America (2002) define romantic novels as books 'where the love story is the main focus of the novel' and has 'an emotionally satisfying happy ending'. Within this definition there are many different types of romance,

² Popular feminist poster from the 1970s

including historical romances, bodice rippers, 'sex and shopping' novels and newer sub genres such as the sci-fi romance, erotic fiction for women and 'chick lit'. This section examines feminist approaches to romance and will focus upon what Snitow (1986) calls 'hard' romances such as those produced by Harlequin and Mills & Boon.

The basic plot can be summarised as follows: a young, inexperienced, poor woman meets a handsome, wealthy man, 10 or 15 years her senior. The hero is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, hostile and even brutal, and the heroine is confused. By the end he reveals his love for her and misunderstandings are cleared away (Modleski, 1982; Weibel, 1977). The tales are set in an 'enchanted space' in which the heroine is socially dis-located -- perhaps on holiday, having gone away from friends and family to recover from a traumatic event, or even waking from a coma (to find herself staying at the hero's villa or castle). Stories are constructed around a series of obstacles that must be overcome in order for the hero and the heroine to fall in love -- these include class, national, or racial differences, inhibitions, stubbornness and, last but not least, their mutual loathing! The romance narrative progresses through hostility, separation and reconciliation which brings with it 'the transformation of the man into an emotional being with a heart who declares his love for the heroine' alongside the restoration of a new sense of social identity for the female protagonist (Pearce and Stacey, 1995:17).

Many commentators have drawn analogies between romances and pornography. Suzanne Moore (1991) suggests that romantic novels 'fetishise' particular emotions in the way that pornography fetishises particular body parts and positions. In a slightly different vein Snitow argues that sexual desire is sublimated in romances so that every look and touch signifies its existence and promise; 'pornography for women is different,' she contends, because 'sex is bathed in romance' (1986:257). At a broader level, Alison Assiter (1988) suggests that the analogy works because both heterosexual pornography and

romantic fiction eroticise the power relations between the sexes, in this way making them both palatable and pleasurable.

This concern with the ideological nature of romantic fiction, has been common to many feminist accounts of it over the last 40 years. In the 1960s and 1970s romance novels were seen variously as a seductive trap which justified women's subordination to men and rendered women complicit in that subordination (Jackson, 1995); as a kind of false consciousness -- 'a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their real conditions' (Firestone, 1971:139); or as a distraction which diverted women energies from more worthwhile pursuits. In Germaine Greer's (1970) words romantic fiction is 'dope for dupes' (cited in Jackson, 1995) and the unambiguous suspicion and hostility towards it is summed up by the feminist quip: 'You start by sinking into his arms, and end up with your arms in his sink!'

Second wave feminist antipathy and dismissiveness towards romantic fiction extended to its readers who were regarded as passive, dependent and addicted to trivial, escapist fantasies. Feminine romance readers were frequently counterposed against heroic feminist figures who had renounced any investment in femininity or romance (Hollows, 2000). This move, and specifically the condemnation of women who were housewives, became such a familiar one that Charlotte Brunsdon (1993) has suggested that it needs to be understood psychoanalytically in terms of the mother-daughter relationship, in which younger feminists were acting out troubled and ambivalent relationships with an older generation of women. Taking this intergenerational psychoanalytic insight further, it is now worth exploring what is happening when the 'daughters' of second wave feminists derive significant pleasure from reading chick lit.³

³ This paper does not include analysis of readers responses that clearly this is an important area for future research.

Complicating the story

Two landmark publications disrupted the commonsense feminist critique of romance. These were Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance* (1982) and Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance*. Both books can be understood as part of a wider attempt to take popular cultural forms seriously, to resist double standards which operate to condemn or dismiss women's genres, and to 'rescue' feminine forms as worthy of attention.

Loving With a Vengeance is a textual analysis of three such forms -- soaps, Gothic novels and Harlequin romances. It drew on feminist psychoanalytic theory to speculate about the kinds of pleasures such genres offer to women. Modleski (1982) argued that Harlequin romances are not simply escapist fantasies designed to dope women but fictions that engage in complex and contradictory ways with real problems -- offering temporary, magical, fantasy or symbolic solutions.

Modleski argued that one of the pleasures Harlequin romances may offer to seasoned readers is their superior knowledge as 'experts' familiar with the genre. Because they are positioned as knowing more than the heroine, theirs is not a straight forward identification with her: they know that the hero is behaving so badly because he is unsettled by the heroine and will come to realise that he loves her. Modleski (1982) suggests that this superior wisdom can transform for readers even the most problematic aspects of romances -- for example the way they draw on ideas about rape. In rape the intention to dominate, humiliate and degrade is often disguised as sexual desire. In romances this is reversed: sexual desire is disguised as hostility and dominance. But readers with privileged knowledge understand this already, and can take pleasure in the way that

everything the heroine says and does serves only to increase the hero's desire/hostility towards her.

