

## POSTFEMINIST DOUBLE ENTANGLEMENT: CHICK LIT'S UNIDIMENSIONAL REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE EMANCIPATION

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### **Abstract**

*Chick lit fiction's rise to popularity in the 1990s coincides with the emergence of postfeminism in the US and the UK. A subgenre of romantic fiction, these novels take the emancipation of their female protagonists as a point of departure and present a contemporary culture where women have achieved complete equality in their personal, social and professional domains. This article problematizes the idea of an unencumbered female emancipation as presented in the fictional world of chick lit by applying a theoretical framework devised from Angela McRobbie's explication of postfeminism as an antifeminist cultural phenomenon that is disguised in a superficially feminist garb. McRobbie's idea of double entanglement as the product of postfeminist attitudes is explored in two chick lit novels, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) by Lauren Weisberger and *Heart of the Matter* (2010) by Emily Giffin to study how it is linked with the undoing of feminism and the broken trajectory of women's path to empowerment. The study reveals that women's double entanglement with liberal and neoliberal values in their personal and professional lives results in a sense of insecurity and stressful attitude of 'have it all' among them.*

**Key words:** Chick lit fiction, unidimensional representation, female emancipation, postfeminism, double entanglement, feminist undoing

### **Research Question**

How does double-entanglement in the selected chick lit novels cause a sense of insecurity, female melancholia and a stressful attitude of 'have it all' among the female characters?

### **Introduction**

According to McRobbie, Double Entanglement is a pervasive problem with most American and British young women who are confronted with opposing forces of feminist and new traditionalist postfeminist narratives. Feminism demands that women be financially independent and do not compromise on equality while postfeminism with its emphasis on femininity and new traditionalist discourses tells them that being feminine and beautiful is their first duty. They get the tacit message that since they have equal rights, they must use their individual choice and agency to live perfect lives. Women are made to think that they can have success in every aspect of their lives, be it professional or personal (however, the employers demand that they prioritise their work, while society expects them to prioritise their families and quit jobs altogether, if required). In the postfeminist era, women can have thriving professions, look thin and beautiful and be available to their families and friends. If they are unable to achieve all these targets it means that they are deficient in some way and responsible for their failure as modern emancipated women. These conflicting cultural messages are not limited to family and professional lives but also to their sexual and social lives. Living at the intersection of

postfeminism and neoliberalism they are expected to enhance their personalities and appearance through consumerism; by spending on fashion and cosmetics products and procedures. Body image has become a fixation, as dowdy appearance is a big downside not only in romantic relationships but also when competing in a job market. Women have to walk a tightrope as they have to maintain a delicate balance by looking sexy without looking sluttish. In their attitude also they need to be watchful and avoid the pitfalls of coming out as either too prim and proper or too seductive and sleazy. These postfeminist narratives choose to ignore the persisting inequalities in both personal and professional lives of today's women who are expected to cope with these issues without complaining, since even the most legitimate complaints are seen as whining and a sign of incompetence.

This study delves into the fictional worlds of two chick lit novels, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003) by Lauren Weisberger and *Heart of the Matter* (2010) by Emily Giffin to unpack the continued existence of systemic gender inequality and sexism that goes unnoticed because of women's double entanglement with feminist and postfeminist beliefs and practices as outlined by McRobbie in her critique of postfeminist attitudes.

### Literature Review

According to McRobbie, Gill and Scharf, a kind of 'double address' exists in the postfeminist culture that takes various aspects of feminism into account and selectively validates some and repudiates others thus creating a Double Entanglement with feminism. Farimond calls this phenomenon "cultures of 'bothness' which situate themselves as a part of and apart from feminism" (2013, p.44). McRobbie, who takes the idea of 'Double Entanglement' from Judith Butler's short work *Antigone's Claim*, explicates the idea of postfeminist Double Entanglement as the tension between opposing ideas experienced by women, for instance, it is acknowledged that feminism has achieved the level of common sense but it is also despised (McRobbie, 2009, p. 6). Young women are faced with contradictory forces: on the one hand they observe liberalization as far as choice or diversity in marital and sexual relations is concerned, on the other they are urged to embrace neo-conservative norms in regard to family life, gender and sexuality. Rather than openly rejecting feminism, it has been co-opted and converted into a discourse of individualism, thus effectively substituting feminism and re-establishing traditional notions about female roles in an effort to minimize the chances of a renewed women's movement.

