

Reading Mom Lit: Feminism, Postfeminism and the Maternal Dilemma

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Abstract

The present paper intends to look at a genre of popular paperbacks, written by and about would-be or new mothers, called mom lit, which itself is a sub-genre of chick lit, and to investigate how it negotiates with the tropes of mothering, neotraditionalism, work and domesticity. Though books have been published worldwide that can be classified under this genre, here the focus will be on British and American mom lit (limiting ourselves to three novels) and how the legacy of a variety of popular productions like childcare books and mothering blogs – among others – inform it. A review of the critical literature, feminist as well as postfeminist, will be undertaken so as to contextualize these novels. Issues analysed include the debate regarding the performance capabilities of working mothers, the influence of self-help books in structuring the mother's consciousness, the cycle of trying to balance work and children, "time-debt" and its attendant feelings of guilt, the psycho-somatic disorders that correspond to motherhood, and the issues of single parenting and unconventional motherhood. This analysis highlights the treatment given these issues in mom lit novels. As an inadequately investigated genre of popular writing, mom lit's ascent to prominence and eventual waning off is critically considered.

Keywords: chick lit, feminism, mom lit, mommy blogs, postfeminism

Popular literature has been so frequently relegated to the realm of substandard and quasi-serious light entertainment, that by and large it has been ignored in the discussion on serious literature. Chick lit, which started flooding the market beginning with *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) in the United Kingdom and *Sex and the City* (1996) in the United States, eventually went on to become a global phenomenon a decade later. The genre was adapted in several areas according to diverse market forces and cultural standards, giving rise to Hungarian chick lit, Asian chick lit, Chikana lit, Brazilian chick lit, Latina chick lit, Sistah lit, and Indian chick lit, to name just a few. In a nutshell, chick lit was a revamped popular romance, featuring a young woman that ventures out into the world negotiating work, love and life. Though at its onset chick lit was meant for a niche audience, the protagonists being “young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas” (Smith, 2008, p.2), with its growing popularity and expansion into a diversified readership, eventually chick lit got further categorized into sub-groups like “workplace tell all”, “single girl in the city”, “bride lit”, “mom lit”, “hen lit” or “matron lit” and “widow lit”. Interestingly, the major thematic subgenres of chick lit reveal an important differentiation in terms of protagonists as well as of intended readership. Authors develop topics and storylines by identifying certain social categories, like the woman's age, her marital status and the level of socialization allowed her. As Cecilia Konchar Farr (2009) puts it, “most of chick lit may not be literature in the traditional aesthetic sense, but it is certainly another chapter in the unfolding adventure and changing fortunes of the novel in today's consumerist and print-resistant world (p. 212).

Soon after the arrival of the single girl narratives came mom lit, with the protagonist reflecting the simultaneous aging and development of the writer and the reader. It was quite natural that the young, sprightly girl of the chick lit novel, who was worrying about her weight, professional and love life and desperately looking forward to coupledness, would very soon be facing the challenges of motherhood and, given her hapless, desperate nature, she would be struggling to balance it with her profession and her love life, often with little success but with great trepidation. Mom lit is for the most part chick lit written for and directed to new mothers, and as the authors are frequently mothers who write the novels as autobiographies, they faithfully reflect the readers' experiences.

This paper intends to study three iconic mom lit novels and the multiplicity of concerns that are voiced by these mothers, from psycho-somatic disruptions to post-pregnancy socialization. There is also an investigation into the very concept of successful motherhood and how it is constructed following social standards. In this context the concerns of employment, work, nurture and caregiving are analysed as they come across in mom lit novels.

The Concept of Motherhood

Before delving into the treatment of motherhood in mom lit novels, it would be worthwhile to look at how motherhood has been culturally constructed through the ages and how feminism has worked to redefine it in different ways. Whether the mother should entirely devote herself to the care of her children or have an individual profession that demands her attention and time has been the crux of the modern debate regarding motherhood and employment. The major point of dissociation occurs between the demands of motherhood (private sphere) and those of employment (public sphere). As Tuula Gordon (1990) notes, the public world of paid work is quintessentially attributed to men whereas the private sphere of reproduction has been culturally attributed to women (p. 11). This facilitates the patriarchal subjugation by controlling the woman's sexuality, but the formula is strongly challenged when the woman exits the home

to join the workforce. Lara Descartes and Conrad P. Kottak (2009) write, “[t]his separation is based in an ideology that associates the inside world of home and family with femininity and the outside world of work with masculinity. Given this dichotomy wives – but not husbands – have to justify why external employment does not make them a bad parent” (p. 15).

