

CHICK LIT AS THE NEW WOMAN'S FICTION: INSCRIPTIONS IN MARIAN KEYES'S NOVEL *WATERMELON*

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Chick lit, just as other formulaic genres, is often dismissed in literary criticism, despite its appeal to contemporary female readership¹. The fact that chick lit has definitely won the status of a feminist bestseller as literature “for the ‘new woman,’ the contemporary reader of our postfeminist culture, and a ‘new woman’s fiction,’ a form of popular literature (largely) written by women for a female audience,” to quote Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, invites us to consider the genre’s status in the literary tradition. It hence has to be analysed in light of the attributes that relegate the emerging genre to the status of lit rather than literature. This article attempts to present the main characteristics of chick lit fiction as well as to reflect on its links with other formulaic genres paying special attention to the narrative’s affinities with the popular romance. This discussion lays the foundation for the analysis of Marian Keyes’s *Watermelon* focusing on the novel’s engagement with other fiction genres to reveal changing perceptions of gender roles, autonomy, and subjectivity.

Chick lit, according to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, emerged in the 1990s after the publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004). The first novel’s popularity is assessed by the fact that, between the publication of the book in 1996 and the release of the film in 2001, the book sold eight million copies and it was translated into thirty-three languages (Ferriss and Young, 2006, 2). Despite such a record, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* has been subjected to severe criticism claiming that Bridget Jones betrays the achievements of feminism. In the novel, the areas of being like the body, beauty and heterosexuality that the second wave feminism had designated as institutions of patriarchal oppression have come to be regarded as goals of self-actualization pursued by many contemporary young women. The publication of Helen Fielding’s groundbreaking novel was followed by an outbreak of novels featuring “fallible, funny heroines,” to use A. Rochelle Mabry’s phrasing (Mabry, 2006, 191). These heroines, usually in their twenties or thirties, struggle to balance challenging careers and personal lives centred on the pursuit for a satisfying

¹ See Wells (2006, 48).

romantic relationship. According to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, the avalanche of commercially successful books, oftentimes categorized as popular literature, inevitably created a need to “establish the genre’s formulas” and to assess its position within literature and popular culture. As regards the reception of the genre, Ferriss and Young argue, “the discourse surrounding the genre has been polarized between its outright dismissal as trivial fiction and unexamined embrace by fans who claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women” (Ferriss and Young, 2006, 1-2). The critics who ignore the central concerns implicit in the novel’s literary and ideological agenda tend to read the genre exclusively as popular literature for adult female readers who embrace consumerist ideology and the images of femininity perpetuated by mass culture. In her criticism of chick lit as a genre populated by heroines entangled in endless self-doubt, depreciation, and blunder, Cris Mazza holds that initially the term “chick lit” appeared in the title of an anthology on experimental women’s fiction that, after much debate, was entitled *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995). Mazza claims that she intended to use the term in an “obviously sardonic” sense, and the chick lit rubrics was meant “not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (Mazza, 2006, 18). Filtered through the lenses of the postfeminism debate, women characters featured in the anthology are viewed by Pamela Caughie as “confident, independent, even courageous women taking responsibility for who they are, or as women who have unconsciously internalized and are acting out the encoded norms of society” (quoted in

Mazza, 2006, 21). Mazza makes clear that the current usage of the term departs from its original intention to reflect a changing relationship between woman and society: “somehow chick lit had morphed into books and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long legged women wearing stiletto heels.” The subject matter of these books is seen exclusively in terms of the description of “career girls looking for love” (ibid., 21). It is regarded as failing to live up to the literary merit of experimental fiction included in the anthology which was expected to become “alternative fiction” with a “non-commercial or non-traditional narrative” (Mazza, 2000, 108).

Such a view disregards the genre’s engagement with contemporary socio-cultural realities. As noted by Imelda Whelehan, chick lit, as a form of a feminist bestseller, delineates the daily concerns of contemporary young women regarding the impact of social and cultural factors, such as consumerism, media images, plastic surgery and job opportunities, to mention but a few, as well as on their perception of gender roles and self-identity (Whelehan, 2005, 4-5). Thus viewed, perhaps not accidentally, chick lit is labelled as “the new woman’s fiction,”² i.e. envisioned as a multifaceted literary remapping of the essential tensions underlying gender relations. This is an obvious allusion to the New Woman phenomenon that emerged between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. According to Gail Cunningham, considerable changes were witnessed during the period in developing sexual and gender identities along with other social norms conditioned by rapid indus-

² See Ferriss and Young (2006, 12).

trialization. These changes triggered the rise of the New Woman novel which, according to Ann Ardis, stands at the roots of modernist aesthetics, though it is “conspicuously absent from modernism’s stories of its own genesis” (Ardis, 1990, 2-3).

