

THE TRADITION OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR FICTION *CHICK LIT*

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Introduction

Chick lit is the fiction about and for the “new woman”, the contemporary readership of post-feminist culture, popular literature mainly written by women for women’s audience (Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction, 2006). Chick lit has succeeded in making contemporary women aware of the continuing difficulties that nevertheless exist in their everyday lives (Harzewski, 2006). Chick lit is one of the new genres that is open to fresh novelists and has presented incredible opportunities for young women to make an impact within a male-dominated publishing industry. Secondly, the term *chick-lit* appeared in print as early as in 1988 when Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell used a slang word for a course entitled “Female Literary Tradition” (Chick-Lit – On the Edge: New Women’s Fiction Anthology, 1995). By the chick-lit term, the two authors wanted to “<...> ironically refer to postfeminist attitudes; <...> not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women, but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (Ferriss, Young, 2006, p. 9). Next, this contemporary women’s fiction phenomenon was given the term *chick lit* by Mazza and DeShell compiling the anthology of post-feminist fiction “Chick-Lit – On the Edge: New Women’s Fiction Anthology” in 1995. The genre of chick lit is often related to the traditional fiction, like prose romance. A contemporary literary critic Stephanie Harzewski notes that the genre relies on the conventions of the romance, but updates them for its present-day setting (Harzewski, 2006). Eventually, the happy ending where male and female protagonists appear to be deeply in love and stay together is a significant feature of chick lit as well as the former prose romance. Research studies by several outstanding scholars in the field of literary studies, such as James Annesley (2006), Suzanne Ferriss, Mallory Young (2006), Caroline J. Smith (2008), Imelda Whelehan (2005) Cathy Yardley (2006), Stephanie Harzewski (2006; 2011) etc., emphasise these essential components, the key concepts of the present-day phenomenon: female readership, representation of popular culture based on consumption, fashion, celebrity cult etc. Moreover, chick lit represents post-feminist women’s writing. One of the editors of the post-feminist writing anthology, Chris Mazza, puts it, “I realised there is such a thing as postfeminist writing. It’s writing that says women are independent & confident, but not lacking in their share of human weakness & not necessarily self-empowered <...> Post feminist writing says we don’t have to be superhuman anymore. Just human.” (Mazza, 1995, p. 9). This extract from the preface of the anthology mentioned starts a discussion on the contemporary consciousness-raising fiction which questions the established female

voices of the romanticism and feminism periods as well as representations of women in fiction transmitting a message to the readership. According to literary critics Ferriss and Young, “chick lit is simultaneously fiction about and for the ‘new woman’, the contemporary reader of our postfeminist culture, and a new ‘woman’s fiction’, a form of popular literature (largely) written by women for a female audience” (Ferriss, Young, 2006, p. 12). Moreover, the majority of the genre’s texts focus on a specific age, race and class: young (women in their late twenties and early thirties), white and middle class (Ibid). Chick lit as a genre gained its popularity in the late 1990s along with the phenomenal success of Helen Fielding’s book *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (first published in 1996) and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (first published in 1996). Chick-lit novels tell intellectual, fast-paced stories about young, predominantly white women’s messy journeys through personal and professional experiences and how they gain self-knowledge and self-acceptance, and are, thus, empowered to take control of their intimate relationships and professional lives (Smith, 2008). A literary researcher Irena Ragaišienė claims that chick lit is often dismissed in literary criticism despite its appeal to contemporary female readership. It is obvious that chick lit has definitely won the status of a feminist bestseller as literature “for the ‘new woman’, the contemporary reader of our post feminist culture, and a ‘new woman’s fiction’, a form of popular literature mostly written by women for a female audience” (Ragaišienė, 2008, p. 68). However, this contemporary literary phenomenon has not emerged without the literary, cultural and social background; it refers to both romance novels and feminist strivings, having the purpose in common, i.e. qualified as women’s consciousness-raising fiction.

The aim of the article is to explore contemporary popular fiction chick lit following the tradition of women’s consciousness-raising literature.

The following **objectives** have been set to achieve the aim: to review the tradition of women’s literature in English, to investigate the situation of women writing novels, to explore the tradition of consciousness-raising fiction and its continuation in the popular genre chick lit.

Research methods. The research has been conducted by employing the feminist and post-feminist approaches to reveal essential features of women’s fiction in the aspects of its purpose, engagement, the woman’s perspectives because the research deals with the novels of different periods: the nineteenth-century and the late-twentieth-century women’s fiction. Also, the comparison of different, yet intertextually linked, periods of expression of women’s awareness towards their representation and positioning has been conducted.