Postfeminism is characterized by neoliberal concepts of choice and agency and one gauge of female emancipation is their ability to make choices, and Kinneret Lahad (2014) posits that "this conceptualization of choice and the injunction for self-monitoring have become central to woman's self-understandings and life trajectories" (10). However, the irony of the postfeminist storylines is that when these acts are enunciated as choices, they are seen as feminist acts but feminist acts which are empty of feminism's collective political contents ((McRobbie, 2004; Kelly, 2015; Whelehan, 2017; and Gill, 2015). This is another example of the postfeminist Double Entanglement which expects women to make choices and self-manage as feminist subjects but forbids espousing feminism as a political act as astutely observed by McRobbie that, 'the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl' (McRobbie, 2009, p. 18).

Fatimah Salah Jamal (2015) in her research on the film based on the novel, *The Devil Wears Prada*, posits that the protagonist, Andy Sachs's engagement with the fashion world

significantly transforms her, boosting her self-confidence and career path. She further argues that this change suggests the broader theme of self-discovery and the empowerment that comes from embracing one's identity as fashion becomes a vehicle for Andy's expression of self-confidence. Jamal also points that the film both critiques societal beauty standards and showcases how individuals can navigate and manipulate these standards for personal gain. Characters like Miranda Priestly embody the idea that beauty and fashion can be leveraged for power, suggesting that understanding and utilizing these elements can lead to empowerment. Jamal perceives the narrative as illustrative of the connection between fashion and professional success, particularly in high-stakes environments highlighting how Andy's initial disdain for fashion evolves into an appreciation for its role in her career advancement, reiterating how fashion can be a strategic tool for empowerment in the workplace. Jamal also draws attention to the film's exploration of the complexities of female empowerment within a patriarchal society pointing out that even though Miranda represents a powerful female figure in the fashion industry, her character raises questions about the sacrifices women have to make in pursuit of success. Jamal observes that the film critiques the consumerist nature of the fashion industry while simultaneously acknowledging that for some, engaging with fashion can be a source of empowerment. The characters' relationships with fashion reflect their desires for control, status, and self-expression, suggesting that empowerment can be found in both the rejection and acceptance of consumer culture. According to Jamal, the film uses beauty and fashion as lenses to explore themes of empowerment, identity, and societal expectations. Jamal's research critiques the consumerist nature of the fashion industry but acknowledges that it is possible to find empowerment through fashion and bodily self-transformation thus guiding towards individualistic solutions to collective problems.

Utilizing Raymond Williams' concept of culture and economy embeddedness, Ganga Rana (2023) in her thesis, *Interface between Culture and Economy in Lauren Weisberger's "The Devil Wears Prada"* analyses the impact of dominant culture on the characters, particularly Miranda Priestly and Andrea Sachs, as well as their co-workers. Rana argues that the dominant culture significantly influences individual identities and workplace dynamics, especially regarding the fashion industry's materialistic and consumer-driven values. The research emphasizes how changes in culture and economy impact the characters' lives, illustrating the broader societal implications of modern consumerism and identity formation. The notion of 'the structure of feeling,' as proposed by Williams, is highlighted by the researcher as a key tool to understand the changes in culture and their economic implications on the characters' lives. The research concludes that examining the relationship between culture and economic outcomes helps critical readers grasp the author's main arguments and the theoretical frameworks applied in the narrative. Rana's research highlights the oft neglected symbiotic relationship between culture and economic outcomes thus demonstrating the increasing impact of the fashion and beauty industry.

