

TO BE OR NOT TO BE A ‘WIFE’: THEME OF MARRIAGE IN THE WORKS OF MARIAN KEYES

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ABSTRACT

Bertrand Russell in his work ‘Marriage and Moral’ said, “Marriage is for women the commonest mode of livelihood, and the total amount of undesired sex endured by woman is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution”. Russell here speaks in favour as well as against marriage by female perspective. The underlying statement is, “Marriage is a combination of pleasure and pain”. This paper will speak in favour of women, their life, their desires, their independence and their chosen priorities. This research paper will focus on the marriage theme in the works of famous Irish Chick Lit author Marian Keyes. It will project different views of women on marriage as portrayed by Keyes’ Chick Lit heroines.

This paper entitled, “**To be or not to be a Wife: Theme of Marriage in the works of Marian Keyes**” aims to explore the struggle of being an ideal wife or not, that goes in the hearts of Keyes’ Chick Lit heroines all the time. They remain in a dilemma and remain uncertain what they actually want in their lives:

A) An Independent Life filled with lots and lots of shopping, money and their job.

OR

B) To marry their Mr. Right and settle down in life as an ideal wife.

Chick Lit is a literary genre that originated in the mid-nineties, with its cornerstone novel, Helen Fielding’s ‘Bridget Jones’s Diary’, published in 1996. In the ten years since Mazza and her co-editor Jeffery DeShell first used the term, Chick Lit has acquired a fixed definition. From the perspective of literary criticism, we can define it as a form of women’s fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience and narrative style. Simply put, chick lit features single women in their twenties and thirties, “navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships”(Ferris and Young 3). As a popular women’s fiction, chick lit has been likened to the contemporary romance popularized by Harlequin in the U.S and Mills and Boons in Britain. But here, the connection might be an ironic one. Janice Radway’s influential work ‘Reading the Romance’ (1984) identifies that genre’s single

unassailable tenet: the primacy of male female couple. The heroine must be connected to one and only one man.

Chick Lit.us explains that chick lit reflects “the lives of the everyday young working women” and appeals to readers who “want to see their own lives in all the messy details, reflected in the fiction today”. The typical Chick Lit protagonist is, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting reader’s compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humour that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible --- like them. “The heroines of these books can be rude, shallow, over-compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above, but we love them anyway!”(Chick Lit.us). Chick lit novels are not just the pink jacketed or pastel cover novels with an image of a girl with a Gucci handbag and wearing a pair of Prada stilettos. It is more than that. It portrays the common issues of an every girl-next-door. It discusses issues like career struggle, searching for Mr. Right or Mr. Maybe, weight obsessions, love, marriage, sexual experience, motherhood and many more.

VIEWS ON BOTH, AGAINST AND IN FAVOUR OF MARRIAGE:

G.B. Shaw described marriage as an institution that brings together two people, “under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive and most transient of passion. They are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal and exhausting conditions continuously until death do them apart.” Shaw’s comment was amusing when he wrote it at the beginning of the twentieth century, and still makes us smile today, because it pokes fun at the unrealistic expectations that spring from a dearly held cultural ideal- that marriage should be based on intense, profound love and a couple should maintain their ardour until death do them apart.

Marian Keyes’ is an notable Irish Chick lit author and is known worldwide. Ireland has often been viewed as a patriarchal society. This male dominated society sets very limited alternatives for women’s role. The two of them being: the role of the Virgin Mary, an ideal role model for women or the role of a mother or a wife. The patriarchal society of Ireland made it compulsory for a woman to marry a man and settle down in life being in service of her husband and children and forgetting about her own personal life. Her education, her professional life was considered as an additional qualification for marriage. The females of Ireland, happily tied themselves to the roles of a wife and mother, being an ideal woman and deep down their hearts felt the stress of not being independent and of being sheer servants. There was a conflict between the theory (usually feminism) and the practice (mostly Catholic, Irish society). Some women feel confused and were often torn apart between the theory and the practice. They were seen struggling between the feminism’s assertions that they do not need a man in their lives to be happy, while still hankering after ‘the De Luxe Love Affair’(O’Brien 1988,501). The difference between typical Chick lit and Irish Chick lit is “Marriage”. Typical Chick lit focuses on the love life and professional life of a woman where marriage is not important. These novels have moved away from the “ending in marriage” trope. “They declare love after a long period of misunderstandings with future marriage likely, but not guaranteed”.(Wells 2006,50). But Irish Chick lit does features marriage. In these novels, the heroine is shown already married or falls in love and plans to marry by the end of the novel but Marian Keyes’ novels shows both the aspects. Some of her heroine’s ultimate need is marrying while others just want to be an independent free woman.