It is noteworthy that this prejudice still survives, even though economic realities – something as basic as the very cost of raising a family – has made it imperative for women to work. It is this spectre of being a bad parent – according to the norms of society – that is instrumental in setting personal standards; this spectre haunts the mothers in most mom lit novels. So the rhetoric of guilt and limitation forms one of the major underlying themes in mom lit: the mothers who are forever under obligation, in a time debt, always desperately trying (and for the most part failing) to make up for the lost time which could be devoted to their children but that has been taken away by her work. Often these anxieties are exaggerated and distorted; they serve to censure the mother who obsesses because she does not question the legitimacy of the social system that burdens her with outmoded concepts of motherhood. Katherine N. Kinnick (2009) writes, “[m]edia morality tales frequently suggest dire outcomes for women who decide to climb the corporate ladder rather than to focus on marriage and motherhood” (p. 7). The markers of good and bad motherhood as constructed by media constantly trouble the mom lit protagonists: the good mother “makes her family her highest priority, continually sacrifices her own interests for the good of her family, and conforms to expected gender roles of femininity”, while the bad mother is “self-centered, neglectful, preoccupied with career, or lacking in traditional femininity” (Kinnick, 2009, p. 9).

In mom lit, like in the other subgenres of chick lit, the dilemma between alleged neo-traditionalism and efforts of breaking away from the quintessential markers of womanhood are worked out in multiple ways. Many chick lit heroines are shown to keep away from motherhood as a matter of personal choice (like Carrie in *Sex and the City*), while there are others (like Bridget Jones, or Becky of the *Shopaholic* series) who go on to embrace motherhood and its challenges. Mom lit therefore becomes instrumental in exploring how motherhood is constructed in the postfeminist context, as this form of popular literature has become one of the key cultural assets that deal extensively with the concerns of today’s mothers.

Second-wave feminism’s efforts to assert individual freedom, to ensure equal pay for equal work and to defend proper professional opportunities often enter into obvious conflict with notions of fruitful and idealized motherhood. Being a mother invariably jeopardizes the individual choice that feminist ideology so idealistically champions, as it binds the woman to domesticity in the form of childcare. Moreover, the very myth of domesticity as a mark of effectual motherhood is never exorcised and the working mother is more often than not deemed deficient in essential mothering instincts. The pressure of societal expectations becomes detrimental in the mother’s own perception of herself, and she regularly worries about her merit. Ann Taylor Allen (2005) terms this as “maternal dilemma”: the question of whether it is “possible to be both a mother and an autonomous individual” (p. 1).

The World Wars in Europe and the United States required the active participation of women in the work front and, consequently, suspended their domestic duties. Things would not return to the *status quo*: there began a widespread movement by the European and US feminists to establish women more firmly in the professional world of which they were now active participants. A new balance between the roles of the working professional and the efficient mother came into play, despite the efforts by political players, religious entities and media

messaging to vilify the working mother. As part of these efforts, the concepts of happy homemaker and working mother were consistently pitted against one another: as Allen (2005) puts it, “[t]wo models of motherhood—one based on full-time homemaker status and the other on a combination of domestic work and employment—competed for legitimacy” (p. 141).

Gradual development and popularization of the methods of contraception and the rising educational level of women rendered motherhood in the post-war era “an option to be chosen rather than a destiny to be accepted” (Allen, 2005, p. 209). But still considering the constraints of the patriarchal society, feminists like Simone de Beauvoir denounced the prevailing concepts of motherhood as nothing short of slavery, since maternity invariably came with the loss of personal independence. Several early second-wave feminist texts like that of Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone were branded as anti-motherhood: their criticism of the limitations that are imposed on women with motherhood in a patriarchal system was wilfully misread as an abhorrence to motherhood.

