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WRITTEN
BY WOMEN
FOR WOMEN
CHICK LIT ABOUT WOMEN
AND WHY WE SHOULD STUDY IT

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Written By Women, For Women, About Women: Chick Lit and Why We Should Study It

Abstract:

This thesis will make a case for chick lit as a viable site for academic analysis, particularly in relation to feminist debates and the study of popular culture. In this first chapter I explore the genre's significance in relation to the study and criticism of contemporary literature, and I examine chick lit's commercial success alongside the conflicting responses it generates from literary scholars. Following on from this I assess chick lit's relationship with feminism, with a particular focus on postfeminism, and situate chick lit alongside the dominant sociocultural and ideological contexts of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the genre was at its most prolific. Next, I conduct a close reading and analysis of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), to demonstrate the benefits of studying chick lit novels, especially alongside feminist debates, and the insight that can be gained from doing so. I then point to the lasting impacts of the genre, and the way in which many of the themes chick lit is concerned with persist today. All of which argue in support of chick lit's ability to provide commentary on gender politics, societal pressures, and femininity, and through this thesis I aim to demonstrate the way in which the genre raises issues of major concern to contemporary cultural, literary, and feminist studies.

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Chapter One

1.1 Definitions and Origins of Chick Lit

Chick lit is a contested term and, as a result, definitions vary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition: “literature by, for, or about women; esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences” (qtd. in Davis-Kahl: 18). Suzanne Ferriss, a leading proponent and scholar of chick lit, states that “Chick lit can be defined as contemporary fiction featuring identifiable, young heroines facing a series of romantic, professional, and cultural hurdles specific to their generation” (178). After surveying numerous texts on the topic I have compiled a general outline of the typical characteristics to be expected of a chick lit novel. Broadly speaking, the plot tends to focus on the life, loves, trials and tribulations of the female protagonist – an “Everywoman, with Everyday concerns” (Kozak: 17), who is often read as a reflection of “the modern-day woman” and her experiences (Perrin: 75; see also Gillespie: 187). This protagonist is predominantly in her late-20s to mid-30s, single, white, middle-class, and heterosexual; often working in a media related industry such as publishing or journalism, and living in a major city (Gormley; Montoro; Baykan; Davis-Kahl; Wilson). The chick lit novel is often written candidly with a first-person narrator, who confesses her aspirations and insecurities in a light and humorous manner; this tends to result in the protagonist being praised by readers as “relatable”, due to her imperfections and “touching vulnerability” (Perrin: 75; see also Papa: 35, Montoro: 186). In other words, as Burcu Baykan suggests, “chick-lit texts are directly connected to their readers insofar as they invite them to identify with the characters and situations portrayed and to see them as reflective of their own lives in the way personal and social problems are handled” (30).

The majority of academics date chick lit’s emergence as a major publishing phenomenon to the late 1990s, born out of the publication, and subsequent success, of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget*

*Jones's Diary (BJD)*¹, and by the end of the decade the catchall term “chick lit” had become established by the media and the publishing industry to describe novels, like *BJD*, written by women, for women, about women. From this point onwards, chick lit became a rapidly growing force in popular culture, “spawning films, websites, publishing imprints, [and] how-to manuals”, for instance (Davis-Kahl: 18). And, as Sarah Milynowski and Farrin Jacobs state, publishers soon “knew a bona fide trend was in the making...[and] they began marketing more books as chick lit (which they quickly decided meant pastel covers and shoes)” (11). Following the commercial success of *BJD*, publishers saw the opportunity to continue generating this response with similar titles, and predominantly targeting these novels at female consumers. This can be seen in the distinctive cover art of chick lit novels, which typically feature bright colours, cursive fonts, and images of feminised consumer items such as shoes or makeup². Rocío Montoro suggests that stereotypical design features “characterise these novels to such an extent that the reader will identify and clearly distinguish books belonging in this genre” before they have even read it (2). Due to the easily definable characteristics within these novels and the genre itself, a certain formula was established and publishers were able to easily acquire and market such titles under the categorisation of “chick lit”. For many, the phrase “chick lit” is derogatory and dismissive, and Ellie Levenson has suggested that the term implies “that this is reading for women only, or not just women but ‘chicks’; women not even bright enough to be afforded the title of women” (90). When considering this in combination with the stereotyped covers, developed on commercially-motivated assumptions surrounding women and their lifestyle interests, not only does this reveal the reductive gendered assumptions of media institutions, but it also demonstrates the way in which these institutions contribute to reinforcing gender binaries in contemporary society. The matter of this gendered marketing is complicated with the assumption that chick lit is an inferior genre of literature, yet this is what is presented as the most appropriate fiction for women.

¹ See Davis-Kahl; Ferriss and Young; Gill and Herdieckerhoff; Gormley; Montoro.

² See Gormley; Montoro; Gill and Herdieckerhoff for further analysis on chick lit's cover art.

Although the origins of the term “chick lit” are debated, several sources state that it first appeared as an ironic label in the title of Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell’s edited collection *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995), and was subsequently co-opted by the media and publishing industries to characterise and market novels (Wilson: 85). Stephanie Davis-Kahl argues that “What began as irony took a turn and morphed into a marketing and sales gimmick that simultaneously denies the authors assigned to the genre any claim of legitimacy or talent” (18). This statement reflects the sense of discomfort some authors feel regarding the term “chick lit”, and many reject the term itself, seeing it as nothing more than a marketing tool that has come to serve as a generalisation, and subsequent dismissal, of women’s fiction. Sarah Dunn, for instance, argues that “chick lit has become a negative term, and it’s one that’s used primarily as a way to put female writers in their place,” however, she also concedes that “as a publishing trend it has been positive for a lot of women, some of whom wouldn’t have gotten their novels published at all if the chick lit thing hadn’t taken off the way it did” (qtd. in Milynowski and Jacobs: 13), suggesting that there have been undeniable benefits to the publishing surge caused by chick lit’s popularity. Carole DeSanti, the US editor for Helen Fielding and Melissa Banks among others, notes that chick lit emerged as a result of women writers wanting to find an authentic way to write about their lived experience. She then states that despite there being multiple definitions of chick lit, the one that has come to be fixed in the popular imagination is “one that trivialises and dismisses” such work (qtd. in Davis-Kahl: 18). Similarly, author Jenny Colgan deems the term chick lit “insulting”, adding that it “is a deliberately condescending term they use to rubbish us all” (ibid.). The “they” Colgan is referring to is ambiguous, but can be seen to extend to the media and publishing industries that constructed, and continue to reinforce, the term.

1.2 Introducing the Chick Lit Debate

As a genre of fiction predominantly produced by and for women, and marketed as such by the media industries, the commercial success of chick lit novels surely calls for a critical assessment of

its position within popular and academic culture. Chick lit generates highly polarised responses, and I will be using the publications of *This is Not Chick Lit* (Elizabeth Merrick ed., 2006) and *This is Chick-Lit* (Lauren Logsted-Baratz ed., 2005) as an introduction to this debate. In early 2005, Elizabeth Merrick began editing a collection of short stories for the anthology *This is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America's Best Women Writers*, published in response to what Merrick calls “the chick lit deluge”, and the way in which this has “helped to obscure the literary fiction being written by some of our country’s most gifted women” (ix). In her introduction, she pens a rather damning indictment of what she sees as the differences between chick lit and literature:

For every stock protagonist with an Hermès Birkin bag and a bead on an investment banker, there is a woman writer pushing the envelope of serious fiction with depth and humour...Chick lit’s formula numbs our senses. Literature, by contrast, grants us access to countless new cultures, places, and inner lives. Where chick lit reduces the complexity of the human experience, literature increases our awareness of other perspectives and paths. Literature employs carefully crafted language to expand our reality, instead of beating us over the head with clichés that promote a narrow worldview. Chick lit shuts down our consciousness. Literature expands our imaginations (ix).

By making this distinction it becomes clear that she views “chick lit” as separate from, and inferior to, “literature”, and this offers an insight into one half of the chick lit debate, reflecting the views of several critics and academics who see chick lit as formulaic, unliterary, and brainless. Chick lit author Lauren Logsted-Baratz was enraged by the news of the upcoming publication of *This is Not Chick Lit*, deeming it a form of “literary snobbery” (3), and in response she compiled and edited *This is Chick-Lit* with the intention of countering the view that chick lit is a “derisory and somehow inferior genre” (2). Logsted-Baratz believes that there are only “two kinds of books in the world: good/well written stories and bad/poorly written stories”, dismissing Merrick’s distinction between chick lit and literature, and instead advocating for the value found within reading something that is entertaining and enjoyable (6). With *This is Chick Lit*, Logsted-Baratz suggests that rather than

debating over categories of “commercial” or “literary” fiction, writers and readers should be supporting women’s voices in literature, regardless of genre:

It used to be that there were two major camps in publishing, Literary and Commercial. And within the area of women writers, that distinction has lately devolved into the following: Chicks and Lits. The former resents the greater review attention bestowed on the latter; the latter resents the greater sales of [the former’s] hot market. But what if, instead of wasting our time throwing stones at one another, we were to pool our reader resources toward the end of greater benefit for all? (6).

However, despite Logsted-Baratz’s celebratory appeals for the genre, and the fact that millions of readers have read and enjoyed chick lit, there are persistent voices and structures within academia and literary criticism that are determined to mark the difference between “serious” literature and “trivial” chick lit (Ferriss and Young, 2006). As with any genre of literature, within chick lit there are *useful* texts that are valuable and relevant for further academic attention as well as those that are not so useful. However, critical discussion of chick lit tends to be overwhelmingly concerned with those texts that lend themselves more towards the category of *useless*, dismissing the genre in its entirety as a result. To counter this, and instead demonstrate the value that can be found within chick lit novels, the third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to a study of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, an exceptional work of chick lit that I have utilised as an example of the rich insight a study of such novels can provide. Furthermore, unlike those within the genres of fantasy or crime for example, chick lit novels are met with derision and a reluctance to recognise them as intellectual in any way. During the course of this thesis I will challenge these assumptions, instead expressing the ways in which chick lit serves as a valid and worthwhile site for academic analysis.

1.3 Chick Lit and Academia

Charlotte Templin suggests that practices of attributing literary value must be reassessed; arguing that “Instead of asking “How good is it?” we must ask ‘Good for what? Or ‘Good for whom?’”

Rather, she continues, we should look to the usefulness of a text; after all, “Judgements about quality are not the objective property of texts, but are contingent: they are political judgements of individuals and, as such, a function of their tastes, interests, and beliefs” (47). Any discussion of chick lit has been dominated by such judgement, and as such this thesis is not necessarily concerned with determining whether chick lit is good or bad, literary or not, as this can never be objectively determined. Instead I aim to look to the “usefulness” of chick lit, and make a case for the genre as a valid site of academic analysis by conducting a more nuanced investigation into a form of fiction that is frequently lauded as an “authentic” expression of contemporary women’s lives.

As Davis-Kahl states, “Academia’s reception of chick lit as a legitimate area of study has been lukewarm, at least in the area of research and scholarship” (19). She considers what the possible reasons for this could be, suggesting that it may stem from “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” (ibid.). Debate has constantly endured as to whether chick lit can be classed as “literature”, and this extends beyond the academy and includes literary critics and authors. One of the most notable examples of chick lit’s dismissal came from Dame Beryl Bainbridge who condemned the genre as “froth”. Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s *Today Programme* in 2001 (alongside Doris Lessing, Pat Barker and Jeanette Winterson), Bainbridge argued that chick lit novels were “a forth sort of thing”, and asked “What is the point in writing a whole novel about it?”, adding “as people spend so little time reading it is a pity they perhaps can’t read something a bit deeper, a bit more profound, something with a bit of bite to it” (qtd. in Ezard). Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing agreed, dismissing the novels as “instantly forgettable”. On the other hand, Jeanette Winterson countered Bainbridge and Lessing and defended chick lit, stating that although she is “unashamedly high art”, she “also like[s] entertainment. Chick lit? No problem. *Bridget Jones’s Diary*? Love it, just great” (ibid.). Winterson takes a more balanced view, recognising that

works of fiction can be, among many other things, “high art” or “entertainment”, and that one does not need to be dismissed in order for the other to be seen as valuable.

Furthermore, Lessing believes “it’s a pity that so many young women are writing like that” and wondered “if they are just writing like this because they think they are going to get published”. She went on to add that “It would be better, perhaps, if they wrote books about their lives as they really saw them and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on” (qtd. in Ezard, 2001). However, I would argue that these women *are* writing about their lives, and the society in which they exist. Helen Fielding has said that, with *Bridget Jones*, she wanted to “represent women as they actually are in the age in which [they] are living”, and she sees this as a “good” thing for contemporary women’s literature to do (ibid.). As Bainbridge and Lessing’s comments suggest, chick lit texts, are frequently dismissed for the entertaining and seemingly simplistic manner in which they represent women’s lives, reflecting Simon Frith’s argument that it is largely assumed that “entertainment is always *only* entertainment” (160, emphasis in original). By looking beyond this dismissal, this thesis aims to demonstrate the way in which entertainment texts such as chick lit are able to explore complex issues within women’s sociocultural realities, and in doing so I will make a case for chick lit novels as a valid site for academic analysis.

1.4 Chick Lit and the Female Reader

Imelda Whelehan argues that “it is the easiest thing in the world to dismiss chick lit...as “froth”, and move on to more “serious” evocations of women’s lives...but,” she concedes, “these novels invite female readers to appraise their own lives while reading fictional accounts of contemporary women” (2005: 16). As Whelehan states, chick lit’s “impact on publishing has been formidable”, and regardless of the controversy that has followed its success, “the key point is...women read them and they read them by the truckload”. She then suggests that this “declare[s] powerfully a gendered community of interests”, and can therefore be provide an insight into contemporary women’s experiences (2005: 17). Whelehan suggests that chick lit emerged at a specific cultural moment,

“never before had women had such resources to reflect upon their own lives”, and in doing so, through writing chick lit novels, “truths about women’s lives were being shared” (2005: 13). Furthermore, despite her disdain for the genre, and although she admits she found *BJD* to be “frothy”, Elizabeth Merrick admits that she “was happy to see any story about a young woman negotiating her place in the world get so much attention” (viii). Chick lit can be read as offering a reflection on the experiences of women³, and providing an insight into the social and cultural issues they face through the genre’s exploration of themes such as gender roles and expectations, consumerism, mass media, sex and relationships, and body image. The response that these novels were met with from consumers, as Baykan argues, indicates that these novels are capable of functioning as “expressions of how women see each other, themselves, their relationships, work and family life” (29). As a result, it can be argued that chick lit responds to and engages with the many tensions and contradictions between young women and the society in which they exist, as well as offer an insight into cultural mechanisms, social developments and feminine subjectivities in the contemporary era – as I hope the subsequent analysis of chick lit will show.

