

Neoliberal Self-Governance and Popular Postfeminism in Contemporary Anglo-American Chick Lit

Eva Yin-i Chen
Department of English
National Cheng-Chi University, Taiwan

Abstract

Contemporary Anglo-American chick lit predicated its difference from traditional romance on the sexual agency and consumerist choice of its female characters and on its celebrated glamorous, materialistic and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Its recurrent themes include a shift from female sexual objectification to empowerment and subjectification, an emphasis on individual agency and bodily self-surveillance, and a celebration of consumption that erases the boundary between consumer and entrepreneur. This paper argues for the importance of the genre's distinct spatio-temporal anchoring in the Anglo-American metropolises of the 1990s and of the consequent predominance of a neoliberal ideology, one that has moved beyond the economic dimension of maximized profit-making into the socio-cultural domain of subject formation. In place of direct disciplinary power from the state, such a neoliberal form of governance interpellates the individual as the actively choosing and self-responsible consumer/entrepreneur who is motivated by economic self-interest and risk-calculation, and who freely and willingly engages in a ceaseless project of self-making and self-governance. As reflected in the Anglo-American chick lit, such neoliberal ideas, working in tandem with the spread of global capitalism around the world, are responsible for a new type of subjectification and characterization, the construction of a new kind of women characters constituted as agentive and active but also immanent in and responsive to normative power. In the light of this changed form of governance and subjectification, this paper seeks to point out that the feminist criticism of chick lit as backlash, retrosexism or as commodification needs to regroup its critique. It also points out that though the chick lit touts a new paradigm of liberated, actively desiring femininity ostensibly miles apart from the traditional femininity of passivity and chastity, such an emancipation, seemingly tolerant of multiplicity and agency, leads only to a new hegemony and coercion, and reinforces, rather than challenges, the patriarchal *status quo*.

Keywords

chick lit, neoliberal self-governance, capitalist consumerism, popular postfeminism

Chick lit is a popular new variation of women's writing that arose in the 1990s. It predicated its difference from traditional romance on the sexual assertiveness and financial independence of its female characters. Unlike the passive, virginal and domesticated heroines of traditional romance who are fixated in their own private romance and wait patiently for marriage with the one dominant male, chick lit female leads are often sexually assertive, well-educated and professionally successful young women who are not afraid to voice their desires or take the sexual initiative. These women seek success in the workplace and more power in love relationships, and also interact with a fashionable cosmopolitan scene and go through a succession of relationships in an active though often frustrated search for emotional satisfaction. Chick lit heroines enjoy the fruits of decades of feminist struggle and take gender parity as a given, but they also remain distanced from and dismissive of feminism as a movement. Instead, they embrace the rhetoric of individual choice and freedom, which is often also measured in terms of commodity consumption.¹

As a term, chick lit was first used in the 1995 anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell. This included recent Anglo-American fictional works showcasing a new approach to contemporary women's experience, one that both reflects the influence of feminism and also addresses issues feminism is perceived to have neglected or evaded. Widely reflected in popular genres like chick lit and TV sitcoms, this approach claims that feminist struggles for gender parity have been successful and thus no longer necessary, and that as autonomous, independent, active subjects, women should embrace and actively participate in patriarchal heterosexuality and capitalist consumer culture as sources of pleasure and power rather than as a form of oppression. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is often credited as having inaugurated the genre, closely followed by Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996),² both then adapted into hugely popular movies and TV series. Other chick lit works quickly followed the formula, contributing to what publishers call a "publishing tsunami" throughout the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium (Ferriss and Young 2). Chick lit works easily make it to the bestseller

¹ For a discussion of the distinguishing traits of this "new" type of femininity portrayed in 1990s chick lit, see the special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* edited by Rosalind Gill and Jane Arthurs, vol.6, no.4, 2006. Also see Ferriss and Young.

² In-text quotations of *Sex and the City* come from two sources, the original novel and the later, much-expanded TV script. References with page numbers refer to the original novel; otherwise references like 3:2 refer to specific TV episodes in different seasons, with the first number (3) standing for Season 3, and the second number (2) for episode 2.

lists in both America and Britain, attesting to the genre's ability to traverse beyond the traditional province of women's romance and appeal especially to a younger generation of urban working women.³

A key attraction of the chick lit genre is the glamorous, cosmopolitan lifestyle it celebrates, a lifestyle characterized by conspicuous consumption and a liberated female sexuality, the two often intertwined; a consumerist stance of agency and of freedom of choice informs both the sexual and fashion decisions of the female characters. Such a glamorous lifestyle is also intricately linked to the contemporary urban scenes of a few global mega-metropolises like New York and London, cities perceived to have enabled and accelerated such glamour and freedom of opportunity. The women characters in chick lit often hold high-powered, highly visible jobs like journalists, lawyers or media publicists, jobs that are typically available in big cities and that allow the women to hobnob with urban elites in a glamorous, commodified cityscape of corporate offices, high-end restaurants or nightclubs, or expensive shops.

The wild popularity of the chick lit genre and its celebrated lifestyle have been subjected to dire criticism by feminists. As a prime site for postfeminist ideas⁴, it exploits feminist terms of gender parity and empowerment but simultaneously announces the "pastness" of feminism, leading to charges of a "backlash" against feminism. It calls for young women to embrace patriarchal heterosexuality and the capitalist beauty/fashion culture as a demonstration of female empowerment and active agency, but this is reviled by feminists as a backpedalling to pre-feminist norms where women are frivolous, coquettish and cannot live without men, and

³ Imelda Whelehan writes that chick lit readers, trying to balance career and love, regard themselves as more sophisticated than readers of traditional romance. Chick lit provides a "post-feminist narrative of heterosex and romance for those who feel that they're too savvy to be duped by the most conventional romance narrative" (*The Feminist Bestseller* 186).

⁴ For representative popular postfeminist ideas, see Wolf (1994). Postfeminism is a rather ambivalent term. It is sometimes used interchangeably with, but at other times distinguished from, third wave feminism; the latter refers to a diverse range of activist projects including black feminism and working-class feminism. See Heywood and Drake (1, 4) for a definition that stresses this distinction. Postfeminism may also refer to academic feminism that uses a postmodern and poststructuralist approach to question the conventional definition of woman as an identity and subject. Popular postfeminism as reflected in a mainstream popular culture that also appropriates some feminist terms is distinguished from both academic and activist feminism. See Gillis, Howie and Munford (xxvii-xxviii). The "post" in postfeminism can be problematic, compounded by the fact that feminism itself has hardly any universally accepted agenda or definition. According to Genz and Brabon, the "post" here can mean a clear break and generational difference from second-wave feminism, or a process of ongoing transformation whereby feminism remains in the postfeminist frame, or even a contradictory middle ground where feminism is both sometimes the basis and at other times rejected (3-4).

where they are passive dupes manipulated by the capitalist commodity culture. Feminists are especially critical of the lifestyle celebrated in the genre, seeing its paraded permissiveness and heterogeneity as a superficial “lifestyling” of genuine socio-economic differences (Dow 209), a reduction and commodification of dire problems of gender, race and other social inequalities that takes attention away from these problems and robs the momentum from calls for social change.⁵

This paper advances the position that chick lit’s valorization of sexual and consumerist agency, something that sets it apart from traditional romance, is closely tied to its own distinct spatio-temporal embedment in the Anglo-American metropolises of the last decade of the 20th century. Such a valorization reflects the predominance of a neoliberal ideology that has in the late 20th century moved beyond the economic dimension of maximized profit-making into the social and cultural area of subject formation, whereby instead of direct disciplinary power from the state, the individual is interpellated as the actively choosing and self-responsible consumer/entrepreneur who is motivated by economic self-interest and risk-calculation to freely and willingly engage in a ceaseless project of self-making and self-governance. In the light of this changed form of governance and subjectification, this paper will argue that the feminist criticism of chick lit needs to reground its critique, and that to do so it must examine its own complicity in an emancipation discourse which has now been so distorted as to spell the doom of feminism and of the need for social change. Finally, this paper will also point out that though the chick lit touts a new paradigm of liberated, actively desiring femininity ostensibly miles apart from the traditional femininity of passivity and chastity, such an emancipation, seemingly tolerant of multiplicity and agency, leads only to a new hegemony and coercion, and reinforces, rather than challenges, the patriarchal *status quo*.