A reverse reaction to this popular myth was brewing which manifested itself in the form of the policy or practice of “pronatalism” which Amber A. Kinser (2010) defines as “the excessive and sometimes obsessive focus on babies and children that often obscures the impact that raising, educating and caring for children has on families, institutions and individuals” (p. 97). Pronatalism was a widespread social phenomenon that constructed much of the popular notions of mothering and motherhood post 1980s in the United States. As Kinser (2010) points out, a certain section of feminists, who called themselves postfeminists, were trying to include the pronatalist rhetoric into feminism itself. A return to domesticity and motherhood was now being held as new norms of feminist emancipation. The widespread dissatisfaction felt by women regarding their working status had nothing to do with their professional exposure, but it was rather because women were now supposed to be professionally active and at the same time care for the family and children. It was this double burden that revalidated the domestic space as the peaceful refuge from the continuous fatigue of running between home and work. Kinser (2010) writes about the pro-motherhood postfeminist argument:

At the end of the 20th century, media, corporate and religious dialogue seemed to adopt the propaganda campaign strategy used before and after World War II to ground women once again in their domestic roles. Nearly eight hundred books were published about motherhood in the last two decades of the century [...] obsessive media coverage of stories about risk to children, risks that could be countered only by equally obsessive management of every minute detail of children’s lives, risks whose countering became the responsibility of mothers, further had domesticating effects on women’s thinking, if not their entire lives. (pp. 120-121)

The two options that are offered to women in this context were either to sacrifice every other aspect of their identity to motherhood or be branded as a bad mother. The threats of being the bad mother and the unnatural obsession over one’s child are two of the thematic threads that feature regularly in mom lit narratives. Popular media has often been blamed for cultivating “mommy wars”, which presumably reflected the conflicting ideologies of at-work and at-home mothering. The image of the ultra-efficient “Supermom” managing her profession and family with equal expertise that was rampant in the media productions up to the 1980s was by the 90s changed to the new image of “the frantic, fatigued woman who worked only because she had to” (Holcomb, 1998, p. 20). The media was clearly stating that “moms with successful careers were reviled as selfish and materialistic, putting their own ambitions ahead of their children’s

need” (Holcomb, 1998, p. 20). The expectation of “having it all” was being portrayed as unrealistic, and the concept of motherhood as full-time occupation as rather appealing.

Reflecting on the media images of women produced during the 1980s, Kathryn Keller (1994) notes that women’s magazines were clearly segregated according to the two different reading circles they tried to address – the housewife’s magazines and the working woman’s journals, though most of them “seemed to favour a return to the hearth” (p. 108). Suddenly the full-time mother was the cultural icon of proper American womanhood, engaging the central position of all popular discourses. Neotraditionalism came up with the new and evolved image of the homemaker, defined by the keyword of choice: “Articles emphasized that the Neotraditionalist was different from the bored and angry housewife of the 1950’s described by Betty Friedan. The homemaker of the 1950’s was a housewife by default, as society allowed her no other role. In contrast the Neotraditionalist of the 1980’s had chosen housewifery over a career” (Keller, 1994, p. 111). The rhetoric of choice that is central to the postfeminist lingo once again provided the central impetus for returning to unhampered domesticity.

Precursors of Mom-lit

The writing of mom lit has a close precursor in the form of the numerous mommy blogs that crowd the Internet, sharing personalized accounts of the mothering experience aimed at providing guidance to fellow new mothers as well as establishing a connection to the world through the act of mothering, which is essentially a solitary endeavour in the modern nuclear family setup. This virtual sharing of personal space to educate and inform others can be seen as a consciousness raising exercise. May Friedman (2013) notes how her book on mothering blogs was inspired by her own experience: she writes, “[i]n my pregnant and slowly expanding state, the words of a woman I didn’t know seemed to hold the key to the secret reality that awaited me” (p. 3). Friedman (2013) elucidates that compared to traditional parenting books, the blogs provided a range of personal accounts which seemed worthy of a true connection, though the experiences were largely varied and often contradictory. She writes, “The intimacy, diversity, and community of the mamasphere quickly made me an avid reader and, while the selection of blogs I followed has shifted considerably over time, I consider reading these blogs to be an important part of my self-development as an individual and as a parent” (p. 5). It is important to note that concept of influx of knowledge which is associated with sharing of experience is underlined here. Friedman (2013) calls this process of writing blogs a way to overcome “maternal isolation” and therefore a way to capture “maternal experiences” (p. 11).