Research results

The feminist thought and the consciousness-raising of women. Social life was the most significant sphere from which women were excluded; throughout history, society was always more favourable to men. For a long period women could not enter universities, publish their works or occupy job places that required physical strength or intelligence. In the early twentieth century, the doors had opened and women started working for very low earnings, but this situation totally changed during the Second World War when men were taken to the Army and women replaced them (Gilbert, 1996). It was a turning point in women's lives: they started engaging themselves in the public life (Elshtain, 2002). It is considerably important to emphasise the uniqueness of the essay *A Room of One's Own* (first published in 1929) by Virginia Woolf. The essay discloses the essential missing element for women's lives – freedom. The way Woolf presented her ideas of women's emancipation shook the typical way of thinking and created discontentment among men. The intense desire to write and educate other women got into its peak in the early twentieth century; Woolf pointed out the necessity to give lessons to other women about freedom and the need to write (Elshtain, 2002). The striving of the modernist female writers was to enlighten female readers, to encourage them to write their own works and to stress their intellectual abilities because all these were diminished by the male gender: "Therefore I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast. By hook or by crook, I hope that you will possess yourselves of money enough to travel and to idle <...> and let the line to thought dip deep into the stream" (Woolf, 1991, p. 119). The feminist movement influenced women to seek for higher matters for their lives, determine goals and become emotionally self-assured. The essay *A Room of One's Own* surveys the development of women's writing making an emphasis on the capacities women would hold, thus performing the consciousness rising function among female readership.

According to a nineteenth-century advocate of women's rights John Stuart Mill (1995), "the potential of women's nature was always restricted to a family and household for their masters-husbands' interests and pleasure" (Mill, 1995, p. 216). Moreover, a feminist Sherry Ortner notes that in patriarchal society women were identified with nature and thus with motherhood, passivity and emotion. Oppositely, men were identified with culture and thus with reason, creativity and social life (Ortner, 1995). Over the centuries literary women were fending the perverse attacks of men who, therefore, in reality kept women in oppression and in literature created ugly images of women (Gilbert, Gubar, 1996). A feminist researcher Rosemarie P. Tong in her *Feminist Thought* (1998) notices: "Some of postmodern feminism's roots are found in the works of a famous feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who phrased the essential question of feminist theory as, "Why is woman the *second sex*?" <...> "Why is the woman the other?" (Tong, 1998, p. 195). This deals with the initial ideas of women's movements, either feminist of post-feminist, i.e. to raise consciousness of

women through enlightenment of women, through fiction texts underpinned with messages to the female readership. Simone de Beauvoir makes an accurate remark on earlier women's writing: "<...> if they undertake to write, they feel overwhelmed by the universe of culture, because it is a universe of men, and so they can only stammer. On the other hand, the woman, who may choose to reason, to express herself, in accordance with masculine techniques, will be bent on stifling an originality that she has cause to mistrust; like the woman student, she is very prone to be studious and pedantic; she will imitate male rigor and vigor" (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 708). Men's domination over the cultural sphere during the earlier periods was a key indicator why so many women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries hesitated to be innovative. Furthermore, the fact that in the nineteenth century some of the women authors still "had to publish their works under male pseudonyms" shows that women indeed were oppressed by men's culture (Gilbert, Gubar, 1996, p. 302). Thus, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar further suggest that women's literary production must be viewed alongside men's literary tradition. According to the scholars, the belief that femininity and creativity were incompatible was popular in the English society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ibid.). To get an equal education to that of men was a taboo during the period, as a historian Joan Kelly points out, women were still educated privately at home (Kelly, 1995).

Nevertheless, romanticism suggested two different versions of femininity induced by revolutionary movements and advanced education: "women emerged during the period as simultaneously a figure of political and cultural revolution and a figure of domesticity" (Benstock et al., 2002, p. 54). According to Gilbert and Gubar, in the eighteenth century women saw the profession of a writer as the most available and even profitable which they could practice at home (Gilbert, Gubar, 1996). However, there were women authors who chose original ways of writing; very often, the female tradition in literature polarised towards the sentimental romance as it was 'safer' due to the existed patriarchal ideology (Curran, 2010). Considering its content, literary scholar Pamela Regis singles out the most important narrative segments of a traditional romance: "the meeting between the heroine and hero; <...> the barrier between them; <...> the declaration of heroine and hero that they love each other" (Regis, 2007, p. 14). Therefore, it becomes clear that the usual content of the romance was not intended to educate or raise the consciousness, but, oppositely, was a handy tool for the society to sustain the prevailing order and keep women to their accustomed position of those of housewives. Moreover, a writer Catherine Gallagher relates this popularity of romance with the marketplace exchange in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when texts became more oriented to the female readership that due to the existed patriarchal ideology was not prepared to be very selective about the reading material (Gallagher, 1994). Despite that, increasing consciousness of women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries matured such great authors as George Eliot, Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Jane Austen. Though forced to follow

masculine modes of writing some of the literary women found their own distinctive ways to 'reveal' their reality, thus, most of the women authors established themselves in the genre of the novel.