Neoliberal Sensibility in Chick Lit

More than traditional women’s writing, chick lit fetishizes female sexual aggressiveness and the pleasures of conspicuous consumption and fashionable self-adornment. Traditional romance touts a femininity of beauty as well as chastity, but beauty is seen more as a natural attribute than as something that both offers pleasure yet also needs constant maintenance/control through commodity

⁵ See Faludi for the backlash charge. See Whelehan (2000) for a representative critique stressing the deceptiveness of the gender ideology of chick lit and other popular female genres. For a balanced overview, see Genz and Brabon, especially 51-75.

consumption. The desirable beauty of chick lit heroines depends to a large extent on the proper use of the right kind of fashion, beauty products and body improving technology. These women characters are emphasized as having independent purchasing power and consumer clout as a result of dramatic changes in women's employment since the 1960s and 1970s, and their participation as confident consumers in the patriarchal beauty/fashion culture is seen as giving them greater agency and empowerment than the women characters in traditional romance.

Chick lit's glamorous, marketable lifestyle, then, is built on the consumption of commodities. Ownership of the right kinds of commodities, which are marketed via mass media commercials, determines the kind of person one is and more specifically whether one possesses the right, most desirable kind of sexuality. Men are also measured in commodity terms, as when Carrie of *Sex and the City* advises women to "try" as many men as possible to see "if they fit for size" ("Oh Come All Ye Faithful" 1:12). Commodities do not just help to make up one's appearance, but they also express or are equated with human moods or inner feelings. *Sex and the City's* HBO webpage, for instance, features a photo of Carrie in a dress "that shows she is finally going to split from Mr. Big".⁶ Knowledge of the right kind of commodities and the right way to use them is crucial to an integrated lifestyle that is offered not just as a copiable gateway to desirability but also as a measure of agency. Carrie is perceived as the quintessential New York woman who is not just a notch above women from other places because of the unique way she adorns herself and uses commodities—through mixing and matching vintage or cheap chic with designer labels, but also because this celebrated fashion sense conveys a sense of cleverness, confidence, knowledge and active control. Sarah Jessica Parker, the actress playing Carrie, puts it clearly in one interview:

I think the chic aesthetic that we see in New York is what separates women in this city from another city, and it's why I've been so dogmatic about the way women look on the show. It's a look that's unique to this city – it's the minimal way women choose to wear makeup. It's the sexy way they pull their hair back into a ponytail . . . It's the way a woman looks when she's hailing a cab. (qtd. in Szabo 10)

In traditional romance, beautiful clothes and a luxurious lifestyle may also constitute part of the rewarding package that a girl desires after, part of the fantasy

⁶ See <http://www.hbo.com/city_style>.

of happily ever-after, marital bliss that comes with the attainment of the ideal husband/hero. In many traditional love stories where the heroine often marries above her, she herself is of humble origin, virtuous but relatively poor, and marriage with an older and also socially and financially superior man is often stressed to be the primary means by which she attains both an adult female sexual identity and also economic and social status (Mussell 118).

In the 1990s chick lit, the female leads start out as already assured of their status both socially and economically and as already the embodiment of the fashionable lifestyle desired after. Though some are shown to overstretch their budgets in order to keep up such a lifestyle, chick lit heroines count on themselves or their female friends for help rather than on their lovers. When Carrie needs a down payment to buy her apartment, for instance, she does not ask the hugely wealthy Mr. Big for help for fear that this might increase her “baggage” and hurt her image of desirability and independence. It is Charlotte who offers to sell her diamond wedding ring as a gesture of sisterhood. In Sophie Kinsella’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2001), despite the journalist-heroine Becky’s perennial debt problems due to over-consumption, she relies on her TV appearances and on loans from banks to keep her adrift, though just barely, and only once borrows money from her lover Luke to buy a designer scarf, a debt which she quickly pays with her next month’s salary (329). To count as an eligible member of the fashionable and status-conscious world of the chick lit, one does need a certain balance sheet.

Admittedly, money and commodities have always been important, even in the novels of Jane Austen, but what is distinct is that in the chick lit women themselves are stressed to have the ability to own that balance sheet, so that they pose as self-reliant and confident users of the commodities to produce their own pleasure. This increased independence seems to contribute to a changed relationship to commodities. As in traditional romance, chick lit heroines also predicate their desirability upon a competitive relationship with other women, but the criteria of competition seem to have changed. Instead of traditional feminine attributes of decorum, tenderness and chastity, Carrie and the New York women stand out in their competition with other women because they can better manage the commodities and better utilize knowledge to produce their own distinct look, distinct style and hence distinct identity. In other words, they are constructed as their own active producers, and as more capable entrepreneurs/consumers.

Such an image of the chick lit heroines reflects the workings of the neoliberal *homo economicus* who is interpellated as her own entrepreneur and the producer of her own human capital. Critics have pointed out the links between chick lit’s rise in

the 1990s, its fashionable, commodified lifestyle, the pursuit of luxury brand names and of a type of me-first hedonistic individualism based on gratification and pleasure, with the increasing expansion in the 1990s West of the neoliberal economic principle (Gill, “New Femininities?” 444-45; Tasker and Negra 6). But it is in the characterization of the chick lit genre and its cultivation of a biopolitical subject of knowledge, agency and individual choice that the influence of neoliberalism is more clearly demonstrated. This is a key difference that sets the chick lit genre apart from previous women’s writing, a difference that is largely produced by chick lit’s anchoring in the last years of the 20th century.

In his 1978-1979 course lectures entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault discusses a new form of political governance that has since come to be known as neoliberalism.⁷ This governance entails an unprecedented expansion of the principle of market rationality beyond economic dimensions into all areas of human life.⁸ It thus entails a perception of the individual as *homo economicus*, a subject who freely deliberates every action based on a rational cost-benefit calculation. Both market rationality and the *homo economicus* are ideas traceable to classical liberalism, but Foucault claims that while classical liberalism articulates a distinction and at times even a tension, among the criteria for individual and associational, and for moral and economic actions, neoliberalism posits a marketization of all human spheres and a collapsing of these distinctions/tensions. Morality or ethics is now seen to reside in the responsibility which the individual must shoulder for his/her own marketized choices. Moreover, while the liberal economic subject is one of exchange, the neoliberal subject is one of competition. While exchange is assumed to be natural, competition needs the constant intervention of states to protect against monopoly and to produce social conditions conducive to the constitution of the economic subject of competition. This subject is then compelled to adopt market values in all her actions in order to ceaselessly

⁷ Foucault’s lectures are a critical analysis of two groups of neoliberal economists: the Ordo-liberal school in postwar Germany, and the Chicago School arising at mid-century in the United States. Before the 2008 translation, most work on these lectures benefited from the summary and interpretation of Thomas Lemke.

⁸ This does not mean that the economic principle, or the Marxian economic base, now determines everything including the superstructure, but rather that the economic principle is itself changed to take on the role of a mentality and a process of subjectification, so that the dichotomy between the economic base and the superstructure is more or less collapsed. As Jason Read points out, neoliberalism is not just a transformation *in* ideology that results in a new ideology, but also a transformation *of* ideology, which situates the ideological and the material on the same plane of immanence (26).

build up human capital⁹ and become an entrepreneur of herself. The subject is thus both compelled and enabled (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* 12, 139, 226).

The principles of neoliberalism were initially formulated in the postwar years by the Chicago school of political economy, which advocated market supremacy and competitive freedom against Keynesian state planning. More than just an economic policy, neoliberalism gradually gained importance, reaching its apotheosis as the hegemonic economic, political and social policy of the West with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the US in 1980. Privatization, deregulation, globalization of markets and capital, and the scaling back of social welfare and state power became the hallmarks of policies not just in the West but also, as David Harvey points out, in third world countries like China,¹⁰ as aggressive tides of global capitalism and free trade swept the world in the last decades of the twentieth century. Commenting on the neoliberal ascent in the US that culminated in the conservative economic, social and imperial policies of the Bush administration, Wendy Brown pinpointed the constitutive role by neoliberal rationality in the formation of the late-capitalist consumer culture and its construction of a new subject, one interpellated as an acquisitive entrepreneurial and self-responsible consumer. Moral responsibility is equated with rational deliberation by the individual who makes choices among different options and bears responsibility for their actions (Brown 3).