I would also argue, that not only do the positions posed by Bainbridge, Lessing and the like dismiss the apparent significance of chick lit’s relation to the sociocultural realities of young women, these views also undermine chick lit readers. In showing concern for the state of modern readership and the harmful consequences of reading chick lit, they are suggesting that these readers are incapable of reflecting on such texts in any meaningful way. It is therefore important to recognise the chick lit reader as more than just a dupe that will blindly follow anything she reads, and to analyse chick lit as more than merely commercially constructed modes of indoctrination. Cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine made a case for consumers of popular culture’s ability to reinterpret and refashion this information so as to find meaning, which they then process to fit their

³ I am aware that chick lit predominantly offers a reflection of the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class women, and as such concerns over how authentic representation within chick lit actually is are completely valid. Therefore, although in recent years there have been developments in expanding and diversifying the genre, this is a research area I would urge others to pursue as it can offer interesting and relevant sociocultural insights.

own values and expectations (1373-1374). The same logic should be applied to readers of chick lit, and attention should be paid to the ways in which these women are able to find a space to explore their own experiences and emotions through the characters within these novels. Likewise, Stuart Hall argues that commercial and popular culture is not necessarily manipulative, and it should therefore not be assumed that consumers of such cultural products are merely “blank screens” that blindly take on any information presented at them (460). Following Hall’s argument, it can be said that within chick lit there are also “elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognisable experiences and attitudes to which people are responding” (461). Similarly, media scholar John Fiske argues that consumers of popular culture practice a selective style of apprehension, adapting the message of the media they consume so that it is appropriate to their own realities (137-138). As such, it can be argued that women are in fact able to use chick lit as a means of making sense of their own cultural experiences and the social structures they negotiate in their everyday lives (see also Baykan: 30-32). In denouncing chick lit novels as nothing more than consumerist vehicles reinforcing harmful messages, and thus implying that readers are merely passive recipients of such information, does not, therefore, provide us with an adequate response to the complex cultural relationships that can develop between the reader and the novels⁴.

1.5 Gendered Dismissals of Chick Lit

There is also an argument to say that, as fiction by women, for women, about women, then “the gendered nature of chick-lit can be one of the major reasons behind its dismissal” (Baykan: 29; see also Ferriss: 179-181). Many of the critics who denounce chick lit novels tend to read the genre “merely as popular fiction for female readers who indulge in consumer goods” (Baykan: 29), and that therefore it is not worthy of any deep thought or further analysis. As popular fiction, chick lit is

⁴ It is worth noting that there have been some more recent studies investigating the relationship between chick lit and its readers, for example: Montoro, 2013; Peirson-Smith, 2013 and Mißler, 2018.

seen as suspect by the academy. In other words, it is presumed that “if it attracts large audiences of reader-consumers, it must not be challenging or critical” (Ferriss: 179). Caroline J. Smith supports this statement, arguing that “The assumption that novels such as these cannot challenge the consumer industry that they reference is...indicative of the deeply rooted, historical bias against popular fiction—a bias that exists against women’s fiction as well” (15). In relation to this, Alison M. Scott notes that “Sociologists have long recognised a phenomenon called feminisation, which means that anything that becomes associated solely with women falls in general esteem” (218). In other words, feminised cultural products, such as chick lit, are largely denigrated by society, and positioned as inferior and less worthy of attention. Elana Levine suggests that this positioning can occur through “dismissive naming”, as can be seen with the term “chick lit”, “or by the general derision through which [these products] are treated”, and these operations work to construct feminised popular culture “as lightweight, frivolous, and excessively emotional” (1). However, it is clear that a serious consideration of cultural phenomena, such as chick lit, that feature within feminised popular culture can offer compelling insights into some of society’s most consumed products. Identifying what makes these products so compelling, what makes the demand for them so high, can offer an insight into the social, cultural and political contexts that have meant that female audiences have gravitated so empathically to such texts, and as such validate the significance of these oft delegitimised cultural products (Levine: 3).

One of the most concerning elements of the debate surrounding chick lit is the fact that much of the derision the genre is met with comes from women and is aimed at women. For instance, whilst Chairing the 1999 Women’s Prize for Fiction, Baroness Lola Young, stated that the work being produced by British female writers “tended to fall into two categories. There were ones by thirtysomethings, quite insular and parochial...[and] the more traditional novels...tended towards the domestic in a piddling sort of way” (qtd. in Parker: 3). Emma Parker edited the anthology *Contemporary British Women Writers* (2002) partly in response to Young’s comments,

with the intention of challenging “misconceptions and glib generalisations about ‘domestic’ fiction...[and to] defend women’s lives as a suitable subject for fiction and challenge the assumptions that an interest in the details of everyday life means a text is devoid of depth” (6). Young also faced controversy when she publicly lamented the “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 was to life” (qtd. in Davis-Kahl: 19). This demonstrates the extent to which women’s writing is met with dismissal, particularly if it concerned with their own lives, experiences, thoughts or feelings. With this thesis I aim to demonstrate the value that can be found within how women present everyday lives in literature, particularly when examined alongside the sociocultural contexts and ideologies of the time in which the work was written.

1.6 Historical Contexts of the Chick Lit Debate

This is not a new debate, in fact as long as there has been women writers there has been a tradition of discounting their work and their readers, and much of this criticism has attempted to “justify the assumption that novels by women would be recognizably inferior to those by men” (Showalter: 63). Female writers have long struggled with achieving recognition for their work, and as Rebecca Traister states, the tendency to dismiss “certain literary trends as feminine rubbish...has a history as long as the popular fiction itself”. Since the birth of the English novel in the 18th century, critics have bemoaned “the intellect-eroding effects of sentimental fiction” and continuously worked to mark out women’s writing as inferior to men’s (ibid.). There have been numerous explanations given in attempt to justify this assumption, for instance women were seen to have a limited experience of life, due to their lack of access to education, careers and political influence amongst other things, and therefore “women could [not] express more than half of life” (Showalter: 65-66). However, the fact that criticisms such as this exist today, in an age where women have a far greater access to education and employment, and can write about their lived experiences in these areas, suggests that these assumptions and biases are entrenched far deeper within the societal

consciousness, and reflects an attitude in which women and their experiences continue to be deemed as inferior.

Writing in 1998, Lana F. Rakow argued that until relatively recently female writers “were scorned by the male intellectual elite because of their “low-brow” appeal” (282). However, I would argue, that while there are now far more critically acclaimed women authors, a culture remains where what is perceived as “low-brow”, in this case chick lit, is continually dismissed as trivial and irrelevant. Moreover, this dismissal now extends to not just the male intellectual elites, but the females (such as Bainbridge and Lessing) too. In the 19th century female authors were also critiquing their peers. For instance, in 1856 George Eliot published the essay *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, in which she argues that the lack of regulation over who can write has resulted in “the fatal seduction of novel writing to incompetent women” (1469). These novels, Eliot suggests, are filled with a “particular quality of silliness...the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic” (1461). The publication of this essay by Eliot is somewhat reminiscent of Merrick’s *This is Not Chick Lit*, and her language is clearly mirrored by statements made by Bainbridge, further demonstrating the endurance of this debate.

Showalter writes that in the 18th-19th centuries, the lack of female literary predecessors setting an example for other budding female authors to follow, meant that women’s writing became “bitextual...a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one” (xv). This then continued to reinforce such assumptions, and meant women were reluctant to write about their own experiences. Eventually, however, this came into being and women’s issues and thoughts began to be explored throughout literary forms, allowing for the creation of a new female literary tradition. Jane Austen was an advocate for women’s fiction and stated that such work, “for all their incidental silliness, are important enough in women’s negotiation with the world to be worth defending against detractors” (Blair: 21-22). She also used her novels, such as *Northanger Abbey* for instance, to make a case opposing the tendency for

women writers to publicly criticise one another, instead urging them to unite against male critics: “Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body” (19), she pleads, rallying for collective solidarity between women writers, and their opportunities to relay female experiences through female voices. Showalter states that “when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation” (9). This can further be seen in the varying claims from authors and scholars that Jane Austen is the mother of chick lit (see Milynowski and Jacobs; Swendson), and the fact that Helen Fielding used *Pride and Prejudice* as inspiration for the plot of *BJD*.

However, as Mary Ryan states, the establishment of a female literary tradition “gave rise to its own problem, namely that women’s fiction was set apart from men’s, which was still viewed by many as “Real Writing”” (79). In other words, men were seen to “write about what’s important; women write about what’s important to women” (Mazza: 28). Virginia Woolf wrote on this matter in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), arguing that:

...it is the masculine values that prevail...football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room (74).

Taking into account the debate surrounding chick lit novels, it seems not much has changed in the decades since Woolf wrote this. In a somewhat modern day iteration of Woolf’s defence of women’s writing, chick lit author Jennifer Weiner argues, “It’s sexist when critics automatically relegate anything concerning young women’s lives to the beach-trash Dumpster bin – especially when they’re automatically elevating anything about young men’s lives to the exalted spheres of Literature” (qtd. in Davis-Kahl: 19). In order to counter such assumptions it is necessary to devote more critical and academic attention to overlooked writing by women, such as chick lit, instead

advocating for the value that can be found within such works, particularly with regard to women's experiences and sociocultural contexts.

1.7 Conclusions:

While recounting the reaction to their call for proposals for their anthology, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2006), Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, recall the fact that they “also received an astonishing number of e-mail messages from students grateful to see someone in the academic world taking their interest in chick lit seriously”, adding that they “have since discovered that many of those women had been – and are being – discouraged by their (mostly female) professors...from considering chick lit a legitimate area of scholarship” (6). With this thesis I will contribute to an ever-growing body of chick lit scholarship, making a case for the genre as a valid site of literary analysis. As Davis-Kahl suggests, then surely “Dismissing chick lit as unimportant diminishes the authors' voices, perspectives, and their experiences to the point of exclusion”. She adds that “Chick lit firmly belongs in the history and evolution of fiction – fiction in general and fiction by women – because of its popularity, its accessibility to the reader, and because it represents issues that modern women face” (20). As such, in this thesis I will analyse some of the more compelling themes that can emerge from chick lit novels, and examine what insight these novels, and the response they garnered, can give us into sociocultural issues in a postmodern, neoliberal society. Ferriss and Young also ask “Shouldn't feminist criticism be open to the latest crop of women's popular fiction?” (6), and in the following chapter I will assess chick lit's mediation with feminism. More specifically, I will draw upon theory from feminist and cultural scholars to examine the genre's relation to postfeminism, so as to show the ways in which an analysis of chick lit can critically engage with contemporary culture and contemporary academic debates.

Chapter Two

Stephanie Davis-Kahl raises the “troubling observation” that “much of [the] negativity towards chick lit comes from other women writers”, she questions why this may be and suggests that “one explanation may be that chick lit is seen as a betrayal of feminism and its call for equality” (19). Sarah Gormley supports this by stating that “For chick lit’s detractors...these novels are formulaic, vapid, and, moreover, anti-feminist.” As such, my own analysis of chick lit would be perfunctory without assessing the genre’s mediation with feminism. As I have established, chick lit is important as a media and social phenomenon, it can thus function as a useful tool for examining contemporary culture. This gains a particular significance when the genre is examined through a critical feminist lens, and in this chapter I aim to assess the genre’s relation to feminism, as well as what chick lit, and the response it has generated, suggests about modern attitudes to feminist ideologies. In doing so I will show that chick lit is a valid site of critical analysis, providing useful insights into sociocultural structures and realities.

2.1 Chick Lit and the Popular Romance Novel

I want to pay attention, firstly, to the popular romance novels of the 1970s and 80s⁵, which several critics see as closely related to chick lit. “The popular romance market exploded in the early 1970s”, and since then many romance writers have enjoyed prolific careers “with extraordinary production rates, longevity, and sales” (Harzewski, 2011: 27)⁶. Significant to my research is the fact that the popular romance boomed alongside the proliferation of second-wave feminist manifestos and, as Harzewski states, the two coexisted in a rather antagonistic manner (2006: 37). Feminists and academics often levelled criticisms at the popular romance novel, Germaine Greer in *The*

⁵ I will be referring to these works as “popular romance novels” throughout, and by this I mean the commercial romance fiction of the 1970s and 80s, typically published by Harlequin, Mills & Boon and the like.

⁶ For instance, household name Danielle Steel has published 174 books since 1973, all of which have been bestsellers, and her books have sold over 650 million copies; and Barbara Cartland, dubbed the “True Queen of Romance” by *Vogue*, wrote 723 books over more than seven decades, selling more than 1 billion copies (Harzewski, 2011: 27).

Female Eunuch (1970), for instance, offers one of the earliest critiques of the popular romance. Greer viewed these novels as “mush” and “trash”, with heroines that were “utterly ineffectual”, arguing that the books attempted to thwart female liberation and maintain a patriarchal order (185). Similarly, Ann Douglas views the popular romance novel as portraying a “duel of sexual stupidity” between “emotional illiterates” in a “totally anti-feminist world” (26). If we compare these views on the popular romance novel given during the 1970s and 80s with journalist Anna Weinberg’s critique of chick lit, for instance, then the similarities are obvious. Weinberg almost echoes Greer when she argues that “inside their dust jackets covered with shopping bags, martini glasses, shoes or purses, many of these titles really are trash” (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 2006: 9), or take novelist Jennifer Belle’s claim that chick lit is “undermining the woman’s movement” (qtd. in Harzewski, 2011: 6). Writers, critics and scholars continue to reject popular women’s fiction not only for its dubious status as “literature”, as touched on in the previous chapter, but also its questionable relation to feminism. Therefore, it is worth not only investigating how much chick lit has evolved from the “patriarchal narrative of romance” novels (Ferriss and Young: 4), but also to consider why so many critics continue to dub popular women’s fiction as anti-feminist.

Chick lit novels are frequently cited as being descendants of the popular romance novel (Harzewski, 2011; Gill and Herdieckerhoff; Merrick; Montoro)⁷, and there are definite similarities⁸. For instance, as A. Rochelle Mabry states, both “are women’s genres, not only in their focus on female voice and narrative...but also in their direct marketing and specific appeal to female consumers” (192). There are also some resemblances in plot, with chick lit predominantly replicating romance conventions in the protagonist’s search for, and eventual union with, her “Mr. Right”. Although Stephanie Harzewski rightly adds that “this is not requisite”, and frequently “Mr.

⁷ It is also perhaps interesting to note that romance scholarship has had a significant influence on chick lit scholarship, with many chick lit scholars citing both Janice Radway and Tania Modleski’s studies on the romance genre as major influences for their own research (see Mißler, 2017; Montoro, 2012; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006).

⁸ See Mabry, 2006; Harzewski, 2011; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006, for a more complete discussion of the similarities and differences between chick lit and popular romance novels.

Right turns out to be Mr. Wrong or Mr. Maybe” (2006: 37). Another difference is that whilst the heroine of the typical popular romance tends to be “impossibly beautiful” and “undeniably wholesome” (Mabry: 193), the chick lit protagonist is characterised as much more of an Everywoman, and as such tends to be met with a greater sense of identification from readers. Additionally, unlike the popular romance novel, chick lit is deliberately humorous so as to further foster a sense of recognition and relatability between the reader and the novel’s protagonist. It can also be argued that the differences between the heroines of popular romance novels and chick lit reflects the changing roles of women within society. For instance the typical heroine of the popular romance would not have a job since the genre’s formula tends to demand that the heroine be undividedly committed to the pursuit of romantic fulfilment, and if she were to have employment of any kind this would only be so as to fulfil a certain plot function. The chick lit protagonist, on the other hand, is almost always employed, with various scenes and plot points, and sometimes entire novels such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), being dedicated to the heroine at work; the predominantly rural dwellings of the romantic heroine are also a stark difference to the urban setting of chick lit novels. These distinctions serve as reminders that although chick lit may be indebted to the popular romance novel to an extent, then the two are still different in many respects and the genres are ultimately independent of one another. Chick lit seemingly offers a more realistic portrayal of women and their positions in contemporary society as opposed to the popular romance, and it is therefore interesting to assess the genres’ relations to sociocultural actualities during their respective evolutions.