Another key way in which romantic fiction may offer pleasures to heterosexual women is through the enactment of symbolic revenge. Modleski (1982) argues that contrary to stereotypes romantic heroines are not passive and masochistic, but active protagonists. She points out that the smallest liberty taken by the heroine is described as a real act of resistance -- as being performed militantly, rebelliously or defiantly (even if it is only a rebellious upturning of the chin or a defiant flick of the hair). She argues that the so-called masochism of the texts is 'a cover for anxieties, desires and wishes which, if openly expressed, would challenge the psychological and social order of things' (1982: 30). Moreover, although the heroine clearly suffers in such novels, the hero is equally tormented by his love for her. Romances might be understood as a kind of revenge fantasy in which the woman obtains power and vengeance from the conviction that she is bringing the hero to his knees; by the end, he is grovelling with her to accept his love and forgiveness.

One of the most pernicious aspects of contemporary romantic fiction is the way in which everything the heroine feels is demonstrated to be false -- at its base this means that when she says no, she really means yes. A classic scene might feature the hero attempting to kiss the heroine and her struggling and saying 'no, no,' and then melting into his arms knowing all along that this has been right (see quote in the introduction). As readers, we are invited to collude with the idea that the hero knows better than the woman herself what she really wants. Yet Modleski (1982) argues that this is not the whole story and not reason enough to condemn romances outright. Drawing on the work of the feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, she proposes that romances promise the kind of transcendent, nurturing love that women may receive in infancy from their mothers, and which they then give to men in later life, but do not receive in return. In romances this

inequality of emotional care is resolved in fantasy through the figure of the nurturing male lover who can meet her needs and satisfy them. It is also significant that romantic union usually occurs at precisely the moment when the heroine has taken no care whatsoever with her appearance. This, Modleski argues, may give readers the vicarious pleasure of temporarily transcending the traditional splitting of themselves -- where they are both object and subject of the gaze. It offers, in a sense, a chance to symbolically 'let yourself go', secure in the knowledge that he will love you anyway -- there is no need to constantly monitor yourself.

Janice Radway's (1984) groundbreaking book *Reading the Romance* combined textual analysis of Harlequin novels with an interview based ethnographic study of committed romance readers, and a detailed examination of publishing and bookselling as economic enterprises. Her work has been regarded as an exemplary example of media/cultural analysis in its attempt to grapple with different 'moments' of the cultural process -- production, distribution, text and audience -- in a way that allows romantic fiction to be understood as simultaneously an economic, cultural, ideological and pleasurable phenomenon.

Radway's ethnographic analysis focused on a group of avid romance readers whom she calls the 'Smithton women' all of whom used the services of a woman named 'Dot' to advise them on which romance novels to purchase. Using a combination of semistructured interviews, group discussions and observation, Radway attempted to uncover the meanings the women gave to their romance reading. She found that far from being unintelligent dopes the women were sophisticated readers of romance, able to make subtle differentiations within the genre and to pick up on small nuances and cues from the cover pictures and 'blurbs' in order to determine whether books would meet their particular tastes and needs. Moreover, the women thoroughly rejected the stereotype of them as unintelligent and superficial and placed considerable emphasis on the educational benefits of their romance reading, both in terms of allowing them to

learn about different places and historical time periods, and also in 'modelling' reading-behaviour for their children. Many of the women expressed the hope that by showing the pleasure they derived from books they would encourage their children to read more and do better at school.

Radway's work is ambivalently positioned in relation to romantic fiction. On the one hand she is critical of Harlequin novels, arguing that they are profoundly conservative, posing some of the problems of life in a patriarchal society only to resolve them through an idealised depiction of heterosexual love. On the other hand she understands women's use of these novels as -- in part -- oppositional. Like Modleski she finds that one of the pleasures of romance reading is wish-fulfilment in which, in 'escaping' into the heroine's life, readers vicariously experience what it is to be really loved and nurtured in the way they crave.

The act of reading can also be understood as 'combative' and 'compensatory'; a way of carving out some time or space for themselves:

'In picking up a book... they refuse temporarily their family's otherwise constant demands that they tend to the wants of others even as they act deliberately to do something for their own private pleasure... Romance reading addresses needs created in them but not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices'. (Radway, 1984:211)

Radway's work has become the focus of a number of important debates in media and cultural studies. These are concerned with what feminist cultural criticism should involve (e.g. critique, celebration or affirmation, respect, etc.) and the nature of the relationship between the cultural critic and her respondents. Len Ang (1996) contends that Radway is working with a thinly veiled political moralism -- a vanguardism which seeks to make 'them' (romance readers) more like 'us' (feminists), and implicitly regards feminists accounts as superior. As well as contesting whether this is necessarily true (would feminism actually make

these women happier?), Ang argues that Radway fails to take pleasure seriously in its own right because it is always read in terms of its ideological functions. At stake in this debate are two very different conceptions of feminist research -- one concerned with ideological critique and the other concerned with understanding women's pleasure in women's own terms.

