

# Post-Feminism and Chic Lit – A Neoliberal Reality?

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Feminism is a theoretical and activist movement focusing on gaining equality for women in all the spheres of life in the patriarchal society. It endeavours to comprehend, analyse, fight and root out patriarchy. Karen J. Warren states that something is a feminist issue “if an understanding of it helps one to understand the oppression or subordination of women” (4). Critics write of various kinds of differences in feminism that have led to the creation of many kinds of feminism, but feminism is one idea that has a few indispensable differences. The different forms of feminism such as liberal, Marxist, socialist, cultural, radical, lesbian, black, postmodern and ecofeminist feminism express the evolution of feminism based on the varying demands of the different periods of time.

The First Wave feminism began in the 1700s, with the publications of works such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft. Writers of the First Wave made efforts to defend the rationality of women, and demanded equal rights to education, and other legal and social rights. The Second Wave feminism was a political movement that opposed all forms of patriarchy, articulating views about the need for sexual autonomy of the female body. It had its origin in the 1960s and extended into the 1980s. The Third Wave is a reaction against the inability of the Second Wave to deal with issues of women of various race, class and sexuality, and it brought in theories such as intersectionality, ecofeminism and postmodern feminism.

Feminism has consistently struggled to fight all the injustices meted out to women. Though it has not been completely successful in eliminating inequality, it has led to innumerable legal, social and political reforms that reiterate the necessity to consider the social, political and economic equality of the sexes. A majority of women, across the globe, have begun to enjoy the benefits of education, employment, economic independence, sexual freedom, reproductive freedom, equality in the workplace, etc., by the 1990s. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of Postfeminism, a new approach to feminism. Postfeminism had five claims: i) feminism has lost its importance and support, ii) young women, coloured women and housewives are becoming anti-feminist, iii) Feminism is dead, and is no more relevant in the modern context, iv) many women have developed a “no ... but” version of feminism, and v) feminism is exclusionary as it focusses only on women, and not on humanity as a whole.

Postfeminism attained instant success, and was hailed as a theory that reflected the living conditions of the modern women. Postfeminism was celebrated by the media that disseminated the notion of the impending demise of feminism. Coppock and Richter write, “Postfeminism happened without warning. It seemed to arrive from nowhere. One minute there were feminisms, identified by their diverse political standpoints and their contrasting campaign strategies, next ... it was all over” (3).

Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: the Undeclared War against Women* (1991) presents postfeminism as a destructive reaction against the achievements of second wave feminism. When more and more number of women were declaring themselves as feminists in the mid 1980s, “the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that ‘postfeminism’ was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women’s movement” (Faludi ). The media, with a compulsory quickness, spread flawed psychological and statistical reports on women’s struggle to “have it all”. They also focussed on, with a feverish intensity, to bring down the popularity of feminism by projecting women who were not real feminists as legitimate spokespersons of feminism, and making them present negative stereotypes about feminism. They employed a divide and rule policy that created dissension among women of various race, class and sexuality.

Faludi considers postfeminism as a backlash on feminism:

Its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique of the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it. In a society which largely defines itself through media-inspired images, women are easily persuaded that feminism is unfashionable, passé, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. ‘We’re all “post-feminists” now’, they assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care (Gamble, 38).

Faludi focuses on the misrepresentation of the women’s movement in the 1980s and the 1990s. She finds the media coverage of the movement was more balanced in the 1960s and 1970s. But the media have been using a consistent pattern of negative images about feminists, branding them man-haters, bra burners, unattractive, unfeminine, lesbians or whining victims. They have always been biased in the processes of gathering and reporting news on feminism. Women of the 1990s were presented as being fearful of feminism as it keeps them away from men, romance, love, marriage and motherhood. Thus postfeminism depoliticised the most prominent issues advocated by Second Wave feminism.

Postfeminism declared that feminism has become obsolete as its goals have been achieved. It projected itself as a radically new way in which young women engage in activism. But feminists brand postfeminism as just a media or publishing phenomenon that takes women back to a prefeminist state, and to practices that generations of feminists have considered oppressive or sexist. Coppock, Hayden and Richter state that postfeminism is just a product of assumption, and that it has never been defined

by its practitioners. The ideology of Postfeminism can be adapted to suit the needs and desires of the individuals. It does not condemn issues like date-rape and pornography as is it critical of a definition of women as victims with an inability to control their own existence. It is heterosexist in orientation, and therefore reserves important roles for men in the lives of women. Popular postfeminist figures such as Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia or Rene Denfeld have not called themselves postfeminists, but the term has been applied to them by the media.

Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1993) accuses feminism of an attempt to take women back to the fifties ideal of a woman with passive, wide-eyed innocence that women of that generation fought to get away from. "But here she is again, with her pure intentions and her wide eyes. Only this time it is feminists themselves who are breathing new life into her"(46). Roiphe attempts to use the idea of backlash against feminists while discussing sexual harassment of women and concludes that feminist initiatives such as "Take Back the Night" only bring out the vulnerability of women rather than bolstering the strength of women.