Mom lit moves towards a similar end, where a personal first-person narrative, often autobiographical, aims at a one-to-one connection with the reader. Julia Grant (1998) considers the history of the popularity of baby-care books in present day parenting as she notes that it was the change from extensive motherhood (where mothers were responsible for multiple children) to intensive motherhood where they “concentrated their attention on the physical and emotional nurture of individual children” (p. 15), which was instrumental in the major shift in the middle-class American woman’s view towards mothering during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sharon Hays (1996) defines intensive mothering as “a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (p. x). Grant (1998) relates the appearance of baby-care books and their proliferation and popularity in the world of parenting to the process of social modernization. She writes, “[w]hile parents in traditional societies learn informally about how to raise children, parents in modern Western societies are inclined to seek “expert” advice on child rearing, often from professional or written sources” (p. 13).

These baby-care manuals were initially predominantly expert advice by healthcare professionals or renowned philosophers on what should be the ideal nature of bringing up children and how to handle the health hazards children are prone to. Eventually instructions diverted from physical development to spiritual wellbeing of the children, and simultaneously the emphasis on the parents' combined role in child rearing was superseded by the insistence on the mother's importance in the physical and spiritual development of the child. Melissa Buis Michaux and Leslie Dunlap (2009), in their study on guide books for mothers, trace how the insistence on mostly expert advice in the form of the oracular paediatrician as in Dr. Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1945) was rejected by the feminist help book *Ourselves and Our Children* (1978), which "presented itself not as an advice manual but, following the practice of consciousness-raising, as a place to share and analyse experiences" (p. 142). They also note that it was Heidi Murkoff's *What to Expect When You're Expecting* which stole the show with its appearance in 1984; it was conspicuous in its focus on stay-at-home mothers, with the working mothers treated as a minority, who were trying to balance the impossible dual responsibility of work and child and therefore were beyond help through instructions. Mommy blogs deftly combined the two forms of narration employed by child care manuals—on the one hand they are instructional, on the other they tap on the commonality of experience. Mom lit often seems to be an extension of mothering blogs with similar insistence on sharing the personal experience, and, on another level, it often engages in a dialogue with real help manuals with its constant references to such books.

Jacqueline V. Lerner (1994), in the introduction to her book *Working Women and their Families*, puts forward an interesting example where a mother going off to work while leaving her child with the caregiver is thoroughly troubled by the guilt of acting as an unnatural mother while the child in reality is not much distressed – it has food, sleep and comfort of the home – but the mother continues to suffer through the day. This self-driven guilt of the working mothers surfaces very frequently in mom lit narratives. In the opening sequence of one of the earliest mom lit books to hit the market, Allison Pearson's novel *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002), the protagonist and mother of two, Kate Reddy, appears to be tampering with readymade mince pies so that they may pass as homemade and save her grace at her daughter Emily's school carol concert, where parents have been requested to send refreshments. Kate's social conditioning makes her read the message as the school's order to send mother-made food and since, as a working professional, she does not have the time to cook, she struggles to keep up appearances. She neurotically tries to rub out every trace of the pies' readymade status from her kitchen so that none finds out about her forgery and worries herself sick that she is not living up to standard.

Lerner (1994) notes that the present mother's relationship with her own mother, and the perceptions she imbibed from the later, often become important in the way that she formulates motherhood (p. 1). Kate too seems to be indoctrinated by the notions of the previous generation when working mothers were held to be an anomaly: "So before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided into two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the washtub, and there were the other sort" (Pearson, 2002, p. 1). Kate is forever anxious of being branded with this otherness: her husband unsuccessfully tries to convince her that she is not really expected to live up to the so-called pointers of fruitful motherhood, but Kate, in her state of sleep-deprived neurotic obsession just refuses to listen. She is convinced that her role as a mother is critical in her child's development. Fiona Joy Green (2004) writes about the social conditioning of mothers and says that "women are subjected to external pressure to conform to the dominant image of the ideal mother and are

punished when they do not” (p. 128). This notion of punishment gains a novel significance when Kate starts reading her daughter’s juvenile outpour of dissatisfaction at her being away from the home because of work responsibilities; the daughter is delivering just punishment for her supposed negligence of domestic duties.