In his dissertation *Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in Lauren Weisberger's "The Devil Wears Prada"*, Arief Labab Umury (2021) explores Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony. The thesis examines how the fashion industry, as depicted in Weisberger's novel, represents a hegemonic culture that dictates standards of beauty, success, and lifestyle. It analyses the power dynamics between characters, particularly focusing on the influence of Miranda Priestly as a figure of authority who embodies the hegemonic forces within the fashion

world. Umary also delves into the characters' roles to illustrate how they either conform to or resist these hegemonic norms. For instance, the protagonist, Andy Sachs, initially embodies the aspirations of the hegemonic culture but gradually becomes aware of its superficiality and the personal costs associated with it. The thesis highlights moments of resistance against the hegemonic culture, particularly through Andy's transformation. As she gains insight into the industry's demands, her choices reflect a counter-hegemonic stance, challenging the values imposed by Miranda and the fashion elite. Commenting on the wider societal implications of these hegemonic and counter-hegemonic dynamics, Umary posits that the novel reflects real-world struggles against cultural norms and the pursuit of authenticity in a commodified society. Umary's findings are interesting as they reveal the potential of chick lit texts to challenge the dominant neoliberal and postfeminist notions through a nuanced exploration of how hegemony and counter-hegemony operate within the context of contemporary culture, particularly in the realm of fashion and personal identity.

Nisa Harika Güzel Köşker (2023) in her article "Body and fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada*" highlights the significant role fashion plays in shaping human bodies and identities. Her analysis focuses on the film version rather than the novel and portrays how fast and conspicuous consumption destabilises the body by presenting it as an interpellated entity. Her article critiques the restrictive practices of the fashion industry and its demands on the body, which becomes a visual text where subjectivity and power dynamics can be inscribed. Köşker argues that the fashion industry operates as a manipulative force, alienating individuals from their true identities by creating prosthetic and inauthentic versions of themselves and their bodies. She observes that a critical perspective is revealed through the frequent imagery of synthetic mannequins both outside and inside shop windows. Particularly striking are the scenes where mannequins are shown being discarded or transported, illustrating the relentless cycle of clothing and fashion trends within a consumption-driven system, with Miranda and Nigel serving as representatives of the industry. Köşker claims that Andy's exposure to this "devil's" ideology leads her to recognize its flaws and the negative impact it has on her body and identity. When she ultimately quits her job and leaves Miranda, she reclaims her authentic self, her subjectivity, and her control over her body, along with her own choice of clothing. Thus according to Köşker, *The Devil Wears Prada* illustrates how fashion ideology shapes bodies and identities, revealing the relationship between the fashion world and reality as it crystallises a broader network of signs that not only create clothes that fit bodies but also shape bodies to fit the clothes.

Nora Rohwani Surahman (2011) in her undergraduate thesis analyses Andrea Sachs's struggles in Lauren Weisberger's novel *The Devil Wears Prada* using a sociological approach, relying on library research to analyse the social dynamics portrayed in the novel. Her research focuses on themes of exploitation and alienation that Andrea experiences in her workplace under her tyrannical boss, Miranda Priestly. The study views the novel as a reflection of social issues, particularly the exploitation of subordinates in a high-pressure work environment. Surahman argues that the power imbalance between Andrea and Miranda leads to Andrea's exploitation and she suffers alienation due to the unrealistic demands of her job, distancing herself from loved ones and losing her sense of self. Driven to the edge of her tether, eventually, Andrea recognizes her exploitation and alienation and in a climactic moment decides to confront Miranda, an act that results in her being fired. According to the researcher this decision of Andrea liberates her from burdensome pressure and allows her to reclaim her life and relationships. The research

emphasises that although exploitation and alienation are significant challenges, individuals like Andrea can resist and overcome these issues. Although Surahman deftly analyses the exploitation and alienation that Andrea experiences in her workplace under her tyrannical boss, her analysis of Andrea's personal resistance against these pressures simplifies a complicated issue which needs more systematic changes in the social structure rather than individuals battling heroically against the odds.