In Marian Keyes' 'The Other Side of the Story' (2004), the protagonist, Gemma, considers the options her mother had as a young woman:

Hard to believe that mum had once had a job-
She'd worked in a typing pool, which is where
She'd met Dad. But she gave up work when she got
Pregnant with me; after the previous miscarriage
She wasn't taking any chances. Maybe she would
Have given up her job anyway, after I'd been born,
Because that was what Irish women did in those
Days. (Keyes 2004, 61)

This extract shows the reality of a women's nature that De Beauvoir once claimed, 'it is often astounding to see how readily a woman can give up music, study, her profession, once she has found a husband'. (de Beauvoir 1997, 391). Feminism had helped females a lot to change their perception. And this was even visible in Ireland. By the end of the twentieth century, a decline in the marriage and awareness for one's own self is seen and this was also visible in Keyes' heroines. In Keyes' 'Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married' (1996), the protagonist accepts the change in culture when she says that the 'days of the little woman staying at home and doing the housework in a little cottage with roses around the door, while the man went out and toiled from dawn to dusk, were long gone'(Keyes 2003,302).

Another heroine of Keyes' novel also feels that there is no dire need of getting married in her life. She can spend her life very happily, independently on her own. She doesn't need a partner to be happy and it was not a main goal in her life to get married:

Yes, once upon a time she'd wanted the ring and
The dress and the babies-so shoot her. There were
Lots of things she had wanted once upon a time: to
Be a size 8; to be fluent in Italian; to hear that Brad
Had got back with Jennifer . None of these things
had come to pass but she'd survived.(Keyes 2009,96).

The change was easily seen in the society and its reflection--- the Literature, the Chick Literature. Women changed their perceptions and didn't follow the notions of the patriarchal society. They somehow agreed to Jerome P. Crabb' quote, "Getting married is like permanently grafting your hand to the cookie jar. No matter how sweet those cookies taste, you can't help but wonder what would have happen if you'd chosen some other dessert brownies for instance frozen yogurt or chocolate straddle". At one point, a woman who wanted to get married was looked down upon. This was in one of Keyes's heroine, Marnie who desperately wanted to be a 'Trophy Wife'. And her mother scolded her by saying, "Marnie Gildee I brought you up to think differently" (Keyes 2008, 213). These extracts clearly throw light on the changing attitude of the society in Ireland as well as in the novels itself.

Till now this paper focuses on the dark side of marriage in Keyes's novels that they do not want to get married and lead an independent life and the other part will deal with the craving for marriage aspect in some Keyes' novels.

Though the society changed, priorities changed, perceptions changed but still a little spark for getting married and having a lovable family of their own was a dream of some women in Ireland and as well as in Keyes' novels. Though the females were stuck between the theory and the practice they secretly desired to get married and it often remains the ultimate goal of many young women. Females feel themselves safe, physically, mentally and financially in the cocoon of marriage. In Keyes' novel *Watermelon* (1995), the protagonist Claire feels such confusion strongly. She reveals how being married and having a family is what she always needed.

I always wanted to be boring and settled down
With a man, but because that was considered to be
The most insulting thing you can say about
Someone, that is that all she wants is to be settled
Down with a man, I'd done my level best to hide it.
Few people know my shameful secret. (Keyes'2003,298).

Claire names her desire to get married as a 'shameful secret' which she decides to hide from everyone. She also makes sure that her own daughter doesn't need a man in her life. And despite Claire's intentions to hide her desire to get married, she cannot deny that she really wants to get married.

CONCLUSION

What women actually want? A little tricky and debateful question to be asked. Feminism tells her (women) that she has a choice of leading her own life, but society doesn't offers her any choice. Feminism says, "Darling, you don't need anyone. Live your life free as a bird and fly high and high in the sky" but society says forget about yourself and settle down in life with a man and be an ideal wife throughout your life. And the heart of a women lies somewhere in-between the two arguments. Perhaps, the most important "rule" a women should follow is to simply do what makes her happy. By showing each woman as different and having different desires, chick lit is valuable to the complete genre of women's fiction. In this way Chick lit is helping women understand that there is nothing wrong with them if they do not want the same things as other women, and that they are not alone in these feelings. And the question, '**TO BE OR NOT TO BE A WIFE?**' should be left unanswered because like every human being is different and the desire of being in a relationship or denying a relationship is completely one's own decision.

In nut shell we can quote from G.B. Shaw's famous work, 'Man and Superman', "Those who talk most about the blessing and the constancy of its vows are the very people who declare that if the chain were broken and the prisoners left free to choose, the whole social fabric would fly asunder. You cannot have the arguments both ways. If prisoner is happy, why lock him in? If he is not, why pretend that he is?"

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