So, as I’ve mentioned, the popular romance novel rose to prominence in the 1970s, and Ann Barr Snitow has attributed this boom to the idea that these novels were able to offer a more traditional and fixed image of the exchanges between men and women during a time with “confusing, shifting and frightening” social actualities (150). In other words, during a period of increasing social change, particularly with regard to women’s roles and freedoms, popular romance

novels were seen as offering an image of conventional gender dynamics and relationships that proved a reassuring comfort to many readers. Gradually though, social changes - predominantly those achieved by the second-wave feminist movement, such as improved education and employment prospects for women, shifts in attitudes towards marital and domestic roles, and increased sexual freedom - began to render the popular romance out of touch with the experiences and interests of modern, young female audiences. As romance authors were getting older and fewer younger writers were turning to the genre, publishing houses such as Harlequin found themselves needing to adapt so as to appeal to younger audiences – Isabel Swift, VP for Harlequin Enterprises, admitted that “There was this realization that we weren’t finding an incredible new crop of twenty-something romance writers” (qtd. in Harzewski, 2011: 32). New markets began to appear as urban, single women with disposable incomes emerged as consumers, and these shifts helped to facilitate the rapid development of the chick lit genre. Following the success of titles such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Harlequin launched their own chick lit imprint, Red Dress Ink, which published chick lit titles from 2001 to 2008 and helped launch the careers of numerous leading chick lit novelists (ibid.). Chick lit aimed to offer a more realistic and contemporary insight into the lives of this new generation of women, the lives of those that were experiencing first-hand the effects of the changes implemented by the second-wave of feminism. And just as the proliferation of popular romance novels related to sociocultural circumstances, so too did that of chick lit. As Heike Mißler suggests, “chick lit became an incontestable moment of the nineties and early 2000s” (1), and it is therefore useful to examine the genre as both a product and a reflection of this period in recent history.

2.2 Generational Divides in Feminism

It is noticeable that many of the criticisms levelled at chick lit and its writers, particularly those concerning the genre’s portrayal of womanhood and its ambiguous feminist stance, are coming from a generation of older women; some, such as Bainbridge and Lessing, are now in fact dead (Ferriss and Young: 9). This is somewhat demonstrative of the wider dynamic, and differing

ideologies, between women of different generations – namely, those that grew up during the activism of second-wave feminism, and those that grew up experiencing the effects, and enjoying the successes, of the second-wave. More explicitly, this generational divide can be observed through the differing reactions to chick lit. Ferriss and Young suggest that “Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism...and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life” (ibid.). Chick lit author Jenny Colgan responded to the comments made by Bainbridge with an opinion piece for the *Guardian*, and her argument relates to this generational debate:

The thing is, though, that if you're not a young woman (and I don't mean that in a nasty way, just that things are different), it is very difficult to understand our lives now. We really are the first generation who have grown up with education as a right; with financial independence; with living on our own and having far too many choices about getting married (while watching our baby boomer parents fall apart), having children (while watching our elder sisters run themselves ragged trying to do everything), and hauling ourselves up through the glass ceiling.

Chick lit as a genre came into fruition at a time when several conflicting ideas surrounding feminism, femininity, and womanhood were in existence. The generations of women coming of age after the activism of the second-wave movement, the women who are predominantly the writers and readers of chick lit have found themselves in an ambiguous position. They are the beneficiaries of the successes of the second-wave feminists with regard to increased education and professional opportunities, but they nevertheless are still faced with pressures to meet the societal expectations, as well as their own personal desires, for romantic, and possibly maternal, fulfilment. Put simply, these women are experiencing conflicting demands to fit the feminist model of the strong and independent woman, whilst meeting the traditional expectations of femininity. In the above excerpt Colgan details the conflicting possibilities faced by the new generation of women – the problem of

too much choice and the dilemma of having it all. I believe that chick lit was largely born out of, and in response to, the sociocultural circumstances that have led women to this position, and the novels are an attempt of expressing and negotiating this struggle.

2.3 Third-Wave Feminism

As Mißler details, “most chick-lit authors writing today were born in the late 1960s or 1970s” (19)⁹.

This means that while they were too young, or not even born, during the height of second-wave activism, they were part of one of the first generations to reap the benefits of the movement.

Furthermore they were coming of age in the crucial decades that followed in which new forms of feminist, or at least women-centred, movements, were beginning to infiltrate and disseminate within popular culture and media forms. Following on from second-wave politics, a new era of feminism developed which is commonly referred to as third-wave feminism, while I am hesitant to use this term as it is arguably a period that is still ongoing and its defining features and characteristics are not firmly established, it is important that I briefly touch on this movement. Third-wave feminism emerged in the mid-1990s, and was mostly formed by those born in the 1960s and 70s who “came of age in a media-saturated and culturally and economically diverse milieu” (Brunell). The third-wave of feminism was largely “made possible by the greater economic and professional power and status achieved by women of the second-wave” (ibid.), however it also contains “an implicit rejection of many tenets held by second-wave feminists” (Genz and Brabon: 76). Whilst second-wave feminism was characterised by collective and political activism, and the intention of eradicating systematic oppression against women, third-wave feminism is far more concerned with the individual, and empowerment through freedom of choice and the reclaiming of femininity. As R. Claire Snyder states, “third-wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it...and actively play with femininity” (179).

⁹ “E.g., Sophie Kinsella and Alisa Valdes in 1969; Jennifer Weiner and Erica Kennedy in 1970; Jenny Colgan in 1972; Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus in 1974; Lauren Weisberger in 1977” (Mißler: 19).

Third-wave feminist activism has been classed as a “project of reclamation” (Snyder: 186), in which women reclaimed sexuality and femininity as sources of empowerment, embracing language and aesthetics – makeup, high heels, girliness, and words such as “bitch”, for example – that the second-wave had worked to reject. As a result, the third-wave “has been dismissed by a number of critics as an objectifying and commoditising trap that makes women buy into patriarchal stereotypes of female appearance and neo-liberal individualist practices” (Genz and Brabon: 76). Angela McRobbie, for instance, has expressed concern over the “emergence of new forms of sexual, social and economic assertiveness among young women”, which was “not in any way constructed as political” (qtd. in Mißler: 17). She warned that in its attempts to erase “presumed tensions between feminism and femininity” this depoliticised feminism was in fact “withholding a critique of normative femininity” and instead maintaining gendered stereotypes and patriarchal structures (ibid.). McRobbie sees this as an effect of the “wider circulation of feminist values across the landscape of popular culture” (265). This reflects the second-wave concern that a shift in feminist practices towards popular and media culture would result in a depoliticization and individualisation of the feminist movement, dismantling their deconstructive efforts that exposed the patriarchal operations within popular media forms, particularly those targeted at women. Whilst it is true that third-wavers place an importance on popular culture, they also express the benefits of studying and critiquing it. For instance, the editors of *Bitch* magazine view pop culture as “the marketplace of ideas”, and as such they advocate for “thinking critically about every message the mass media sends”, and “loudly articulating what’s wrong and what’s right with what we see” (qtd. in Snyder: 178). As I will show with my analysis of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in the following chapter, an engagement with popular culture and media can be worthwhile in that it provides an insight into societal pressures and expectations, and this is particularly apparent when observed alongside the contexts in which the media was produced.

2.4 Chick Lit and Feminism

Debate continues to surround what exactly chick lit's relationship with feminism is, and Mißler suggests that most chick lit writers grew up in a period in which they were "feminism-aware without necessarily identifying themselves as feminist" (20). As such, the novels they produced, in their reflection of popular culture, "include issues that they may not openly refer to as feminist, but that do indeed belong to the very core of feminist politics", such as themes of body image, financial and emotional independence from men, workplace equality, and combining career success and motherhood (ibid.). The seemingly paradoxical idea of being feminism-aware but not necessarily feminist identifying is summarised by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards who state that "For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it - it's simply in the water" (17). More explicitly, the suggestion here is that the mainstreaming of feminist ideas, such as women's right to work, education, and their own bodies, has meant that these issues have gradually become validated to such an extent that they are now accepted as common sense. This shift in attitudes certainly played a role in enabling chick lit novels to get written, novels which, as Mißler suggests "all play with their feminist legacy, as well as with the freedoms and perceived new obligations it brought about" (19). It is therefore fundamental for my analysis to acknowledge that chick lit's emergence was largely born out of the sociocultural circumstances, particularly the conflicting feminist consciousnesses, of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to recognise that chick lit novels are both a product of and a reflection of such contexts, and they can therefore be positioned at the intersection of various discourses on womanhood and women's experiences within popular culture at this time. In addition, as I have touched on, the producers and consumers of chick lit came of age in an era where "formative understandings of, and identifications with, feminist ideas have been almost exclusively within pop culture" (Hollows and Moseley: 2). Subsequently, chick lit can be viewed as both an outcome, and a continuation of this, and a further example of the intersection of contemporary womanhood and popular culture.

While the status of feminism during the 1990s and 2000s could be viewed as third-wave feminism, many critics suggest that this is a period that has been “particularly dominated by postfeminist themes and debates” (Negra: 5). The late 1990s were a period of social flux, and the dominant ideology of neoliberalism impacted manifestations of feminism, resulting in a shift from a collective to an individual focus, predominantly focused with issues of identity, choice and individual success. There are several overlaps in definitions between third-wave feminism and postfeminism¹⁰, largely due to the fact that both are firmly embedded within neoliberalism and discourses of capitalism, encouraging “women to concentrate on their private lives and consumer capacities as the sites for self-expression and agency” (Genz, 2006: 337-338). Both share a focus on popular media, but, as Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters note, postfeminism has increasingly “become the lens through which contemporary discussions of the relationship between popular culture and feminism are most often refracted” (13), and I will therefore be exploring chick lit’s relation to postfeminism for the remainder of this chapter. Ferriss states that “it has become critical commonplace to consider chick-lit novels as part of postfeminist culture” (178), and Harzewski claims that chick lit is “the most culturally visible form of postfeminist fiction” (2011: 8). But what exactly is postfeminism, and how does it relate to chick lit?

2.5 Postfeminism: Characteristics, Impact, and Relation to Chick Lit

As Ferriss suggests, “little common agreement exists about the definition of postfeminism” (178), and “it was during the 1990s that the term became concretized, both as a discursive phenomenon and as a buzzword” (Tasker and Negra: 8). Angela McRobbie defines postfeminism as “a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined” and undone (11). Postfeminism is also “inherently contradictory”, in that it “suggests that it is the very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture” (Tasker and Negra: 8),

¹⁰ See Braithwaite (2002) for a more detailed overview of the differences between postfeminism and third-wave feminism.

in other words, “Feminism is taken into account, but only to be shown to be no longer necessary” (McRobbie: 17). More explicitly, postfeminism positions feminism “as an historically specific outlook that once made an important intervention, but is now no longer necessary” (Levine: 5) – due to the abundance of freedom of choice women seemingly possessed at the turn of the 21st century, postfeminist logic deems gender equality as accomplished, so, as Gormley suggests, “feminist campaigns for...equal opportunities are believed to have been met rendering feminism no longer relevant”. As such, postfeminism “relies upon a fundamental contradiction – feminism is both incorporated but simultaneously reviled” (Budgeon: 281). As Tasker and Negra suggest, “postfeminist discourses rarely explicitly denounce feminism” (5), they in fact engage with feminist rhetoric through the principles of “autonomy, independence and freedom of choice” (Gormley). However, as McRobbie theorises, these ideals are caught in a “double entanglement”, by which she means that they coexist alongside “neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life” that work to encourage “choices” that conform to societal norms and dismantle feminist politics (12). These operations largely occur through “through structures of power within popular culture and mass media”, which facilitated postfeminism’s emergence as a dominating discursive system during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Tasker and Negra: 1-2). Negra describes how, as female centred popular media proliferated in the late 1990s, the emphasis on celebrity consumerism and self-help formulated models for a “successful” life heightened, and the landscape of popular culture became increasingly concerned with women’s life choices (2). McRobbie, too, argues that postfeminism and its impacts are predominantly manifested in popular media and culture, she explicitly discusses postfeminism in terms of chick lit, suggesting that novels such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* work to construct a new gender regime by normalising “post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice” (21-22). Personal choice and individual freedoms are inherent characteristics of postfeminism, but, as Negra suggests, “postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within

firm limits” (5; see also Gill and Herdieckerhoff: 499). In other words, women’s supposed freedoms are in fact illusory as they are regulated, by structures such as those within popular media, so as to fit within postfeminist norms and expectations; so, as McRobbie states, within postfeminist culture, choice operates as a modality of constraint (19). By conducting an academic analysis of chick lit novels, we are able to assess the ways in which these texts either *reflect* postfeminist societal pressures or *contribute* towards them.

Postfeminism operates in tandem with neoliberalism, with the discourses of one facilitating the other and vice versa (Gill and Scharff: 6). An emphasis on individualism and consumerism is a key characteristic of both concepts, and Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue “that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” (7). The social changes that have facilitated postfeminism are the same as the ones that have positioned the single female with a disposable income as the ideal consumer, and as such she “finds herself the recurrent target of advertisers, centralised in commodity culture to a largely unprecedented degree” (Negra: 5). Here, the woman is expected to feel empowered by the consumer options available to her, and in this way postfeminism utilises “consumption as a strategy...for the production of the self” (Tasker and Negra: 2). In order to achieve a certain lifestyle, a lifestyle inspired by celebrity culture and perpetrated through popular media, women are encouraged to “select the correct commodities” so as to attain it (Harzewski, 2011: 10). This lifestyle typically requires “having it all”, and failure to manage private and personal satisfaction often leaves women unable to meet the demands of the “self” they desire, to remedy this they must continue to consume (Negra: 5). Questions therefore arise as to why, in a time where women are perceived as having more choice and freedoms than ever before, do so few “actually seem to find any cause for celebration” (Negra: 5), more explicitly, why do these women feel more insecure in their own identities than ever before? Through an

investigation of chick lit and the issues they present we are able to gain more of an inclination to why this may be.

As I've touched on throughout this chapter, "the lived experiences of femininity have become increasingly complex" (Budgeon: 279), which has resulted in the emergence of the dilemma of "having it all". As a result of the abundance of choice available to women after second-wave feminism, they are expected to have "the successful combination of career, personal and family life, and conventionally attractive physical appearance" (Levine: 8). However, in a postfeminist culture and rapidly changing social order "the discourses of female success require interrogation" (Budgeon: 284), this interrogation can occur through an analysis of chick lit novels, and in the following chapter I have examined the way in which *Bridget Jones's Diary* exposes "success" as constructed within the confines of postfeminist, neoliberal expectations. Likewise, Imelda Whelehan suggests that through chick lit, "writers such as Helen Fielding offered a view of women crippled by choice and seeing the relative freedoms their generation inherited as themselves a tyranny" (2005: 6), and similarly Harzewski argues that whilst chick lit heroines "stand as direct beneficiaries of the women's liberation movement...now the problem is too many choices" (2006: 37). As such, chick lit can be read as a reflection of women's contemporary experiences, with the protagonist typically "struggling to make sense of the world" and their own identity (Lockwood: 61; see also Perrin: 75).