Romance revisited

In the 20 years or so since Modleski and Radway were writing, discussions of romance have changed. One important factor has been the development of the World Wide Web which has facilitated both writers and readers of romantic fiction to become involved in debates that were previously the sole province of academics and college students. E-zines, chat rooms and bulletin boards are today the site of fierce debate on questions such as whether romances can be considered feminist, with authors and fans contesting the issues.

New questions are being asked about romance, connected not simply to gender relations but also to sexuality and 'race'. In what ways are conventional romances racialised discourses? How are their constructions of love and desire connected to white fantasies of racial others? (Maddison and Storr, 2002; Ingraham, 1999; Perry, 1995; Blackman, 1995). Does romance writing by black women (women of colour) challenge or disrupt traditional generic and normative expectations? (Barr, 2000; Charles, 1995; Nkweto-Simmonds, 1995;) (see also Squire, 2003 on 'HIV romances'). Research is also exploring the way that romantic discourse as a western discourse is being contradictorily taken up and resisted in other post-colonial contexts, complexly negotiated with other traditional discourses of intimacy and kinship (eg. Kim, forthcoming).

Discussions of lesbian writing also explore the heterosexism of romance, and investigate the ways in which erotic discourses in the wake of HIV and AIDS may be challenging or reinscribing conventional narratives (Wilton, 1994; Griffin,

2000). One of the key questions might be 'can romance be queered?' in the way that other cultural forms (arguably) have been. This would involve not simply replacing heterosexual protagonists with homosexual ones, but, more fundamentally questioning the very binaries on which conventional romance depends (male/female, gay/straight, virgin/whore, etc) as well as the premise of fixed identity, and the idea that a declaration of monogamy represents narrative closure. It may be hard to imagine what such texts would look like but there have been a number of notable attempts to experiment with the genre e.g. Sally Potter's film *Thriller*, and Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body*.

Attempts to experiment and innovate with/in the genre have partly come about because of the growing realisation of the power of romance as a discourse. What makes it so powerful, Stevi Jackson (1995) has argued, is its narrativity or storied nature -- it is one of the most compelling discourses by which Western subjects are inscribed. Its resilience in the face of social, cultural and demographic changes that include high rates of relationship breakdown, the growth of new family forms and broader transformations of intimacy show that there is no necessary correspondence between changing patterns of sexual relations and romantic desire. In fact, rather than diminishing in importance the significance of romantic love is undergoing a rapid intensification according to Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995). They argue that as the structures of industrial societies break down alongside an increasingly competitive labour market and rising social secularisation, traditional sources of security are disappearing fast. In this context 'romantic love is gaining ever greater significance as a "secular" religion' (1995:173). Ingraham's (1999) research on weddings as a recession proof industry, alongside many US postings to romance discussion boards in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 would seem to affirm this reading of romance as offering a secure meta-narrative in unsettled times.

The other key to the enduring significance of romance as a discourse lies in its

ability to adapt or mutate (Pearce & Stacey, 1995). It is this ongoing evolution of the romance genre that is at the heart of the current paper. Some writers have suggested that romance writers have responded to the transformations brought about by feminism by creating heroines who are more independent and assertive, more likely to be sexually experienced and more likely to work outside the home, and who are seeking more equal partnerships (Jones, 1986). Yet there has been very little empirical analysis of contemporary romantic fiction, and chick lit, in particular, seems to have been overlooked by feminist cultural analysts. This paper begins the task of analysing this new genre.

Enter Bridget Jones...

'Must not sulk about not having a boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete without boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend'⁴

Chick lit as a category or recognisable genre emerged in the late 1990s in the wake of the phenomenal success of Helen Fielding's (1996) book *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Starting life as a column in the British newspaper, *The Independent*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* stayed on the New York Times bestseller list for more than four months and to date has sold more than 5 million copies and been translated into 30 languages. When the film of the book opened in Britain it took £5.7 million in its first weekend, outstripping both *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, the previous benchmarks of British film success. Ultimately the movie took \$160 million worldwide, and the subsequent book and film sequel *The Edge of Reason* have been similarly successful.

More telling than any of these economic indicators, however, was the veritable explosion of discourses about Bridget Jones. She became an icon, a recognisable emblem of a particular kind of femininity, a constructed point of identification for women. Newspapers set out to find the 'real' Bridget Jones or sent 'genuine Bridget Joneses' to review the films. Bridget generated instant

⁴ Fielding, H (1996) *Bridget Jones's Diary* p.2

recognition among many young heterosexual women; as Imelda Whelehan (2002) has argued, part of the success of the book lay in the 'that's me' phenomenon whereby Bridget became regarded not as a fictional character but as a representative of the zeitgeist.