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the chick lit genre should arise in the mid 1990s in the UK and US, a decade and a half into the two countries' embrace of neoliberalism. Promoting the pursuit of luxury lifestyles and of solipsistic individual gratification, the new genre was part of a more widespread form of popular cultural representation of the neoliberal sensibility which generally touted the supremacy of materialistic values and solipsistic individualism. This image and idea of the empowered, assertive, pleasure-seeking, "have-it-all" woman of sexual

⁹ For Marx, labor and capital are in a conflict such that the former is seen to be exploited by the latter. In neoliberalism, the theory of human capital effaces this antagonism. As the subject is now seen as being constituted as his own producer and investor, his labor becomes an activity and capital becomes the effect of that activity and of self-calculating investment. Every action in life becomes an act of labor and investment, and the opposition between labor and capital, indeed the very fact of exploitation, are effaced by a new mode of subjectification. For more, see Read 31.

¹⁰ The dissemination of market rationality to the political sphere and social policy, the pursuit of economic development at all costs and the increasing emphasis on the citizen as self-responsible, enterprising individuals are seen, for instance, in the same period of the 1980s in Deng Xiao Ping's reform-era China, where the official ideology is "Development is everything". For a discussion on China's particular form of neoliberalism, see Harvey, particularly the chapter on China entitled "Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics."

and financial agency, set within a totally cosmopolitan, phantasmagoric spectacle of fashion and beauty commodities, allowed the chick lit genre, after gaining wild popularity in these two countries, to quickly spread its influence around the world, especially in countries in Asia, Latin America and East Europe where global commodity culture was gaining increasing influence.¹¹

As a popular cultural representation of neoliberal values, chick lit works nicely in tandem with the economic policies of free trade and global capitalism to construct a desirable world order where the values of conspicuous consumption and individual gratification reign supreme, and where super-chic mega-cities like New York and London stand at the top like city “brands,” followed and copied by a constellation of lesser and would-be world cities like Shanghai and Mumbai. These top city brands boast the free, unobstructed circulation of the top fashion brands, the latest trends, the freest capital flow and global lifestyle, and the most eligible, sexy men and women. *Sex and the City* is set in New York’s swinging Manhattan, *Bridget Jones’s Diaries* in London, *Ally McBeal* in Boston, and *The Shopaholic* series in London and Manhattan. Chick lit heroines are tuned in to the vibes in these world cities and are seldom confined by geographical or financial restrictions. They are portrayed as capable of confident and effortless navigation of the global scene, not just in terms of fashion and dating but also in terms of workplace. Bridget Jones travels to Bangkok for her TV channel reporting, and Carrie follows her European lover to Paris where she finds herself idolized by French readers of her book. To be able to stand in the vanguard of the latest world trends and to enjoy, as it were, the best and widest choice of everything (from hunks to fashions to job opportunities) is thus indispensable to the championed sexual and financial confidence of the heroines.

Such a paradigmatic lifestyle is then broadcast to the world by the globe-straddling Anglo-American culture industry. HBO, where the TV adaptation of *Sex and the City* was first aired on 6 June 1998, epitomizes the new era of digital technology and direct consumer subscription that bypasses traditional distribution and government media restrictions (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves 46) so that consumer demand and satisfaction worldwide becomes the top priority. Itself the product of global market supremacy, HBO reaches subscribers in Asia, Australia and New Zealand as well as the whole of Europe and Canada (Akass and McCabe 2), and aggressively cultivates itself as a “quality” brand among TV channels. The huge success of *Sex and the City* helped fortify HBO’s own brand identity, and aided by Anglo-American media conglomerates like BBC and *Time*—the latter,

¹¹ Rachel Donadio cites Indian and post-communist Eastern European chick lit works in her piece entitled “The Chick Lit Pandemic.”

owned together with HBO by the same parent conglomerate Time Warner, ran a cover story of *Sex and the City* in 2000—HBO’s award-winning series gets women viewers worldwide hooked and yearning for more. Beyond the Western brand-name commodities and Western-defined and locally endorsed values of beauty and femininity, the globalization of the chick lit genre also propagates the idea of a neoliberal, global sisterhood of chic, empowered, consumerist and individualistically minded women, who find liberation through consumption and progress in following Western commodities and values. This would be a succinct example of what Inderpal Grewal, commenting on the transnational influence of American culture in India, calls the joining hands of the biopolitical dimensions of neoliberalism—which works on the cultivation of the rational, actively choosing and self-responsible entrepreneur-subject—with its “geopolitical” dimensions so that the cultural, social and economic supremacy of Anglo-American imperialism is ever more fortified (2).

Choice, Agency and Subjectification

Neoliberal ideas in the Anglo-American chick lit are responsible for a new type of subjectification which does not just produce a more active female subject, but also entails a different process of constituting the subject as immanent within and responsive to normative power, a process wherein traditional boundaries and oppositions (as between entrepreneur and consumer) are collapsed and erased. To understand the working of such a process of subjectification in the chick lit genre, a detailed examination is necessary of the meaning of choice and freedom, the magic words forever cited by chick lit heroines to symbolize their liberation and progress over women of the past.

Marriage is the most significant domain where the chick lit women characters may be seen to enjoy individual choice. In traditional romance, everything revolves around the core issue of marriage, which is constructed as the destiny of every woman and the single climatic event in every woman’s life; all her life before is a prologue and a life-long preparation, and all her womanhood and identity is affirmed and enabled because of marriage. To many feminist critics, romance as a genre enforces the compulsory status of heterosexual marriage and its disproportionately crucial status in a woman’s life, thus reinforcing patriarchal status quo and the dependent status of women in general (Fowler 8).

A chick lit work like *Sex and the City*, however, revolves around the central theme of the modern woman who has a free choice as to whether or not to marry,

with the answer more likely to be “no.” Though the TV series and the later movie version end up with the eventual marriage of Carrie to Mr. Big after many ups and downs, the novel and the main thrust of the adaptations present a scene where women do feel that they have a choice when it comes to marriage, and that in many cases women more than men are threatened by the claustrophobic restrictions of marriage. Even in less cynical works like *Bridget Jones’ Diaries* where the idea of marriage is more readily embraced by the thirty-something single Bridget, she is presented as mocking at and dismissing the traditional form of teary-eyed, fairy-tale marriage fetishized in traditional romance, the fantasy of which briefly crosses her mind after her flirtation with her handsome boss (played in the movie by Hugh Grant). Though she desires an ideal man to marry, Bridget does not view her single life as a failure should that man never turn up, and she is prepared to continue her self-reliant, sexually active single life instead of desperately settling for marriage with just any man.

Yet instead of leading into an in-depth exploration of the wider social ramifications of why many women nowadays prefer not to enter into marriage, of the continued existence of inequality of responsibility inside marriage or of possible discrimination of women should they become mothers, thus probably instigating the awareness for social change, chick lit works present such decisions as simply a woman’s own rational choice after cost/benefit deliberation, a decision for which she takes up full self-responsibility rather than shifting the blame onto others or onto society.

In *Sex and the City*, almost all the episodes/columns¹² revolve around a group of women characters who offer a variety of different views on marriage and relationships, each view representing a particular kind of choice a modern woman might feel free to make. This is a format the novel/TV series is seen to carefully uphold so as to give an impression of non-judgmental democracy and open-mindedness. Of the four TV characters, Samantha, Miranda and Carrie all start out as not interested in marriage. They don’t pick up the bouquet tossed up by the bride at weddings, and a trip to the suburban home of their wedded acquaintance finds them almost suffocated out of boredom. When Carrie does for a time accept the proposal of Aidan after breaking up with Big, she experiences nausea and a rash attack and hastily rips her wedding gown off during a rehearsal, because “my body

¹² *Sex and the City* first appeared as a series of columns by Candace Bushnell in the *New York Observer* in 1994, and retained its short column format when published as a book in 1996. Various generic shifts may have occurred when it appeared respectively as newspaper columns, then a book, then the TV series and finally the movie version, but this paper deals primarily with the ideological underpinnings of the work which inform all its various forms.

is literally rejecting the idea of marriage” (“Change of a Dress” 4:15). It is the man, Aidan, who wants to get married and not Carrie, and this difference finally breaks up their relationship. Even with the more conventional Charlotte who has always wanted to get married, her seemingly ideal marriage proves short-lived and ends in divorce.