Punishment, as in Kate’s case, is internalised as a gnawing of guilt. The child, Emily, appears to be both the antagonist and the embodied voice of conscience for the erring mother: Kate feels distressed by Emily’s actions that clearly chide her for being away. Julia Grant (1998) points out that from the physical, emotional and clinical wellbeing of the child to the very question of salvation everything becomes a matter of responsibility of the mother (p. 22). To her husband’s reassurance that with her busy working schedule nobody expects her to be the homebound mother, Kate retorts “Well, *I* expect me to” (Pearson, 2002, p. 2) (emphasis original), thus making herself a wilful victim of the norms of mothering that she has internalized from her own childhood.

The reader sees another generation of potentially guilt-ridden women brewing in Emily, who would eventually carry on the legacy of suffering under the burden of heteronormative expectations: eventually she might try to be the mother her own mother strives to but fails to be. It is a curious mixture of hilarity and pathos with which Kate is presented: a woman with a soaring career obsessing incessantly about her lack of domestic competence. This somehow articulates the dichotomy that neo-traditionalist postfeminism embodies—however hard you try, you cannot have it all. Kate’s neurotic behaviour extends to the way she relentlessly blames her children’s nanny Paula. It is her nascent jealousy of the role of mother substitute that Paula plays that makes her read all of Paula’s actions as potentially destructive to the wellbeing of her children, or at least intrusive to her space of maternal authority.

Kate’s guilt extends from not being able to spend enough time with her children to not knowing them well. She constantly fears that her profession is robbing her of the experience of mothering – she seems to be unaware of their food habits and intricacies of their daily routine – and ends up marking herself as an “unnatural mother”. Amber E. Kinser writes in the prologue to her book *Motherhood and Feminism* (2010) “feminism taught me I had the right and internal resources to construct a mother role and identity that were of my own design, even if they didn’t follow cultural standards, and I had a right to the external resources that would help me do that. I don’t have to sacrifice what is right for me in order for my family to flourish” (p. ix). This message seems to be entirely lost to the likes of Kate, who finally decides to quit the urban space and corporate life in favour of part-time work and peaceful unhampered mothering. But even Kinser, later in the essay, cannot deny the extra burden of obligations that she has for her family by the virtue of being a mother, something that her male colleagues are blissfully free of. Perhaps these obligations will become massive for neo-traditionalist Kate, and may move her to take refuge in the rural, premodern existence of full-time motherhood.

Kate does not only rue the fact that she cannot take care of her children as much as she would like, but she also laments her mismanaged household, which emerges as the visual reminder of her status as a failed domestic goddess. Adrienne Katz (1992) notes that in post-war Britain the picture of the ideal mother was related to the propriety, order and cleanliness of her household. Katz writes that “[t]he image of a good mother was projected as measurable in terms of how her family looked: keeping up appearances took on a new meaning” (p. 6). Years of social indoctrination makes Kate cry over her status as an unsuccessful mother whenever she spots a dirty dishcloth or a bunch of rotten apples. The perpetual race against time that the chick lit heroine is engaged in – she is usually always late for her office, her date, her doctor

and everything else, and of course she is racing against the biological clock – turns onerous when she becomes a mother and multitasks like never before. These instances highlight the pressure of the double burden of handling both family and work that working mothers must take upon themselves. Now her lists of things-to-be-done multiply and she suffers more crucially from undone tasks.

Through the course of the novel her private life keeps on interfering with her workspace and vice versa, and she tries to excel in both fields while constantly jetting between the two. The novel begins with a Christmas gathering at Kate's in-laws' place, where she becomes busier than she is in her professional space as she tries to play a role to which she is not accustomed. She is the main breadwinner of the house but must abstain from any mention of that fact so as not to hurt the sentiments of her in-laws or her husband's ego. Kate seems to be surrounded by a nexus of women who enthusiastically showcase their happy housewife status, like her sister-in-law Caryl. Despite Kate's obsession about not being the perfect mother, she cannot help but recognize her superiority when it comes to individual worth and financial independence. Therefore, her choice of retreating into apparent domesticity at the end of the novel raises deeper questions on the relative worth that postfeminism places on the two.