Bridget Jones's Diary gave a new prominence to the figure of the thirtysomething (almost exclusively) white female across a range of cultural forms. Its success impacted on film, advertising and television, where the notion of 'must-she TV' was coined and schedulers created themed weekends or weekly 'girls night in' sponsored by advertisers pushing hair or skincare products or 'girly' drinks like Baileys or, in direct homage to Bridget Jones, (Jacob's Creek) Chardonnay.

The reverberations of the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* were felt most powerfully in the publishing industry, sections of which had been concerned by the dwindling sales of romance novels amongst 20 to 30-year-olds in the 1990s and were looking for new formulas to attract younger readers (Jones, 2002) *Bridget Jones's Diary* supplied this and spawned huge numbers of 'copycat' novels centred on the life a thirtysomething female who was unhappily single, appealingly neurotic, and preoccupied with the shape, size and look of her body, and with finding a man.

Louise Chambers (2004) argues that *Bridget Jones's Diary* was so important in establishing chick lit as a genre that one of its defining features might be said to be some kind of bookcover reference to Bridget Jones e.g. 'IF YOU LIKED BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY, YOU'LL LOVE THIS' or 'THIS YEAR'S BRIDGET JONES'. Other key factors which helped to create and stabilise chick lit as a new, identifiable category of romance fiction included highly similar cover designs featuring either day-glo or pastel shades and hand drawn illustrations; the development of book clubs (e.g. Mango) devoted entirely to selling such fictions to young women; new purchasing strategies in supermarkets which gave prominence to chick lit titles as good reads for women; and the rapid proliferation

of chick lit lists on the Amazon and other Internet bookseller sites. By the late 1990s the genre was well established.

Bridget Jones's Diary is important not only for founding or inspiring a new fictional style but also because it articulated a distinctively postfeminist sensibility (Whelehan, 2002; McRobbie, 2005; Chambers, 2004; Gill, 2006a, 2006b). This sensibility is characterised by the entanglement of feminist and anti feminist discourses, such that feminist ideas are both drawn on and disavowed, borrowed from yet repudiated. There is in the Bridget Jones texts a 'double movement' which on the one hand stresses the 'guilty necessity of being a feminist in order to avoid total degradation and humiliation' while on the other naturalises the unattractiveness of feminism (Maddison & Storr, 2002:3). Indeed, feminism is treated simultaneously as important and potentially empowering, yet also as inauthentic, punitive and ultimately worthless, except in as much as it may actually help to secure a male partner (see quote at the start of this section and Gill 2006 b for a detailed discussion). Other features of this postfeminist sensibility include an emphasis on neoliberal feminine subjectivities and self surveillance and monitoring; the notion of the (sexual) body as the key source of identity for women; discourses of boldness, entitlement and choice (but usually articulated to normative femininity and/or consumerism); and a belief in the emotional separateness of men's and women's world's that we have elsewhere dubbed 'Mars 'n' Venus thinking' (Gill, 2006b).

Chick lit: rewriting the romance?

'Hello! Jacqueline Pane here, single, age... erm... ah.... erm ...31. Okay, all right then, at 33. I'm 5 foot 5 inches, size 12... Well, actually the thing is I *can* just about fit into a size 12 but only if it's not really tight... Otherwise it would probably be more honest to say size 14. Well, my top half's a size 12 (except if it's from Next) And my bottom half is usually a size 14 -- but definitely not bigger. Admittedly it was a size 16 the other day but that was at M&S and they've obviously change the people that make their clothes or something because I have always been able to get into their size 14, so I don't know what was going on with those trousers, maybe they'd been made in a foreign country where everyone's small... Where are pygmies from?'⁵

⁵ Weir,A (1997) Does My Bum Look Big in This?p.5

Is chick lit, then, a postfeminist phenomenon? Does it articulate a new or different version of romance from earlier novels? Do the new fictions simply update the romance genre for an audience in the 21st century or do they represent a break with traditional romance? And in what ways, if any, do these texts constitute new depictions of gender relations? In order to begin to address these questions, we have analysed 20 recent chick lit novels published since 1997. The aim is to look in detail at the extent to which these might be said to be rewriting the romance. This analysis forms part of a wider project concerned with contemporary gendered fictions, and here our focus is limited to analysing some of the themes, concerns and characterisations of chick lit novels. We will examine five themes: the construction of sexual experience; depictions of the heroine's intelligence and independence; beauty and appearance; work; and singleness.