For instead of viewing marriage as the morally right and patriarchy-prescribed destiny compulsory for every woman, chick lit heroines now rationally weigh the pros and cons of this socio-cultural institution, subjecting it to a businessperson’s cost-benefit analysis. Is the happiness (e.g. the love and security) derived from marriage enough to justify the responsibilities and other burdens (not least the financial ones) a wife may be forced to assume? Or finally, which is more valuable—the joy of freedom or the joy of marital love and security?

Yet obviously, while marriage is an institution into which many chick lit heroines choose not to enter, this does not mean that they are pitiable spinsters deprived of sexual pleasure. Instead they are all sexually active and even aggressive, to the point that one column in *Sex and the City* is entitled “Testosterone women, foolish men” (49). In other words, sex is seen as quite separate from marriage and as an area where these chick lit women also exercise free choice. “For the first time in Manhattan history,” the column writes, women in their thirties and early forties have the “luxury of treating men as sex objects”, and have many sexual partners while choosing not to enter into a relationship, let alone marriage. As Angela McRobbie comments with regard to Bridget Jones, these women could brazenly enjoy their sexuality without fear of the sexual double standard (“Postfeminism and Popular Culture” 38), a standard prevalent in traditional romance where heroines stay chaste before marriage while their men sow their wild oats and only in the last instance get reformed by the heroine. In chick lit works, the women characters are touted for their sexual aggressiveness and their ability to separate sexual pleasure from marriage or even relationships, enjoying multiple sexual experiences while keeping the option of emotional attachment open.

Choice, particularly in the sense of consumer choice, is also evidenced in the much greater variety of eligible men chick lit heroines may choose from. In traditional romance which prioritizes that single Mr. Right, the man who is going to be the destiny of the patiently waiting, long-suffering heroine, his paradigmatic masculinity is often buttressed by a single and absolute comparison with the flawed, violent and irresponsible masculinity of the villain, that potentially evil temptation away from which the heroine should steer herself (Mussell 124). In the chick lit texts, the heroine is no longer restricted by the need for chastity and goes through a

number of relationships to sample many men. With this much wider range of choice, these women weigh the cons and pros of different types of men, and their decision is emphasized to be that of an active consumer or entrepreneur who is responsible for their own pleasure and own risks. The consumerist stance is emphasized when the eligible men are often compared to different fashion brands, to be weighed and chosen not on grounds of their innate personality but often on how they dress or smell like, or whether they are good kissers or lovers.

The emphasis on consumerist choice and individual responsibility seems to encourage more tolerance of and open-mindedness toward multiplicity and heterogeneity. It is for instance exemplified when chick lit characters often declare a more tolerant, matter-of-fact attitude toward gays and lesbians, and refuse to take these as structural categories with socio-economic ramifications. Instead, to be gay or lesbian is “just a label . . . like Gucci or Versace” or “Birkenstock” (“What’s Sex Got to Do with it?” 4:4). *Sex and the City* is applauded by some critics for not only bringing female sexuality into the limelight and showcased the many forms of female sexual practices and pleasures, but also for presenting non-heterosexual, especially lesbian sex with a boldness and humor previously unseen in prime time TV (Henry 79). Carrie tries going to bed with a bisexual, and Samantha proudly declares herself a tri-sexual, experimenting with two gay men and eventually having a relationship with the lesbian Maria. Claiming that people should wake up and move into the new millennium, Samantha urges to stop viewing people as lesbians or gays but just as individuals who are freely expressing themselves sexually (“Was it Good for You?” 2:16).

It thus seems contradictory that such an image of multiplicity and freedom of sexual choice/expression should belong to the same chick lit genre that is often criticized by feminists as being conservative and reinforcing the patriarchal *status quo*. It must be pointed out, though, that the former “positive” aspect is actually buttressed by the same concern that gives rise to the latter, conservative dimension. Chick lit may claim to challenge or dismiss many entrenched social norms, but this permissiveness ultimately stems from a neoliberal, highly individualized approach to structural problems. Rather than direct disciplinary power by the state through normative discourses of sexual behavior or orientation, the emphasis is now more on the self responsibility and self-governance of the freely choosing individual as entrepreneur/consumer, the individual who must be relied upon to make the best cost-benefit calculation for his/her own self interest and to take up full responsibility for his/her sexual choice. As Lemke points out, neoliberalism thus shifts “the regulatory competence of the state” onto responsible, rational individuals

with the aim of encouraging them to give their lives “a specific entrepreneurial form” (202). Therefore the traditional repression of gays and lesbians is disapproved of not because of any structural, social unfairness, but because such repression may obstruct the individual’s exercising of his/her own choice, for which he/she alone must take responsibility, a responsibility seen to rest with the individual and the individual only. In this sense, chick lit should not be seen as progressive simply on the basis of its disapproval of traditional (sexual) repression, because the solution it proposes focuses exclusively on the individual and bypasses the social and the structural. If its *modus operandi* is conservative, it is not because it supports traditional repression, but because eventually it leaves the status quo largely intact.

The same problem is behind the mantra of “it’s my life, my choice and my responsibility,” which runs through many chick lit works when it comes to another key issue, the issue of whether or not to quit work to get married and have a baby. This is an emotive issue for feminists for it is the quintessential achievement of the feminist movement that women nowadays can claim the right to work and to financial independence without having to be tied down in domesticity. A cluster of socio-political ramifications is at work behind this issue. Yet in the chick lit genre, this often simply boils down to an individual woman’s personal choice. In *Sex and the City*, Charlotte gets married and then decides to quit her job as manager of an art gallery in order to get pregnant. A WASP by birth and breeding and married now to another even wealthier WASP, Charlotte could of course afford to view this decision as no more than a lifestyle change. Though for most real-life women around the world, economic and social constraints would mean that there simply is no such choice, this is downplayed or ignored in the work.

Yet to criticize the “free” choice of single, financial secure women in big cities as superficial or empty, as manifesting a disregard of the “deeper” economic constraints like money concerns that impact on and restrict such choices, or to accuse the chick lit genre of “lifestyling” or “aestheticizing” real socio-economic problems (Dow 209), may also somehow miss the point. For one thing, as neoliberal subjects these women characters’ choices are always marketized, always based on economized cost-benefit calculations. There may be different costs and benefits and thus different degrees of “freedom” facing richer or poorer women, but all such “freedom” is materialistically bounded freedom. Thus when a chick lit heroine makes a choice, “deeper,” material or economic elements are far from being ignored. On the other hand, when some critics equate lifestyling or aestheticizing with the superficial and the non-material, over against the domain of genuinely

material (e.g. economic) problems, they again fail to see the genre's deeply materialistic considerations and the worshipping of the neoliberal market supremacy whereby the economic principle expands into all areas of social cultural life. In the chick lit works, rather than ignoring the material and the economic, the dichotomy between the spiritual/cultural and the material/economic is collapsed, and all social differences are marketized and translated into costs and benefits which the individual should calculate rationally for maximized self-interest. This emphasis on economic self-interest leads to the fortification of capitalism as the only possible economic system and the equation of capitalism with rationality.

The crucial point is not that the economic and the material are downplayed, but rather that responsibility or blame for material problems is shifted from society to the individual, thus admittedly leaving social structural problems largely intact. The chick lit heroine or her gay/lesbian friend, interpellated as an entrepreneur of his/her own human capital and calculating his/her own self interest, must bear full responsibility if the choice (with regard to one's sexual/marital partners or whether or not to come out of the closet in terms of sexual orientation) turns out to be costly. Here there are no longer right or wrong in the traditional moral sense; there are only costly or efficient in the economic sense, and morality or ethics now resides in the ability of the individual to take full responsibility for his/her own actions. The neoliberal self-responsible subject has to keep improving his/her competitiveness in a ceaseless project of the self to attain better results, should the choice and result turn out to be costly and not that successful. In this sense, it would be equally inadequate to criticize such choice as merely false and deceptive that dupes and objectifies women, for such marketized choice and calculations are integral to and immanent in the constitution of the chick lit women characters as a new type of subjects, subjects who are both subjected to and subjectified by the exercising of such choice. For these subjects, the boundary between the entrepreneur, conventionally coded as active, and the consumer, coded as passive, is erased as they are emphasized to be the producer of their own choices and calculators of their own risks.

