

I DON'T DO FASHION, I AM FASHION: FEMININE BEAUTY IN CHICK LIT NOVELS

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Abstract

Jane Austen rightly said, “It would be mortifying to the feelings of many ladies, could they be made to understand how little the heart of a man is affected by what is costly or new in their attire... Woman is fine for her own satisfaction alone. No man will admire her more, no woman will like her the better for it. Neatness and fashion are enough for the former, and a something of shabbiness or impropriety will be most endearing to the latter.”

Chick lit is often discussed in terms of its apparent preoccupation with fashion and image, specifically women’s weight. And maybe this is the main reason why chick lit genre often considered as light and “not-to-be-taken-seriously” topic. But fashion has remained and continues to be an important part of society and of women lives. This paper would deal with the elements of fashion in chick lit novelist Marian Keyes’ works. How fashion plays an important role in their lives and how they desperately need to look good and stylish.

A flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realized in a dim way how much the city held- wealth, fashion, ease- every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart.

-----*Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie*

This paper entitled, “I don’t do fashion, I am Fashion: Feminine Beauty in Chick Lit novels” aims to explore the fashion statement in Marian Keyes’ works, an Irish Chick Lit novelist. Women’s magazines provide their readers with a number of different tips and offer advice most of which concern beauty, relationships and health issues. However, beauty related articles appear under many different headings and boundaries. Reaching for the magazine a woman may expect to find certain information or advice as there are regular sections which appear in every issue of the magazine. Dealing with appearance related topics in women’s magazine might be described as reading in order to get some ideas. The aim is to get general understanding about some novelties and trends in order not to stay back. It is also western women’s common practice to rely on magazines when it comes to choosing a certain cosmetic

product or service. The reader is supposed to follow the advice and adopt the ways of improving one's appearance, which is connected with trying out different beauty treatments or purchasing certain products.

Main protagonist of *Sushi for Beginners*, Ashling who is an employee in a women's magazine admits to making up the tips for an advice column and ironically comments on their effectiveness:

For example, why buy expensive shampoo when you could fashion your own from some lemon juice and washing liquid! You'd like the highlights? All you need to do is to squeeze a couple of lemons over your hair and sit in the sun. For about a year. (13)

The reader accompanies heroines in their struggles and often gets the detailed description of certain beautifying practices ranging from dieting to undergoing certain treatments. One of the main characters of *The Last Chance Saloon* – Tara wants to lose weight and desperately tries different ways to achieve her goal. One of them is special slimming treatment that she tries to experiment with.

She knew about mud wraps, and she liked what she'd heard. Being coated neck-to-toe In a warm, luxurious Chocolate-type substance (...) all her sweating away effortlessly, jumping ship from her lardy body into the thick, creamy mud sounded like heaven. Weight loss and pampering all in one. What could be nicer? (Keyes 370).

All her ideas about beauty treatment and its results are even similar to the ones so often found in women's magazines and the above quotation could probably be found on one of the magazine's pages among other articles praising various beautifying method and techniques. However, whereas reading women's magazines may encourage the reader to undergo certain treatment, being a witness of the heroine's experience in the beauty salon may have the opposite effect:

The wrap turned out to be six tatty old salmon-pink bandages (...). To her disappointment, the special rubber suit wasn't a special rubber suit at all (...). Things got worse. After a while the bandages cooled and felt damp and cold under the tracksuit. The horrible feeling of the soaked, clammy underclothes reminded her of days of school when she'd wet her knickers and woollen tights but was carrying on as if everything was normal. After an hour, Adrienne [the beautician] came back. 'Oh yes', she kept saying (...) 'much smaller' (...) Eleven inches, you've lost eleven inches'. 'Sure,' Tara whispered. She might be fat, but she wasn't stupid (372-73).

Various techniques and methods of shaping the body involving those often recommended by magazines do not seem to work for Tara. She knows many tips and ways to become slim and healthy but is not able to apply them to her life showing the readers that complying with the rules of the healthy life style it is not an easy task to do. Women's magazines often provide real life examples and stories to confirm the validity of their views often quoting opinions of women who, following magazine tips, achieve success and take control over one's weight. While in the magazines these women succeed in putting theory into practice and manage to act on magazine advice, chick-lit heroines often fail in doing so, which shows how difficult it is to achieve the perfect figure and adopt ubiquitous recommendations.

Chick lit is often discussed in terms of its apparent preoccupation with fashion and image, specifically women's weight. While this is just one of the areas of chick lit that provokes criticism, as critics express concern that the genre's focus on 'shopping, fashion and

consumerism leads to an arguably obsessive focus on skin-deep beauty' (Ferriss, 11), defenders of the genre may suggest that investment in fashion is actually an accurate reflection of our consumer based culture (Ferriss, 4). Additionally, it is important to note that an emphasis on female beauty and image is not necessarily an unliterary one, as texts such as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* mention 'attitudes towards beauty when encouraging women to write about what has long been considered unimportant' (Wells, 61). The issue of self-image is also one which some theorists would argue is really the main focus of the chick-lit novel:

chick lit might seem at first to be a category of novels primarily concerned with finding a mate [...] And although this is a controlling feature of the genre, I maintain that in many of the books this quest for a partner is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit's heroines are engaging with themselves-particularly with regard to weight. (Umminger, 240) .

In their representation of the 'modern woman', typical chick lit heroines tend to be extremely fashion-conscious and mindful of their appearance, including in intensive skincare rituals and the latest cosmetics. They desire to look as trendy as possible, often placing fashion before their own comfort:

Sitting herself in the chair, she tucked her Patrick Cox-shod feet neatly around each other. The shoes were a size too small- no matter how many times she asked the Patrick Cox press office to send a size six, they always sent a five. But free Patrick Cox stilettos were free Patrick Cox stilettos. What did an unimportant detail like excruciating agony matter? (Keyes, 4).

The mention of Patrick Cox and other designers is a trait which is commonly associated with chick lit, as many critics of the genre refer to the amount of 'brand name-dropping' (Yardley, 15) – usually in the form of 'recognizable, distinctive, coveted high-end brands' (Van Slooten, 227).- which is evident in many novels in the genre, as well as providing 'the temporary illusion of decadently and stylishly "having it all"' (Van Slooten, 220). Such circumstances are often criticised in chick lit for provoking feelings of anxiety and envy in the readers who may not be able to afford the same "luxurious" products as these heroines who are supposed to be "just like them" and yet who are never shown to suffer the consequences of such extravagant, and often irrational, spending (most notably in Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series). However, Keyes' extract above changes this by not portraying the protagonist as constantly spending money on luxuries and never suffering from financial crisis, but instead as indulging in such luxuries only when they are provided as "freebies" from her job; the fact that the shoes are the wrong size does not matter to the protagonist, as perhaps she realises it is the only chance she may have to own such designer shoes.

Conclusion: Thus, in nut shell we can say that Fashion is an integral part of chick lit novels and it plays an important role in the lives of chick lit heroines and all the readers can relate to it in one way or the other.

"I don't know who invented high heels, but all women owe him a lot!"

— Marilyn Monroe

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