Sex in chick lit

In traditional romances the typical heroine is characterised by sexual innocence and passivity. Usually this means that she is a virgin or, as Jane Ussher has argued, she must 'feign innocence and reticence. She lies to hide her desire and always tries to cover up any signs of sexual interest... She may want sex, but within the codes of romance, she can only have it if she is seduced' (1997:44). In a world increasingly saturated by sexualised imagery and in which other texts aimed at women (e.g. glossy magazines) are preoccupied with sexual satisfaction this emphasis on sexual innocence might seem anachronistic. How different, then, are the portrayals of women's sexual identities in chick lit novels? At first glance, they would seem to be entirely different. Far from being virginal, most of the heroines are sexually experienced describing themselves as 'a great lay' (*New You Survival Kit*:187) or as able to 'sit here reading about oral, anal, sucking, fucking' (*Jemima J.*:60) or casually engaging in one night stands. They no longer need to be seduced and can initiate sexual contact, as Stella in *Don't You Want Me* does when she says: 'I'm not saying let's get married, Frank. But I

am saying, let's go to bed.' (p.225)

However, this apparently 'liberated' attitude towards sex is not the whole story. Interestingly, whatever their degree of sexual experience, heroines are frequently 're-virginised' in the narrative when it comes to the encounter with their hero. With him, they return to what we might characterise as an emotionally virginal state, which wipes away previous 'sullyng' experiences by making them enjoy sex fully for the very first time, or which allows them to 'admit' their sexual timidity or inexperience after previously having boasted about their sexual expertise.

For example, Jo Smiley in *New You Survival Kit* has her very first orgasm with Charlie, and, after years of sex, 'she finally understands what all the fuss was about' (p.190). Meanwhile, Kate, in *The Wrong Mr Right* also has a new and totally different experience: 'during her previous sexual encounters she had felt awkward... But Tom was a different partner altogether. She had never felt as aroused as this. And she had not expected his touch to wipe away any trace of denial' (p.257). Hence, the narrative constructs the heroine as re-virginised and innocent, and only the hero can make her into a real woman. Whilst it is true that the heroines are allowed to 'be capable of desire and even of pursuing men' (Jones, 1986:210) they are nonetheless narratively put into a virginal position when they encounter their hero -- their innocence is narratively restored to allow for the reader to relish in the traditional scenario of the 'specialness' of the sexual encounter between hero and heroine.

It would seem, then, that the codes of traditional romance are reinstated 'through the backdoor' with what we call 're-virginisation', and further that chick lit, like traditional romance, offers precisely the promise of transcendent love and sexual satisfaction discussed by Modleski (1982). One of the things that makes this important and fascinating is that implicitly it suggests that sexual liberation (here represented by the notion of pursuing sexual pleasure through more than one partner) is not really what women want. Not only does it not speak to women's true desires, but also it is often presented as mere posturing or performance --

something that women in a post-*Cosmopolitan* (magazine) world are required to enact, even though it is not what they want. More analysis is needed to examine to what extent feminism is also implicated in this critique, as one of the discourses promoting women's sexual freedom and agency. Certainly from the novels analysed here it appears that (what are coded as) feminist goals in relation to sexuality are presented as inauthentic, in the sense of not speaking to women's deepest desires.⁶

Independent women?

Radway (1984) claims that most of the heroines of romances are 'spirited', 'fiery' and intelligent. Perhaps surprisingly -- particularly in the context of claims that heroines are more independent and assertive (Jones, 1986) -- chick lit heroines seem somewhat less spirited than their Harlequin counterparts. Many heroines are depicted as naive and constantly surprised by events (e.g. *Angels*, *Jemima J.*), surpassed by men in terms of career opportunities (*New You*) or tricked by 'evil', 'scheming' female characters who compete for their chosen heroes (*Persuading Annie*; *New You*; *Wrong Mr Right*). This latter theme draws on the old notion of women as manipulative, particularly in relation to men. Thus, 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. The reason the heroines manage to win the hero's heart in the end is not because they surpass in spirit or intelligence, but because they conform to traditional stereotypes of femininity. Indeed, the downplaying of intelligence sometimes appears to be essential to make the dynamic between the strong hero and needy heroine work. He must save her with the chivalry, wit and expertise she may not have herself.

⁶ The characterisation of 'intercourse' also requires further analysis. Preliminary findings suggest that the modes of sex enjoyed are primarily those involving vaginal penetration by the penis, and discourses about women's physical sexual satisfaction are conspicuously absent. Rather, this is assumed to result miraculously from having met the right man.

In *Bridget Jones's Diary* there are three such rescue scenes, the most dramatic of which involves Mark Darcy revealing that Julio, Bridget's mother's lover, is a conman -- a rescue which works simultaneously to present Bridget and her mother as naive and gullible and, in a familiar racialising move, to highlight the superior white masculinity of Mark Darcy.⁷ In *Persuading Annie*, Jake saves Annie and her family from poverty because he discovers a crook within the family company, and Charlie saves Jo in *New You* from going to prison over an illegal business transaction. Being saved from the responsibility of single motherhood is also a common feature of chick lit novels. The heroines seem to need rescuing from independence. *Babyville* by Jane Green is an example -- Maeve, a high powered career woman, gets pregnant from a one night stand, but eventually Mark comes to the rescue and she no longer has to 'cope' on her own.