Because marketized individual cost/benefit calculation remains the only standard for individual choice making, it should come as little surprise that eventually the individual, despite an array of multiple possibilities, should end up choosing to adjust to the normative ideal for which the state provides the best conditions. In this way, a heterogeneity and multiplicity of consumer choice eventually leads to a normalizing process, as the individual decides that the choice of this norm should produce the best benefit and least costs and thus best suits

his/her own self-interest. The interests of the individual and those of the state, traditionally perceived as in possible tension, are fused and de-tensioned.

In the chick lit genre, this is seen in the fact that despite its emphasis on female liberation from past repression and on the characters' ability to do whatever they desire, a remarkable similarity and homogeneity turns out to characterize the eventual choice made by these "free" heroines, as almost all of them end up willingly desiring the same normative heterosexual relationship and the same sexy, eroticized and fashionably adorned female bodily charm that has always been prescribed by patriarchy and capitalism. The sexy, sleek and fashionably feminine body is the Holy Grail to almost all chick lit heroines, a body all the four main heroines boast of in *Sex and the City*, and a body the overweight Bridget Jones desperately desires after and sets up as an ideal. In their approach to love, all chick lit heroines, despite being economically and professionally successful, are love-sick, emotionally needy and yearn for men, seeking (though not always finding) fulfillment and happiness in heterosexual encounters. In *Ally McBeal*, Ally may be a high-powered lawyer but she is more famous for her miniskirts and love fantasies about men. In *The Undomestic Goddess* (2005) by Sophie Kinsella, author of the Shopaholic series, Samantha rejects an offer of a partnership in a preeminent London law firm for the menial job of a domestic housekeeper, largely because she now has a sustaining relationship which was not possible in her previously high-paced and stressful lawyer's life. It could also be argued that in terms of their sexual orientation, despite their celebrated sexual openness, all chick lit heroines are straight. Miranda tries to kiss a lesbian in an elevator to test her own sexual boundaries, but quickly decides afterwards that this is not for her, as if lesbianism serves only as a foil to bring her own heterosexuality into greater relief. Even Samantha, the most liberated of the four and the only one who has had a full lesbian relationship, views this as a phase in her journey of sexual exploration, when she claims that "I'll try anything once" ("Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" 3:4). The lesbian phase is just an experiment that is never going to upstage the central quest for sexual gratification through heterosexual intercourse with men. In the end, a seeming diversity and freedom works only to lead to a fundamental assimilation that fails to problematize or question heterosexuality in its current form, thus eventually fortifying the patriarchal norms.

This celebration of normative heterosexual pleasure and of the sexy, eroticized female body is critiqued by many feminists as a deplorable return to the pre-feminist phase of female objectification which the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s fought so valiantly against, and which now

returns with a vengeance in a new rhetoric of subjectification (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 89; Whelehan, *Overloaded* 11). Yet while successfully subjecting this new retrosexism to a scathing criticism, feminists need to deploy new terms to understand and eventually effectively challenge this neoliberal sensibility and its drastically changed form of governance. First of all, it is not enough to view this as simply another form of disciplinary power exercised by the dominant discourse of patriarchal capitalism over passive female subjects, or another form of false consciousness through which women are manipulated as dupes. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write of contemporary Western society following Foucault's criticism of neoliberalism, there has now been a shift from a disciplinary society to a society of control (23). Neoliberalism involves a new form of self-governance by which individuals economize their cost-benefit calculations and willingly and freely choose to follow the path most conducive to their self-interest, the path which often turns out to be the normative one, the one for which the state has provided the best conditions. Thus instead of direct disciplinary surveillance by the state, individuals now willingly and actively self-govern in a climate enabled by the state. This is by and large a much more effective form of governance, as once responsabilized and entrepreneurised, these individuals would then defend such a form of self-governance and their much-heralded "power of self-actualization" (Rose 137), thus defusing criticism of oppression and rendering obsolete many older terms of critique.

This then leads on to a changed definition of choice, freedom and agency. Instead of the traditional humanist definition of unlimited, universalized and absolute freedom, neoliberal choice refers to one's ability to choose the maximum material gain and profit in order to construct one's own self, and agency means now the ability to be active in this materialistic, profitable self-actualizing project. Freedom as positive governmentality is never complete freedom from power, but freedom and power are always the precondition of each other's possibility. To be free is to exercise one's power to influence and be influenced by others. Freedom is thus equated with the autonomous ability to realize one's potential through one's own efforts and choice, and the ability to respond to power (Foucault, "The Ethics" 34). To passively wait for discipline by the state, the old way of power and repression, is the opposite of democracy. But to willingly take normative, profitable action/discipline is a type of "positive freedom" that Foucault claims to have always existed in history but to have now become the main form of governance in the last decades of the 20th century.¹³ Freedom is thus no longer freedom from want but

¹³ Friedrich von Hayek says that "freedom is an artifact of civilization. . . . Freedom was made possible by the evolution of the discipline of civilization which is at the same time the discipline

freedom from passivity, and freedom is the ability to achieve a self-realization which can be obtained only through individual activity, not social action. Conveniently for neoliberalism, this self-interest of the *homo economicus* dovetails with the interest of the state, or what Rose calls the “patriotic duty of the citizen” (145), as it seems that individuals can now best serve their own economic interests and freedom by choosing to follow the normative line.

As direct state power is replaced by neoliberal bio-power as the main form of governance, the impact on the body, for both the key site for the exercise of power, changes from negative threats and coercion to active regulation and production through technologies of power (Hekman 218). It is little wonder then that in the chick lit works it is the sexualized female body that has become the main site for this self-governance and technology of power. As Rosalind Gill points out, chick lit and the contemporary media culture demonstrate an obsession with the sexy, desirable female body, which is offered both as productive of active female identity and as needing constant care and regulation (*Gender and the Media* 255). Indeed, in traditional romance the desirable feminine identity embodied by the heroine is constituted by the more or less abstract values of decorum, sympathy and nurturing care, and sometimes a traditional heroine is even described as physically plain, though chaste and modest. But in chick lit texts, desirable femininity takes first and foremost the form of a sexy, slim and fashionably adorned body. As has been mentioned, the active feminine pride of Carrie and her female friends is always crucially evidenced in their pride in their own sexy, slim bodies, over which they are stressed to have complete control, and which they proudly display as a source of active pleasure.

Yet at the same time it is also hinted that this body is innately problematic, and needs ceaseless care and self-surveillance through technologies of power like dieting or cosmetic correction as well as adornment with commodities. Of course the female body has always traditionally been presented as unruly and needing control/discipline, but the highlighting of the importance of the body and the

of freedom” (qtd. in Rose 67). 19th century liberal thinkers failed to distinguish between negative liberty, in which individuals are left alone to do what they wish, from positive liberty, in which authorities seek to make people free, to coerce them in the name of justice, rationality to become wiser, healthier or more virtuous in order to realize what their freedom is. In the name of this positive liberty, all kinds of despotism (compulsory education, public health and moral policing) turn out to be identical with freedom. Hence the apparent paradox: 19th century liberals debated on the limits on power in the name of freedom of individuals, while at the same time they were accompanied by strategies seeking to intervene in order to enable people or markets to properly bear the demands placed on them. See Rose 68.

intensity of such bodily self-discipline, exacerbated by the availability of unprecedented technologies of the body like anti-aging products and cosmetic surgery, are much more pronounced in the present era. The sexy female body of the chick lit genre is both a crucial source of one's identity and a locus of the ceaseless self-improvement and self-surveillance project, a prime example of the workings of neoliberal bio-power.