2.6 Conclusions

Context is crucial when examining the feminist implications of any text. By studying chick lit against the ideological and cultural contexts in which it was produced critics are able to observe the ways in which these texts relate to the dominant discourses of the time, particularly with regard to gender roles and expectations within society. In this chapter I have provided an overview of the ideological backgrounds that were existent when chick lit was at its most prolific, this is useful not only to gain a more complete understanding of certain themes within chick lit novels – it can also

enhance readings of the texts in the present as critics can draw upon contemporary feminism. The current era of feminism is popularised and accessible, feminism is a major part of cultural discourse and is celebrated by a majority of women. Thus, when critically engaging with chick lit now, it is possible to more clearly detect feminist (or non-feminist) messages within the novels. In addition to this, by reading these works from a position of distance one is able to observe how feminist ideologies have adapted from when these novels were written to the present day, as well as seeing which issues women continue to face. As Shari Benstock notes, “Scholarly attention to chick lit allows for an ideal confluence of gender, genre, and generation”, allowing feminist critics from varying generations to “assess where we are now” (253). Or, as Ferriss and Young suggest, chick lit can act as an accessible “starting point for intergenerational discussion of feminism” (6), and I believe this is an area of study that would prove a worthwhile for further research possibilities beyond this thesis.

Drawing upon the critical theory regarding postfeminism I have outlined in this chapter, in the following section I will analyse Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and investigate what insight the novel can provide into women’s experiences and the societal pressures they face. I will analyse the text alongside its sociocultural contexts and ideological background, and in doing so I will demonstrate the ways in which chick lit texts relate to broader issues, highlighting the benefits of academic attention towards the genre.

Chapter Three

3.1 “An Exceptionally Bad Start”: Introducing Bridget Jones

Bridget Jones's Diary (BJD) was written by Helen Fielding and published in the UK in 1996, and 1998 in the US. The novel, which arose from Fielding's weekly columns in the Independent, providing “an exaggerated portrayal of the author's own experiences as a single urban woman” (Harsewski: 58), became a huge commercial success. Along with its sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999), the books generated over 15 million sales in over 40 countries (Mißler: 9) – and the third instalment in the series *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013) sold 50,000 copies in its first day (O'Brien) – as well as producing a successful film franchise. *BJD* also won Book of the Year at the British Book Awards in 1998, and in 2007 *Guardian* readers voted it “one of the 10 novels that best defined the twentieth century”, and, significantly, the novel that best represented the nineties (Mißler: 9). Bridget was dubbed “a representative of a zeitgeist”, and became “in short, a cultural reference” (ibid.). Moreover, *BJD* is credited as one of the defining texts of the chick lit genre, so much so that it has been suggested that one of the genre's aesthetic features might be some kind of book-cover reference to *BJD*, for example: “If you liked *Bridget Jones's Diary*, you'll love this” or “This year's Bridget Jones” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff: 489; Mißler: 10). Milynowski and Jacobs declare that the publication of *BJD* “changed the world of women's fiction forever”, adding that this shows that “clearly, women were ready for these types of characters” (11). In this chapter I will explore *BJD* and the subsequent effect it had on women's fiction, examining what insight this novel and its reception can provide into sociocultural contexts, particularly with regard to postfeminism, and contemporary women's experiences. In doing so I will demonstrate the benefits of dedicating academic attention chick lit novels, supporting my case for the genre as a worthy site for academic analysis.

In a postmodern age characterised by constant social change, Bridget is facing an uncertainty with regard to her identity, and the novel thus “portrays womanhood and gender relations in many

contradictory facets” (Mißler: 10). It details Bridget’s attempts to establish an identity and achieve self-acceptance, whilst negotiating the tensions of “feminist notions of empowerment and agency as well as patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty and heterosexual coupledness” so as to meet societal expectations (Genz, 2010: 100). The reception of the novel suggests she is not the only woman facing these struggles:

I’ve talked to women all over the place at book signings – Japan, America, Scandinavia, Spain – and what they most relate to is the massive gap between the way women feel they’re expected to be and how they actually are. These are complicated times for women. Bridget is groping through the complexities of dealing with relationships in a morass of shifting roles, and a bombardment of idealised images of modern womanhood. It seems she’s not the only one who’s confused (Fielding, qtd. in Whelehan, 2002a: 17).

This sensation of identification is mirrored in the following collected statements from British newspaper reviews: “Bridget Jones is no mere fictional character, she’s the Spirit of the Age;” “Her diary presents a perfect zeitgeist of single female woes;” “It rings with the unmistakable tone of something that is true to the marrow and captures what...it is like to be female;” “Any woman of a certain age can recognise elements of Bridget in herself;” “Indeed she is far more than the patron saint of single women: she is everyman, or rather, every person. She is the most enchanting heroine for the millennium”¹¹. This praise for the novel further indicates the emphatic reception it was met with, particularly from readers who felt a strong sense of identification with Bridget, leading to what Imelda Whelehan dubbed the “that’s me phenomenon” (2002a). André Bazin has written on the ways in which novels can function as “myth makers”, in the way that their characters are capable of transcending the novel by entering public consciousness and becoming recognisable

¹¹ This paragraph is constructed from quotes from reviews which appear on the back jackets and inside pages of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*. The reviewers are, in order of appearance, Melanie McDonagh in *The Evening Standard*; an unnamed reviewer in the *Sunday Express*; Nicola Shulman in *The Times Literary Supplement*; Sally Emerson in the *Daily Mail*; Rachel Simhon in the *Daily Telegraph*; Virginia Blackburn in the *Express*; and Jilly Cooper. See Maddison, Stephen and Merl Storr. “The Edge of Reason: the Myth of Bridget Jones” in *At the Interface: Continuity and Transformation in Culture and Politics*. Hands, Joss and Eugenia Siapera eds. (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2001) p.14

outside of their literary origins (23). Shelley Cobb applies this principle to Bridget, suggesting that she became synonymous with single women in the cultural imagination, the mass identification she prompted “has created a Bridget who “exists” and functions transtextually as a distinct but malleable image of contemporary womanhood, a postfeminist icon of the late twentieth century” (283). It is key here that Cobb dubs Bridget a “postfeminist icon”, as this is one of the primary critiques levelled at her and the novel. McRobbie, for instance, views the novel as “distinctly postfeminist”, in that it “gently [chides] the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent” (12).

In the previous chapter I outlined the shifts within feminism that took place in the 1990s, and it is therefore useful to examine the text within these contexts, and see how *BJD* relates, and responds, to the postfeminist culture in which it was produced. As with chick lit as a whole, debate surrounds *BJD* as to whether it is a work of postfeminist fiction that promotes and reinforces harmful, gendered standards and expectations, or if it is a smart, satire tackling the issues and pressures faced by modern women within a postfeminist society. In this chapter I will be supporting the latter, arguing that although *BJD* can be read as both a product and a reflection of postfeminist culture, this does not necessarily mean that the novel is an endorsement of a postfeminist sensibility. Rather, I believe, that through *BJD*, Helen Fielding offers a commentary on this society and the impacts it can have on the modern woman, and therefore it is a useful insight into a certain cultural moment and a worthwhile site of academic analysis.

Throughout the novel Bridget strives to be what she believes to be the perfect woman. She obsessively worries about her weight, ageing and attractiveness to men; feels the pressure of having a career as well as those posed by the constant societal reminders about her so-called body clock; and is torn between feminist notions of self-respect and independence and traditional, romantic expectations. All of which fuel her constant self-improvement efforts, assisted by the contradictory

and generally nonsensical advice of glossy magazines and self-help books. Fielding, in my opinion, thus provides a smart and satirical commentary on postfeminist society, demonstrating the impossibility of having it all, and the fact that it is okay not to. The novel begins with Bridget's New Year's resolutions, listed in two columns on either side of the opening pages (fig. 1) – the reader is immediately introduced to the neuroses and obsessions that motivate Bridget's all-consuming self-improvement goals – and over the course of the novel we see her humorously attempt at, and fail, the majority of them. These resolutions also show the extent of the pressures Bridget faces at the hands of a postfeminist society that measures success in terms of “having it all”: she must be thin, successful at her job, in a functional relationship, poised and kind as well as confident and assertive, intelligent and cultured as well as practical and athletic. During this chapter I will explore the pressures Bridget faces, and the way in which Fielding is able to expose and subvert them.

I WILL NOT

- “Drink more than fourteen alcohol units a week.
- Smoke.
- Waste money on: pasta-makers, ice-cream machines or other culinary devices which will never use; books by unreadable literary authors to put impressively on shelves; exotic underwear, since pointless as have no boyfriend.
- Behave sluttishly around the house, but instead imagine others are watching.
- Spend more than earn.
- Allow in-tray to rage out of control.
- Fall for any of following: alcoholics, workaholics, commitment phobics, people with girlfriends or wives, misogynists, megalomaniacs, chauvinists, emotional fuckwits or freeloaders, perverts.
- Get annoyed with Mum, Una Alconbury or Perpetua.
- Get upset over men, but instead be poised and cool ice-queen.

I WILL

- Stop smoking.
- Drink no more than fourteen alcohol units a week.
- Reduce circumference of thighs by 3 inches (i.e. 1½ inches each), using anti-cellulite diet.
- Purge flat of all extraneous matter
- Give all clothes which have not worn for two years or more to homeless.
- Improve career and find new job with potential.
- Save up money in form of savings. Poss start pension-also.
- Be more confident.
- Be more assertive.
- Make better use of time.
- Not go out every night but stay in and read books and listen to classical music.
- Give proportion of earnings to charity.
- Be kinder and help others more.
- Eat more pulses.

- Have crushes on men, but instead form relationships based on mature assessment of character.
- Bitch about anyone behind their backs, but be positive about everyone.
- Obsess about Daniel Cleaver as pathetic to have a crush on boss in manner of Miss Money Penny or similar.
- Sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete without boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend.
- Get up straight away when wake up in mornings.
- Go to gym three times a week not merely to buy sandwich.
- Put photographs in photograph albums.
- Make up compilation 'mood' tapes so can have tapes ready with all favourite romantic/dancing/rousing/feminist etc, tracks assembled instead of turning into drink-sodden DJ-style person with tapes scattered all over floor.
- Form functional relationship with responsible adult.
- Learn to programme video."

Fig. 1, *BJD*: 2-3.

3.2 “It is proved by surveys that happiness does not come from love, wealth or power but the pursuit of attainable goals: and what is a diet if not that?”: Diet Culture and the Self-Monitoring Subject in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

For Bridget, the diary serves as her means of self-examination and reflection, characteristics that McRobbie views as defining features of the postfeminist, self-monitoring subject within a neoliberal, individualist society (20). This is a symptom of the insecurity the postfeminist woman feels with regard to her identity, and for Bridget her sense of self, and subsequently, her sense of value, is deeply rooted within her physical appearance. As such, her attempts at dieting and self-monitoring are fuelled by the desire to meet societal expectations and standards of beauty that conform to postfeminist notions of “success”. The majority of diary entries list her daily intake of calories, alcohol units, cigarettes, and sometimes include other notes such as the number of negative thoughts, obsessive phone calls, and scratch card purchases. These are then positioned against Bridget’s own judgement criteria, with comments such as “v.g.” for her perceived ‘very good’ days, and her worse days marked with comments such as “repulsive”. Whelehan has taken issue with Bridget’s self-monitoring practices, and suggests that *BJD* “paint[s] a bleak picture”, of a woman “seeking control through the dutiful accounting of the day’s ‘sins’”, adding that “What is most depressing about the Bridget Jones effect is because people find echoes of their own struggle with

femininity in it, it somehow legitimates the measuring of one's own inadequacies through the body" (2002b: 22). However, this not only fails to credit readers with an ability to distinguish themselves from Bridget, but also neglects the idea that the portrayal of diet culture within *BJD* could be intentionally "depressing", in a way that, rather than "legitimizing" such practices, encourages the reader to identify Bridget's behaviours as unhealthy.

Furthermore, the criteria by which Bridget judges herself is often inconsistent, for example 23 cigarettes on the 3rd of January is "v.g." (17) and on the 18th of March is "v.v. bad" (81), additionally 3,100 calories on the 8th of January qualifies as "poor" (27) but 8,489 on the 29th of April is classed as "excellent" (111). As Leah Guenther suggests then this causes "the reader to question just how serious she is about the process of reform" (88). Another prime example of Bridget's inconsistencies comes after she wakes up in a panic about putting on weight in her sleep, she phones her friend Jude who advises her to "write down everything you've eaten, honestly, and see if you stuck to the diet" (74). Bridget then lists everything she ate the day prior, alongside the diet she was supposedly following:

Breakfast: hot-cross bun (Scarsdale Diet — slight variation on specified piece of wholemeal toast); Mars Bar (Scarsdale Diet — slight variation on specified half grapefruit)

Snack: two bananas, two pears (switched to F-plan as starving and cannot face Scarsdale carrot snacks). Carton orange juice (Anti-Cellulite Raw-Food Diet)

Lunch: jacket potato (Scarsdale Vegetarian Diet) and hummus (Hay Diet — fine with jacket spuds as all starch, and breakfast and snack were all alkaline-forming with exception of hot-cross bun and Mars: minor aberration)

Dinner: four glasses of wine, fish and chips (Scarsdale Diet and also Hay Diet — protein forming); portion tiramisu; peppermint Aero (pissed) (74).

It then dawns on her that it had "become too easy to find a diet to fit in with whatever you happen to feel like eating and that diets are not there to be pick and mixed but picked and stuck to", adding that this "is exactly what I shall begin to do once I've eaten this chocolate croissant" (75). As much as she shows an awareness of the requirements and rules of each diet, Bridget struggles to commit

to one, instead altering the requirements to fit her own behaviour and impulses. In fact, throughout the novel Bridget rarely makes a genuine attempt to stick to a diet, and she continually puts off making a permanent adjustment to her behaviour, instead tending to make excuses or provide justifications for her actions. By having Bridget, who is supposedly obsessed with dieting and self-improvement regimes, fail to stick to the rules she has placed on herself, Fielding is able to show the constraints and overall futility of diet culture, as well as offering a relatable image of a flawed woman.

Nevertheless, Bridget still blindly attempts to prescribe to the ideals of diet culture, and this is largely because she has been conditioned to. As we have seen, then she does not logically follow these diets, rather she does it because she sees it as the norm, and that it is thus expected of her if she wants to meet societal standards of beauty and success. This is made more explicit during a scene in which Bridget's best friend Tom is considering going on a diet after failing to win an Alternative Miss Universe competition, and he quizzes Bridget on how many calories there are in various food items. Bridget responds immediately and correctly to each question, believing calorie counting to be as much common knowledge as "one's alphabet or times tables." Tom tells Bridget she is "sick", but she believes that she is in fact "normal and no different from anyone else" (258). Prior to this Bridget admitted that she has "spent so many years being on a diet that the idea that you might actually need calories to survive has been completely wiped out of [her] consciousness", and she has instead "reached [a] point where [she] believe[s the] nutritional ideal is to eat nothing at all" (257). Clearly this is a very damaging way to think, but Bridget admits that she is so indoctrinated within diet culture that she has had all sense wiped from her consciousness, and here Fielding is able to demonstrate the impacts and dangers of diet culture. Furthermore, Bridget muses that she is "quite worried about Tom", adding that she thinks "taking part in a beauty contest has started to make him crack under the pressures we women have long been subjected to and he is becoming insecure, appearance obsessed and borderline anorexic" (258). Ironically, Bridget can

recognise unhealthy behaviours in others, but not herself. She is also aware that weight related issues stem from social pressures and gendered expectations, yet she continues to buy into this culture of dieting and self-improvement, observing and critiquing the pressures it places on women but doing little to counter them. This calls into question the subversive capability of *BJD*, however, it arguably also reflects the realities of many Western women.