### Analysis and Discussion

Double Entanglement is manifested in diverse ways in the lives of most female characters in both the chick lit novels selected for the current research. *The Devil Wears Prada* focuses on the choices and dilemmas faced by working women in their personal as well as professional lives while *Heart of the Matter* explores the issues related to stay at home mothers and their agency and choices which reflect their double engagement with feminist and postfeminist values, often in contradictory ways.

#### ***The Devil Wears Prada: Precarious Balance: Work, Workout and Carework***

In Wieseberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, one of the many chick lit novels that seemingly celebrates the lives of empowered women, providing commentary on the everyday travails of their existence, also reveals the Double Entanglement women face in their lives. Although all the female characters represented in the novel are shown as empowered and emancipated working women, most of them are presented as having to struggle with balancing their professional and personal lives besides managing to look slim and sexy. In the case of the novel's protagonist the struggle is very apparent and is presented as the core issue in the narrative.

As the novel starts, Andy is struggling to meet the extremely taxing nature of her job, all the time thinking about what she is missing because of it. She is in her first job and is working as a junior assistant to a highly driven and successful editor in chief of a fashion magazine. Her salary is meager compared to her never ending responsibilities and the body image she has to maintain. Moreover, she feels she is not learning anything useful and is only running errands for her unpredictable boss. Initially she resists changing her get up by refusing to wear designer clothes as she considers it "completely selling out" (Weisberger, 2003, p. 30) to superficiality and objectification. Although the word feminism is not mentioned, Andy's resistance to transforming her attire and relating it to objectification is a manifestation of her unconscious feminist self. Another very strong feminist influence is apparent in her looking down at fashion magazines and women who are obsessed with fashion. A fact that did not escape Miranda who tells Andy that she has noticed her aversion to many of the tasks that Miranda assigns to her.

It can be strongly argued that many issues in Andrea's life are a direct consequence of her Double Entanglement with unconscious feminist ideals of financial autonomy and rejection of objectification on the one hand and postfeminist values of individual choice and responsibility with an intensified emphasis on feminineness and blindness to sexism and persisting systemic inequalities in professional and personal lives on the other. Her resolve to build her career and be financially independent reflects her feminist side just as her rejection of revealing clothes and obsession with slimness and self-objectification demonstrated by her female colleagues demonstrates the effect of feminist consciousness. However, since she does not value the work related to fashion as evident in her lack of interest in fashion and beauty magazines, her job becomes even more difficult for her than it would be for someone who is passionate about fashion as she is told by everyone how fortunate she is to get this job as "it's a job million girls

would die for" (Weisberger, 2003, p. 21). Her resistance to wearing designer stilettos and skimpy clothes earns her the disapproval of her boss as well as her colleagues and adds to her frustration and annoyance with her job. She feels angered by the unrealistic demands of her job; however, like a true postfeminist subject she fails to see any systemic gender discrimination that might be at play, squarely putting all the blame for her stress on her female boss's meanness. From the description of her male and female colleagues it becomes apparent that males are not subjected to the same stringent dressing standards. Although some of her male colleagues are gay and passionate about fashion, they do not have to run around wearing uncomfortable pencil heels nor are they openly objectified as females are. Interestingly, the majority of junior assistants who are most poorly paid are females but no mention is made of such discrimination in the novel.

In Andrea's personal life also we see the effects of Double Entanglement. She is torn between her relationship with her boyfriend and the demands of her job. She is constantly apologetic and guilty when she is unable to spend time with him and has to cancel dates. Although her feminist voice is strong enough to make her confidently argue with Alex about the importance of her present job experience for her future, she cannot shake off doubts and uncertainties about her decisions which result in her walking out on her job commitment in Paris when she is close to attaining her goal of getting a suitable reference from Miranda for her dream job at *The New Yorker*. It seems that Andy acts under the influence of a postfeminist ethos which tells young women that too much preoccupation with their jobs is responsible for their unhappiness (Douglas, 2010), blithely ignoring the unfair demands of the corporate sector from employees. Ironically, Andy loses both her job and her boyfriend due to this Double Entanglement with the feminist and postfeminist ideals. The problem is not that she has lost her job or her boyfriend but that she holds herself responsible for both, thus not recognising the fact that she alone is not responsible for maintaining the relationship, her boyfriend should have understood her job obligations and cooperated with her. After all, she has been explaining repeatedly to him that this drudgery is only for a year. Nonetheless, he chooses to break off the relationship but his action is not criticized by anyone in the novel and in fact he is presented as a victim of Andy's unspoken feminist aspirations of having a career. Greta Christina's (2007) observation in her blog accurately represents the unfairness of Andy's dilemma that,