However, once more it must be stressed that this is not just a continued intensification of disciplinary surveillance along the old lines (though this does still exist), but that a significant role is now played by self governance, by the so-called "project of the self," for which the state provides the best conditions. In the chick lit genre this particularly takes the form of what Foucault calls the Californian cult of the self (qtd. in Hamann 57), whereby the heroines are obsessed with technologies of cosmetic correction to fashion the self (body) toward the "true" ideal. Indeed in the chick lit works there is a pervasive sense of anxiety about the female body over and above the desire for a suitable man, anxiety over the need to keep the body sexy, slim and fit through constant dieting and visits to the gym or shops. Here the old disciplinary power is replaced by a project of the self, which takes the form of daily work at the micro-political level performed by the individual on features of the self held to be problematic. Thus in *Sex and the City*, Carrie and her friends take meticulous care of their bodies. Shopping is indispensable, and fortunes are spent on designer labels not because the girls are oppressed by the tyranny of the fashion industry but because this gives them a sense of confidence and individual identity, and the competitive edge in a marketized arena of dating and working. Criticism of irrational consumption or manipulation by scheming capitalists may now be defused if shoe fetishism, for which Carrie is famous, is seen as contributing to the accumulated human capital of the economic subject, who as consumer is her own entrepreneur, her own producer of satisfaction and pleasure, and eventually the bearer of her own responsibility. Once again, the boundary/opposition between the entrepreneur and the consumer is collapsed, and shoe consumption becomes an entrepreneurial activity, which as Foucault points out is analyzable solely in terms of the individual economic subject who is now recognized as one among many productive enterprise-units (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 225).

In *Bridget Jones's Diaries*, Bridget's overweight body is a perennial source of problems and anxieties which sometimes seem even more serious than her anxiety about not being able to find a desirable man. The female body here is presented as being particularly unruly, threatening to go out of control without ceaseless care and daily dieting. Yet instead of direct imperative from the outside, Bridget experiences

this body-control as a form of self-governance that requires daily work. She confesses her weight worries and resolutions about dieting to her daily dairy, takes daily calorie counting and weight checks, making plans now and then, and seeking help from the many self-help or DIY manuals and books topping the bestseller charts. Her constant sharing of her concerns with her friends, like the similar weekly talks of the four leading ladies of *Sex and the City*, serve as yet another means of self-governance whereby she talks about her worries and seeks common-sense advice on adjusting. The best, most beneficial course is always the common-sense, normative one to which an individual needs to constantly adjust to maximize self-interest.

In the same way, Carrie's own weekly column is a kind of self-confession like Bridget's diary, one which may present problems but always in the end advises common-sense, adjustment and self-governance. Rather than giving direct imperatives about how to act, neoliberalism acts indirectly by creating or enabling the best conditions for an action which individuals may then choose to take because it best serves their own economized interests. A fit and slim body works best not just in the workplace but also in attracting men. And in the competition with other women and in the ceaseless construction of a desirable self-project which claims not to serve dominant patriarchal discourses but only to bring the woman her own power and freedom, she thus willingly and actively chooses to follow the course which also turns out to be the dominant discourse on femininity beauty. This would not, however, be just a return to the deception or false consciousness exposed by the Frankfurt School in their criticism of the culture industry, because now the subject is no longer the passively receiving victim but actively makes her choice. That agency is further shown in the pervasive tone of playfulness and ironic self-consciousness characterizing Bridget's view of her weight problems. Her overweight body is an object of self-mockery, and it is not without a certain critical self-questioning that she views the fashionably slim body or the happily married heterosexual couples. Far from the duped and self-deceived subject, Bridget as neoliberal subject has the capacity for distanced, self-conscious reflection, but she still in the end chooses the normative line because it best suits her self-interest.

A proper critique of neoliberalism thus needs to be aware of the changed nature of this self-governance and its much more effective impact through the consumerist rhetoric of active choice and self subjectification. Neoliberal governmentality is both subjection and subject-making, for the neoliberal subject is not a pre-given essence external to and repressed by power, but is actually immanent to power and enabled by it. Such a subject therefore cannot simply be

liberated and restored to its “true” essence by overthrowing power. The collapsing of all boundaries through the encompassing mediation of the capital and market contributes to the immanent nature of neoliberal self-governance, whose effectiveness one has to first recognize before challenge from within, not without, could be attempted.

Feminism, Postfeminism and Emancipation

In the last two decades of the 20th century, what feminists call “retrosexism” (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 11), or the re-eroticization of the female body or “pornographication” of everyday life (Merskin 106), has become a marked pop-cultural trend. The sexy, revealing female body has been displayed ubiquitously in ads and media representations, and the topics of female sexuality and heterosexual pleasure discussed openly. The eroticization of the sexy female body was of course a staple of patriarchal culture in the pre-feminist days, but in the current postfeminist popular culture this is no longer perceived as demeaning or insulting to women but rather marketed as evidence of female pride or girl power. The female body is now on display not primarily as an object of the male gaze but in support of a discourse of freedom and empowerment—“Wear it for yourself,” “Because you are worth it,” as the wonder-bra and cosmetics ads say. Women are being presented not mainly as seeking male approval but purely to please themselves and to celebrate their own inner value and worth. Girl groups like the Spice Girls and kick-ass sex-pot detectives like the new Charlie’s Angels exhibit “girl power” and confidence, but these are always in the first place a sexual power; in the same way the confidence and agency of the chick lit heroines in a work like *Sex and the City* is always first and foremost a power in sexual appeal and fashionableness. It is obvious that such postfeminist ideas of empowerment and agency, directed not toward the feminist goal of collective social change but toward the individual sphere of personal improvement and valorization, are informed basically by the neoliberal ideas of individual freedom and agentive choice. As Gill points out, the basic themes of popular postfeminism include the shift from female sexual objectification to subjectification, the emphasis on self-surveillance and self-improvement, choice and empowerment, and a celebration of consumerism (“New Femininities?” 446). Arising in the 1990s and primarily reflected in popular women’s culture, with Bridget Jones and the Spice Girls touted as its poster children (Genz and Brabon 1), this popular postfeminism reflects decades of neoliberal infiltration into mainstream popular culture and is a sexualized and

gendered dimension of the hegemonic neoliberal ideology.

Agency, emancipation and empowerment are of course familiar feminist terms, as the feminists fought in the 1960s to liberate women from patriarchal oppression, but sexuality and the female body are also traditionally the province of feminist critique. It is little wonder then that the chick lit genre, having made a name for itself by touting the sexual freedom and agency of its female characters, should prove a fertile ground for crossfire between feminist and neoliberal postfeminist approaches. While feminists complain of backlash and retrosexism, postfeminists may appear at first to embrace and celebrate feminist calls for gender parity. But at the same time they also adroitly undermine feminism by dismissing feminism as obsolete, old and out of fashion, while seeing themselves as the new trend that speaks to and is embraced by a younger generation of women who have grown up in a climate of female emancipation and material prosperity. The end result is that feminist terms like equality, independence and empowerment are appropriated, “rescripted” and mainstreamed, while feminism itself is undermined and rejected.

Thus though in the 1990s popular women’s genres, a greater prominence of women-related topics and more permissiveness or openness on issues of female sexuality does occur, which would seem to suggest the wider dissemination of ideas of female emancipation, this has led not to a greater embrace of feminism as a movement but instead to a wider ambivalence toward or even repudiation of feminism (McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture” 30). In neoliberal postfeminist chick lit, feminism is often portrayed as a forbidding, repressive and strident presence that alienates and distances today’s young women and obstructs their assertion of individual choice, pleasure and self-responsibility. In *The Undomestic Goddess*, for instance, when Samantha is asked whether her decision to reject her law job for that of a domestic housekeeper has turned her into a “Judas” to feminism and to all the women who “have fought for years to gain an equal foothold,” Samantha angrily replies that she doesn’t want to tell women anything but has only “made a personal choice,” for “personal reasons” and is “just leading my own life” (362, 368).