Juliette Wells suggests that in chick lit novels “A heroine who is completely free of care about her looks and happily self-accepting is nowhere to be found...an absence that suggests that such a character is too unrealistic to appeal to image-conscious women readers” (59). The extent to which Bridget has been consumed with dieting shows the impacts of a culture that encourages body dissatisfaction in women; she therefore can be seen to offer a portrayal of issues that many contemporary women face, an idea that is supported by research on this topic. Professor Sarah Grogan, for instance, published her study *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children* (1999) around a similar time to *BJD*, in which she examines several body image studies performed in the UK, US and Australia in the late 20th century to highlight the pervasiveness of body dissatisfaction. She writes that “Slimness is seen as a desirable attribute for women in prosperous Western cultures, and is associated with self-control, elegance, social attractiveness, and youth”, and names 90s supermodels such as Elle MacPherson and Claudia Schiffer as epitomising the idealised body (25). She cites a 1986 study conducted by Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr who interviewed 200 British women of various ages, of these 200, 177 (88.5%) expressed concern or dissatisfaction with their body, and 153 (76.5%) claimed to have dieted in the past (32). These women described feeling that “their life would change for the better in some way if they lost weight, usually identified as an increase in self-confidence” (34), which is clearly a similar logic to Bridget. Charles and Kerr conclude that these women show “a strong dissatisfaction with their bodies, a dissatisfaction that was not confined to women who were dieting or trying to diet but was shared by almost all the women we spoke to” (qtd. in Grogan: 36). A more recent 2015 survey

of almost 10,000 Western women conducted by psychologists from the University of Westminster and the University of Vienna found that 89% of these women reported weight-based body dissatisfaction, with 84% expressing a desire to be thinner (Swami et al.). Additionally, this study found that 91% of women saw a discrepancy between their “ideal” body and their current body. Not only do these findings point to the fact that *BJD* offers a portrayal of the issues women face in regard to body image, but they also demonstrate the fact these issues continue to be relevant. With *BJD*, Fielding is able to demonstrate the futility in self-regulation and diet culture, suggesting that women need not be so concerned with their weight and try to find self-acceptance instead.

One way in which Fielding is able to subvert the assumptions surrounding the ideals of the “perfect body” comes when Bridget does reach her target weight. She jubilantly declares that “Today is a historic and joyous day. After eighteen years of trying to get down to 8st7 I have finally achieved it...I am thin” (105). That night she goes to a party at Jude’s house, but rather than being impressed, the other guests are shocked by Bridget’s appearance - Jude asks if she is “all right”, and tells her that she looks “really tired”, another friend comments that she looks “drawn” (106). Bridget leaves the party feeling crestfallen and deflated. Later that evening Tom phones her and says that she seemed “flat” and not her “usual self”, to which Bridget responds “I was fine. Did you see how thin I am?” She is met with silence until Tom admits that he thinks she “looked better before” (107). This exchange leaves Bridget feeling “empty and bewildered” and questioning what benefit has come from her years of dieting:

Eighteen years — wasted. Eighteen years of calorie- and fat-unit-based arithmetic. Eighteen years of buying long shirts and sweaters and leaving the room backwards in intimate situations to hide my bottom. Millions of cheesecakes and tiramisus, tens of millions of Emmenthal slices left uneaten. Eighteen years of struggle, sacrifice and endeavour — for what? Eighteen years and the result is 'tired and flat.' I feel like a scientist who discovers that his life's work has been a total mistake (107).

Through the character of Bridget, Fielding is able to demonstrate the impacts of a culture that fuels an insatiable pursuit of self-improvement, and insinuating that this is only possible if they conform to the ideals of beauty and body presented by false images in the media. Bridget struggles under the burden of these societal pressures, and Fielding instead aims to offer a message of self-acceptance. Furthermore, by having a protagonist who is hyper-aware of all her flaws but makes little genuine attempt to alter them, Fielding subverts the convention of presenting picture perfect women within popular media.

3.3 “Am going to change life: become well informed re: current affairs, stop smoking entirely and form functional relationship with adult man”: Bridget Jones and the Male-Motivated Quest for Self-Improvement

Neoliberalism was the dominant ideology of the 1990s, and two of the defining characteristics of this age were a focus on the individual and a shift towards self-regulation practices. Individualism within neoliberalist ideology is a result of a postmodern era that is characterised by constant change, subsequently resulting in a pressure on individuals to structure their own lives and form their own identity (see Bauman: viii-xii; Giddens: 14). Anthony Giddens has written on the ways in which, in a neoliberal society, “the concept of identity has become a process of becoming”, adding that “the self is the subject of multiple and on-going processes of revision, reform and choices” (5). Identity is thus chosen and constructed, and self-regulation is used as a means of identity formation which is expressed in the language of freedom and individual choice, however, this masks the fact that self-regulation tends to conform to societal expectations (see Kellner: 158). Sally Budgeon emphasises that identities are firmly embedded within the culture in which they are produced, and identity formation is only possible within the limits of this culture (282-283). In other words, in order for an identity to be recognised as valid it must meet the standards of the society in which it is produced. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim suggest, in a neoliberal society there is a distinct ethic of individual self-regulation as a means of self-fulfilment (22-23) – and this led to the establishment of a culture increasingly preoccupied with self-improvement means. Bridget

embodies the self-regulating subject, and she is an avid believer in the logic of self-help books, using their theories and guidelines as a means of rationalising her problems in the attempt of gaining control over, often uncontrollable, aspects of her life. However, over the course of the novel the reader constantly witnesses Bridget fail in her efforts, usually with humorous consequences. In doing so, Fielding is able to demonstrate the ways in which self-help and diet culture feed off societal pressures and function as a means of control over women, and she exposes the futility in blindly following such strategies.

After she finds out her boyfriend, Daniel, has been cheating on her, Bridget attempts to console herself: “Everything’s fine. Am going to get down to 8st 7lb again and free thighs entirely of cellulite. Certain everything will be all right then.” However, she eventually admits that her “plans to lose weight and change personality” were “only a complicated form of denial” (184), and an attempt to negate the “impact of Daniel’s hurtful and humiliating infidelity, since it had happened to [her] in a previous incarnation and would never have happened to [her] new improved self”. All of which was done with the intention “to make Daniel realize the error of his ways” (184-185). Not only does Bridget blame herself, rather than Daniel, for the cheating, but she also attempts to change and “improve” herself so as to win him back. This points to the idea that much of Bridget’s self-improvement efforts are motivated by the desire to appeal to men, demonstrating the fact that societal expectations are predominantly patriarchal ones, with value assigned to the women that conform to standards of desirability aligned with the male gaze, and as such men are able to control Bridget’s self-perceptions and self-value. For example, Bridget is ecstatic when Daniel first asks for her phone number: “Yesssss!...Am marvellous. Am irresistible Sex Goddess. Hurrah!” (26). However, once he does not immediately phone her she is left wondering “What’s wrong with me?” (27). This is indicative of a postfeminist return to prefeminist values, as bell hooks states, “before women’s liberation all females...were socialized by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested

solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men” (31).

Within postfeminism, as Rosalind Gill suggests, “women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on the condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy” (151). This can be seen in the way that, before her first date with Daniel, Bridget spends an “entire day” preparing and beautifying herself, leaving her “completely exhausted” (30). She then lists the complex and extreme processes of beautification she has undergone, comparing it to farm work:

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, eyebrows plucked, feet pumiced, skin exfoliated and moisturized, spots cleansed, roots dyed, eyelashes tinted, nails filed, cellulite massaged, stomach muscles exercised. 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. Sometimes I wonder what I would be like if left to revert to nature — with a full beard and handlebar moustache on each shin, Dennis Healey eyebrows, face a graveyard of dead skin cells, spots erupting, long curly fingernails like Struwelpeter, blind as bat and stupid runt of species as no contact lenses, flabby body flobbering around. Ugh, ugh. Is it any wonder girls have no confidence? (30)

Wells likens chick lit to women’s magazines, in that the novels immerse “the reader in a world in which the pursuit of beauty is never ending”, however, she adds that “what distinguishes chick lit from magazines is that its heroines frankly admit to the drain of energy and resources demanded by this pursuit, even as they persist in it” (61). This suggests that novels such as *BJD* aim to be representative of women’s realities and the societal pressures they are faced with, whilst at the same time demonstrating the constructed nature of femininity and the artificiality of the feminine ideal. In the above quotation, Bridget shows an awareness that standards of beauty are constructed by societal pressures, and that they are responsible for low confidence among women, however, she still participates in this culture, deeming it a necessity if she is to be validated as a suitable romantic

partner for Daniel. This points to how deeply rooted these expectations are within society and calls into question the conditions of women's supposed freedoms. Gill suggests that in a postfeminist culture, femininity is seen as a bodily property, which means that although women's bodies are their primary source of power, they are in need of "constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness" (148). As such, the postfeminist, female self-policing gaze is positioned in addition to the male judging gaze, with both working to impose further control upon women (Gill: 149). All of this, Gill suggests, is framed within the terms of personal choice and a right to self-definition, a logic that is flawed as it does not explain why every woman makes similar choices so as to look a particular way (153-154). Writing on this subject with Elena Herdieckerhoff, Gill questions why, if women are really just "pleasing themselves", the resulting valued look "is so similar: thin, toned, hairless body, etc." (499), thus exposing the illusory nature of postfeminist freedoms. In detailing the way in which femininity is constructed so as to conform to societal expectations of beauty, Fielding is also able to raise similar questions and pose an examination of processes of beautification and self-improvement.

3.4 *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women From Venus: Negotiating Feminism and Femininity in *Bridget Jones's Diary**

As outlined in the previous chapter, several critics view chick lit as anti-feminist, and argue that it instead conforms to, and subsequently reinforces, a postfeminist agenda that in fact recalls a prefeminist past. However, although I agree that chick can be read as a product of postfeminism, I do not think that the novels, in this case *BJD*, necessarily endorse postfeminist ideals; instead I believe that *BJD* represents the postfeminist realities faced by women and subsequently position them as a subject for critique. Additionally, to claim the novel as wholly feminist or antifeminist, inhibits a more nuanced reading of the text, overlooking the complicated relationship that Bridget herself has with feminism, and what this can tell us about contemporary ideologies. Whelehan

suggests that “contemporary women’s novels about women’s lives are ‘about’ feminism in that they offer any commentary on women’s lives”. She adds that, as such, the chick lit genre is “ripe for feminist interpretation and investigation”, especially *BJD* because it has a “substantial global appeal to women” which is therefore worth investigation (2004b: 38). Feminism is definitely present within the novel, and Guenther suggests that “a large portion of Bridget’s quest for self-definition...surfaces through her struggle to understand her place within feminism as a whole” (91). Even if Bridget does not explicitly identify as a feminist, then the ideology has had a strong impact on her life, and continues to influence her, particularly through the character of her friend Sharon.

The first reference to Sharon in the novel is alongside Susan Faludi’s feminist text, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), immediately drawing a connection between the two. This takes place at Bridget’s parents’ New Year’s party where she first meets, eventual beau, Mark Darcy. He asks Bridget if she has read anything good lately and she feels as though she cannot tell him truthfully that she is currently reading John Gray’s self-help bestseller *Men Are From Mars, Woman Are From Venus* (1992), so instead says she is reading *Backlash*¹². To the reader, Bridget admits that she hasn’t “exactly read it as such, but” feels as though she has “as Sharon has been ranting about it so much” (14). Here Bridget’s literary points of reference are indicative somewhat of her conflicting identities. *Men are From Mars...* is a self-help relationship guidebook which is based on the premise of innate, biological gender differences between men and women; Bridget fears that the subject matter of this book will reveal her to be vapid, self-interested and romantically desperate, so she instead tells Mark that she is reading *Backlash*. In doing so, Bridget aims to both impress Mark and put an end to their conversation (as she initially dislikes him), thus suggesting that Bridget finds *Backlash*, and the feminism she

¹² It is interesting, and somewhat ironic, that Fielding chose *Backlash* for Bridget in this instance. Faludi outlines the backlash as an internalised and pervasive modern sensibility that works to “try to push women back into their “acceptable roles”” (xxiii), and that “instead of assailing injustice, many women have learned to adjust to it” (57). This is in fact a critique that has been levelled at chick lit works such as *BJD*, with the suggestion being that the novels encourage a postfeminist, backlash ideology which then helps further integrate this view into society.

believes it encapsulates, as both impressive and repellent. Bridget's conflicting identity falls some place in between the self-help seeking Singleton of *Men are From Mars* and the independent and assertive feminist of *Backlash*, she is uncertain about which woman she wants to be.

In *BJD*, Sharon is a self-identified feminist and she is often presented as the voice of reason within the friendship group, giving Bridget the most accurate insight and sound, albeit firm, advice. For instance, after Bridget receives a Valentine's Day card from Daniel, Sharon warns that Bridget "should not allow [her] head to be turned by a cheap card and should lay off Daniel as he is not a very nice person and no good will come of it" (52), advice that is ultimately proved right but Bridget nevertheless struggles to follow. Furthermore, rather than recommending Bridget read a self-help book to deal with her problems and adjust her behaviour accordingly, as Jude does, Sharon instead promotes a method of feminist self-empowerment. For example, when Bridget phones her in a moment of loneliness and confusion, Sharon decrees "The only thing a woman needs in this day and age is herself" (286). However, at other points in the novel Sharon's character verges on the point of a feminist caricature. She is frequently described as "ranting", and these "rants" tend to be of a radical, man-hating tone. For example, she believes that men "are so catastrophically unevolved that soon they will just be kept by women as pets for sex" (77), and she frequently suggests that men are nothing more than "Stupid, smug, arrogant, manipulative, self-indulgent bastards", that "exist in a total Culture of Entitlement" (125, 127). What's more, these "rants" frequently take place whilst the girls are all quite drunk which somewhat undermines their content (125-127; 188). Nevertheless, Sharon's "rants" often emphasise the double standards and everyday sexist behaviours of men, and Cheryl A. Wilson asserts that Sharon "unapologetically champions female independence and criticizes men for exploiting feminine insecurities" (88).

Moreover, Bridget clearly admires Sharon and her views. She describes her as being "splendid" (127) and on "top form" (125) when delivering the "rants", and these "delicious night[s] of drunken feminist ranting" (125) leave Bridget feeling "v. empowered" (77). As a result, Sharon and her

feminist sentiments often provide Bridget with the momentum to reject unacceptable behaviour from men. When Daniel cancels a holiday with Bridget, she describes how “a huge neon sign started flashing with Sharon's head in the middle going, 'FUCKWITTAGE, FUCKWITTAGE'” (75, emphasis in original), and this enabled her to assert herself to Daniel: “Either go out with me and treat me nicely, or leave me alone. As I say, I am not interested in fuckwittage” (76). However, Bridget does tend to struggle to combine a feminist sense of self-respect and decisiveness with her desire for a relationship. After this encounter with Daniel she immediately feels “marvellous” and “v. pleased with self”, but 12 hours later she lies awake and feels “so unhappy about Daniel” (77). A similar occurrence happens earlier in the novel when after her first date with Daniel, he tells her he wants to keep things casual. Writing in her diary Bridget recounts the event:

Had it not been for Sharon and the fuckwittage...I think I would have sunk powerless into his arms. As it was, I leapt to my feet, pulling up my skirt...'That is just such crap...How dare you be so fraudulently flirtatious, cowardly and dysfunctional? I am not interested in emotional fuckwittage. Goodbye!'...It was great. You should have seen his face. But now I am home I am sunk into gloom. I may have been right, but my reward, I know, will be to end up all alone, half-eaten by an Alsatian (33).