As a literary scholar Caroline J. Smith holds, individuality became the essential feature of post-feminism (Smith, 2008). Earlier feminists were concerned about differences between man and woman and these were the 'third wave' feminists who realised that women were highly diverse and it was the right time to analyse their individuality and oneself (Moi, 1995). The 'third wave' feminists believed in further changes and they were the ones who focused on the importance to express women's words in a written form, they emphasised analysis of self-identity and started pointing out women's role in society in a positive way (Benstock et al., 2002).

Development of women's fiction. To continue the discussion on development of women's fiction, a literary scholar Imelda Whelehan notes that "where feminist fiction takes its heroines out of marriage into singledom, chick lit moves in the opposite direction as for the Bridget Jones generation the home and the family are places they see as a destination rather than as a point of departure" (Whelehan, 2005, p. 4). On the other hand, a critic Janice A. Radway (1991) notes that even in the second half of the twentieth century most women look after children and are responsible for other domestic duties which means that family life still occupies an important place within woman's life. Thus, feminism is no longer required as it fails to meet the needs of the womankind and post-feminism appears to be about learning to love men but not to reject or abuse them. According to Stephanie Genz (2010), the confusion is aroused by a woman's want to "have it all", that is to be both successful in her career as well as to be happy within her personal life.

Austen and Fielding as representatives of different women's consciousness-raising. Although, two women writers, Jane Austen and Helen Fielding, are representatives of the two different epochs, the novels *Pride and Prejudice* (first published in 1813) by Austen and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (first published in 1996) by Fielding are frequently taken in parallel. Today Austen is considered as one of the greatest women writers of the nineteenth century, the period which is described as a Golden Age of women's literature. Austen is praised for her realism in the view of contemporary society as well as her brilliant use of irony (Blackwell, 2009). Many female authors of the Romantic period were writing prose romances because they fitted the existing society's order; Austen used romance as a screen which on its surface hid the deeper meanings of her texts (Moi, 1995). Radway in her book *Reading the Romance* (1991) states: "<...> the story told by all romances can be considered a myth because every book is dominated by the same set of events resolved in an identical way <...>" (Radway, 1991, p. 204). During the late twentieth century when chick-lit first appeared, critics claimed that chick-lit fails to offer more diversity in genre itself and multiplicity in plot compared to the present days when the genre has been on a wave of popularity (Harzewski, 2006). The traditional romance heroines are the desperate housewives who fall

in love with a handsome man and face various challenges to get to the happy ever after life: "Its main plot must involve a man and a woman falling in love and its conflict centred on the pair struggling to make the relationship work" (Smith, 2008, p. 122). On the contrary, chick-lit characters are educated, business success type women with a disposable income with their own choice and in search for "the quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social interaction" (Smith, 2008, p. 122). Thus, "the main difference between the romance and chick lit novels appears in the status of money and the marriage contract. Romance has traditionally apposed love and monetary gain, as the gold digger or social climber functions as a foil to the less worldly heroine" (Radway, 1991, p. 11). Furthermore, chick-lit female characters are busy with their career, inner emotions, while the plot in the usual romance novel focuses on women who are attached to their husbands, creating intrigues and overemphasising their feelings. Moreover, what really separates chick-lit from romance fiction is the manner of telling the story. Chick-lit is told in a more confiding, personal tone frequently using first person narration, like having a best friend tell you about their life. In addition, chick-lit has monumentally changed the representation of single women in literature by portraying not figures of pity, illness or derision, but a cast of funny, usually capable women not looking to settle (Harzewski, 2006). Therefore, both Austen and Fielding are the novelists of their time whose books reveal realities of the society, though on the surface both novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* appear as comedies of manners. Hence, we may presume that while literary women of the nineteenth century tried to imitate the vigour of a man, today's women are innovative in the use of various forms. However, the deeper sense of the novel resides not in its plot but rather in its social value due to the themes the writer approaches through the satirical tone (Aragay, 2005).

It is widely accepted that the genre of novel firstly developed from letters, diaries or other memoirs and only later the form of the novel shifted to third-person authoritative narration which was started to be used by male authors (Curran, 2010). Furthermore, a third-person narration used in *Pride and Prejudice* shows that Austen followed the conventions of the nineteenth-century impartial narrative which in itself sounded authoritative and convincing. According to scholars Gilbert and Gubar (1996), women's attempts to write were usually dismissed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hence, in the late twentieth century chick lit appeared as a 'new' literature for and about the women, especially those in their late twenties and early thirties. Thereby, we see that Fielding chooses a diary form for her novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* which enables the protagonist of the story to say a genuine word by herself.