"Nobody blinks an eye when men have to work late or miss special personal events for job emergencies... but women are supposed to be loving and emotional and think family and love are always, always, always more important than work".

Another example of the burden of Double Entanglement is reflected in Andy's short dalliance with Christian who she meets at a party. Her interaction with him shows the pressure women are made to feel in their relationships with men. While talking to him on the phone Andy's stream of thoughts reveals how women are expected and guided by magazines like *Cosmo* to behave in certain ways to find success with men,

"Fine. Great, actually," I lied quickly, remembering a *Cosmo* article I'd read that had exhorted me to "keep it light and airy and happy" when talking to a new guy because most "normal" guys didn't respond so well to hard-bitten cynicism. "Work is going really well. I'm loving my job, actually! It's been really interesting lately—a lot to learn, tons of stuff going on. Yeah, it's great. What about you?" Don't talk about yourself too much, don't dominate the conversation, get him comfortable enough to chat about his favorite and most familiar topic: him. (Weisberger, 2003, p. 199)

In her conversation with Christian, she is constantly on guard about not saying anything that might jeopardise her chances and reminds herself to not dominate the conversation. This specific advice about not dominating the conversation harks back to the pre feminist times when women in patriarchal societies were expected to be silent and submissive. One of the important lessons taught by feminism is for women to freely and confidently express their views; in the postfeminist era, however, due to its invisible censors on women's agency, women are seen intentionally acting passive and subdued to appear feminine. Gil (l in her article "Mediated Intimacy and Postfeminism: A Discourse Analytic Examination of Sex and Relationships Advice in a Women's Magazine" discusses the "postfeminist nature of the advice, in which pre-feminist, feminist and anti-feminist ideas are entangled in such a way as to make gender ideologies more pernicious and difficult to contest" (4) claiming that "Women's autonomy and power is called on to help them 'find and keep a man', to 'get him to propose' or to seek out pole dancing lessons to get over a ' libido lull ' and feel more powerful" (29). Andy's narration also communicates this Double Entanglement with feminism and postfeminism as taking control of the relationship seems empowering but the end goal seems to be to please the man and keep him.

Adverse effects of Double Entanglement are also quite obvious in the case of Miranda, who is presented as a successful career woman but with a not-so-enviable reputation as she is presented as "the career-at-all-costs woman you were supposed to love to hate" (Douglas, 2010, p. 45). Although her dedication to her job responsibilities and her reputation as a highly competent and talented chief fashion editor demonstrate her arguably feminist credentials, she also embraces many postfeminist values like unnatural obsession with thinness, consumerism (her extravagant spending on clothes) and femininity. She is presented as a woman who wants to "have it all" and can go to any length to achieve her targets. Despite having a very committed career Miranda alone is responsible for the needs of her twin daughters as well as her husband who she has to consistently cajole and pamper and Andy observes that Miranda's tone changes completely when she talks to him on the phone. It appears as if the onus of sustaining the marital relationship falls on women in the postfeminist culture. She arranges an elaborate and lavish party for her husband's brother who has left his first wife to marry a woman twenty plus years younger than himself. It seems that even with her top notch career and formidable reputation she has to fulfil all the duties that a full time housewife is expected to. It is another matter that she is able to manage all these challenging responsibilities because of her assistants, who have to look after the needs of the entire family, from laundry to arranging tutors to chartering planes for her travels. An example of what McRobbie calls a 'luminosity', portraying the model postfeminist female subject living a perfect life in a gender neutral world thus obscuring the persisting inequities faced by ordinary women.