Here, Bridget expresses the tensions of a woman who, although she recognises feminist rhetoric of independence and empowerment, is unable to relate this to her desire for romantic fulfilment.

Bridget is faced with an identity conflict as she attempts to navigate a culture that encourages her to be in control of herself, but also totally available to men.

The mixed messages with regard to men and relationships within chick lit novels such as *BJD* have been used as a reason for the genre being anti-feminist, in other words, critics have taken issue with the fact that these novels depict “well-educated single women with exciting jobs”, who “are unhappy because, despite all their accomplishments, they lack a fulfilling relationship with a man” (Davis-Kahl: 19). McRobbie, for instance, bemoans the fact that “Despite feminism” Bridget still “wants to pursue dreams of romance, find a suitable husband, get married and have children”

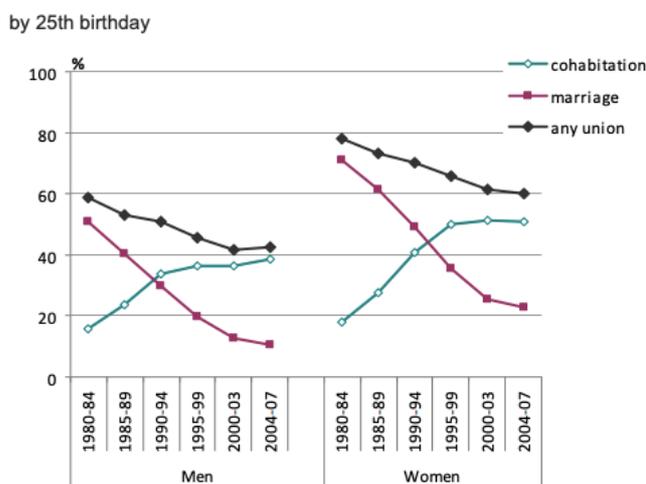
(12) - “very traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment” that feminism tried to “constrain” (20; see also Gill and Herdieckerhoff: 499). There is a sense of frustration among (particularly second-wave) feminists that, despite their empowered position, women, such as those portrayed in chick lit, make choices that conform to normative expectations of femininity. However, it is important to note that by investigating the reasons for why this may be, through literature such as chick lit, one is able to examine the pervasive and persistent nature of postfeminism and the way it impacts women’s lives. Furthermore, by taking a critical feminist lens to the chick lit genre, and examining the choices women make “despite feminism”, one is able to assess issues that feminism may not have accounted for. For instance, Whelehan has suggested that chick lit novels offer a recognition “that feminism did not solve the problem of how to conduct heterosexual relationships in the framework of notional equality”, and as such these works “continually teeter between the potential empowerment of narratives which tell it as it is, and the longing for the comfort and nurturance embodied in the classic romance” (2002a: 10). This can be seen in the ways Bridget attempts to negotiate her own relationships, in which she struggles to be independent and assertive alongside her desire for traditional, romantic love. As such, Stéphanie Genz suggests that Bridget “epitomises a both/and dynamic that illustrates the incoherence and inconsistencies of being feminist, feminine, and female in the early twenty-first century” (2010: 109), further implying the way in which chick lit is able to offer an insight into the realities and tensions of modern women’s lives.

3.5 “by the turn of the millennium a third of all households will be single, therefore proving that at last we are no longer tragic freaks”: Singletons, Smug Marrieds, and Modern Relationships in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

As I’ve stated, *BJD* was voted as the book that best represents the 1990s (Mißler: 10) and the novel is strongly rooted within its decade of cultural production, and the sociocultural contexts of this period. Clare Hanson suggests that the success of *BJD* is connected with the greater degree of financial independence, sexual freedom, and reproductive choice that followed the achievements of second-wave feminism, which meant that “the old imperatives that sustained the institution of

marriage have gone” (17). Harzewski also suggests that *BJD* provides a representation of the shifting realities of marital demographics and the “growth of singles culture” that took place during the late 20th century (2011: 72). She supports this argument with statistics which show that “between 1970 and 2000, the proportion of unmarried women aged 20 to 24 doubled, and among those aged 30 to 34 the share tripled”, adding that “almost half of Americans are reaching the age of 30 without marrying” (72-73), and “more than 22 million American women live alone, representing an 87 percent surge over the last two decades” (Harzewski, 2011: 73). Similar trends can be observed for the UK, where *BJD* is set, with statistics pointing to the fact that marriage rates are decreasing¹³, women are marrying later in life¹⁴, and cohabitation prior to marriage is increasing (Beujouan and Bhrolcáin: see fig. 2, 3 and 4). As such, it can be said that *BJD* reflects changing social realities, and is “full of astute and critical observations about womanhood in the nineties, especially about female economic independence” (Mißler: 10).

Fig. 2
The number of men and women who have married, cohabitated, or experienced a non-marital union by age 25 between 1980-2007. (Beujouan and Bhrolcáin: 39)



¹³ In 1981 there were 351,973 marriages in the UK, there were 306,756 marriages in 1991, and by 2001 this had decreased to 249,227. See “Marriage rates in the UK”, *Guardian*.

¹⁴ In 1983 the average age for women to get married was 27.2, this increased to 29.9 in 1993, and 32.9 in 2003. See “Average age of men and women at marriage in the United Kingdom 1973-2013”, *Statista*.

Fig. 3

The number of men and women who have married, cohabitated, or experienced a non-marital union by age 30 between 1980-2007. (Beujouan and Bhrolcáin: 39)

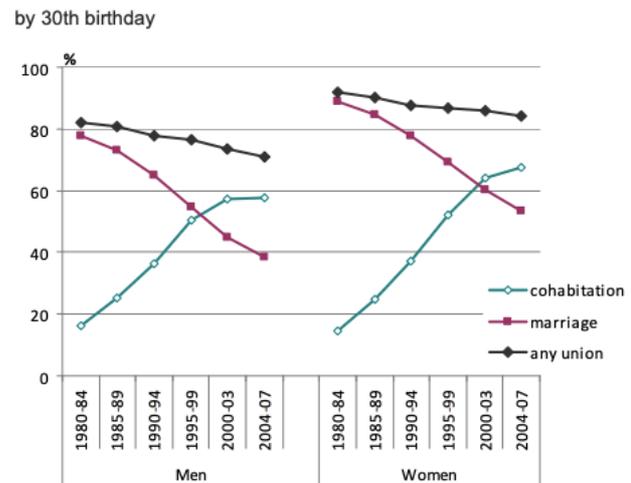
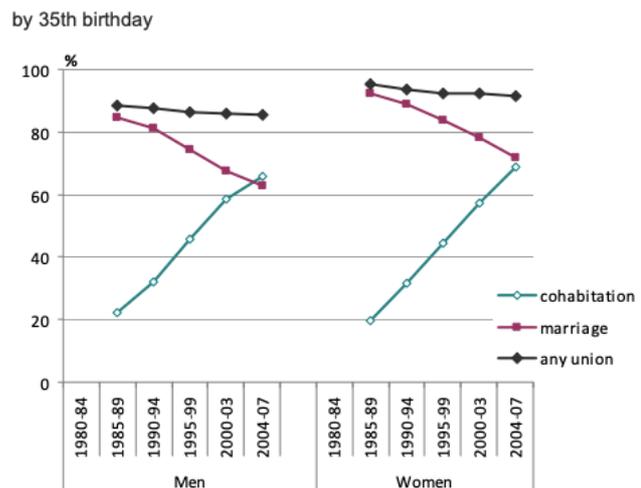


Fig. 4

The number of men and women who have married, cohabitated, or experienced a non-marital union by age 35 between 1980-2007. Beujouan and Bhrolcáin: 40



As the above statistics indicate, then *BJD* was published at a time of increased social change, particularly with regard to marriage and relationships. As women gained increased economic and sexual freedom, the number of marriages decreased and a singles culture emerged. In *BJD*, Sharon reflects on these sociocultural changes, making a case for the single identity:

I'm not married because I'm a *Singleton*... And because there's more than one bloody way to live: one in four households are single, most of the royal family are single, the nation's young men have been proved by surveys to be *completely unmarriageable*, and as a result 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. We'd be as happy as sandboys

if people...didn't conspire to make us feel stupid just because [they're] jealous (42, emphasis in original).

Bridget and her friends show an awareness for the ways in which single women are devalued within a society that continues to present married women as the ideal model of femininity. In an attempt to counter this, they dub their peer group of young, professional singles as “Singletons”, and the term soon became part of the cultural lexicon outside of the novel due to both the popularity of *BJD* and the increasing development of a singles culture. In *Bridget Jones's Guide To Life* (2001), Fielding defines the term “Singleton” as a “Replacement for poison outdated word “spinster”” (51), highlighting the ways in which she created a new narrative for the single woman, distancing this portrayal from outdated stereotypes and instead offering a depiction of a single woman rarely seen before in fiction, and certainly never before received in the way Bridget was. Writing for the *Guardian*, Fielding described the sociocultural realities of women when she was writing *BJD*, making it more explicit the ways in which she helped create a new literary model for the single woman.

Back in the mid-1990s the way single women in their 30s were presented socially – and certainly in books and films – hadn't caught up with reality. The air of Miss Havisham and the tragic barren spinster left on the shelf was still hanging around us. We weren't Miss Havisham or bunny boilers. We were products of a new generation, with our own flats, cars, incomes and expectations. We...didn't need to settle for someone who wasn't right, simply to keep life afloat.

Harzewski credits *BJD* with “inspiring a genre in which a single funny woman figures prominently” (2011: 68), adding that this “is relatively new historically and marks a shift in representations of gender insofar as funny women have been formerly laughed at, not laughed with” (ibid.).

Traditionally in Anglo-American literature the single woman served as an object of ridicule or pity – “Chick lit, by contrast, foregrounds this figure as the protagonist: the never-married funny woman— whose humour contributes greatly to the genre’s appeal— finds her most developed

expression” (ibid.). Bridget’s Singleton identity was celebrated by audiences, she was crowned the “Patron Saint of single women” (qtd. in Genz, 2010: 100), and Whelehan suggests that the novel has had such an impact on single culture and modern dating that that “the current era of the single woman might as well be described as post-Bridget Jones” (ibid.). *BJD* therefore can be seen as offering a more realistic portrayal of modern women’s experiences, creating an identity beyond the “spinster” for the single woman and providing a more authentic examination of contemporary dating.

Throughout the novel Bridget and her friends have mostly owned their status as Singletons, offering solidarity for one another against the patronising comments of the “Smug Marrieds”, and making attempts to counter the negative assumptions surrounding being single. Bridget occasionally attends dinner parties with her Smug Married friends, which make her “feel as if [she has] turned into Miss Havisham” (40). However, the dinner parties also have the tendency of indirectly reinforcing the positives of being a Singleton for Bridget – she rarely ends the evening feeling enthused about the concept of marriage, instead usually leaving “congratulating [herself] on being single” (71). In fact, Bridget’s interest in marriage tends to stem from fantasies around how different, and thus presumed better, their lives are in comparison to hers. She describes how when at Smug Married couple Magda and Jeremy’s house she admires “the crisp sheets and many storage jars full of different kinds of pasta, imagining that they are my parents” (40). The respect Bridget holds for Magda and Jeremy’s marriage is based on how much more mature their life is than hers, so much so that she is rendered childlike by their apparent marital success in comparison to her own. When she compares her life with Magda’s, Bridget idealises the fact that “Magda lives in a big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars, and gets to go shopping all day” (133), she does not necessarily envy the fact Magda is married, it is more the lifestyle she believes that comes with it, and how different from her own life she presumes this to be.

The idea that Bridget is marriage obsessed in fact stems from critics of the novel rather than the novel than itself¹⁵. Bridget's aim, as outlined in her New Year's resolutions, is merely to "form [a] functioning relationship with [a] responsible adult" (3), a goal that is not overly romantic nor as anti-feminist as she is made out to be. And in fact, when she seemingly achieves this with Daniel, she finds it boring and prays for God "to stop [Daniel] getting into bed at night wearing pyjamas and reading glasses, staring at a book for 25 minutes then switching off the light and turning over", and instead "turn him back into the naked lust-crazed sex beast [she] used to know and love" (124). Bridget clearly doesn't want to lose the sex life she enjoys as a single woman, and the idea that Singletons have a more active sex life than Smug Marrieds persists throughout the novel¹⁶. Bridget actually makes very few references to a desire to get married, it is far more common for her to want a boyfriend than a husband, and these marital desires are always expressed in the language of fantasy rather than as a burning ambition. For example, she writes that her "Head is full of moony fantasies about living in flats with [Daniel] and running along beaches together with tiny offspring...being trendy Smug Married" (131). Significantly, this moment is immediately followed by a "thought-provoking evening" with Magda, in which she realises the "grass [isn't] always greener" (131-133).

In the novel, Magda provides the perspective of the "ex-career girl mother" and wife (69), posing as a foil to Bridget's Singleton lifestyle. Bridget idealises and envies Magda's life, however, the reality is that Magda's marriage is struggling after her husband committed infidelity with a younger co-worker. On learning of this, Magda tells Bridget that she should "make the most of being single", warning her that "Once you've got kids and you've given up your job you're in an incredibly vulnerable position" (131). She reflects on the time when she had a "proper job", and the "fact [that] it's much more fun going out to work, getting all dressed up, flirting in the office and

¹⁵ See McRobbie: 20, Erica Jong qtd. in Genz, 2010: 102, Mabry: 200, Harzewski, 2011: 68, Whelehan, 2002a: 38, for examples.

¹⁶ See pages 11, 41, 119, 245.

having nice lunches than going to the bloody supermarket and picking [her child] up from playgroup” (132). By positioning Bridget’s marital fantasy alongside Magda’s critique of married life, Fielding subversively critiques traditional expectations of womanhood, and instead offers a more balanced and realistic portrayal of modern relationships. As Fielding suggests, *BJD* is concerned with the “gap between the way women feel they’re expected to be and how they actually are”. Both women hold fantasies over how the other lives, and Fielding exposes them as exactly that: fantasies. Bridget sees Magda as exemplary for how women should be, and she views herself as inadequate in comparison for not meeting the same, postfeminist standards of “success” as Magda, and Magda envies Bridget’s Singleton freedoms. However, by revealing the realities of each woman’s life, Fielding is able to demonstrate the futility in comparison logic, exposing the fact that each idealisation is based off social constructs and pressures, and instead pointing to the fact that there is no perfect way to live a life. Hearing Magda’s problems Bridget wonders “what the answer is for we girls”: with Bridget feeling the pressures of societal expectations regarding marriage, and Magda struggling to adapt to a life without a career, both women are suffering under the postfeminist notion that woman can, and should, “have it all”.

3.6 “She had merely been infected with 'Having It All' syndrome”: New Women, Having it All and the Dilemma of Choice in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

Bridget’s generation grew up experiencing the achievements of second-wave feminism and the idea that they were able to have it all; at the same time feminist ideas were gradually shifting from collective goals towards a focus on the individual and an embracing of the feminine. While women such as Bridget have more opportunities than ever before, the resulting abundance of choice led to an overwhelming uncertainty with regard to identity and how to best achieve recognition as a “successful” woman. Choice is a defining feature of neoliberalism (Eagleton-Pierce: 20), and within the constraints of postfeminist, neoliberal ideology there is often a “right” choice to make so as to meet the expectations of society. As Lia Macko and Kerry Rubin suggest, women did not know

how to take advantage of this new found choice “in a way that also acknowledges parallel desires for marriage, motherhood, and an otherwise fulfilling life outside the office” (87). This is a persistent image throughout *BJD*, as exemplified primarily in Bridget but also in characters such as Magda, and also, arguably, Bridget’s mother. As such, Fielding offers an exploration of the contradictory roles and issues faced by women during this time.