The personal tone of the confessional narrative in chick lit novels is often effective in drawing the reader into the protagonist's life, and this tone becomes more efficient when private physical experiences are related, especially those related to mothering. When Marian Keyes published *Watermelon* in 1995, the chick lit market was yet to flourish. The narrative begins with Claire giving birth to a daughter, and the locus of the experience is on how the trial of parenthood is so tellingly different in a man and a woman: the active physical trauma that the mother undergoes in the process of childbirth is juxtaposed to the passive mental stress that the father presumably undertakes. In case of Keyes's novel, the concerns of the body and motherhood are viewed in connection to each other. Besides her new responsibility as a mother, Claire has to deal with an unfaithful husband that abandons her and the infant. The intense neediness that the chick lit heroine is often prone to is intensified in the case of Claire by this abandonment at a crucial transitional stage of her life, and her lack of self-reliance surfaces repeatedly as she has to live alone after a long period of routine intimacy.

The fact that the apparently perfect husband – “a nice man, a bit older than me, with a decent job, good-looking, funny, kind” (Keyes, 1995, p. 4) – abandons her at the most critical stage of her life highlights the fact that all is not rosy in the coupledness and marriage lifestyle that chick lit heroines look forward to. The change of relationship status, from singlehood to coupledness or vice versa, and the emotional changes that accompany the process, are often at the centre of discourse in chick lit novels. At 23, the naïve, bumbling young woman was “rescued” by a well-to-do man by means of marriage, making Claire so accustomed to dependence that she is initially incapable of getting a hold of her life after the break-up.

Claire establishes her postfeminist, neo-traditionalist status clearly at the beginning of the novel: “For all my talk of independence, I was clearly a very romantic person at heart. And for all my talk of rebellion, I was as middle-class as you could get” (Keyes, 1995, p. 9). She adds, “I was perfectly happy to be a homemaker while my husband went out to earn the loot. And if my husband was prepared to share the household chores as well as earn the lion's share of the loot, then so much the better” (Keyes, 1995, p. 129). The flowery language of romantic idealization that Claire employs in retrospection while relating her fairy-tale courtship sounds ironic when contrasted to her present status. At this stage it must be questioned whether chick lit really upholds neo-traditionalism, because Claire certainly grows up when her romanticism

fails her and she has to learn to live alone and be self-sufficient. While coping with the fact she is alone as an individual, Claire also comprehends that she is a single parent with added responsibilities for her child. This revelation might work to make her a more capable mother.

The protagonist's biological family is often absent in chick lit narratives since the chick lit heroine is mostly displaced into an urban space away from her family. Additionally, they are often relegated for their behavioural quirks, which are absurd by the chick lit heroine's own standards. But when Claire comes back to her downtown Dublin home from her accustomed English living space, she is enveloped by a protective family, though the members are quirky in their own way, supporting her with childcare and helping her through her gripping depression and hopeless alcoholism.

The havoc that pregnancy plays with the woman's body has been the source of major feminist debates: the aversion towards the pregnant body or the post-partum changes of the body have been both celebrated as marks of successful womanhood and also decried as an impediment to the construction of female selfhood. Claire tries to justify her decision not to breastfeed her child apologetically, but soon reverses it when her mothering impulse proves stronger than the concern to maintain a perfect body. Significantly, Claire's process of regaining control over her life is aligned with the gradual reclamation of her fitness, though the process is almost involuntary since she cannot drink anything but vodka and juice and exercises to vent out her pent-up anger. The feeling of being a "watermelon" fades away with her inadvertent weight loss, and at the same time she steadily gains control over her encumbered senses, though still harried by the thought of the unfaithful husband.

As in other chick lit narratives, the question of physical attractiveness here too looms large over the consciousness of the protagonist. When Claire meets her husband after their breakup, she intends to look good so that he might comprehend his loss: self-worth is measured according to others' opinion, especially those of the opposite sex. Eventually, Claire becomes attracted to a younger man, Adam, but constantly admonishes herself for not only falling for another man while still married (though her husband had actually breached the contract by having an affair and abandoning her), but also because she thinks that it is socially unacceptable to desire a younger partner.

But mainly, Claire feels that it is selfish to be indulging herself when her child should be the priority. She notes, "My child was growing up without a father, but instead of getting on the phone and trying to work something out, I stood in front of mirror holding my stomach in, checking my profile and finally, as though the years had rolled away and I was still fifteen twisting my head around, trying to see what my butt looked like in the mirror" (Keyes, 1995, p. 163). Claire sees her obsession with the body and love life as an obstructing anomaly to her role as a mother. What in other mom lit novels is the guilt of neglecting the child for professional obligations, for Claire is the guilt of neglecting the child for her emotional needs. Both ways of prioritizing the individual's demands over the role of a mother are judged to be the result of gross selfishness. This socially conditioned guilt consciousness makes Claire stay away from social interactions with Adam for fear of censure and disapproval. Even when Claire decides to go back to her husband James it is because she is thinking of her motherly duties: she wants to secure a better life for her daughter within a regimented family structure, although she ultimately decides otherwise and remains a single mother. The novel closes with a possibility of union with Adam, but only after Claire has learned to live by and for her own self.