This brings us back to a similar strain of thought on the relationship to the existing genres, themes, and modes of fictional representation and, most importantly, critical reception of new trends in (women’s) fiction. Shari Benstock points out that the heroines of chick lit “bear little resemblance to [...] the new woman of a century before.” Nevertheless, even in contemporary culture, “the most confident and self-assured women must negotiate conventional expectations” (Benstock, 2006, 254-255). The questioning of the impact of convention on contemporary women’s identity is enacted through a mixing of genres like popular romance, the novel of manners, the domestic novel and the realist novel in which chick lit fiction is embedded. Negotiation with the realist convention can be detected in the destabilization of literary conventions like those of omniscience coupled with the predictability of plot and character; yet, in terms of subject matter and the appeal to verisimilitude to reality, the genre manifests a detour to realism.³

The formal and thematic characteristics of Marian Keyes’s first novel, *Watermelon* (1996), seem to align it with the genre of chick lit. The novel is modelled after the author’s own experiences of alcohol abuse and depression.⁴ In *Watermelon* these problems are linked to hardships that the female protagonist has to endure after her husband abandons her and

she has to leave London to move into her parents’ home in Dublin. Because of all that befalls her, Claire, the mother of a newborn daughter, builds a wall of despair and impotence: she spends the day in bed, reading popular women’s magazines, neglects personal hygiene and even takes up drinking. Though entangled in self-hatred, Claire never doubts her love for her daughter, and she is determined to instruct her on how to navigate her way through traditional and postfeminist discourses: “Out with *The Little Mermaid* and in with *The Female Eunuch*” (Keyes, 1996, 51). Typically of chick lit heroines, the protagonist of *Watermelon* finds comfort in a sexual affair, shopping and social interaction. Although the closure of the novel suggests a successful overcoming of identity crisis as well as foreshadows a budding romance, the narrative progression of events departs from the plot characteristic of the traditional romance. This is in accordance with Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young’s statement that, in chick lit, there occurs a dramatic shift from the “boy meets girl and lives ever after” plot to the “girl meets boys with no tidy ending” story. This narrative manipulation reflects changing social realities and offers a “more realistic portrait of single life, dating and the dissolution of romantic ideals” (Ferriss and Young, 2006, 3). To highlight the novel’s postfeminist agenda, it engages in a teasing play with discourses that had been instrumental in woman’s gender identity. At the onset, the novel implicitly suggests an intertextual reworking of one of the major tenets of earlier feminisms revolving around the victim-victimizer dynamics.

Victimization is promoted to the foreground and even exposed at its most extreme when the female protagonist, Claire, announces that her husband left her for another

³ See Harzewski (2006, 40).

⁴ See “Marian Keyes: Biographical Sketch.”

woman the day she gave birth to their daughter (Keyes, 1996, 1). This is revealed to have happened on February the fifteenth, the day after St. Valentine's Day. Irony or coincidence aside, this temporal spacing of the narrative may be indicative of the changing perception of love and responsibility manifesting itself on the personal and collective levels. It is in the shifting of attention to the diversification of family forms and the reasons conditioning this departure from the traditional nuclear family model as well as offering insights into the protagonist's perception of herself as a single woman and single mother that *Watermelon* resembles other chick lit novels. As stated by Stephanie Harzewski, chick lit challenges the traditional representation of singleness. Negative images are largely replaced with "affirmative models. For example, *singularity* is transformed from incompleteness to a state of readiness, of openness and self-sufficiency" (Harzewski, 2006, 39). To a great extent, Keyes's heroine conforms closely to these thematic figurations characteristic of chick lit. The somewhat linear narrative of the novel develops as a story of the female protagonist's conversion from the perception of her singleness as a state of incompleteness to the recognition of herself as a subject with desires yet to be discovered. Claire's potential for such a route of self-discovery can be gleaned from the way she reflects on the situation in which she finds herself with her newborn daughter after her husband's desertion. On the one hand, she follows the path cut through the tangle of similar plot lines, the literary representations of which highlight woman's victimization. On the other hand, her confessional recounting of abandonment and its contextualization sheds further light on "man's blame" as well as points out the inevitable dif-

ferences between the sexes despite any attempts to balance the involvement of humankind in reproductive practices:

"I subscribed to the classical, or you might say, the traditional role fathers play in the birth of their children. Which goes as follows.

Lock them in the corridor outside the delivery room. Allow them admittance at no time. Give them forty cigarettes and a lighter. Instruct them to pace to the end of the corridor. When they reach this happy position, instruct them to turn around and return to whence they came.