Genz suggests that Bridget “remains caught in a tension between her romantic longings, her feminist awareness, her feminine performance, and her professional objectives”, leading to an insecure sense of identity as a result of her struggle to have it all (2010: 111). This idea is expressed clearly when Bridget experiences a pregnancy scare. At first she views this as the “end of her freedom” (118), and she describes her conflicted response:

On the one hand I was all nesty and gooey...smug about being a real woman...and imagining fluffy pink baby skin, a tiny creature to love...On the other I was thinking, oh my God, life is over...no more nights out with the girls, shopping, flirting, sex, bottles of wine and fags. Instead I am going to turn into a hideous grow-bag-cum-milk-dispensing-machine which no one will fancy and which will not fit into any of my trousers... (119).

Here, Bridget demonstrates the conflicting demands and desires of women in a postfeminist age, she outlines the positives that come with the freedom of being a single woman with a disposable income, and this is positioned in contrast to the traditional expectations of motherhood. As Genz suggests, *BJD* is concerned with Bridget’s quest “to find a subject position that permits her to hang onto the material and social gains achieved by the women’s movement as well as indulge in her romantic longings” (2010: 102), in other words, the novel deals with the difficulty of “having it all” (*ibid.*). Bridget continues to experience an uncertain identity, not sure how to incorporate the freedoms of her generation with what is expected of her as a woman. During her pregnancy scare, she muses that “This confusion...is the price [she] must pay for becoming a modern woman instead of following the course nature intended by marrying...when [she] was eighteen” (119). As such, *BJD* offers an insight into the sociocultural realities of women, demonstrating the tensions they

experience as well as situating itself amidst changing social contexts. The novel features a new generation of women, experiencing these shifting social realities first-hand and for the first time; as Sharon declares, the characters of *BJD* are part of “a pioneer generation, daring to refuse compromise in love and relying on our own economic power” (21). They are young urban professionals, enjoying their sexual freedom and economic independence, however, as I’ve mentioned, these new freedoms come with a sense of added pressure in the sense that Bridget and co. are now expected to have it all. The above quote from Sharon is preceded by “We women are only vulnerable because we are...”, reflecting the conditions of their newfound independence, in that their power and freedom is also what renders them as “vulnerable” to personal and professional struggles and a sense of conflicting identity.

Magda complains to Bridget that “it’s extremely hard work looking after a toddler and a baby all day, and it doesn’t stop. When Jeremy comes home at the end of the day he wants to put his feet up and be nurtured...You do feel rather powerless” (131-133). This is reminiscent of sentiments uttered by Bridget’s mother, Pam, earlier in the novel, for example when she tells Bridget that she realised when Bridget’s “father retired, that [she] had spent thirty-five years without a break running his home and bringing up his children...and that as far as he was concerned his lifetime’s work was over and [hers] was still carrying on” (53). Pam’s frustrations are similar to those expressed in seminal second-wave texts such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and she likens herself to “Germaine sodding Greer and the Invisible Woman” (47). This points to the idea that Pam has developed some form of feminist consciousness, and as such she begins to implement changes in her life. She separates from her husband¹⁷, and discovers freedoms that lead her to seek out new sexual partners and venture into the world of work. Bridget notes that her mother seems “sort of blooming and confident” (39) after making these changes, and that she

¹⁷ Here it is worth noting that with Magda and Jeremy and Bridget’s parents both experiencing marriage troubles, Fielding does not offer any particularly positive models of marital relationships in the novel.

must have “discovered power” (67) . This leads Bridget to advise that Magda should be more like Pam and “seize power...Go back to work. Take a lover”, to which Magda responds: “Not with two children under three...I think I've made my bed, I'll just have to lie in it now” (133).

Choices *are* available to women like Bridget, Magda and Pam but these choices have conditions and are constrained by societal expectations in regard to women’s roles and identities which still largely fit within the confines of either mother and wife or the single, career-girl. The tensions within Pam’s relationship with Bridget are reflective of these societal expectations. Even though she is now living a life that is seemingly not that dissimilar from her daughter’s, Pam still maintains traditional expectations for Bridget. Throughout the novel, Pam has been one of the main pressures on Bridget to begin a relationship and have children, and she constantly pesters Bridget with critiques such as: “if you don't do something about your appearance you'll never get...another boyfriend!” (192). Although Pam is concerned that her daughter may not meet societal expectations and conventional standards of femininity, there is also perhaps a sense of jealousy Pam feels in regard to the freedoms Bridget is able to enjoy, and when Pam admits that she wants a career, Bridget finds herself feeling “happy and smug” because she has one (71). Professor Cheryl A. Wilson states that she teaches *BJD* at the end of her Introduction to Women’s Studies course because it brings together various issues, for instance “the distinction between second-and third-wave feminism”, which can be better grasped by studying “the relationship between Bridget and her mother and each woman’s engagement with the gender roles promoted by her generation helps to snap things into focus” (87). This shows the way in which studying chick lit alongside feminist criticism facilitates an understanding of both, making a further case for the academic value of the genre.

Another useful reason for analysing chick lit is to examine the way in which it explores social pressures faced by women. For instance, Pam’s new career, presenting a television show called “Suddenly Single” that focuses on “a dilemma faced by a growing number of women” (90),

exploits and promotes the sexist discourse that she is currently attempting to reject in her own life. Whilst presenting, Pam reinforces the patronising narrative single women are confronted with on a regular basis, exposing the contradictions and conflict between her traditional background and the new freedom she enjoys. She asks Bridget to appear on the show to “talk about the...pressures of impending childlessness” (134), and after Bridget eventually agrees to be interviewed she stares incredulously as Pam asks her questions such as: “I mean, it must be a terrible time, with no partner on the horizon and that biological clock ticking away...Don't you want a child?” (136). With “Suddenly Single”, Fielding mocks a society that finds the lifestyles of modern women - women that are single, career orientated, childless – so alarming and unconventional that they are worthy of national attention and examination, in doing so she is able to demonstrate the societal pressures placed on women with regard to age, motherhood and loneliness, and the way in which these pressures are perpetrated through the media.

3.7 “Once get on track of thinking about ageing there is no escape. Life suddenly seems like holiday where, halfway through, everything starts accelerating towards the end”: Age Related Social Pressures in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

For women in Western societies, ageing is constructed as something to be feared, and age related societal pressures are a constant theme throughout *BJD*. Ageing is a natural and uncontrollable process, yet women are expected to have control over it, and are made to feel guilt and shame at their inevitable failure to do so. During the month of her birthday Bridget experiences “Severe Birthday-Related Thirties Panic” (64), demonstrating the sense of fear that is associated with ageing. This fear is motivated by a consumerist media and celebrity culture in which false standards of perfection are constantly reinforced. This maintains the assumption that a woman’s central value derives from her physical appearance, and as her appearance allegedly deteriorates with age, so does her value. Subsequently the consumption of beauty treatments and cosmetic surgeries are targeted at women as the only suitable remedy for an ageing appearance and means of maintaining self-value. The industry thus depends on promoting a sense of insecurity amongst female

consumers so as to maintain a constant market, urging women to live in an endless pursuit of self-improvement which will never be fulfilled. In *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Naomi Wolf speaks with a beauty editor at a magazine who “confirms that airbrushing age from women's face is routine” (66) and that “women's magazine ignore older women or pretend they don't exist” by avoiding “photographs of older women, and when they feature celebrities who are over sixty, “retouching artists” conspire to “help” beautiful women look more beautiful; i.e., less their age” (67). This demonstrates the culture of shame that surrounds ageing, and the way in which the images within magazines that women are confronted with are artificially constructed so as to reinforce impossible ideals of beauty. Bridget is one such woman who blindly consumes the contents of magazines, “constantly scanning [her] face in [the] mirror for wrinkles and frantically reading *Hello!*, checking out everyone's ages in desperate search for role models” (78), rarely pausing to consider how truthful their contents actually are. This explicitly demonstrates the way in which Bridget places celebrity culture on a pedestal and buys into the ideals presented to her in magazines.

Instances such as this have meant that Bridget has been consistently criticised as “self-obsessed”¹⁸, and although this may be true of the *character* Bridget Jones, it is important to look at the novel itself as Helen Fielding’s work of *fiction*. *BJD* can be read as a social commentary, exposing the operations of a sexist and damaging media industry and the impact this has on women. As Jenny Colgan suggests, “popular novels reflect, and are part of, popular culture, so to expect young women to tell their stories without mentioning the pressures of magazines, TV, thinness, media celebrity and love that surround us would be extraordinary”. Standards of feminine beauty are present in most forms of popular media, relentlessly presenting women with images and false ideals of the perfect body and everlasting youth, and Susan Faludi suggests that in a postfeminist era the media was “strengthening what we are not and what we would like to be”, and as such it fuels women’s quest for unattainable perfection (65). Bridget shows an awareness of the damaging

¹⁸ For example, see Suzanne Moore in the *Guardian* (2013).

impact of the popular media she impulsively consumes, declaring that she is “a child of Cosmopolitan culture”, and as a result she has “been traumatized by super-models and too many quizzes” leading her to believe “that neither [her] personality nor [her] body is up to it if left to its own devices” (59). This demonstrates the way in which postfeminism characterises women’s problems as individual, forcing women to treat, as Guenther suggests, “the symptoms of social problems rather than the problems themselves” (86). Gill argues that postfeminism works to dismiss “any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves” so as to deny the fact that their problems and insecurities often stem from societal pressures (433). Women are made to see themselves as the problem rather than society, and the proposed remedy is achieved through consumerist and self-modifying practices so as to meet constructed standards of success.

Another age related societal pressure stems from the constructed nature of “success” - by a certain age individuals are expected to be wealthy, married, have a family, and own a home, so as to meet societal standards of success. As Bridget nears her birthday she complains about the fact that she’ll “have to face up to the fact that another entire year has gone by, during which everyone else except me has mutated into Smug Married, having children...and making hundreds of thousands of pounds...while I career rudderless and, boyfriendless through dysfunctional relationships and professional stagnation” (77-78). This relates to the postfeminist pressure to have it all, and throughout the novel Bridget is faced with pressures surrounding having a career as well as getting married and raising children. Pam’s friend Una constantly berates Bridget’s status as a “career girl”: the characterisation here of career orientated women as “girls”, although a common phrase, can be seen to signify the idea that women only reach maturation once they are married and have children, thus condescendingly assuming that being single and having a career is merely a transitional period between adolescence and marriage. Una warns Bridget that she “can’t put it off forever”, the “it” here referring to aforementioned marriage and children, made more clear as Una follows this

warning with the “tick-tock-tick-tock” (11; 172) associated with a woman’s “biological clock”. Here, postfeminist societal pressures such as this are utilised as a means of control so as to maintain the patriarchal institution of the family with women in a position of wife and mother, questioning why she would ever choose to pursue otherwise. The Smug Marrieds at dinner parties also provide constant reminders to Bridget about the societal requirements associated with women’s ageing: “Well, you know, once you get past a certain age...” (41), and “You really ought to hurry up and get sprogged up, you know, old girl... Time's running out” (ibid.). There is the constant suggestion that women have an expiry dates of sorts, as if they can only achieve the validation of “successfully” being a woman within a certain time limit. Bridget alludes to this when she is at one such dinner party, and is left “quivering furiously at their inferences of female sell-by dates and life as game of musical chairs where girls without a chair/man when the music stops/they pass thirty are 'out.' Huh. As if” (213). Through these instances Fielding is able to satirise a culture that views women’s true purpose as being that of a wife and child bearer, as well as pointing to the prevalence of such views in the society and the persistent rate to which women are exposed to them. For Bridget, and other women in her position, gender identity is more complicated than choosing either family or single life, it also encompasses more complex issues such as “sexuality, professionalism, cultural pressures, and individual desires” (Wilson: 88), and as such Fielding is able to offer a more realistic portrayal of modern women’s experiences and actualities.

Age related societal pressures also fuel Bridget’s sense of loneliness, which partly stems from the belief that she is not meeting the standards of success expected of her by society. She describes feeling an “extreme sense of jealousy, failure and foolishness at being in bed alone on Sunday morning” (61). However, she is aware that her fears and sense of failure surrounding being single are largely due to social expectations, and she makes explicit that this is related to ageing. She shows a rare and astute sense of awareness as she describes how the “mild bore of not being in a relationship — no sex, not having anyone to hang out with on Sundays, going home from parties

on your own all the time” gets heightened in your thirties as it becomes “infused with the paranoid notion that the reason you are not in a relationship is your age...and it is all your fault for being too wild or wilful to settle down” (143). Adding that the “whole thing builds up out of all proportion, so...when you do start going out with someone it cannot possibly live up to expectations” (144), again demonstrating that her burning desire for a relationship largely stems from social pressures and constructed ideals of what life should be like at a certain age, as well as illustrating the impacts of these pressures. This suggests that despite supposed freedoms women such as Bridget tend to remain governed by a traditional system of societal expectations and pressures. Critics have argued that this is reflected in the predominant conclusion of chick lit novels in which the issues the protagonist has been facing are resolved once she has eventually found romantic happiness with a man. Bridget does end the novel in the (very) early stages of a relationship with Mark Darcy, and this does coincide with a sense of self-acceptance for Bridget. However, I do not view this necessarily as an instance of cause and effect.

Mark is actually quite a minor character within *BJD*, and he barely features until the final third of the novel (see Mabry 200-201). Bridget’s romantic failings with Daniel were much more central, partly due to their facilitation of instances for Bridget’s character development as she gained a sense of self-worth, assertiveness and determination to get what she deserved romantically, rather than settle for “fuckwittage”. Moreover, Bridget’s major relationships have arguably been with her friends, and even with her mother, all of which have helped to strengthen her own sense of identity, and provided her with more insight into who she is as a woman, than any of her romantic relationships. The lack of attention spent on the novel’s hero points to a shifting focus in women’s fiction towards the primary interest being solely the female protagonist: their feelings, their experiences and their story, with the men being reduced to a function. A. Rochelle Mabry supports this, and argues that despite Bridget’s preoccupation with securing a boyfriend then “the novel’s emphasis on Bridget’s growth as a person and her relationships with her friends outweigh the quest

for romantic partnership” (200; see also Umminger: 240). As Whelehan suggests then, *BJD* “presents some pertinent questions about the changing nature of relationships” (2002a: 37), instead pointing to the fact that a woman’s most important relationship is with herself.

3.8 “An Excellent Years Progress”: Conclusions

The novel ends with Bridget revisiting her New Year’s resolutions and reflecting on her progress, or lack thereof, achieved over the year.

JANUARY—DECEMBER: A Summary (310)

Alcohol units 3836 (poor)

Cigarettes 5277

Calories 11,090,265 (repulsive)

Fat units 3457 (approx.) (hideous idea in every way)

Weight gained 5st 2lb

Weight lost 5st 3lb (excellent)

Correct lottery numbers 42 (v.g.)

Incorrect lottery numbers 387

Total Instants purchased 98

Total Instants winnings £110

Total Instants profit £12 (Yessss! Yessss! Have beaten system while supporting worthwhile causes in manner of benefactor)

1471 calls (quite a lot)

Valentines 1 (v.g.)