Miranda's apparently perfect life sets unrealistic standards for average working women who do not have access to the same resources, thus resulting in not only their friends and families' disappointment with them but also their own frustration with themselves as seen in the case of Andy. In spite of Miranda's strong personality and success, she is not immune to the impact of Double Entanglement. She is viewed by her subordinates as malicious and selfish who can exploit anyone to attain her targets but they are afraid even to express their sentiments because of what Andy calls "classic Runway Paranoid Turnaround" (Weisberger, 2003, p. 51). A deeper analysis of her actions and personality shows that she has some insecurity that makes her change her mind frequently, (Emily tells Andy that she changes "her mind every hour"

(Weisberger, 2003, p. 147) and is never satisfied with anything. Her insistence on perfection might be because of her perfectionist nature but it can also be an indication of her insecurity as the female head of an organization competing in a male dominant society. Miranda's difficult nature and split personality may be the consequence of the contradictory messages she is forced to cope with, in her capacity as a high profile working woman, who feels that she is being judged for how she is balancing her professional and personal life. Miranda's character appears to be an undesirable product of feminism which, it is assumed, drives women to hunger for professional success at the cost of losing their womanliness. Her character is an example of McRobbie's concept of postfeminist masquerade as she appears to be masking her tough and manipulative nature under the façade of ultra-femininity in order not to appear too threatening to men. The narrator is surprised by her impossibly thin figure when she first meets her, noting that "The hand she held out was small-boned, feminine, soft" (Weisberger, 2003, p. 26). Moreover, she is always dressed in the most feminine and seductive style with her trademark white Hermes scarf and can switch from her tough as a cookie bearing to sexy "cooing to B-DAD" which is how her husband is referred to, throughout the text (Weisberger, 2003, p. 192).

Another character in the novel whose life seems to have been messed up by the onslaught of opposing messages is Andy's childhood friend Lily. Born to teenage hippie parents who left her to the care of their friends at a hippie commune in New Mexico, she was taken over by her grandmother when her parents did not return after one year. Like Andy, Lily also wants to have a career and is fiercely independent. She is pursuing a PhD in Russian literature and working part time to support herself, demonstrating that her aspirations align with feminism. However, in Lily's personal life, a chaos is discernible that might be the result of the disturbance caused by her parents abandoning her. Even though Lily loves her grandmother, they seem to have disparate world views revealed in Andy's comment that Lily called the commune a collective while her grandmother called it a cult. In her romantic or sex life she is very different from Andy who has a long time steady boyfriend. Lily has been in and out of many romantic relationships and has developed a scale on which she gauges men, just as men judge women on a scale. It is interesting to note that in men's scale women's physical beauty has the highest score while in Lily's "Scale of Fractional Love" (Weisberger, 2003, p. 88) physical appearance is secondary to intelligence, sense of humour and decency. Lily has so far been unable to find a perfect guy according to her scale and consequently goes out with a new man almost every day after work. She fits the description of McRobbie's concept of "phallic girl" who uses the sexual freedom gained by feminism to indulge in excessive drinking and sexual activities to show her equality to men. Lily's sex life makes Alex think that she would be open to any offers of sexual nature as he suggests to Lily that his friend "Max could use a, well..." (ibid, p.198) to which Andy responds,

"A what?" I laughed. "Go on, say it. Do you think my friend is a whore? She's just free-spirited, is all. And is she seeing someone? What kind of question is that? Someone named Pink-Shirt Boy stayed over there last night. I don't think I know his real name." (ibid, p.198)