Other postfeminists such as Rene Denfeld blame feminism for developing a negative image of female victimisation. Her *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995) claims that feminism has overrun the academy, and in the process, "it has become totalitarian and inflexible in its upholding of views that are reminiscent of those in an earlier age" (Gamble 39). When Roiphe accuses feminism of taking women back to the 1950s, Denfeld states:

In the name of feminism, these extremists have embarked on a moral and spiritual crusade that would take us back to a time worse than our mother's days – back to the nineteenth century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness. Through a combination of influential voices and unquestioned causes, current feminism would create the very same morally pure yet helplessly martyred role that women suffered from a century ago" (46-7).

Naomi Wolf, in her *Fire with Fire* (1993), views the backlash as a defensive strategy of the male-dominated establishment. She critiques the inability of feminism to defend its image against the distorted, false images created by the media, as "the definition of feminism has become ideologically overloaded. Instead of offering a mighty Yes to all women's individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined in the popular imagination as a massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements" (49).

Postfeminism finds its ideals expressed through a new kind of writing called Chic Lit that emerged in the 1990s. The term is interpreted as a derogatory way of approaching writings of women by women – Chic being an offensive slang reference to young women, and Lit a not very serious way of referring to literature, symbolising frivolity and insignificance (Cooke 11). Though the term "chic" refers to something that is stylishly fashionable, the connotation does not go unseen. Chic Lit books come in pastel-coloured covers with swirly cartoonish young women depicted on them. They are bestsellers that immediately get turned into Chick Flicks.

Chic Lit claims that it represents postfeminism, yet it reaffirms traditional gender roles, and feminists label it as anti-feminism cloaked as postfeminism. The protagonists of Chic Lit are young urban heterosexual single white women in their 20s or 30s, invariably employed in managerial positions in cities such as New York. These women are projected as trying to come to terms with the challenges in “balancing their career with personal relationships” (Ferriss & Young 3). They exhibit a self-deprecating humour that draws the readers’ compassion for and self-identification with the protagonists. The novels send out powerful signals that promote consumerism; the economically independent heroines, with full time careers, are obsessed with glamour, fashion and shopping. Chic Lit depicts the protagonists’ search for the perfect man, with constant references to the ticking of their biological clocks. Marriage, represented as a gateway to happiness, eludes the protagonist, yet the novel invariably ends with the heroine getting married to the perfect man, falling in line with traditional views of femininity and sexuality.

The popular Chic Lit novels give expression to the various ideals of postfeminism. Novels such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1998) by Helen Fielding, *Sex and the City* (1999) by Candice Bushnell, *Legally Blonde* (2001) by Amanda Brown, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2001) by Sophie Kinsella, *Good in Bed* (2001) by Jennifer Weiner, *Girl’s Poker Night* (2002) by Jill A. Davis, *Sushi for Beginners* (2003) by Marian Keyes and *Dumping Billy* (2004) by Olivia Goldsmith best define the tenets of postfeminism.

Michele M. Glasburgh, in *Chick Lit: The New Face of Postfeminist Fiction?* writes that Chic Lit articulates the five pertinent issues associated with postfeminism. The first idea is that women have started rejecting feminism. Though women enjoy the privileges that are the fruits of the feminist movement, they do not want to be associated with the idea of being a feminist, with its implications of badly-dressed, unattractive, lesbian, man-hating women.

Postfeminism deviates from a focus on Sisterhood and social activism or a good cause; it rather deals with, individual women self-obsessed with their problems, and reemphasizes “lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures” (Braithwaite 18). It supports media’s endeavour to unearth the traditional forms of femininities that had become obsolete due to the attempts of feminism. The propaganda is for a return to men, a reconsideration of domesticity and motherhood, and the glory of consumerism.

Postfeminism calls for women to return home, attract men by their feminine charms, and be engrossed with romance and love. The media blare with alluring advice on manuals of posh and necessary domestic homegoods, and encourage women not to be genuinely concerned with cooking or decorating, but with the feelings invoked by such ideas. Women are made to long for domesticity and the apparent warmth and comforts of feelings associated with domesticity. Consumerism plays a significant role in developing the notion of postfeminism:

Household goods are still seen to symbolize things associated with married life – order, security and everlasting love, which is an everlasting consideration for a single woman who has not yet decided if she is happy being single. Media are using femininity as a means to market

products and women are feeding into it under the guise of deserved indulgence, which is now a right we have under postfeminism. Also the act of shopping has predominantly been considered a female sport, frivolous and fraught with negative messages about women. Returning to this as a means of indulgence and a focus on individual desires constitutes a rebellion against the old regime of feminism (Glasburgh 15).

The fourth issue is the idea of the female identity crisis; women are confused about what actually makes them women. Conflicting views on the notions of marriage and motherhood confuse women from about their role as reproducers, and the backlash and media compel women to return to the family to take up traditional roles of womanhood. The fifth characteristic of postfeminism represented in Chic Lit is the anxiety that women face due to the multiple choices that are open to them. Women are scared of failure, and filled with self-doubts and a fear of choosing what is not right for them.