Similarly, when in *Ally McBeal* a feminist requests Ally to act as a role model for other women, Ally replies that she just wants to be responsible for herself and not for anyone else. This episode, entitled “Love Unlimited,” is particularly important as it presents the stereotype of the typical feminist as the sexually repressed and personally unattractive radical or old spinster,¹⁴ who warns against

¹⁴ Many feminists of the 1960s did believe that there was a true, essential female sexuality

dangers of heterosexuality and capitalism but is really a failure as an individual. The middle-aged feminist character Lara Dipson who urges Ally to be a role model is presented as mannish and brusque in her long-out-of-fashion 1980s “power suit” complete with shoulder pads, a caricature of those angry, querulous, strident, unfeminine and unfashionable feminists from whom the young, sexy and fashionably-dressed chick lit heroines are invariably alienated. Lara insists that Ally drop that mini-skirt-wearing, “skinny, whiny, emotional slut thing and be exactly who we want you to be,” but the audience laughingly dismisses this cartoon-like figure. That Ally is so representative of today’s younger generation of women, who seems to have moved away from the feminist legacies of the 1960s and 1970s, is also clear from the cover of the June 29, 1998 issue of the *Time* magazine, entitled “Is feminism dead?” Here we see four photos, the first three of older feminists like Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem, and the fourth of Ally McBeal, the TV sitcom heroine. In an issue that asks the provocative question of whether feminism is now dead Ally, the lawyer who commands a high salary but dismisses feminism and loves men and fashion, is now touted as the face of postfeminism.

It is interesting to see that in the neoliberal postfeminist chick lit, feminists as individuals are caricatured as failures and feminism as a social movement is presented as a new repressive force—“be exactly who we want you to be”—from which the young women of the 1990s feel the urge to be freed. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom, brands itself as a discourse of emancipation, but as is reflected in the popular cultural forms like chick lit it now seems to position feminism, also a discourse of female emancipation, as part of a prohibitive, restricting, reactionary force preventing the individual from exercising her freedom

repressed by patriarchy, one should be liberated and valorized for its true worth (Dallos, Dallos and Foreman 131). Since the 1980s, however, other feminists have come to see the danger of sexual revolution and warned against the proliferation of male sexual violence against women. This led to the feminist movement against pornography in the 1980s, the success of which was also paradoxically responsible for the popular image of feminists as sexually repressive. See Whelehan (2000) 16-19. There has always been a division among feminists between a more libertarian stand celebrating sexual freedom and a more conservative one warning of sexual danger, a divide that may be traced to the early days of the 19th century suffragette movement. By the early 1990s, this debate escalated into a “sex war” among different generations of feminists. Willis writes that the 1982 Barnard College conference on sexuality marked an outright split among contemporary feminists into “pro-sex” and “anti-sex” camps. The former advocated complete sexual freedom for women, including the right to participate in and enjoy pornography and sadomasochistic sex. The latter warned of the dangers of heterosexual intercourse, which is viewed as being fundamentally in the service of patriarchy together with heterosexuality itself and pornography (44-56).

of choice. This is most poignantly brought home in the episode in *Sex and the City* where Charlotte decides to quit her job to get married and have a baby. As if pressured by the silent disapproval of her three girlfriends and by her own awareness that her decision might run counter to the feminist struggles for gender parity and for women's right to employment, Charlotte hotly contends that "[i]t's my life and my choice," that "I chose my choice" and that nobody should have the right to lecture her. Ironically, Charlotte appeals to the very feminist ideal of female freedom to justify her very unfeminist choice. Claiming that "[t]he women's movement is supposed to be about choice," she contends that she is therefore justified in "choosing to quit my job" ("Time and Punishment" 4:7). With these words she silences her disapproving girlfriends, and they simply move on to a different topic. Here an adroit appeal is made to the feminist ideals of women's empowerment and freedom of choice, a freedom of choice that is liberated from gender constraints over how to live their lives and thus set up as a born humanistic right and a result of morality or ethics. At the same time such an appeal is made in an ambience where feminism is not embraced but positioned as a lecturing, moralizing and repressive force from which Charlotte wishes to free herself in order to make her individual choice.

This episode serves to show the difficult position feminists often find themselves in when criticizing neoliberal postfeminist chick lit. To the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women's freedom and independence from patriarchal oppression, their ability to take their lives into their hands and freely choose their own life courses are crucial objectives. It is not hard to see that with the neoliberal rhetoric of the agentive subject and freedom of choice as reflected in the 1990s chick lit, an adroit appropriation of the feminist ideal has been achieved not to advance the goal of social change or elimination of inequality but rather to distance and alienate such a goal, and by extension the very feminist movement thus appropriated. Many feminists criticize this phenomenon as a commodification of feminism, a reductive appropriation of feminist terms in order to undo feminism and reinforce the patriarchal status quo (McRobbie, "Postfeminism and Popular Culture" 27), but the difficulty of their position is made obvious in the personal trajectory of the feminist cultural studies critic Angela McRobbie herself.

A celebrated feminist cultural critic of popular feminine genres like girlie magazines, McRobbie is famous for her late 1970s and early 1980s assertions that found positive potential for resistance and agency in young girls' love of the popular girlie magazines and in their interaction with the dominant culture industry (McRobbie 1978). This finding echoes other feminist cultural studies on popular

romance (Radway, Modleski) that reject the Frankfurt School's dismissal of the passively manipulated consumer/reader and argue for a complicated process of consuming/reading in which the consumer/reader is capable of differential uses of commodities and of imbuing meanings into such uses which may even point toward transgression and resistance. However in her 2004 article "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," McRobbie performed an about-face and regretted her earlier scholarship as too optimistic and "extravagan[t]" (30). User/consumer agency and empowerment, the very words first used by cultural studies critics like McRobbie in their effort to champion the polysemic meanings of cultural texts and the room for differential maneuver enjoyed by consumers when faced with the manipulating influence of commodity culture, have not after all led the public to "embody more emboldened identities" (30) but have actually been appropriated by the very commodity culture itself to urge the young women, interpellated as agentive and empowered, to willingly choose to embrace normative culture and to adjust to it. An idea of antagonism and of romantic subversion is now translated into a term of normalization. What is more, such ideas of agency celebrated by the feminist critics of the late 1980s have now been used to "dismantle" and "undo" feminism itself (29), as these are translated into terms of individualism antagonistic to the collective agenda of feminism.

McRobbie's change of position is representative. While feminist cultural scholarship of the late 1980s and early 1990s finding positive resistance in popular female genres like the romance or girlie magazines dramatically changed traditional perception of such genres as the sugar-coated opiate deceiving women into loving their shackles and embracing patriarchy (Firestone, Greer), with late 1990s chick lit and other postfeminist genres, feminists have responded with almost unanimous criticism and found it hard to come to terms with the pervasive ridicule of and alienation from feminism as reflected in the popular genres they used to defend.¹⁵ The feminist terms and ideals have certainly been commodified in a reductive fashion, but this also further demonstrates the effectiveness of a neoliberal capitalism that assimilates, appropriates and finally commodifies forces of resistance and then translates these into profitable capital and reproductive energy, not to overturn or subvert the status quo but to instead fortify capitalist economic and social relations.

¹⁵ One or two books have proved the exception, celebrating the new postfeminist popular genres as progressive and symbolic of women's emancipation. These, represented by *Reading Sex and the City*, edited by Akass and McCabe (2004), are singled out by most other feminists as a commodified form of feminist critique, and as proof that neoliberal capitalism has not only taken over popular female culture but has actually infiltrated academia (Tasker and Negra 3).

To castigate this neoliberal popular postfeminism as mere commodification, as totally deceptive and false—as if a pure, uncommodified and unmediated form of feminism could replace it from the outside—is also untenable. It is not a matter of how to find authentic forms of resistance, but rather of how to start *from within*, from a position that stands in an immanent though critical relation to the way neoliberalism achieves its effective governance, the way inner conflicts may harbor beneath that problematizes its touted message.