Andrea's response shows her awareness of the fact that her friend's lax sexual ethics are likely to label her as being promiscuous and not reflect positively on her reputation, unlike a man in a similar situation who would be considered a stud. This aspect also shows how double edged messages, that women receive, can have contradictory impact on their lives. Griffin et al. in their

research on female British drinkers postulate that women, especially from the working class, have to negotiate conflicting concepts of ideally modelled femininity. They argue that while visibly hyper sexy postfeminist femininity is culturally appreciated in their peer groups but “a more subdued working-class “respectable” sexuality was also required, making the take-up of new sexual subjectivities both prescriptive and risky” (Riley et al., 2017, p.12). The tension between postfeminist and feminist ideals is observed by Griffin et al. (2013) as they state that young women are exhorted upon to assume vigorous and self-assured “(hetero)sexuality whilst holding both ‘boring’ respectable femininity *and* the reviled figure of the slut at bay, simultaneously operating *as if* they were unaware of the dilemmatic nature of such ‘schizoid’ contradictions (p. 19).

An in-depth analysis reveals that many female characters in the novel exhibit some elements of Double Entanglement of feminist and postfeminist ideals whereby feminist ideals are implicitly held responsible for everything that is wrong in women’s lives. For instance, Miranda, who symbolizes feminist achievements in having a successful career, is portrayed as almost schizoid and detested by her subordinates and having a problematic marital life with her third husband, Andy loses her boyfriend because of her commitment to her career (feminist goal) and Lily becomes an alcoholic and seems unable to have any meaningful or stable relationship with her boyfriends as she espouses so called feminist sexual freedom and equality. This ruinous Double Entanglement with an embedded denunciation of feminism in women’s lives is not limited to *The Devil Wears Prada* but is also manifest in the female characters of other chick lit novels being analysed in my study.

#### ***Heart of the Matter: Agency, Choice, Retreatism and Identity Crisis***

Giffins’s *Heart of the Matter*, presents a complex scenario revolving around an English literature professor turned full time housewife, whose husband becomes involved with a single mother who is a highly successful lawyer. Both these characters demonstrate their Double Entanglement with the feminist and postfeminist values in diverse ways. Tessa was working as a teacher and pursuing her PhD in literature when she married Nick. She is portrayed as an independent and emancipated woman who actively pursues her love interest and does not let social censure prevent her from calling off her forthcoming wedding, firmly believing in gender equality. However, her approach to life markedly changes after her marriage, as she prioritises Nick’s job over her own by first switching to part time work and then quitting altogether. Moreover, there is no mention of whether or not she completed her PhD, evincing a lack of importance given to female careers. This change in her priorities suggests the impact of postfeminist culture that idealises femininity and motherhood and presents feminism as antifeminine and anti-family. This view of feminism is implicit in her interactions with her mother who she perceives as a strident ‘bra burning’ feminist with inflexible and hostile opinions about male gender as reflected in her suspicions about Nick. Like many postfeminist subjects, Tessa does not disavow feminism per se, her understanding of feminism is in contradiction to her mother’s. Whereas her mother advises her to focus on her career and demand Nick to share child rearing responsibilities, Tessa believes it is a mother’s duty to sacrifice her career for her family’s welfare. Moreover, the novel does not present her as an exception who prioritises her family over her career to the extent that she quits her job, there are other female characters like her neighbour, Carly and her sister in law, Rachel who have also given up their thriving professions to fulfill their motherly obligations, showing the pervasiveness of this phenomenon.

All these characters are depicted as empowered women who have willingly made these decisions without any coercion unlike the older times when very few professional avenues were open to women. However, what is of concern is that only one of these three women, her sister in law, seems to be satisfied with her life. Tessa and Carly are presented as bored and dissatisfied in their roles as stay at home mothers. Jessica Heagren (2023) states in her blog that her research revealed that ninety-eight percent women want to go back to work, contrary to the narrative that has surrounded women for years that they are reluctant to return to work after giving birth. Her research seems to resonate with women like Tessa, Rachel and Carly who left their jobs because of lack of support from both employers and spouses and also because of their unquestioning acceptance of unrealistic social expectations from them to sacrifice their personal aspirations for their families.