Conclusions

The period of romance novels underwent certain restrictions, concerning societal attitudes, material capabilities and emotional freedom of women. The period of modernism brought about the changes, including the feminist ideas, into fiction. Contemporary fiction chick lit,

as a postfeminist phenomenon, refers to both the romance novel tradition and feminist ideas of emancipation, displaying them by plots and characters of chick lit fiction, meeting the formulas of popular culture; moreover, a 'new woman' appears to be distinct from the pre-feminist or feminist images of woman as she embraces the features both feminine and feminist.

The societal order depicted in the novels *Pride and Prejudice* by Austen and *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Fielding as well as the essay *A Room of One's Own* by Woolf is presented from the female perspective. Moreover, within the daily life scenes the authors show the essential issues of women of their time. The analysis suggests that both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* are consciousness raising novels in their own respect: they aim to educate female audience. Apparently, the contemporary chick lit novel in its ideological content restores the values similar to those of Austen's novel; however, Fielding modifies and integrates those values into the present setting.

On the whole, due to the great distance of time and social manners, thoughts and values conveyed through the chick-lit novel, the modernistic essay and the romance novel, the images of women can be considered within the continuation of the consciousness-raising tradition in women's fiction.

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POPULAR FICTION *CHICK LIT*

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Summary

The cultural, social conditions have been different throughout several past centuries for public expression of women's ideas. The period of romance novels underwent certain restrictions, concerning societal attitudes, material capabilities and emotional freedom of women. The period of modernism brought about the changes, including the feminist ideas, into fiction. Contemporary fiction chick lit, as a postfeminist phenomenon, refers to both the romance novel tradition and feminist ideas of emancipation, displaying them by plots and characters of chick lit fiction, meeting the formulas of popular culture. The societal order depicted in the novels *Pride and Prejudice* by Austen and *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Fielding as well as the essay *A Room of One's Own* by Woolf is presented from the female perspective. Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* are consciousness-raising novels; therefore, they aim to educate female audience. Apparently, the contemporary chick lit novel in its ideological content restores the values similar to those of Austen's novel; however, Fielding modifies and integrates those values into the present setting. On the whole, due to the great distance of time and social manners, thoughts and values conveyed through the chick-lit novel, the modernistic essay and the romance novel, the representation of women's images can be considered within the continuation of the consciousness-raising tradition in fiction.

Keywords: chick lit, women's literature, feminism, postfeminism, consciousness-raising fiction, femininity, consciousness.

SAĖMONINGUMO SKATINIMO TRADICIJA ŠIUOLAIKINĖJE POPULIARIOJOJE MOTERŲ
LITERATŪROJE „CHICK LIT“

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Santrauka

Kultūrinės, socialinės sąlygos moterims viešai reikšti savo mintis skyrėsi per pastaruosius kelis šimtmečius. Meilės romanų laikotarpis buvo tam tikrų suvaržymų, susijusių su socialinėmis nuostatomis, materialinėmis galimybėmis ir emocine laisve, laikotarpis. Modernizmas į grožinę literatūrą įnešė nemažai pokyčių, įskaitant ir feministines idėjas. Šiuolaikinė grožinė literatūra „chick lit“, postfeminizmo reiškiny, siejasi tiek su meilės romano tradicija, tiek su feministinėmis emancipacijos idėjomis, atskleidžiamomis per siužetus ir personažus, vartojant populiariosios kultūros formules.

Socialinė tvarka, pavaizduota romanuose *Puikybė ir prietarai*, *Bridžitos Džouns dienoraštis* bei esė *Savas kambarys*, yra pristatoma iš moteriškosios perspektyvos. Minėti kūriniai yra sąmoningumą skatinantys meno reiškiniai. Jais siekiama ugdyti moteriškąją auditoriją. Akivaizdu, šiuolaikinio „chick lit“ romano turinys rekonstruoja Džeinės Osten (Jane Austen) romano vertybes, tačiau Helena Fylding (Helen Fielding) modifikuoja šias vertybes ir integruoja jas į šių dienų aplinką.

Dėl atstumo tiek laiko, tiek ir socialinių papročių, idėjų prasme, perteiktų „chick lit“ romane, modernistiniame esė ir meilės romane, moterų įvaizdžių reprezentacija gali būti traktuojama kaip sąmoningumą skatinančios grožinės literatūros tęstinumas.

Prasminiai žodžiai: „chick lit“, moterų literatūra, feminizmas, postfeminizmas, sąmoningumą skatinanti literatūra, moteriškumas, sąmoningumas.

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