A fruitful way to start this critique is to examine the neoliberal claims of liberation and progress as reflected in the chick lit genre. It must be pointed out that despite all the emphasis on freedom, agency and choice particularly in sexual matters, an emphasis that distinguishes the chick lit genre from traditional romance, it is not difficult to see that the heroines are not happy. None of the four female leads in *Sex and the City*, for instance, is fulfilled and satisfied. Samantha, the most sexually liberated and uninhibited character, may feel as free as a man sexually and always adopt the power position in her sexual experiences, but she is burdened by this ceaseless yearning, this endless search for the next man or experience from which she could never stop and pause. The other women seem never able to locate the ideal man, and find one after another to be somehow wanting, somehow dissatisfying. All are plagued by a sense of failure or guilt because they feel they ought to be sexually satisfied now that women are free as men and spoiled for choice. When Carrie scans the Manhattan dating scene, she feels panicky not because there is no man but because there are simply too many men and she is scared of not making the right choice. An envy of those traditional women of an earlier age who had little choice creeps into the pages—“in a city of infinite options there can be no better feeling than that you only have one” (“The Monogamists” 1:7). Bridget Jones, that perennially whining, panicky heroine, is made even more anxious by the thought of a sexually free life, for she is constantly aware of the risks of free choice, of not finding the right man and making the right choice before her childbearing days run out.

This feeling that despite their much-touted new freedom and agency these women are not happy, are in fact under constant pressure and sometimes even desperate, is quite widespread in the chick lit texts. This does not mean that such freedom is deceptive or false in the sense that a truer and more essential form of freedom is available, but rather that the promise of freedom, which should mean the elimination of all prohibitions, all restrictions, has itself turned into a new form of restriction and pressure which urges women to follow and not deviate, and to constantly live up to its promise by actively choosing and enjoying. The burden of

this freedom, this pressure to go find a man to “show for it” now that women are free, is palpable in many chick lit works. Sexual liberation and freedom, for which feminists have fought so much since the 1960s so that women could be free from oppression, has now become the new imperative, the new obligation from which one is not free.

This is a mentality that the neoliberal self-governance contributes to, whereby to be empowered, free and actively choosing becomes the normative ideal to which one must aspire through ceaseless self-care and perfection and for which one must bear full responsibility and take risks. This urge to enjoy is accompanied by a sense of guilt or failure over the inability to enjoy or to find the right man, hence a general feeling of desperation and anxiety. In Lacanian terms, the old symbolic prohibitive norms are increasingly replaced by imaginary ideals of social success, which together with ferocious superego figures enjoin the subject to enjoy, have a good time, and have it all (Žižek 368). Indeed, women nowadays can “have it all,” an often-heard hymn to the progress of modern day life, but this is often less a statement of fact than an enjoinder, an urge and imperative which women feel they must try to follow. The permissive, free-choice society brings with it a new obligation to be liberated and to enjoy this freedom. But it also produces anxiety, unhappiness and a new form of shackles that eventually undermines its claims.

If neoliberal agency/freedom is deceptive, it is so not because there is a truer form of absolute freedom but because despite the changed and much qualified and materialistically bound meanings of agency, freedom and choice, neoliberal postfeminist popular genres like the chick lit deliberately appropriate and make extensive reference to the traditional humanist terms of freedom, choice and agency as unbounded, absolute, given and emancipating. This leads to a gap that is deliberately glossed over. In widely-circulated commercial catch-phrases like “Wear it for Yourself!”, “Girl Power” or “Free Woman,” and in the celebration of sexual freedom and assertiveness in the chick lit genre, young women are hailed as free agents with infinite choice, their freedom spiritually unbounded, their inner female essence and worth completely emancipated and of absolute value. This is where the wide appeal of the chick lit genre lies, and also the source of its illusion.

This gap is then closely related to the inner contradiction between the promised neoliberal fantasy/imaginary of emancipation and empowerment for all on the one hand, and on the other the market reality of a principle of competition and economized self-interest. For in a climate of competition, not everyone could be winners and there are bound to be losers. Though this is used as proof of the need to strengthen the system, and the loser is simply urged to keep working on the project

of ceaseless self-improvement so she could better adjust to the normative ideal, there is always the possibility that some might not keep up, or that there are residual elements within the neoliberal subject that need to be constantly improved or rectified but that cannot be or fail to be. This leads to moments when the loser, who has made the wrong choice and incurred high costs, certainly faces a situation where their individual interests do not dovetail with the normative ones of the neoliberal society, again opening up the intended collapse of the boundary/conflict between the individual and the state. Even among winners, not everyone could claim the same level of power because not all individuals have equal access to the information needed to make the same informed choice and to know what best conforms to their interests.

Neoliberalism has always viewed competition as not naturally given but as something that has to be constantly enabled and urged and fostered. Failure is to be neutralized through continuing self-improvements, but there are bound to be residues that leak through the seams. In the chick lit genre, the answer to these residual failures is simply exclusion. The chick lit heroines are always emphasized as young, physically attractive and financially well-off, the women who are most “free” and “empowered” and also happen to be white and middle-or-upper-class. Those women that are not attractive, past their youth and racially and economically underprivileged are losers in the competition and simply do not appear in the works, or else are hastily dismissed. Even with technologies of bodily makeover and surgical intervention to aid ceaseless self-improvement, the very hierarchical and layered nature of this touted freedom and empowerment is glaringly revealed. Criticism of the chick lit genre and its neoliberal ideology should thus start from an unearthing of this residual element within the neoliberal process of self-production that fails to catch up, fails to avail themselves of the choices made available not by themselves, or fails to achieve maximized self-interests.

Therefore the findings of earlier feminist cultural-studies research on romance and other popular female genres should still be valued, not because of its rather “optimistic” celebration of agentive resistance, but because of its perception that these genres are complicated, and capable of harboring different levels of meanings rather than simply transmitting and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Rather than unanimous criticism of chick lit’s unproblematic espousal of neoliberal capitalist ideas, a more constructive approach could start by recognizing the genre’s inner tensions and layers. That is, instead of dismissing the genre as outright commodification and deception, we could start by understanding how this genre is able to appeal to such a wide audience of young women, how the neoliberal

operation of self governance works in it, and how its touted freedom is revealed to be governed in ways that are limiting. The chick lit genre is an ideal subject for criticism and critique, not because its women characters may be rescued from self-deception but rather because it allows its reader to move toward self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their own subjectivities which are both conditioned and constrained as “free.”

The feminist critique of chick lit could thus benefit from focusing on these newly-exposed dimensions and not simply dismiss the genre on the grounds of its commodification and reductiveness. Indeed an in-depth delving into the complicated issues behind the genre’s process of commodification and its espousal of neoliberal self-governance may lead to some fresh insights. In opening up the debate on whether feminism has indeed become commodified and de-radicalized, a critique of chick lit may also lead to a deeper interrogation of the nature of feminism itself and of its complicity in a discourse of modernist liberation and progress that, while seeking to emancipate the repressed female subject and female “essential sexuality” (Dallos, Dallos and Foreman 131) from patriarchal oppression and objectification, has itself contributed to the permissive society and eventually to the mainstreaming of the transgressive and the commodification of the repressed. The dichotomous structure of repression/transgression remains intact despite a reversal of order.

A study of the particularly commodified and increasingly technologized female body as reflected in the chick lit genre may also point chick lit criticism in the direction of the posthuman, wherein the idea of the human/female essence is even more radically problematized and the dualism of subject and object, self and other, commodity and nature, oppression and liberation may be eroded. As inevitable and inescapable products of commodification, chick lit female characters may increasingly harbor multiple positions as both subject-and-object that open themselves to conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable possibilities. This might lead to a more interrogative and self-reflexive stand, and also a more energized and pluralistic engagement with the issues of gender and capitalism.

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About the Author

Eva Yin-i Chen is Professor of English at National Cheng-Chi University in Taipei. She is the author of *Meandering Footsteps and Roving Eyes: Women, Commodity Culture and Turn-of-the-Century London in George Gissing's London Novels* (Bookman, 2007) and *Mapping the Primitive: Race, Gender and Sexuality in D. H. Lawrence's Writings on the Native Americans 1922-1925* (Crane, 2000). Her articles have appeared in *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *Canadian Journal of Comparative Literature*, *Etudes Lawrenciennes*, *The Journal of D. H. Lawrence Society*, *Asian Survey*, *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*, *Review of English and American Literature and others*, as well as in the collected volumes *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty-First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels* (Cambridge Scholars, 2007) and *Feminist Transitions: Identity, Community and Activism in a Postfeminist Era* (forthcoming, U of Edinburgh P).
Email: evachen@nccu.edu.tw

[Received 15 Sept. 2009; accepted 28 Jan. 2010; revised 22 Feb. 2010]