Another deeply problematic aspect is the stereotypically negative way, stay at home mothers are portrayed in the novel while also idealising women who sacrifice their careers. While talking to Valerie about April and other housewives, Nick says they are ““Superficial. Artificial. Sheep. They’re more worried about how they come across to others than who they really are. They exhaust themselves in their pursuit of things that don’t matter.”” (Giffin, 2010, p. 92). These degrading views about housewives, coming from a man who told his wife to quit her job, point to an extremely paradoxical attitude that puts women in a dilemmatic situation. His attitude towards housewives parallels “a sexist double standard that constantly sells beauty products to women while complaining that they are too image focused and superficial” (Monteverde, 2014), p. 11). These contradictory views create an identity crisis in women who opt out of their jobs to become full time housewives, since they do not want to identify with housewives because of derogatory stereotyping and after quitting their jobs they cannot consider themselves working women. This Double Entanglement with feminist and postfeminist values creates a paradoxical situation for women like Tessa, who find it hard to reconcile these opposing forces and end up abandoning their feminist aspirations to embrace postfeminist retraditionalisation.

In the case of Valerie, who is portrayed as the ‘other’ woman in the novel, Double Entanglement appears in the form of conflict between her lived experience as an outstanding lawyer and an independent single mother and her innermost desires where she covets Tessa’s life of home and hearth. Being brought up by a feminist working mother, she seems to have been a high achieving student and managed to get her law degree even after becoming a single mother, however she does not come across as someone who takes pride in her professional success. She presents an interesting case study of a girl caught between two worlds; one of her hometown friends who are content with low paying jobs and marrying their school sweet hearts and her own ambition to go to Harvard law school and live a different life. Her friends start drifting away from her after she goes to Cambridge for studies and when she candidly told her best friend, Laurel that she found Southbridge and her (Laurel’s) fiance suffocating, Laurel took serious offence and even after Valerie’s apology, she spread rumours about her snobbishness in their friends’ circle that resulted in her alienation from them. This incident had a strange effect on her and she started doing things she had vowed not to do like “falling in love with the wrong guy, getting pregnant right before he left her, and jeopardizing her plans for law school” (Giffin, 2010, p.7). Due to what McRobbie calls young women’s Double Entanglement with feminist and traditionalist beliefs, Valerie,

felt caught between two worlds, too proud to crawl back to Laurel and her old friends and too embarrassed by her pregnancy to maintain her college friendships or forge new ones at Harvard. Instead, she felt more alone than ever, struggling to make it through law school while caring for a newborn. (Giffin, 2010, p.7)

However, because of her willpower and sound educational background she was able to manage both, caring for her baby and studying for law school, an accomplishment that not everyone can achieve. Although Valerie was successful in achieving her professional goals, this Double Entanglement took its toll on her personal life as she became a loner and felt reluctant to develop a serious bond with anyone until she met Dr. Russo and fell immediately in love with him, partially because of her lonely existence. Her feeling of alienation or being a misfit is reflected in how she feels in relation to other women, “She would never fit in with the stay-at-home mothers populating Wellesley, nor does she have time to bond with the childless attorneys at her firm” (Giffin, 2010, p.92). Thus, it can be seen that postfeminist Double Entanglement results in dissatisfaction and unhappiness of both Tessa and Valerie, albeit in different ways who then subconsciously feel a disconnect with feminism and its values reflected in their problematic relationships with their mothers who implicitly represent second wave feminism.

### Conclusion

A detailed study of both chick lit texts with reference to McRobbie’s concept of postfeminist double entanglement reveals the presence of contradictory pressures faced by women in their domestic lives along with professional lives. These pressures manifest themselves in the form of liberal values of individual freedom to pursue any course in life including women’s pursuit of professional success and financial freedom on the one hand with simultaneous and conflicting neoliberal emphasis on traditional family values and personal responsibility. Women’s double entanglement with these oppositional pressures lead to a sense of insufficiency among women who feel unable to reconcile these unrealistic and contradictory expectations as evident in the representation of both, working women like Miranda and Andrea and stay at home moms like Tessa and April in the chick lit novels studied in this research. On the basis of this research’s findings, it is suggested that women be more aware of the subtle differences between liberal and neoliberal values and make choices which are empowering rather than disempowering.

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