[...]He is also allowed to let a spasm of anguish pass over his face when he hears the agonies of his loved one within. And when it's all over and mother and child have been cleaned up and mother is in a clean nightdress and is lying back against the lacy pillows looking exhausted but joyful and the perfect infant is suckling at her breast, then, and only then should the father be permitted to enter." (Keyes, 1996, 1-2)

The emphasis on weakness in the sardonic representation of the would-be fathers supposedly present in the process of giving birth to their children destabilizes the hierarchy of power in gender relations. As soon as the delivery is over, however, the mother succumbs to the prescribed passivity and resumes her role as an object that pleases "male gaze." She undergoes a somewhat ironic beautification and thus acquires every feature of the modern "Angel in the House." Had Claire not been abandoned by her husband, the story line may have developed along the line of plots designated as mommy lit, a sub genre of chick lit that exists along with dad lit, lad lit, teen chick lit and hen lit ("the latter for the over-fifty reader").⁵ Compared to these formulaic variations, we see that Marian Keyes is suggesting an unexpected twist in the plot by placing a

⁵ See Harzewski (2006, 31).

married heroine into the category of a typical chick lit heroine “searching for the perfect job, the perfect man, and more importantly, the perfect shoe.”⁶ Before she can realize the goals outlined in the item in a series, Claire of *Watermelon* has to recover from a dependency which, in her particular situation as a mother deserted with a newborn baby, cannot easily be labelled as postpartum depression. Upon returning to her parents’ home, she spends weeks in bed crying and neglecting her motherly duties even though she finds her daughter “totally beautiful” (Keyes, 1996, 3). The fact that, in effect, enhances her recovery is the realization that she had lost weight and does not “look like a watermelon with legs” anymore (ibid., 117). The anxiety about weight evokes Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff’s statement that “the leitmotif of the unruly body that needs constant disciplining is constitutive of the chick lit novel” (Gill, Herdieckerhoff, 2005, 22).

According to another line of argument, a reference to one’s postpartum body as “a watermelon with legs” suggests intertextual links with Sylvia Plath’s poem, “Metaphors” (Plath, 1980, 116) which has been read as a metaphorical description of a pregnant woman and the imagined foetus gestating in her body. In Plath’s poem, the gestating body is envisioned as “an elephant, a ponderous house”; the speaker is so aware of her large and round body that she imagines herself as “a melon strolling on two tendrils.” The implicit intertextuality with Plath’s text echoes Juliette Wells’ statement that “writers of chick lit ... frequently invite us to view their works as descendants of women’s literary classics”

(Well, 2006, 48). This may be envisioned as an attempt to become a work of recognized literary merit or part of the recognized “intertextual web.” In *Watermelon*, the intertextuality may be considered as a framework within which the female protagonist negotiates her desires, ambitions and inadequacies. Her familiarity with Plath’s poem can also be related to the fact that Claire “had a degree in English” (Keyes, 1996, 5). Given her educational background, one function of this intertextual reference, then, is to point to the gap that exists between her education and her present position as an abandoned wife and economically marginalized single mother. It could also signal Claire’s identification with Sylvia Plath who herself was an abandoned wife and a mother of two small children and who was overcome with a fear of the day when she will have to explain to her child the play of lights and shadows in life as, for instance, in “For A Fatherless Son” (Plath, 1980, 205). In Marian Keyes’s novel, the treatment of the protagonist’s despair echoes Shari Benstock’s statement that, in the chick lit genre, “the high seriousness and simmering anger characteristic of earlier feminist [literature] has given way to comedy” (Benstock, 2006, 257). When Claire’s husband tells her he is leaving her for another woman, she displays self-irony. To do so, she attempts to filter the present reality through some more acceptable frame of reference that would distance her from shock once she has understood that all hopes have crashed to live out the solid nuclear family model:

“He didn’t even attempt to smile and I knew then that I had lost him. He looked like James, he sounded like James, he smelt like James, but it wasn’t James.

Like some fifties science-fiction film, where the hero’s girl-friend’s body is taken over by an alien – it still looks like her on the outside (pink

⁶ Chick lit heroine as defined in “Johnson County Library.”

angora sweater, sweet little handbag, bra, so pointily it would take the eye out of a spider, etc.) – but her eyes have changed.” (Keyes, 1996, 16)

By referring to a science-fiction heroine of the 1950s, the period when gender roles were most utmostly emphasized, Claire seems to question her husband’s conformance with traditional masculinity. Yet there is a view in reverse to the long-established one that, by leaving a woman, a man demonstrates his power and confirms the associations of maleness with the strong sex. *Watermelon* ironically shows that the desertion of a woman is conditioned by the weakening of a man’s own masculinity. The disjunction of the husband’s identities marks the shifting trajectory of romance, a departure from the description of an unflinching love relationship between “an impossibly beautiful, undeniably wholesome heroine and her strong, hyper-masculine hero,” to borrow the phrasing from A. Rochelle Mabry (Mabry, 2008 193). Anna Kiernan relates such a shift in “thematic dominance” to the social context of readership when she holds that originally conventional romances and Harlequin romances in particular were aimed at unemployed women being supported by men or women with low incomes. Chick lit, meanwhile, “is marketed more broadly, to both the typical ‘Harlequin lady’ and the urban single woman with a disposable income” (Kiernan, 2008, 208).