General Considerations

The challenge of being a single parent, female or male, has been the locus of many present-day discourses ranging from academic considerations to popular novels and self-help books. Several of these intend to deliver purposeful instructions on how to be a responsible single mother and still have a fulfilling career and personal life. These are mostly compiled success stories: Caryl Waller Kruegar in her book *Single With Children* (1993) promises “144 ideas for doing it alone” along with autobiographical accounts of divorced, widowed or single parents with adopted children. Terri Apter (1995) perfectly envisions the position of the working woman who struggles to balance work, family and motherhood in the title of her book that asks “Why women still don’t have wives?” referring to the domestic duties which are traditionally associated with the role of being a wife/mother, a role that still sticks to the working woman when she has to go out and earn her own bread. The question underlines the sexual division of labour and its stagnation now that women venture out and deal with glass ceiling and wage gap monsters in their workplaces.

Apter (1995) points out how work has become mandatory for women, it being a way to secure a proper life for themselves and their children, especially for divorced or single mothers. The dichotomy in societal expectations is significant: these involve striving for equality (with measures like curbing of alimony and so on), but at the same time burdening women with majority of parental responsibilities, including financial ones. The emotional baggage attending single status, yoked to the responsibility of being a parent, creates a multifaceted challenge. Jane Porter’s *Odd Mom Out* (2007) has a single mother as the protagonist and the title itself is a clear marker of the status of the single mother in a society where heteronormativity is idolized: she is an outsider, an anomaly and an alien. Ruth Sidel (2006) writes, “single mothers and their children have all too often been seen as a breed apart, a subgroup that requires its own analysis, norms, criticism, and punishment” (p. 184). Again, though it comes with the stigma of unacceptability, single motherhood can mean liberation in a variety of ways, as Jane Juffer (2006) puts it, “freedom from marriage, freedom from the stigma of ‘out of wedlock’ births, freedom to have different sexual partners, freedom to raise children in alternative fashion” (p. 10). Juffer (2006) also points at the recent phenomenon in social media of valorising single working mothers because they are deemed to be more economically stable, with the capacity to spend, unlike the dependent stay at home mother as well as the single mothers depending on state welfare (pp. 46–47). Single parenthood, especially single motherhood, has been the centre of much debate regarding the effect it has on the emotional development and economic well-being of the children. Marta is a single mother by choice who has to deal with an adolescent daughter, which makes her position different from the new mothers of quintessential mom lit. When she sometimes wonders what it would be like to share responsibilities with a partner, Marta appears to be too self-assured to ever qualify as the domestic mother – she struggles but she enjoys her trials.

Conclusion

Categorising a genre has its drawbacks and the same is true for mom lit. While it was profitable for the publishers to designate the niche and secure the intended readership, the writers were never very happy with the mom lit label. It is a type of pigeonholing that insured that, even though the texts deal with a matter of considerable gravity like mothering, mom lit would be treated as a casual read for nursing stay-at-home mothers or struggling single mothers. Mom lit, like chick lit, declined within a decade of its inception, faltering in a competitive market noted for its ever-shifting demands and easily satiated tastes. Mom lit would not become a

manifesto for the women navigating the rough seas of motherhood in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the new, high-speed and faceless world of the new century, mommy blogs and self-help books would now provide the more personal connections that mothers desired. The emphasis on family heteronormativity that is obvious in mom lit limited its reach (only conventional, middle-class women made it as protagonists). At a time when society was changing around it, it excluded the new class and gender multiplicity of characters whose inclusion might have helped it remain fashionable. But while it was trendy, mom lit celebrated motherhood, with its trappings of trouble and triumph, perhaps delving deeper than it initially intended to. Moreover, while it never found a solution to the issues it raised, its real achievement was that it signaled the urgency for a critical discussion around one of the most significant issues of our changing times.

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