Working girls?

In traditional romantic novels, heroines are not normally seen as particularly career driven, despite their spirited nature and intelligence. Rather, they seek advancement and power through a romantic alliance with a man. In this respect, the female characters in chick lit novels seem markedly different, as they are invariably portrayed as employed and committed to the idea of a career. Most chick lit heroines are, a la Bridget Jones, employed in underpaid positions, typical of the actual situation in which most working women are concentrated in low paid jobs in the service sector. Often, they are portrayed as dissatisfied and struggling in their jobs. Kate, for example, in *Wrong Mr Right*, is employed as a secretary after dropping out of university when she became pregnant and was forced to bring her child up alone. Although she does 'protectively' refer to her secretarial work 'as a career... it was not she wanted to do in the long-term' (p.117). Similarly, Jemima, in *Jemima J.*, whose work consists of compiling the

⁷ The profoundly racialised nature of chick lit romances is explored elsewhere -- see Gill, 2006b -- and is also evident in the opening quote from Arabella Weir's book, reproduced at the start of this section.

Top-Tips column at her local newspaper says that: 'sadly my talents are wasted here at the Kilburn Herald. I hate this job' (p.3).

Interestingly, in both these novels, as soon as they decide to marry their heroes, the heroines magically have the courage to ditch their dead-end jobs and fulfil their dreams. Kate becomes an interior designer and Jemima realises her ambition to become a magazine journalist. Each explains how the love of a good man gave her the confidence to pursue her goals. Although this type of narrative is perhaps more progressive than the customary return-to-the-home discourse of most traditional romances and contemporary backlash narratives, it is nonetheless striking that the hero is again seen as vital to 'save' the heroine from her dead end job and to propel her into a 'happy ever after' that in this postfeminist moment now also includes a dazzling career.

The other type of chick lit heroine is professional and successfully employed. Jo in *New You* is a Public Relations executive at a successful company and she 'loved herself. She loved her job, her successful friends' (p.282). However, her success comes attached with the price tag of being unfeminine, since she is portrayed as cynical, cheating, hard-nosed, snobby and as a frequent drug-user. Jocasta in *Game Over* is characterised in the same way as cold, manipulative and immoral. She does not believe in love, and unscrupulously exploits people to appear on her reality TV show *Sex with an Ex*. Both Jo and Jocasta are 'saved' by good-natured heroes who see beyond their 'bitchy' and 'hard' facade and melt them with their love, and, in the case of Jocasta's man Darren, with his highly principled belief in love, marriage, and fidelity. Jo, in turn, meets Charlie, gives up her job and moves to the countryside to fulfil her destiny as a happy housewife. Positive models of independence and career success are conspicuous by their absence in chick lit, and it would seem that within this genre women are only allowed to be successful at work if this is achieved with the support and endorsement of a loving man. Without that ticket, the successfully employed woman is invariably villainised, as in films like *Fatal Attraction* and

Disclosure.

Single income, no boyfriend, absolutely desperate (SINBAD)

Closely related to this, the portrayal of singleness in the chick lit is also extremely negative. It might be supposed that at a moment in which demographers tell us that single person households are the fastest growing group, and in which household forms are diversifying and notions of 'friends as the new family' exert an increasingly powerful hold in popular consciousness being single might be treated in a positive -- or at least neutral -- way. But this is decidedly not the case within chick lit novels analysed here. With the exception of the minority of heroines who are in successful careers and are therefore portrayed as cold and unfeminine ('I've turned my heart to steel. In fact even my closest friends ask if I have one at all.' as Jocasta puts it in *Game Over*), most women in chick lit are portrayed as single and unhappy about it. Jemima asks 'what could be worse than being single' and thinks it is entirely understandable that 'women stay in relationships, miserable, horrible, destructive relationships because the alternative is far too horrendous to even consider. Being on their own.' (*Jemima J.* :81). Stella in *Don't You Want Me* pleads 'I don't want to live the rest of my life on my own, without sex, lonely again' (p.188), and even an 'tough' Jo in *New You* hates spending an evening alone as 'it made her feel like a failure' (p.7). What they really want is, according to Stella, 'hardcore domestic' (p.17). Or, as Kate puts it in *Wrong Mr Wright*, 'I do want strings. I want them attached to every part of me. Pulling me down, if that's how you want to see it.' (p.265)

The terror and misery apparently threatened by being single resonates powerfully with Faludi's (1991) account of backlash trend stories which emphasise the 'man-shortage', the 'infertility epidemic' and the suggestion that a woman over 30 has more chance of being killed by a terrorist than getting married.