It is namely financial independence that distinguishes chick lit heroines from those of the traditional romances. Although “the quest for the One,” as Imelda Whelehan has it (Whelehan, 2005, 5), still constitutes the underlying thematic concern of these fictions, most heroines of chick can hardly be labelled simply as modern Cinderellas. Instead they

pursue careers, and some of them even have high-powered jobs. In this respect, they are self-sufficient enough to realize desires triggered by personal needs and make use of the possibilities created by the consumer culture. Most scholars in the field envision the characters of chick lit fictions as products of the fashion industry, advertising and mass media in the sense that luxury purchases are regarded as essential elements in the characters’ identity quests. As Jessica Lyn Van Slooten holds, a typical chick lit heroine “engages in culture of conspicuous consumption, fashioning and refashioning her identity by means of her label-driven purchases” (Van Slooten, 2006, 218). In *Watermelon*, although meaningfulness is also provided to labels, shopping is treated as a way to “normalcy” and as a means of regaining the prepartum identity. The first thing the female protagonist, Claire, does once she understands that she has surfaced from the quagmire of depression is to go shopping. Shopping is also frequently attuned with dating the new lover, Adam, who is presented as the embodiment of an ideal man. On the other hand, a desire for new clothes, the social mask, is associated with the time when she was working. Nonetheless, Keyes’s heroine decides that, to work out a definition of her self for herself, she has to return to her past habits: “There was a time when my name was legendary amongst Women who Shop” (Keyes, 1996, 234). As stated by Juliette Wells, the novel “has always been concerned with the material world,” and “novelists from Austen to Wharton cast a questioning and often a critical eye on women’s relationships to consumer goods and consumption.” Chick lit, as a rule, “is distinguished both by the centrality” of consumerism and “by the implicit message

that, while indulgence may not always bring happiness, happiness cannot be found without a good dose of indulgence.” In this respect, the chick lit heroine is very different from the one of the novel of manners or the domestic novel who would be “largely confined to minimal purchases such as a ribbon or pair of gloves” (Wells, 2006, 62-63). In *Watermelon*, the female protagonist’s preoccupation with shopping serves not so much as a demonstration of a socially constructed personality characteristic leading to the remodelling of identity but as an act of revenge. Since she is not working at the time, Claire goes out buying at the expense of her husband. This shopping is not considered an escapist strategy into a “safe’ consumerist fantasy world,” to borrow the expression from Van Slooten (Van Slooten, 2006, 218). It is expressed not so

much as an obsession with fashion as an ironical treatment of the traditional male breadwinner role and as a reaction to the fact that her husband promises support as he deserts his wife and daughter. This is specifically what prompts Claire to give so much attention to fashion, sex, and beauty.

The persistence of these thematic spans in the novel highlights its alignment with the chick lit genre. With regard to the literary merit of both the novel and the genre, a question that remains to be answered is whether it is simply “a form of popular literature which provides laughter, escapism, and as much temporal pleasure as the final kiss in a film,” as Jessica Lynice Hooten has stated (Hooten, 2007). Another question that poses itself is whether it is a form of literature that still waits to be re-visioned and assigned a status of literature rather than lit.

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NAUJŪJŲ MOTERŲ LITERATŪRA: ATSPINDŽIAI MARIAN KEYES ROMANE *ARBŪZAS*

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariama nauja tendencija moterų literatūroje. Ši tendencija apibūdinama kaip komerciniu požiūriu sėkmingų romanų protrūkis. Šiuo romanus vienijanti tema – jaunų moterų pastangos suderinti sėkmingą karjerą ir emancipuotos moters asmeninius poreikius. Kritinėje šios literatūros recepcijoje vyrauja dvi nuomonės. Vieni kritikai naują žanrą tapatina su meilės romanu, skirtu vartojiškumo dvasios apim-

tai skaitytojų auditorijai, kiti teigia, kad šis žanras įkūnija realistinio romano sugrįžimą ir nurodo akivaizdžias sąsajas su jo žanrinėmis variacijomis. Šiuo požiūriu ši literatūra atspindi svarbiausius laikmečio faktorius, lemiančius tapatybės raidą. Marian Keyes romane *Arbūzas* pastebimi charakteringiausi aptariamojo naujojo literatūros žanro bruožai, straipsnyje analizuojami pasitelkiant šio žanro tyrinėtojų vertinimus.

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