Christmas cards 33 (v.g.)

Hangover-free days 114 (v.g.)

Boyfriends 2 (but one only for six days so far)

Nice boyfriends 1

Number of New Year’s Resolutions kept 1 (v.g.)

An excellent year’s progress.

Despite the fact that she has hardly achieved the goals she set for herself at the start of the novel, Bridget ironically dubs this “an excellent year’s progress” (310). This progress ultimately takes the form of a shift towards an attitude of self-acceptance and the ability to find humour in her experiences, a sentiment that is subsequently encouraged to readers. Harzewski suggests that the overriding message of the novel is a celebration of the ordinary, adding that it offers the encouraging sentiment “that it is OK to be average” as a counterargument to the self-improvement discourses that surround Bridget (2011: 76). Guenther suggests that Bridget often adopts “a tone of

deliberate self-acceptance that has largely been overlooked by the novel's critics", adding that there's no makeover scene, no revelation of a hidden talent, nor is there seemingly any genuine attempt to modify her behaviours, lifestyle or self (88). Bridget ends the book just as flawed as she begins it, but that is okay, fulfilling Fielding's goal for the novel – to “counter the culture of perfection and [making] people feel it's alright just to be alright” (*Guardian*).

Writing for the *Guardian* about *BJD*, Fielding describes how she knew she “wasn't the only person infected with the idea that I should look like someone out of a magazine” and that her the novel was partly created in response to the “inundation of images of perfect”. Instead, she wanted to show “that it's actually alright to be human, just to sort of muddle along, try to do things right, be nice to your friends, and laugh about what goes wrong on the way”. The humour of *BJD* was part of what made the novel so relatable and well received by audiences, as Melanie McDonagh has noted then the success lies with Bridget's ability to embody “feminine anxieties and defuse them by making them funny” (qtd. in Mißler: 11). The novel, and its reception, reveals a shared sense of frustration with many aspects of women's lives – as Fielding writes “Details that I thought were just unique to me...turned out to be the sort of thing that millions of other women identified with” (*Guardian*). Chick lit author Laura Zigman, has celebrated the way in which the genre has captured women's lives: “I felt like there was a lot going on with women that no one was really talking about...We had a lot of freedom and a lot of choices, but there was a price. People were lonely...But you would pick up these books and go, okay, I am not mad. I am not the only loser in the world who feels lonely” (qtd. in Smith). The success of Bridget as a flawed heroine was reassuring in a time of conflicting messages and social pressures, a time of overwhelming choice and subsequent confusion, and “women recognised within the book's irony their own experiences of popular culture, and especially the tensions between the lure of feminist politics and the fear of losing one's femininity” (Whelehan, 2005: 151).

Point is not that women are retrograde ditzes, but feel that they have to be so perfect in every area that become incredibly hard on selves: trying to live life of non-independent and independent woman at same time, haunted by media images of anorexic teenage models running from gym to board meeting to nuclear family and cooking elaborate dinner parties for twelve. Vision of someone else – Bridget – trying so hard and spectacularly failing, ending up when guests arrive in underwear with wet hair and one foot in pan of mashed potato is comic release from pressures of overreaching role models. (Fielding, qtd. in Guenther: 95-96)

Writing here in Bridget's recognisable diary-speak, Fielding offers an insight into her intentions with *BJD*. She describes the societal pressures that women face every day: conflicting ideals of feminism and femininity, images in the media presenting false standards of beauty, the struggles of balancing a career, a family, and the responsibilities that come with both, and, ultimately, the overriding need to be the perfect woman. Seeing Bridget trying, and failing to, achieve this not only provides a recognisable model for readers to identify with, but it also provides a recognition of the impossibility of living up to such an unrealistic ideal placed on women by society. As Brenda Bethman states, "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" (qtd. In Wilson: 84), and with this thesis I aim to have demonstrated the benefits of analysing popular women's fiction, such as *BJD*, highlighting the insight this can provide into women's lives at a particular cultural moment.

Conclusions

Chick Lit Today?: Contemporary Women's Writing

The publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the success that followed “certainly contributed substantially to a new representation of women in the media” (Mißler: 12), and for the first time “women were seeing themselves depicted in fiction in a way that they had not seen before” (*Unpopped*). With *BJD*, Fielding played a role in initiating a new generation of female-centred media, through chick lit and beyond, that gave a new prominence to the young, single woman as a leading figure across a range of cultural forms. Not only did *BJD* help with improving the representation of women within contemporary media, but it also improved the number of women writers being published. Jenny Colgan has praised the novel “as an absolute revelation”, that enabled her “to see [her] life and confusion reflected in print - but comically and warmly - and clearly about one and a half million other people thought the same”. For Colgan, this sense of representation, and the celebration of the everywoman, paved the way for future writers such as herself – “Now, no longer do you have to have been to the right university, or be the right person's daughter. Opportunities are here for young novelists that have never existed before”. Harzewski supports this, arguing that *BJD*, and the chick lit genre it helped form, “opened unprecedented opportunity to new women writers” (2011: 185); and Guenther purports that “chick-lit has grown into a community of writers and readers who share the goal of telling more stories about women” (96).

This has since expanded beyond the chick lit genre, into a wide range of cultural forms, and the successes of *BJD* are still felt today. Speaking on the BBC's *Unpopped* podcast, author Daisy Buchanan asked fellow panellists “Could *Fleabag* have existed without *Bridget? Girls*, or *Broad City?*” to which the response was a unanimous “no”. Tanya Sweeney supports this and argues that “*Bridget* predicted the Age of Oversharing and the writers of Generation Confession – Lena [Dunham], Tina Fey, Mindy Kaling - are in her debt”, adding that “A whole host of other female

comic writers - Sharon Horgan...Phoebe Waller-Bridget...and Ilana Glazer & Abbi Jacobson - have turned the Singleton experience into a delightful playground". In recent years there has been a surge in female written, and female-centred, narratives that draw on themes outlined in the previous chapter – identity, relationships and womanhood, for example – but adapt these issues to the modern age. It is worth briefly considering the similarities these works, amongst others, share with chick lit novels such as *BJD*, and what their reception can tell us about changing attitudes towards women's experiences within popular media, and the necessity to keep studying it.

In the opening episode of *Fleabag* (2016), Phoebe Waller-Bridge's tragicomic heroine of the same name arrives drunk at her father and stepmother's home in the middle of the night and announces "I have a horrible feeling I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist." There is a Bridget-esque sense of self-repulsion blended with humour here, as *Fleabag* expresses the uncertainty and frustration she feels with regard to her identity and the ideals she feels she does not meet. In a 2017 interview Waller-Bridge spoke about the ways in which *Fleabag* addresses conflicting societal messages, and the impossibility of meeting them – "Being proper and sweet and nice and pleasing is a fucking nightmare. It's exhausting. As women, we get the message about how to be a good girl...from such an early age. Then, at the same time, we're told that well-behaved girls won't change the world...So it's sort of like, well, what the fuck am I supposed to be?...It's impossible" (qtd. in Aitkenhead). Waller-Bridge "says the character [of *Fleabag*] emerged from a mix of feminist anger and wild frustration at the limitations put on young women before they can decide who and what they really are", and the show deals with questions such as: "Am I still a feminist if I watch porn, or if I want to change my body to make me feel more sexually attractive?" (qtd. in Raeside). *Fleabag* offers an updated examination of the conflicting ideals of femininity, and the difficulty of negotiation identity within these circumstances.

In a similar vein to Bridget prepping herself for hours before a date, Fleabag describes the rush to get “ready” after being propositioned with a late night sexual encounter: “you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything, put on some agent provocateur business, suspender belt, and wait by the door until the buzzer goes”. But whilst chick lit was described by Doris Lessing as nothing more than “helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on”, critics have argued that, despite (or because of) the fact that Fleabag is “self-centred” and “sex-obsessed” (Hale), “there’s something so exhilarating” in the way in which the show portrays “women getting things wrong” (Hinsliff). Like *BJD*, *Fleabag* challenges the idea and pressures of “success”, instead celebrating “getting it wrong” and “reclaiming female failure” (ibid.). But unlike with *BJD*, women’s failures are now being recognised critically as valid and important themes within popular media, and audiences have related to the characters in *Fleabag*; Waller-Bridge believes that “a lot of people recognise [them] trying to connect and failing” (ibid.). Clearly, there is an enduring nature to the experiences of women, particularly with regard to the conflicting realities and expectations that they are faced with, and this is something that audiences are continuing to respond to, and now critics are too.

Another example of popular contemporary fiction that can be compared with chick lit is the work of Sally Rooney. Just as how with *BJD* Fielding was credited with capturing the zeitgeist of the late 20th century, Rooney is being heralded the voice of the “millennial generation” (Collins). Both authors are seen as being able to reflect a certain cultural moment, with women’s thoughts and experiences at the forefront. Almost echoing Fielding’s sentiment that *BJD* was concerned with “the gap between how people feel they are expected to be on the outside and how they actually feel inside” (*Guardian*), Rooney has stated that she believes the “interesting stuff lies” in “the gap between gender expectations and reality ” (qtd. in Parker). Rooney’s two novels, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), are primarily concerned with navigating identity amidst relationships, friendships and the other everyday matters of life – often “with the repeated

refrain of wondering what it would be like to be a “normal” person” (Donnelly). I believe it would therefore prove an interesting option for further research to examine the sociocultural contexts and ideological backgrounds of when these works were produced, assessing what has changed, and how this has impacted the content, and subsequent reception, of the novels. The response to Rooney’s novels already indicates that much has changed in the two decades since *BJD* was published.

Conversations with Friends can be a book recommended by Sarah Jessica Parker on Instagram, and also by Booker Prize winner Anne Enright; it proves that a book that focuses on the experiences, thoughts and relationships of young women that can be nominated for literary awards¹⁹, as well as dominate glossy magazine’s “Best Beach Reads” and “Gifts for Her” lists. This can be seen as indicative of the ways in which the distinction between “popular” and “literary” are being reduced, marking a more progressive approach towards assessments of literary value. Particularly in her first novel, Rooney is concerned with a feminine experience of negotiating identity, however, it is striking to see the ways in which Rooney is described as being “a perceptive writer with keen insight into *human* behaviour” (Donnelly, my emphasis), rather than having her writing being confined primarily to female. Carrie V. Mullins states that “Rooney’s success is an important step towards legitimizing female stories”, adding that “if we pay attention to how we talk about female writers and their work, we can let go of the idea that “stupid” wears lipstick and “smart” has a beard.”

As I aim to have demonstrated, albeit *very* briefly, with these examples is that whilst many of the themes remain the same, the reception of these works has been different from that of chick lit. This suggests that women’s thoughts, desires, and experiences are gradually becoming more validated as a worthwhile subject within the cultural and critical imagination. Undeniably the examples I have picked out are far more complex than the largely formulaic nature of chick lit,

¹⁹ *Conversations with Friends* was nominated for the 2018 Swansea University International Dylan Thomas Prize, and the 2018 Folio Prize.

however, it can be argued that without chick lit, and its popularity, works such as *Fleabag* or *Normal People* may not have been possible, nor such a universal success. By beginning to draw similarities between these works and chick lit, I aim to indicate the influence of the genre and the impact it had on literary and cultural industries, creating a new space for female voices and a new kind of protagonist. Additionally, I believe this would be an interesting and fruitful area for further scholarly research, further demonstrating the academic value of studying the chick lit genre and its impact. By examining these contemporary texts against a backdrop of today's feminism and socio-political contexts, one is able to examine how attitudes towards women's fiction have developed, and to investigate what may have facilitated such changes. Furthermore, it would be worth studying how writers such as Waller-Bridge and Rooney, that grew up during the years in which chick lit was in its prime, have built upon, and distanced from, this literary tradition. I believe a more in depth comparison of chick lit works and contemporary women's fictions would be a beneficial addition to literary and cultural scholarship, assessing which issues women's face continue to be represented within literature.

The Pedagogical Future of Chick Lit

Jennifer Weiner's bestselling chick lit novel *Good in Bed* (2001) was inspired by *BJD*, and she has praised Fielding's novel, arguing that she "can see that book being taught, fifty years from now, as some sort of psychological snapshot of a moment: what it was like to be female in Britain at that moment, what were the pressures and what were the expectations" (qtd. in Mead). Just as chick lit itself provided opportunities for young female writers, such as Weiner, to make an impression in a typically male-dominated publishing industries, the same is true for chick lit scholarship. As Ferriss and Young argue, regardless of whether chick lit's popularity endures, "the body of work amassed over the past decade alone raises issues and questions about subjectivity, sexuality, race and class in women's texts for another generation of women to ponder" (12). Women's writing continues to be largely excluded from the literary canon, and not only does this impact what is read and what is

taught in an academic setting, but also what scholars critique. By challenging this, looking instead at work that has been predominantly overlooked within academic circles, I hope to have somewhat illuminated the academic value within chick lit. With this thesis I aim to have made a case for the value in analysing chick lit novels, particularly alongside the contexts in which these works were produced. Additionally I hope to have demonstrated a need for academia to put aside literary prejudices, instead focusing on the “usefulness” of the text. As Cheryl A. Wilson argues:

we need to rethink the implicit validation that occurs when a text appears on a college level syllabus and move from arbitrary value judgments about whether or not a text is “good” to more culturally relevant considerations of its usefulness. Judged by the criteria of “usefulness,” many chick-lit novels are thoroughly literary and relevant for a range of courses due to their engagement with the cultural moment of their production, incorporation of other media, and critique of social forces that are particularly relevant for twenty-first-century college students (95-96).

Slowly academic opinions of chick lit are shifting in a more positive direction, for instance chick lit novels such as *BJD* are increasingly being featured in reading lists for Women’s Studies and Contemporary Literature courses²⁰. Furthermore, the genre’s inclusion as a site for research and analysis in anthologies focused on broad issues within literature and society is indicative of changing attitudes towards the study of chick lit²¹. Anthologies and full-length academic books focused on the genre itself²², as well as, reader’s companion for novels²³, are continuing to be published too, forming an ever-growing field of chick lit scholarship, illuminating the way in which works from the genre relate to wider issues and themes. However, even if there are signs of

²⁰ Courses featuring chick lit, or entirely focused on the genre, are being increasingly taught in Universities, including Ivy League colleges such as Harvard’s course “The Romance: From Jane Austen to Chick Lit”, and University of Pennsylvania’s “Chick Lit” course (see Harzewski, 2011: 194 for further examples).

²¹ Some examples from this thesis include: Maddison & Storr in *At the Interface: Continuity and Transformation in Culture and Politics* (2001); Whelehan in *Contemporary British Women Writers* (2004); McRobbie’s chapter “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime” in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2008).

²² For example, Ferriss and Young (2006); Harzewski (2011); Mißler (2017).

²³ For example, Imelda Whelehan’s *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2002).

improvements, changes must continue to be made. As Emer O'Toole suggests, "The canons of our time are not going to represent diverse voices unless we consciously intervene". By celebrating and studying women's voices within literature, not just those within the chick lit genre, but other works that are primarily concerned with female thoughts and experiences we are able to increase a recognition of female-centred media, altering academic attitudes and approaches, and moving towards a more inclusive and representative literary canon. In recognising the usefulness of chick lit for academic study, and the relation this genre has to women writers and readers, we are able to formulate new intellectual, affective models for the sharing and valuing of literature.

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