Mirror, mirror on the wall...

Finally, we want to turn to the portrayal of beauty and the body within chick lit novels. In traditional romances heroines fall into a category that might be described as 'effortlessly beautiful' -- that is, they are blessed by a particularly attractive appearance, but also entirely unselfconscious about this. In chick lit novels, there are broadly two different approaches to beauty taken. In one the heroine is beautiful but, interestingly, is often presented as having been transformed from 'ugly duckling', in order to rebut readers' potential envy or hostility (and also in consonance with the makeover paradigm that dominates contemporary popular culture). *Jemima J.* is a good example of this: she undergoes a dramatic weight loss to become a 'blonde bombshell' who is not only suddenly gorgeous, but also blessed with excellent career prospects, a new circle of friends and the love of her adoring hero. The message is devastatingly simple -- as the song says 'be young and beautiful if you want to be loved'. The importance of beauty is emphasised throughout, with Jemima saying things like 'if I had only one wish in all the world I wouldn't wish to win the lottery. Nor would I wish for true love. No, if I had one wish I would wish to have a model's figure' (2). Chillingly, this echoes the findings of Naomi Wolf's (1990) study of the Beauty Myth, in which she found that young women's single greatest aspiration was to lose 10 lb. It is underpinned in all chick lit novels with a preoccupation with the shape, size and look of the body that borders on the obsessional. What is striking is not only that appearance is such a preoccupation, but that it is depicted as requiring endless self-surveillance, monitoring, dieting, purging and work. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the leitmotif of the unruly body that needs constant disciplining is constitutive of the chick lit novel. In this sense, the novels can be read as offering an insight into the disciplinary matrix of neoliberal society, with its emphasis upon policing and remodelling the self. Often a humourous, self-deprecating tone is deployed, as in *Bridget Jones's Diary* or *Does My Bum Look Big In This* (quoted at the start of this section) but

this in no way reduces the palpable anxiety associated with the possibility that heroines might not live up to increasingly narrow normative judgments of female attractiveness.

The second type of chick lit heroine is either less stunning or adamant about being free of the demands of beauty. A postfeminist mantra reverberates through many of the books: 'I choose when to make myself pretty and if I choose to be pretty, then only for myself'. However, such rebelliousness is ironically inverted as soon as a man enters the scene. See Annie's reaction when, to her horror, she finds herself face-to-face with the man she loves in an unwashed and un-preened state: 'Annie's limbs deadened. Her palms dampened. This wasn't how it was meant to be. She hadn't got a scrap of make up on. Her hair was unwashed. Toxic fumes were escaping from certain regions of her body... She wasn't ready for this' (*Persuading Annie*:122). The similarity to traditional romances could hardly be overstated and points up the partial nature of the engagement with feminism, and the hollowness of the rhetoric about beauty being all about 'pleasing oneself'.

Conclusion: A Postfeminist Sensibility?

In this brief analysis we have explored some of the themes and characterisations of contemporary chick lit. It would appear that romances are being rewritten at the start of the 21st century, but how much has the traditional script of heterosexual romance been altered or challenged? We want to argue that romances have indeed changed in significant ways, but that the modes of femininity and of heterosexual coupledness on offer in contemporary chick lit are neither straightforwardly more progressive nor more retrogressive than in earlier popular romances like those from the Harlequin or Mills and Boon stable.

On the one hand chick lit heroines are much more likely than their romantic forebears to be presented as financially independent, working outside the home,

and sexually assertive and liberated. On the other, as we have noted, heroines still frequently require 'rescuing' at regular intervals -- from crooks and conmen, single motherhood, or even from themselves -- as when male characters recognise that the hard, successful outer shell is not the real woman inside (in this sense showing that men in chick lit, like previous romance heroes, are still presented as knowing better about what women want and who they are than women themselves). Chick lit heroines still regard many other women as figures of mistrust and competition rather than sisterhood, and still primarily define themselves in terms of their relationship to a man -- perhaps even more so than in earlier romances, as singlehood is something to be utterly feared and pathologised in this genre.