The most important agenda of Postfeminism and its aide Chic Lit is the way women present themselves in the work space. Chick Lit presents young women who are ditzy or conniving, materialistic, and much focussed on romantic or committed relationships. The heroines occupy the upper rungs of administration, holding significant profiles and managerial skills. When feminism fought for equal rights for women in education, employment and pay, men, directed by the capitalist patriarchy, were hesitant in acquiescing to the demands put forth by feminism. But the unrelenting struggle of the feminists led to a creation of an equal space for women in these areas.

White women, the most important group that reaped the benefits of the feminist movement, left the domestic space, became economically independent, enjoyed complete freedom in issues of sexuality. These women, with the values imbibed during the Second Wave feminism, became less dependent on men either for emotional support, money, sex or protection. The foundations of the social structure, based on the decisions of the market, underwent a drastic change, as women started to avoid consumerism.

The neoliberal capitalist market foresaw imminent threats: the possibility of a fall in the consumption of cosmetics, textile, household goods, and other goods that accentuated the feminine charm. Patriarchy experienced a huge blow with the refusal of women to accept the superiority of masculinity, and the unwillingness of women to yield to the demands of heterosexuality and childbirth. White supremacists feared the reducing number of births of white children when there was an increase in the birth of children belonging to other races.

In the 1970s, the eugenics departments of America and other European countries stealthily organised massive compulsory sterilization programmes on poor, non-white, mentally-challenged women, in order to control the rising population of these ethnic groups. White supremacists wanted the White women to give birth to more number of White children, but these women rejected the plea as a result of the awareness created by the feminist movement. The capitalist powers and White supremacist powers were forced to forge a new ideal that would serve the neoliberal policies governing the market, and also the demands of patriarchy. A term that would draw on feminism, but

would invariably topple its strong foundation with the powerful intervention of the media, would be the best remedy, and this resulted in the strategic emergence of Postfeminism in the 1990s. Thus postfeminism became a single solution for many various problems faced by White supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Maria Adamson, in her article “Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and a ‘Successfully’ Balanced Femininity in Celebrity CEO Autobiographies”, analyses the close connection between postfeminism and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as a public policy, involves the privatization of the public economic sector and services, the deregulation of the private sector and a reduction of spending on public works (Klein 47). Robert W. McChesney defines Neoliberalism as “capitalism with the gloves off” (1). Lester Spence refers to the neoliberal notion that “society works best when the people and the institutions within it work or shaped to work according to market principles” (3), and this is best achieved by the neoliberal capitalist powers with the postfeminist intervention.

There are many kinds of managerial administration in organizations, and with women occupying upper levels of the administrative machinery, recent researchers have found that hegemonic masculinity is not the only ideal way to manage any organization. Various feminine characteristics have become an integral part of the managerial role, and the workplace projects many femininities as opposed to a single ideal masculinity. All kinds of femininities are not encouraged in an organization; they are hierarchically ordered, and valued accordingly. “The construction of femininity is not only embedded in the postfeminist but also in the broader neoliberal context. This is because the latter shapes ideals of what constitutes a valuable (citizen)-worker, which may help us further understand the constitution of a more or less valuable femininity in the work or organizational context” (Adamson 317).

Every action of an ideal neoliberal employee is subject to the notion of profitability, and is therefore required to be individualistic and entrepreneurial. The worker is never allowed to relax or rest, and is expected to stretch herself/himself beyond limits in order to self-improve. Neoliberal capitalism has found that women are capable of multitasking and contributing endlessly towards work, and has worked to bring them into a framework that defines the right kind of femininities needed for the organization. “Despite the extensive set of expectations of self-discipline and transformation, they are also expected to interpret their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice” (317).

Women who work towards achieving this sense of self, arrange their interests in such a way that they serve the interests of economic production and enterprise without coercion. All social and non-market spheres are controlled by neoliberalism and the market concerns associated with it, and so, the value of an individual gets constructed by the way one applies oneself as a productive subject. Gill argues that an “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” (443). Postfeminism provides women with freedom, autonomy and choice, and neoliberalism exploits these to serve its own needs.

Postfeminism also caters to the needs of consumerism. Postfeminist fashion and advertisements use the notion of femininity as a commodity. They, in alliance with the media, fill the lives of women with multitudes of images of furniture, apparels, bridal wears, cosmetics, flowers, accessories such as jewellery, footwear, bags, purses, and other sparkly items that are coloured with the idea of fashion and status. Women are the most important and indispensable consumers of the market, and feminism has served to ruin the market by subduing the desire of women to shop.

Postfeminism serves patriarchy by freeing women from the restraints of feminism. It encourages women to fall in love with the notion of romantic love, to move back to a prefeminist state, in which they are objectified and controlled by the patriarchal desires of men. Postfeminism sanctions women the right to be free – free to work, free to shop, free to choose a male partner, and above all free to be in a space where the issues of health, representation of the image of the female body, objectification, consumption are not contested.

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