In addition, there are a number of new elements in chick lit fiction which might be regarded with some concern by those interested in more just and equal gender relations. Perhaps most striking is the obsessional preoccupation with the body that emerges from even the most cursory reading of contemporary chick lit. In a shift from earlier decades it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property, rather than a social structural or psychological one (Gill, 2006a). Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity (all, of course, highly problematic) it is the possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity. But the body in chick lit novels is constructed in a highly specific way: it is a body that is always already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling in order to conform to judgments of normative femininity. It is also a body which is supposed to be a window to the character's interior life: for example, when Bridget Jones smokes 40 cigarettes or consumes 'excessive' calories we are invited to read this in psychological terms as indicative of emotional breakdown (invariably precipitated by a man). Far from offering a more hopeful version of femininity this emphasis re-locates women in their bodies, indeed as bodies, and makes them morally responsible for disciplining the body/self (Bordo, Bartky)

Closely related to this neoliberal construction of power, the body and subjectivity, is the development of what we regard as a distinctively postfeminist sensibility in contemporary culture which can be seen clearly in chick lit. One feature of this concerns the ambivalent manner in which feminist ideas are treated within the novels. Feminism is not ignored or even straightforwardly attacked (as some backlash theorists might have it) but is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated (Whelehan,; Madison & Storr; McRobbie, 2005.) A certain kind of (liberal) feminist perspective is treated as commonsense, whilst at the same time feminism and feminists are treated as harsh, punitive and inauthentic (Tasker & Negra, 2005). In a recent interview, Marian Keyes, author of a series of successful chick lit novels (one of which was included in our analysis), refers to herself as part of a 'post feminist generation' that grew 'in fear of being 'told off' by feminists and 'having everything pink taken out of my house'⁸. This captures well what Esther Sonnet (2002) has called the 'naughty but nice' effect where 'disapproval from Big Sister intensifies the secret/guilty pleasures offered to the "postfeminist" consumer of the forbidden pleasures of the unreconstructed "feminine"'.

Closely related to this is another aspect of a postfeminist sensibility, namely the emphasis accorded to individual choice and empowerment. Chick lit heroines are, it seems, much more active protagonists than their counterparts in popular romances from the 1970s and 1980s. They value autonomy and bodily integrity and the freedom to make individual choices. What is interesting, however, is the way in which they frequently 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. They choose, for example, white weddings, downsizing, giving up work or taking their husband's name on marriage (McRobbie, 2005). One reading of this may highlight of the exclusions

⁸ Start the Week, BBC Radio 4 June 7, 2004

of second wave feminism, and suggests that it represents, in fact, the 'return of the repressed' e.g. the pleasures of domesticity or traditional femininity (Hollows, 2005). Another -- not necessarily contradictory -- reading might want to stress the ways in which prefeminist ideals are being (seductively) repackaged as postfeminist freedoms (Probyn, 1997) in ways that do nothing to question normative heterosexual femininity. Two things are clear: first, that chick lit novels construct an articulation or suture between feminism and femininity, and second that this is effected entirely through a grammar of individualism (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005).

This brings us to the final feature of postfeminism in chick lit that we want to discuss: the shift from objectification to subjectification. In these novels there is a palpable shift from the objectification of women's bodies evident in previous popular romances to sexual subjectification: women are presented as active desiring sexual subjects. Indeed, a voracious heterosexual sexual appetite seems to be one of the new requirements of postfeminist femininity. More than this, women's subjectivities are constructed through the idea of 'pleasing ourselves' which, along with choice, reverberate through these novels. In relation to beauty this suggests that regimes of body modification that involve shaving, waxing, dieting, purging, working out, making up, etc are entered into entirely freely and with no compulsion (in fact, of course, women's magazines like to name this through a discourse of pampering or indulgence). In relation to sexual relationships it presents women as feisty and empowered sexual subjects able to enter into unions entirely on their own terms and for their own pleasure.

As we have argued elsewhere (Gill, 2003), what makes the notion so problematic is that it presents women as entirely free agents and cannot account for why if women are really just 'pleasing themselves' the resulting valued look is so similar: thin, toned, hairless body, etc. It entirely evacuates the space of social and cultural influence and avoids all the interesting and difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are made our own. It completely

eschews any discussion of power, and has no language, besides that of individual free choice, with which to discuss women's lives.

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 relation to beauty a mantra about 'being beautiful only for myself' coexists with an acknowledgement of the hollowness of this and a recognition of sorts that 'beauty work' is necessary (within the terms of reference of these novels) to attract a male partner (as we witnessed in Annie's horror upon meeting Jake in her un-made-up state). These contradictory discourses sit by side by side in chick lit novels. But it is not enough merely to point to their coexistence; what is important is the work they are doing -- in particular rendering the possibility of critique extremely difficult. For what is missing in these contradictory postfeminist discourses is any space to contest the restrictive beauty norms of contemporary culture, to think about them through anything other than the language of individualism. Similarly, the inequalities, problems and frustrated desires of heterosexual relationships -- including those that related to sexual intercourse -- are rendered invisible and unspeakable through a discourse which merely offers a postfeminist gloss on 'one day my prince will come'.

In conclusion, then, we can say that chick lit is indeed rewriting the romance, but not in ways that allow for complex analyses of power, subjectivity and desire, but rather in ways that suggest women's salvation is to be found in the pleasures of a worked-on, worked-out body and the arms of a good man.

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